

Lives

OF THE

WOMEN

VOL II

Edited by **Jerry Pinto**
Social Communications Media Department,
Sophia - Smt. Manorama Devi Somani College,
Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai - 400 026.

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CREDITS

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Preface

In our continuing efforts to battle the pervasive amnesia relating to women's lives, we present the second volume of the series *Lives of the Women*. This volume documents the lives of three women who have contributed to women having a voice—the lawyer and women's rights activist Flavia Agnes, painter Meera Devidayal and gender activist, archivist and writer C S Lakshmi. These are the stories of women who have fought spirited battles, in the courtroom, in the studio and with the erasures of society when it comes to women, as they grappled with prejudice. We focus on their professional lives; where the discussion has ventured into the personal lives of these women, it has only been in relation to the professional or to their public images.

Conceived, supervised and edited by visiting faculty member Jerry Pinto, our students chose and interviewed these inspiring women and their collaborators. These are their stories, in their words, supplemented by research. We hope that this work will add to the documentation on what it means to be a professional and a woman at this time in history, in this part of the world. These articles are records until the present, we know that many more chapters of their lives are yet to unfold.

In our previous volume, we carried the stories of the theatre director and playwright Nadira Babbar, the novelist and cultural critic Shanta Gokhale, the Odissi dancer Jhelum Paranjape, and the actor and public relations expert Dolly Thakore.

As work on this book progressed, we found that words on paper capture only a tiny part of the sheer dynamism of the interviewees and the range of their professional achievements. We hope that in the years to come, readers will support us in bringing these stories alive using audio visual and digital formats that will reach even those who cannot read.

We look forward to our readers sharing their views on this book with us, via e-mail, on scmsophia@gmail.com.

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We would also like to thank:

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Dr (Sr) Anila Verghese, Director of Sophia Polytechnic, was an unfailing support.

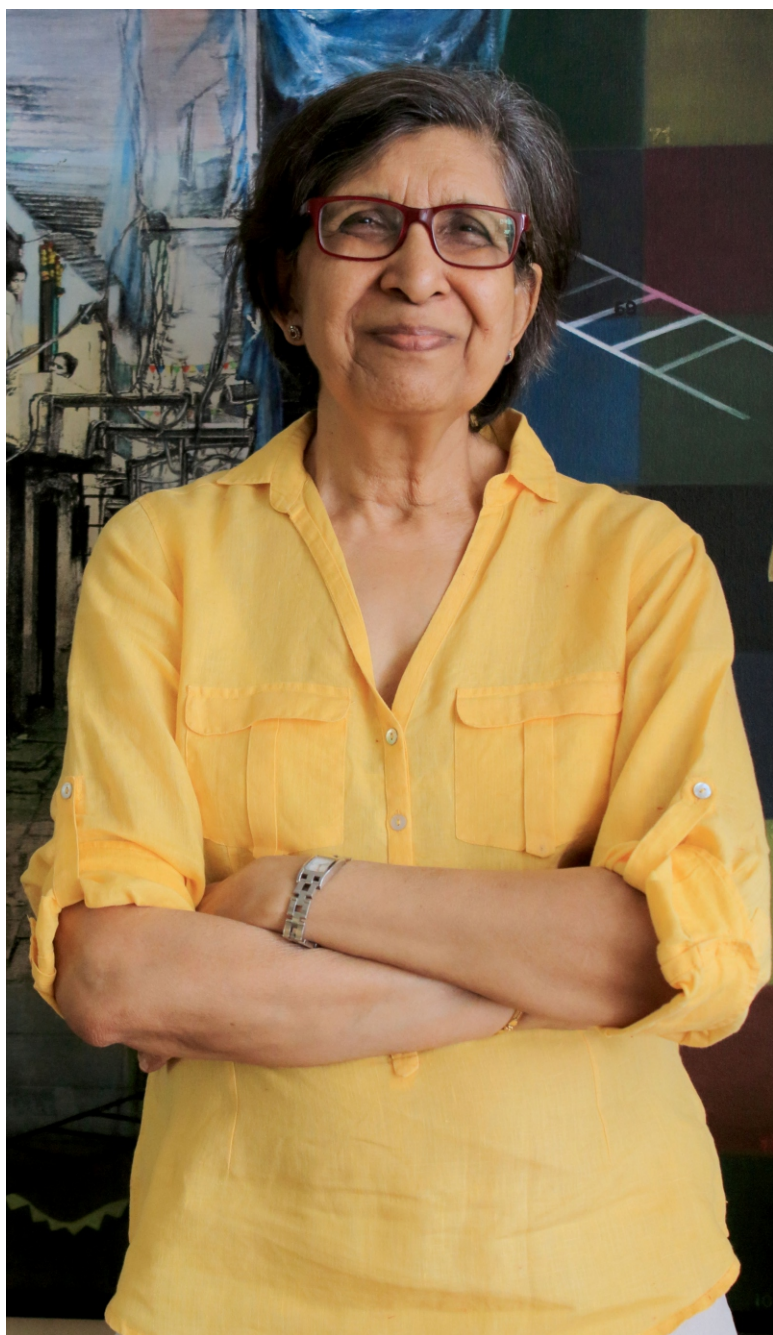
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Students of the SCMSophia Department,
Class of 2015



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAMTA KALAMBE

Meera Devidayal

As a class, we went to see Meera Devidayal's show 'A Terrible Beauty', at the Gallery Chemould. A group discussion followed the event with architect and scholar Rahul Mehrotra, Princeton University's Gyan Prakash and Ms Devidayal participating. These may seem like odd choices for an event at an art gallery but it became clear that many of her works are driven by social concerns of the kind that any urban dweller in a megapolis like Mumbai must feel when confronted with the glaring disparities that exist between the rich and the poor, between Antilia and the ant-hill. We present Ms Devidayal in her own words, making as few interpolations as possible.

“I was born in Delhi. Both my parents belong to Delhi. But I grew up in Calcutta as my parents moved there. I was born in 1947 and they may have moved in 1948 or 1949 because my father was in the process of setting up a textile mill in Orissa. But I went to school and college in Calcutta.

“I have a brother, Ashok Pratap Singh, five-and-a-half years my elder. In those days we had the Senior Cambridge after eleven years of schooling and then college. I went to Loreto House and studied there right up to my graduation. For a while, I was a science student because the teachers I had for subjects like history and geography did not inspire me and so I dropped those subjects as soon as I could. I had never thought of myself as interested in English or even good at it. But in my last two years in school Mother Joseph Catherine took us for English. I would say she was the one teacher in my whole career who really influenced me. She started inculcating the love of English

literature and writing into me. I had always done fairly well in school in those subjects but she really began to show us a side to it that I had not suspected was there before. And so I did my BA in English literature. I graduated in 1966 and in 1967 I got married and came to Bombay and have been in Bombay ever since.”

Devidayal took part in extracurricular activities “things like debates, that sort of thing.” She does not remember being a sporty type but she was house captain and participated, when required to, in sporting activities.

Painting was one of the skills a young woman ought to acquire or so her mother, Savitri Pratap Singh felt. “I have the feeling she thought it could be a hobby so I used to have someone come home to teach me. And then when I was a little older, my mother felt I had a talent for art and I was taught by the head of the Art School in Calcutta. He too came home; I didn't have the time to go to other places. No, that's not strictly true. There was a hobby class, run as a private enterprise by the Academy of Fine Arts. They had a studio to which private students could come and they even had a model. So I did go there for two years.”

But through all this, Devidayal did not think of art as anything more than a hobby. “I never took it seriously actually. I stood first in the university in English literature. It was a first class in the Calcutta University after twenty years. In those days when no one got a first class, it was quite a big thing. After graduation I got married and in Bombay, I wasn't doing anything much but there was a home to make, a new city to explore, a new relationship to settle into, a new role to play. For the first two years we lived in Cumballa Crest, which is quite close to the Sophia College. Then we moved here.”

'Here' is a duplex apartment on Anstey Road, off Altamount Road, not very far from Sophia College either. “At first it was only the upstairs; the downstairs bit came later.”

This bit of urban geography has some bearing on how Devidayal managed to balance the demanding roles of artist

and mother. She had her studio downstairs and could always pop upstairs to supervise her children or intervene in battles. As her daughter Rachana says, “I have absolutely no recollection of the time when she went to classes when I was a baby. I only found that out recently, so I can't really talk about that. But she was there, every day. Whenever we came from school, she was there. So in that sense, she was not a working woman who left the house in the morning. Her studio was downstairs in the flat. So we used to be upstairs while she was painting downstairs. I know various artists who need to paint to pay the bills. That's not the case with her. So it's a different kind of momentum, a different kind of drive, more a personal need. Her family always came before her work.”

Devidayal tells the story of those classes: “After a year or so, I thought I have to do something but I didn't really have a career to fall back on. I could have joined advertising but that would have meant a full-time job. It wasn't a world that encouraged women to freelance. You must remember I was twenty years old when I got married. It was an arranged marriage too so I was in a bit of a quandary. My question was: where do I go from here? I continued to do a little bit of painting but not seriously, only in whatever free time I had. Eventually, I joined the Sophia Polytechnic where they had a course of art. The teacher there was a Mr. Chavan. Art was not a major department at that time and things were rather haphazard. In 1971, I wanted to join the J J School of Art but by then I had two children. The class hours ran from ten to five. There was no way I could do a full-day course. In fact, that was the time when my second daughter was just six or seven weeks old. Then I heard that they also had a diploma course and I could attend whatever classes I wanted to. They had a category called 'casual students'. I would not be allowed to sit for the exam or eligible for a diploma but I was not interested in those things. I just wanted to get back to painting and have some kind of serious, formal training. I thought the J J could give that to me,” she says.

“In the morning they would have life class, a still life class, sometimes composition. It was systematic if somewhat old-fashioned but it felt good to be challenged and to have some formal discipline. I would go from ten in the morning to about one in the afternoon. I didn't go for the non-practical classes; art history for instance. After two years of this, they dropped the 'casual students' category. But fortunately, they still had a studio class, like a hobby class, where they had a model. You could come and sketch and the teacher would give you some tips. A very mixed group would show up: quite a few commercial artists, some committed and serious artists, some housewives—and I suppose I was one! There were ten to fifteen people, sometimes going up to twenty.”

Two of the teachers earned themselves a place in Devidayal's memory. “There was Prabhakar Kolte who is now a very well-known artist. The other was Kashinath Salve. Both of them taught for several years. At some point much later, Kolte stopped teaching and started practising on his own. Salve continued teaching for a while. I think the teachers often felt that they were dealing with rank amateurs or weekend painters and so they taught very little. I remember telling one of them: 'Listen, it isn't easy for me coming every day from six to eight in the evening. I have two small children and I have to make a huge effort to get away. So I'm here because I seriously want to learn. You better teach properly and give me proper guidance.’” It is likely that whoever this teacher was, Devidayal also won herself a place in his memory.

“After three years, I felt I had come to the point where I could go on and there'd be no end to it. I'd remain a student forever. So I stopped going there but I do think I learned a great deal. At some point, they stopped this class too. And now there's no place where somebody who just wants to learn can go. You have to be a full-time student. That's a pity.”

Devidayal began to seek out the artists of the city around her. “I began to work on canvas and then showed my work to people like Akbar Padamsee. I was feeling my way, I think,

because I was still not sure where to go and what to do. I don't have any clear recollection of what they said but I felt I needed to find a particular subject, something that I could own."

She points to other painters and other personalities who have been significant influences:

"The person that I connected to, starting from 1976 or so, was Bhupen Khakhar [1934-2003] because he lived in Baroda but was originally from Bombay and in a sense he was also self-taught. So I felt some sense of there being a kind of bond between us. He was actually trained as a chartered accountant and then moved to Baroda because he felt that there was an art community there. In Bombay the community was scattered, he said. Many artists were living and working in Baroda, like Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh and Jeram Patel. It was an active group of artists; it still is because Maharaja Sayajirao University has a School of Fine Arts, which means there's a faculty of fine arts. My husband's family business had a set up in Baroda and so he went to Baroda quite often and I used to go with him too and that's how I met Bhupen, Gulammohammed Sheikh and all of them. Although, it is difficult to say at this remove whether it was a movement, Bhupen pioneered it. But the truth is that his work was very unusual. He was the first person at least in India who actually used popular images, like kitsch, low art, and posters in his work. He made collages and used them in different ways. I found that intriguing; in fact in my second show I had done a lot of collage work. Today kitsch is popular but at that time it was unusual. Bhupen was one of my early role models. There were others like Gieve Patel, Jehangir Sabavala and many other painters I got to know including M F Husain. These were the people I used to meet. I cannot say how each one influenced me in specific ways but I think it happens through constant interaction, through conversation. You don't ask a question and get a solution. But in the process of talking, you hear things and they go and settle inside your head and come out as something quite different. You make it your own, I guess. But that's what

any artist will do with what you call influences.”

Devidayal also mentions the artist Nalini Malani. She met her at Gallery Chemould. Chemould and Pundole are the oldest art galleries in Mumbai, both having been started within months of each other in 1963, both settling into a friendly rivalry over the fifty years of their existence. At the time Devidayal is speaking about, Gallery Chemould was perched on top of the Jehangir Art Gallery at Kala Ghoda while Pundole was at Flora Fountain. (Both have since moved to other locations.) “Nalini was somebody I had met quite soon after I had started painting. And then I began to go to exhibitions and galleries so I got to know the Chemould Gallery and would go there. Nalini was one of the painters I met there. I would go as a painter to see the work of other artists but I hadn't shown there. Up to that point, it was still the Taj Art Gallery. But my work got picked up and was even exhibited in Chemould's famous monsoon show. This was an annual event held in the monsoon because Jehangir Art Gallery was not much in demand at that time. I had given them two works, both of which were tongue-in-cheek; they had elements of kitsch. My work is not very straightforward; it's got a sense of humour, irony. I think I moved from laughing at some of the things around us to strident feminism. And then I had my first gallery show. This is a turning point in the life of an artist. It means that I was not the person booking the gallery. The gallery was booking me.”

This was Art Heritage Gallery, run by Ebrahim Alkazi. Alkazi, Devidayal tells us, was quite a character in the art circles of both Mumbai and Delhi. He turned English theatre in Mumbai from a group of amateurs playing Neil Simon reruns into a bunch of committed people trying to interpret the Greek classics and the modern masters. He changed the life of the art critic Nissim Ezekiel by buying him a ticket to London so that he could see the great masters. Then he moved to Delhi when he was invited to run the National School of Drama. He transformed this into a demanding course that gave us the likes of Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. It was after this stint that he

started the Art Heritage Gallery.

“Alkazi had some kind of fall out with the government and so he moved out but he was too dynamic a person to just settle down and he started his own gallery which was very special, it was the best, he did all kinds of exciting things. I had a show with him in 1978. I was introduced to him by Jehangir Sabavala and then I started showing with Gallery Chemould when it was in a little room above the Jehangir Art Gallery. I still show with Chemould.”

*

This is a city where an abandoned picture of a deity can attract first a flower, then an agarbatti, next a rock, then some tile work, a bell and suddenly, you have a roadside shrine. Debates rage over their right to occupy common space, which is at a premium in this city of twenty-plus million people.

“Around 1975, I began to notice these wayside shrines in the most unlikely places and almost without thinking about it, I realized I had my subject. There were all kinds of shrines. Sometimes the deity inside would be a stone painted red and brought to life with eyes of a dazzling white. I had my first exhibition of my take on these shrines at the Taj Art Gallery. I think it is important to mention that simply to contextualize my practice. The Taj Art Gallery is not curated. It is a commercial enterprise. You book it and once you have paid the money, you hang your show and hope for the best. My show was well received but in those days the art scene was very different. Back then, it did not have acceptance, recognition and support.”

Devidayal's next show grew organically; it might be said, from her interest in those wayside shrines. “My next collection was based on the theme of religion in everyday life. Wherever I went, I sketched. I draw roughs and then work on the sketches and make them into paintings. This was the time when I was working in oils. The wayside shrines had come out of my travels

in the countryside; this next collection that came a year-and-a-half later was more city-centric. Earlier, I had concentrated on the image of the deity, using that as the starting point of the visual. The deity dominates the image. Then I began to see that in a city every image in a crowded area must struggle for its existence. I began to see that it was only through juxtaposition that you could construct the sense of a city. Take a temple. Now really, this is a simple thing. It is the house of a God. And so that should determine everything. But where is this temple? What's in front of it? What's next to it? Is it a cinema or a brothel? Or both? This is how religion is in our country, it is not a thing apart, it is part of the fabric of our existence. It is simultaneous with life, not a parallel realm. You may stop at a temple on your way to the office or you may take your hands off the steering wheel of your car and make a 'namaskar' (salutation) to God as you pass. I wanted to capture this flow from religion to life and back again," says Devidayal.

"Or consider the poster seller. He has film actors and he has religious posters. That means he has stars and Gods. The Goddess Lakshmi is now right next to Madhuri Dixit. It was this overlapping of boundaries as much as religion that was the subject of my next collection, again at the Taj Art Gallery in 1977. I suppose from then on each thing lead to another. I don't know that my preoccupations have changed that much although the forms may have altered. I still look at the city, the urban context and the human situation in that urban context."

Devidayal's own urban context is her family: her husband Bhagwat, and her three daughters, Rachana Shah, Namita Devidayal and Gauri Devidayal.

Her husband, Bhagwat Devidayal comes from a business family. One of eight children, he has seen many ups and downs in his professional life but his friends attest to his almost legendary good nature and his fund of risqué jokes. Family disputes meant that he often found himself involved in businesses that were not particularly to his taste but at the age of seventy-two, his wife believes that he has found his métier.

With charming vagueness, she says that he “started something to do with chemicals. It started out small but it's doing quite well now. The irony is that he's seventy-two but because he got into it when he was around fifty or so, he's only been working at this about twenty-two years. Normally this is the time for retirement but he's working harder than ever. He's doing things now that most other men would be doing in their forties. He has a very eclectic range of interests and but his main business is with chemicals.”

Does the literature student shaped by Mother Joseph Catherine ever show up? How does reading play a role in Devidayal's work? “Well, one of my shows was called 'The Secret Garden'. It actually took off from a book which I had read: *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estes.”

Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype, to give it its full name, was published in 1996 and sets out the belief that in every woman lives a wild woman who is creative, dynamic, a natural risk-taker and story-teller. Dr Pinkola Estes believes that stories have the power to reconnect women with their inner wild woman. It became a cult book with noted American writer Maya Angelou saying, “I am grateful to *Women Who Run with the Wolves* and to Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés. The work shows the reader how glorious it is to be daring, to be caring, and to be women. Everyone who can read should read this book.”

Devidayal continues, “*Women Who Run with the Wolves* struck a chord somewhere inside me. That was one time where I can say that there was actually a direct response to a book. For instance when I had to create layers for my show, 'The Secret Garden', I used a lot of handmade paper, tearing it myself to create layers. Otherwise I don't know about how directly it influences me. For instance, my last show used the starting point of the ruined mills of Mumbai. Now at one level, we all talk about them, we all know how much the death of the mills has changed the nature of the city. So those words from

articles and conversations and discussions one has had with friends, with activists, with artists, form one strand. Along with this, I was introduced to the writings of Walter Benjamin by a friend, Gyan Prakash. His work on the arcades of Paris, an enormous project he left unfinished, was inspiring. It offered a way of looking at a city, and into a city. He links these passages, sometimes covered in glass, to the image of the flaneur, wandering through the city. And I began to wonder whether I had been a flaneur of Mumbai, without knowing it. I also wondered whether his thoughts could be applied to the mills so in a sense reading that text did help me but in general, it is the visual that is the trigger. I know I'm sounding a bit all over the place and that this is very amorphous...let's just say that his writing gave me a peg for my show."

Another show that Meera Devidayal created, which may be said to have taken its name at any rate from a text, is called 'Where I Live' (2009) which takes its title from the poem by Arundhati Subramaniam, a noted Mumbai poet. The poem combines lyricism and rage in fine and startling counterpoint.

I live on a wedge of land
reclaimed from a tired ocean
somewhere at the edge of the universe.

Greetings from this city
of L'Oreal sunsets
and diesel afternoons,
deciduous with concrete,
botoxed with vanity.

City of septic magenta hair-clips,
of garrulous sewers and tight-lipped taps,
of '80s film tunes buzzing near the left temple,
of ranting TV soaps and monsoon melodramas.

'Where I Live'

Nancy Adajania, noted cultural theorist and international curator, herself an alumna of our programme, wrote the catalogue essay in which she described how Devidayal's sensibility had shaped itself.

“Over the years, Devidayal's work has expanded to include an encyclopaedia of found materials from popular culture: the ubiquitous Hindi film poster, calendar prints, newspaper photographs, car stickers, digitally manipulated family photographs and real-estate brochures that sell the delirium of dream and mirage.”

Devidayal tries to decode her relationship with the city. “If I look back, what I generally find is that it is one image that triggers a thought or an idea and then that leads me into a collection. I generally drive myself but one day I found myself in a taxi. On the glove compartment, I saw a little sticker that said, “*Tum kab aaoge*” (When will you return?). The visual accompanying it was that of a stylized woman, her head on her knees, the picture of *viraha* (parting), which in Sanskrit aesthetics represents a woman's longing for the absent lover. There was a train going past and behind her a rural landscape. The woman herself was dressed as if she were in a Hindi film. I suddenly found that I had my entry point into the world of the migrant labourer and a show began there, in that taxi. I had always been fascinated by the number of men in the city who live far away from their wives and families, making a living. And this was perhaps the other side of the picture, or the other side as the migrant labourer would like to imagine it, a woman longing for the return of her husband. In reality, most village women probably don't get much time to moon about like that. But my show was called also 'Tum kabaaoge' and it was a bit tongue in cheek. A lot of my work is tongue in cheek. There is a sort of irony to it too, I would say.”

How does a sticker actually translate into a show?

“I went back home, took a lot of photographs, talked to a lot of taxi drivers, went in search of these stickers and that lead me to another thing, one thing flows into another. Another

collection that I had was of metal sheet work. I was fascinated by the fact that in all the slums and lean-tos you see along the pavement, the house itself is so basic. It's just a plastic sheet and some stones and a pole holding everything up. Yet, everything inside is clean; the pots and pans are always shining. It's kind of their décor, their wealth and that idea fired my imagination. I got somebody to introduce me to some of those slum dwellers. I would go there and try and make some photographs. I thought they might not like this invasion of their privacy so I tried to go with someone from the area, an in-house person, so to speak. At first my focus was only on these pots and pans but then I began to talk to the people who lived there. One of them took me to see her daughter. I started talking with them. Those conversations started me on 'Where I Live'.

Devidayal remembers also her visit to a slum in Govandi. "It was not in a very pleasant place, this house to which we were going. On two sides, there were open drains and in between there was a very narrow path, about two or three feet in width. If you visit enough slums, they begin to reveal their character. You can tell that some are better built. This was not one of them. Then I went into this woman's house; there was a ground floor and a floor above. The upper area was connected by a small staircase inside the house and we all sat in the small room and talked. Upstairs, there were two rooms. One was the bedroom with a proper bed. I had no idea how the floor bore the load and how it was built. Then there was the kitchen which had a bit of window and a bit of greenery. If you didn't know you were in a slum, it could be a kitchen anywhere. It had these aluminium and brass utensils, these steel *bartans* (cooking vessels), a cooking stove, everything. Then the idea struck me that if I took a photograph of this and showed it to someone who did not know where it was located, it could be mistaken for a kitchen in a middle-class home. Not a fancy, up-market kitchen but an adequate one. That started me thinking. I decided that I would get these metal sheets from the second-

hand metal markets, choosing the worst sheets, the really bad ones. The dealers kept telling me they had better ones and finally, they would scratch their heads and ask why I wanted them. I said: 'I can't explain it. But I need the worst, the most rusted, bent and deformed,'" she remembers with a smile.

Bhagwat Devidayal remembers going with his wife and how the dealers would say that they would charge the premium rate for these unsaleable things. "I would want to bargain but one look at Meera's face and I knew that we were going to get these things and we were going to pay the price and I would say, 'Okay', much to the dealer's surprise."

Meera Devidayal continues: "I took those sheets and digitally printed the kitchen photograph on that. I hoped that the juxtaposition would do the work, that something was left for the imagination of the viewer. I hoped that without stating it, I was saying, 'This kitchen could be anywhere but this is where it is'. I hoped it would tell you a story about the city. That particular home, I remember, had two or three members. They were earning quite well. It was not that they were poor. The problem in the city has been housing for a while now. Even if you are earning a decent wage or making a good living, there is no affordable housing. While these people lived in a slum but they were not down and out. That presented me with a problem: how to say all this while using the minimum needed. In many of the slums, you get the most beautiful zardosi (embroidery using precious metals) work, all of which goes into boutiques. Designers go to these places to get work done. Once it leaves those sweatshops, it takes on another avatar. I read Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (Penguin India, 2012). It's an award-winning book she wrote about a particular slum near the airport. Again behind this façade there is much aspiration, there is hard work, there is beauty being created. They may not be houses as the middle-class would define a house, they may not have water but whoever lives there will struggle to keep it clean and well decorated. They use wallpaper, paint, a poster, a

picture. So I live in a city. I'm not living in an ivory tower. I move around. I interact. I keep my eyes open."

Some of Devidayal's early work showed a penchant for strident feminism. Many remember a striking image of a woman's body, sliced as if into cuts of meat and served on a platter. This seems to still be a driving force but Devidayal feels that it has now been subsumed into her other concerns. "I know the one you're referring to. I had a show in 1995, I had one or two paintings that were overtly feminist. One of them, it was called 'Iceberg Lettuce', showed an elegantly-laid table and there was a plate on which there was a salad and a woman's breast as if it were one more edible thing, one more thing to be consumed in a variety of other things. I suppose I was going through my own process at this time and this was coming out into the painting. My in-laws were quite conservative so I performed all the rituals that were required of me but there was very little of me in the performance. I did them because I felt it was required of me and I used to feel angry about it. At a certain point, I decided, I would not do these any more and so perhaps these images came out of that store of anger, that reservoir of remembered rebellion," she says now.

"In the last few shows, I don't think I have been as strongly feminist as I once was. In my earlier shows, there was much more. I remember thinking a lot about *karwa chauth*, the day when Indian women fast for their husbands' health and longevity. You can see clearly where this practice originates. Any married woman who was looking at the plight of the widows of her family would know that she needed her husband alive and well so that she could stay alive and well. The other thing that fascinated me was the mother-son relationship which seems to inform everything including popular culture. Then there's nag panchami, when snakes are worshipped. But for an artist, I don't think there's a button with which you can turn on and off your preoccupations or your concerns. I have worked with themes and each theme has had something to do with something in my psyche. Perhaps it

would be best to say that the human situation is always present and is always of concern,” she says.

“In 2003, I had a show called 'Dream Home'; I think I was trying to spoof the idea of real estate advertising, the way in which we are constantly being told that buying a home in this or that place will guarantee you happiness. The commercials and advertisements, the hoardings all talk about places like Alibagh and Lonavla as if they are paradises. But actually what they are doing is to ruin the countryside and turn it into a slum. They show you images of green woods and lovely fields and farms and actually what you are getting is a row house in the middle of thousands of row houses, all of which are alike. So there is this whole irony to all this that: you're going there to get your dream home and actually it's as if everyone has been sold the same dream. The show was a take-off, a parody of all this.”

Meera Devidayal's paintings generally combine multiple elements from metal sheets to stickers, from photographs to taxi doors. The images are as diverse: from flamingos to migrant workers. Do these grow by accretion?

“It's a combination of the image and the idea that I portray. I suppose I begin and then of course I sketch a bit and do rough drawings to plan the painting. Because it has to work as an artwork for me and not just an idea. The visual is the most important but content is also important. The visual gets you started and then the content follows. So how I arrive at the final image involves a bit of trial and error. It's really just by drawing. And of course since the last couple of years, I have been using photographic images and some of that work happens in the computer. Now I don't always sketch it, I play around on the computer, try out things there.”

Technology then allows for what she calls a 'short-cut' method. “I am not all that technically competent,” she adds. “In the mills show I had to work with experts to do certain things for me. Each work was sometimes a composite of two or three images and there were a lot of different things to be done. I can

do basic Photoshop but I can't do the really complicated stuff. I worked with somebody who did what was to be done, the technical side."

The show, 'A Terrible Beauty' also has some video components. Senior painters like Lalitha Lajmi and Mehlli Gobhai seem rather struck by Devidayal's courage in striking out in this direction. Lajmi says, "I think one of Meera's strengths is that she will use what she needs. She changes media when she needs to. For instance, now she has she used film and that's quite something."

Devidayal admits, "I don't know anything about video. I felt that some of the things I wanted to say could only be said using video so I worked with a video editor. In some ways, I don't think it's a good thing. The process of drawing it and discovering it on paper yourself is a more magical process than just having somebody put this here and that there and save. But certainly it has helped me, I have started using my camera more, I don't know whether that is good or bad. I don't know whether using the computer to do things to the images is good or bad. I suppose it is just a different thing."

For Devidayal believes in the power of change. "Things do change. Painting is at the base of all of it for me. Painting itself has taken on so many dimensions. I have been experimenting with these dimensions since 1977. I have been using collage, a mixture of photography and painting for a long time, before the computer came along. Then I started using screen-printing combined with painting. This mixing and matching and using different elements in my work has been an ongoing thing. The mills show was the first show which was largely video based but I have used it before."

Meera Devidayal's three daughters all have strong opinions about their mother's work. Namita Devidayal is a well-known writer and with veteran journalist Bachi Karkaria, director of the annual Times Literary Carnival which is held at Mehboob Studios in Bandra. Rachana Shah is a graphic designer who has relocated to India after stints in London and Morocco where

she lived with her husband, the writer Tahir Shah. Gauri Devidayal acquired a law degree from University College, London and became a chartered accountant, specializing in tax law. She and her husband run 'The Table', a fine dining restaurant. Gauri believes that her mother has been an “an important part of my education. She has been very strong about imparting the best education, I mean that's been her inspiration to us and she is a huge support and has always made us think independently and given us the confidence to be independent women. I think I can speak for all my sisters. It's made us very confident. I really respect her a lot for that. She's a friend to us, obviously we call her when we have any problems. She is a very smart, grounded and a practical person. I think that's sort of my summary of the relationship I share with her.”

Namita Devidayal, author of *The Music Room* (Random House, 2009) and a novel, *Aftertaste* (Random house, 2011) agrees though she puts a different and writerly spin on the confidence thing. “She really was ahead of her time and right from when I was a child, she gave me the kind of confidence to do things that very few girls are given especially in India. So she always made me feel like I had the right to dream about anything in my life and get it. Almost to the extent that she made me a bit too overconfident and I got a few knocks later on. But I still had that strength to deal with them because she used to make us feel like queens. We were raised in a way where we weren't differentiated as boys or girls so we really have the confidence that allows us to think quite differently without compromising. She really went out of her way for me because I was her first born and like a lot of parents do, she did put some of her own unfulfilled aspirations into me which has both good and bad results. So I started by being a very high achiever; then of course I became myself and toned down on all that and it balanced out but it's great because, you know, there are a lot of times a mother does have to like really be a tiger mom because children are often not ready to really figure out

their own way. So, one of the major things, she introduced me to was classical music, which then became a kind of underlying current in my life. She is a very remarkable woman, given our background. She really broke the mould and I think in today's times having a mother, who tells you go out and rock the world is a very big thing."

Although Gauri was held to be good at art, she never felt any urge towards it. "People said I was good at it but it was just not my inclination. I'm much more the logical sort, I love maths, I love law and I think also because both my older sisters who are much older than me, they are nine and twelve years older so they were in the creative space as well, one is a graphic designer and one is a writer, so I think I didn't want to be in anyone's shadow but most of all, I think, it's a matter of not being made that way."

Meera Devidayal did not insist on her daughters taking art seriously. "In fact," Gauri recounts, "she used to take art classes at home and I would often sit around. That's the thing, people did say that I was good at it but I was never interested in pursuing it."

Rachana came closest to being an artist, as a graphic designer. Was she inspired watching her mother as she grew up?

Did watching her mother painting ever inspire her?

"Um, not really," she says. "I have a very different sense of aesthetics. Because she didn't study art formally and I studied graphic design formally. I come from a very different school of thought. There isn't much of an overlap; I don't paint and my work is very technical in terms of production. So actually I wasn't really influenced by her but she really helped me. I really wanted to study abroad, I wanted to go to the best design school, she supported me and helped me in every way she could."

The four women are still close. Gauri says, "We have big fights. The three of them do yoga together and go to mum's place for breakfast afterwards so I join them there. Invariably

we end up getting into some argument or the other, whether it's about her profession or my profession or something. The thing is that my mum has always been very ambitious for us, which is good and bad. As in, she wants us to do well, but she is sometimes unable to recognize that's it okay to fail sometimes. She doesn't like us to fail at anything and that, I think, means I don't deal with failure well. That's a double-edged sword because I have become something of a perfectionist; I work very hard to avoid failure. Therefore I am good at what I do, but when something goes wrong for whatever reason, I'm not able to deal with it. I can't blame her or anything but her attitude to success has definitely moulded me. My husband often tells me that I don't live in the real world. He says that I have lived a very sheltered life, where everything has worked for me. This is something I don't agree with because I think, I had some part to play in things working out well. Now, I think she has been through her own revolution and now she follows Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev and we have seen a big change in her. As I was growing up, she played a big part as to who I was and now when I have the maturity to understand things, I can't blame her for who I am today. I am responsible for this. I wouldn't say because of her but it was a huge impact on me as I was growing up, I have become this perfectionist and it's not okay."

It is quite a breath-taking experience to talk to three women who do not seem to conform to the Indian stereotype of dutiful daughters who only praise their mothers. For instance, Rachana says, "To be very honest with you, her style of work is not one of my favourites, I think I liked her earlier styles; she's very good at picking up details from photographs and mosaics and tiles and replicating them in fabrics so in terms of her ability to copy details, I really admire that and also her miniature paintings. I am not entirely in tune in some of the qualities that she picks up, sometimes they are too intellectually driven."

But then she says frankly: "She's not one of my favourite

painters. I personally feel her work is too cerebral, too intellectual. She speaks to a small class of people, those who read, those who understand her references and her sense of humour. These are very small circles. But that's just my personal opinion, it's not like, I know it comes across as criticism. I can name artists who when you see their work, it's an immediate connect. I think because she didn't have any formal training, you can see the struggle between the elements which she uses in the composition of her work, it's not really her fault. I think it may be just that I have a problem, not her."

Lalitha Lajmi, the noted painter and filmmaker Guru Dutt's sister, found her a "young, vibrant and gracious lady. She was very well-spoken and was very passionate and good with her work." Lajmi feels that they have not had much contact because of the nature of the city; she lives in north Mumbai and Devidayal in the 'deep' South. The painter Mehlii Gobhai has watched her work over the twenty years of their acquaintance, ever since he returned from New York, with great attention. Once again geography plays a role in the friendships and relationships of the artists of the city for Gobhai says, "We were neighbours when I lived in Darbhanga Mansions on Carmichael Road and we could drop in on each other and look at work in progress. I enjoyed very much her early work where she was doing wonderful interiors of ancient homes with old tiles, pieces of cupboards and things like that. She stopped doing that which is a pity as I liked those very much. But then one of her strengths is that she is constantly changing."

Gobhai also remembers, "some wonderful things with open taxis and half opened doors. She has a great appreciation of kitsch and she uses it very often and uses it well."

Bhagwat Devidayal tells us a story that he thinks sums up his wife: "She insisted that she wanted to visit her father's textile mill in Orissa which is closed. Even though the current chief minister of Orissa is her friend, we could not make it happen. Then one day, Meera said, 'No, we're just going to go there'. I sometimes do travel to Orissa myself and she said, 'Please go

and check what's happening in the mill.' So I went and I introduced myself to the workers who were sitting at the gate on a dharna and they received me well and I brought back the news to her and then she said, 'To hell with rules and regulations, I am landing up'. And so she, her brother who used to manage the mill at one time and I, just landed up at the gates of the mill. She walked up to the workers and requested them to take her inside because legally we are not allowed to go in. They immediately said, 'Of course, madam, we remember you from when you were a child.' That's the kind of determination she has. And that's also evident in these plants," he says, indicating the potted plants that dot their home, "Some have been in this house for thirty-one years. Now that's lot of determination, a lot of care, and a lot of love. That's Meera."

We quote Pablo Neruda, the poet, who once said that a poem is never finished, only abandoned. How does Meera Devidayal decide when a painting is finished? "That is a very dicey thing and I have to say that tendency to over work and not know when to stop and sometimes I have actually spoiled something in the process. It should have been left and then you say that, 'No, I'll do more' and in that process you ruin it. As you grow more in whatever you are doing one should get more to the 'less is more.' That's been one of my constant endeavors to try and arrive at the 'less' stage rather trying to reach the 'more' stage. That's always a struggle."

by Srishti Khurana and Shobha Bhaskaran

With inputs from Anjani Patel, Shivangi Srivastava, Saloni Anand, Aman Sharma and Sameer Pachasara



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAMTA KALAMBE

Flavia Agnes

One day, Mary Fonseca (name changed to protect identity) left her matrimonial home, a one-bedroom apartment where she lived with her husband and daughter, to go to work. At the time, she was a temporary teacher in a primary school. Her husband, who came from a wealthy family, had stopped working because of his mental health problems. They had already been having tiffs; one of the most important causes being that Mary had given birth to a daughter. Her husband and his family wanted a son. “I never understood this attitude,” Fonseca says, “I didn't know why my beautiful daughter was a 'problem'. I was one of five sisters and I can't remember my family, an ordinary middle-class family, ever being bothered by the fact that we were girls.”

When Mary got home that evening, she found the house empty. She was not sure what to think but she hoped that it was only because her husband had taken a temporary break and taken their daughter to stay with his parents. She waited for two days for her husband and child to return and then decided to go and look for them at her in-laws' place, a posh residence in an up-market suburb.

There, the maid who clearly recognised her, refused to open the door to her. Mary was told that the family had gone shopping and her daughter had gone with them. She went to her daughter's school the next day but the girl was not in class. That was when she began to suspect that her child had been taken away from her.

“But then I thought: ‘They didn’t want a grand-daughter. They wanted a grand-son. Why would they do this?’ I tried to tell myself I was just imagining things,” she says.

And so Mary clung to the hope that her husband would return and things would go back to ‘normal’. When three days passed and nothing had changed, Fonseca knew she had to find help.

“I ran from pillar to post to no avail. I tried everyone, the legal aid centre of the church, the special cell to help women in police stations but no one did anything. Then someone told me about Flavia Agnes and her organization and I landed up there,” she says.

Fonseca calls Flavia Agnes ‘an angel,’ who took up her case and fought it for her. Fonseca got her child back and started putting her life back in order, and was able to go back to her studies. Agnes helped Fonseca make her daughter her priority once again. She says, “If I had not met Flavia, I don’t think I would have ever got my daughter back.”

*

There is a Flavia Agnes who writes books, helps set up institutions and advocates passionately and powerfully for women’s rights. She is a public personality with an air of someone who will brook no opposition, who will fight to the finish for what she knows to be right.

And then there is the Flavia Agnes who will sit down with Mary Fonseca in the evening and will listen to her through the night, woman to woman, helping her work it out. It is this Flavia Agnes who will give up her Sunday rest to go to the aid of a client, who will simply shrug away the mention of money and say something like, “Pay me when you can.”

Majlis, the legal and cultural resource centre that she founded describes her on its website as,

“...a women’s rights lawyer. A pioneer of the women’s movement, she has worked consistently on issues of gender

and law reforms. As co-founder of Majlis, a legal and cultural resource centre, her primary engagement has been to provide quality legal service to women and children.

“She has played an important role in bringing women's rights to the forefront within the legal system and in contextualizing issues of gender and identity. A prolific writer, she has provided incisive analysis of many social trends and legal reforms including domestic violence, minority law reforms, secularism and human rights. Significant among her many publications is her autobiography *My Story Our Story... Of Rebuilding Broken Lives* (2014, Majlis) which has been translated into several languages. Other publications include *Law & Gender Inequality—The Politics of Woman's Rights in India* (1999, Oxford University Press) and *Family Law Vol 1 and Vol 2* (2010, Oxford University Press) amongst others.

“She is one of the proponents of legal pluralism. Within the premise of 'reforms from within' she has played an important role in reforming the Christian personal laws as well as advancing the rights of Muslim women. Her more recent engagement has been with issues of democracy, secularism and identity politics. Majlis has worked consistently in countering the rising wave of Hindu fundamentalism in the country. After the communal carnage in Gujarat, India in 2002, she initiated a legal advocacy program for sexually violated woman in relief camps and subsequently has brought out a publication titled, *Of Lofty Claims and Muffled Voices*” (2002, Majlis).”

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Here's a tip.

Don't ask Flavia Agnes what it's like to be a female lawyer.

We did.

“I was female. I wanted to do this. I wanted to become a lawyer, so what is it to be a female lawyer? Can't I be a female lawyer?” she asks.

Might there be some challenges only a female lawyer might have to face?

“I did not feel or face anything maybe because I was much older by the time I became a lawyer and I was also well known as I had written extensively on domestic violence, by the time I became a lawyer, so I never faced any such situation. People already knew who I was they knew that I was married and separated from a marriage, maybe I am not the right person to answer these questions, you should ask somebody younger. I am not saying there are no problems but I did not face any.”

We chose to write about Flavia Agnes, because she exemplifies courage in every aspect of her life. Many colleagues say that one of the most admirable of traits is how sharp and straightforward she is with everyone. She throws herself into the fight for every one of her cases, putting herself in the shoes of each and every client.

My Story Our Story...Of Rebuilding Broken Lives is an autobiographical account that ends with her founding Majlis. Our account takes up her story from that point onwards. We relied heavily on her brave and honest narration for details of her early life.

Flavia Agnes' struggle for selfhood began in December 1967 after an arranged marriage to a seemingly nice man went badly wrong. Having been brought up in a peaceful environment by a loving unmarried aunt, Agnes grew up only around women. Hardly had a month passed before her husband was using violent words which escalated soon into physical violence. No mercy was shown even as she became pregnant with her first child. As the child grew within her, the violence grew too. Agnes speaks honestly of how she did not leave for fear of becoming a social outcast.

What is terribly moving in her book is the fear she describes. This was brought about not only by the violence that was routinely inflicted on her but also because of the great insecurity she faced. This was not just about when the next blow might land; the instability drilled down to every level.

There might be loads of food in the house on certain days. Her husband would bring in chocolates and ice cream for his children. But there would be other times when there was no money to even buy milk for the children. As she was not working at the time, she could not buy these necessities herself and had to ask him for money for them. This might provoke another beating.

She tells the story that so many women tell. That the relatives would blame her, even if indirectly, by asking her, 'What is it that you do that provokes him?' This is to blame the survivor of the violence, not the perpetrator. Then they would tell her not to provoke him, to reach out to him and to support him. This is to make even the solution something that the survivor has to handle. Agnes could not make these well-wishers understand that his violence was not within her control, that she had no power over him. But in a patriarchal society, every attempt is made to excuse the man—the power centre—and to lay the blame on the women. Through her entire book, no one in her family or in her environment seems ever to have suggested that her husband should be the one who needed to change, that he was the one with the anger management issues, that he should be reaching out with love and respect rather than with a belt and a blow.

Realising that her husband's power over her was not just physical but also economic, Agnes began to look for ways to become self-reliant. She began with tutoring children for sixty rupees a month. Her attempts at independence catalysed further violence, forcing Agnes to leave home but each time she would return for her children. Leaving home with the children was not possible. Temporary shelter at relatives and friends would backfire forcing her to return. To escape the dark and solemn evenings at home, she began to attend church every evening where she met someone from a newly evolving group called Forum Against Rape.

She began to work there, discovered her gift of writing, and met women who shared a similar ideology about marriage and

family which gave her the courage to free herself from the chains of marriage. She filed for judicial separation.

After several unsuccessful attempts at gaining custody of her children, Agnes finally won her battle. She acquired a law degree, completed her post-graduation in law and even an M.Phil degree from the prestigious National Law School at Bangalore. She co-founded Majlis, to help women battling similar wars, by sharing her own experiences. With the same hunger for freedom, Agnes paves the path of liberation for these women today. Her courage and strength continues to shine on.

My Story Our Story...Of Rebuilding Broken Lives has had a great impact on many of its readers. Bishakha Datta, who now writes and films non-fiction, works on gender and sexuality, runs Point of View in Mumbai and serves on several non-profit boards, says: “When I was in my twenties, I had just come back from the United States, where I had studied journalism. I was just getting interested in women's rights activism. And I came across this little book called *My Story Our Story...Of Rebuilding Broken Lives*. This was long back in 1989, and at that time domestic violence was an area of silence; no one spoke about it. And certainly no woman spoke about her own experience of undergoing domestic violence. So when you ask me how I know Flavia, it isn't Majlis, the real beginning was in 1989. I read the book and I still have two or three copies. I found it unbelievable: that somebody could talk about her own experience of domestic violence, so openly, so honestly. Because it is obviously very painful, it's not about it being a matter of shame or anything; it's about the pain of it. That somebody could even talk about this so openly and with so much detail; that she could describe her own struggle, not just the physical part of it but also the struggle she went through to get out of that situation and to rebuild her life. Frankly, that was the first time I really understood what domestic violence can do and what it means because before that I didn't know—or I thought I didn't know—anybody, who had

experienced domestic violence. It had a shattering impact on me. And I started volunteering at the domestic violence helpline after that.”

From the chrysalis of that battered woman has emerged the powerful lawyer who fights for women's rights. We asked Flavia Agnes how she prepares for a case. “As any other lawyer does. As any one does. How do you prepare for an examination? You have to know everything, right? In the same way, you have to know all the facts of the case; you have to be well informed about the law and how it affects your case; and you should know how to put your case across. There is nothing much more to it than that. I feel it's like answering a board paper, it depends on how much you know, you have to prepare well and go, and then you have to communicate what you know, it's the same thing. The only difference is that in a courtroom if you do not know the law or you make a mistake, the judges shout at you,” she says with a grim smile.

“I believe in meeting with my client as much as possible,” she adds. “If you were to meet one of my clients, you would only see a problem. When I meet my client, I am already asking her questions so that I will know the case thoroughly. It's as if I am already making the first draft of my argument inside my head. I argue their case with them, talking as if I am opposing them, preparing them for the confrontation in the court. I know all my cases like the back of my hand because I know my clients as people not as problems.”

The first five or six years, she says, were ordinary, dealing with the problems that every lawyer has, of finding one's feet in the courtroom and understanding the way in which the judiciary expresses its wisdom in the nuts and bolts of courtroom processes. She feels that the first case in which she made her mark was when she argued for the law to change to allow Christian women to get divorces on the grounds of cruelty in 1997.

“It was before a full bench and we struck down the opposition which insisted that Christian women could only ask

for divorce when they could prove that cruelty had been combined with adultery. After that Christian women in Maharashtra could get divorce on the grounds of cruelty alone. So if you say a case of historical significance, then that's a very important case. On an emotional level, there are many important cases but in terms of significance this was one."

She remembers a difficult domestic violence case: "My client was a woman who wanted to commit suicide because she had had a baby daughter and the whole family would taunt her because she had borne a female child. But then she wondered what would happen to her child when she died, who would look after her child? So she poisoned her child so that the baby would not suffer alone. Then she took poison but the child died and she survived. She was told that she could be charged with first-degree murder. Later, a note was found saying that she blamed her father-in-law for making her life so miserable that she wanted to kill herself. When she was unconscious or semi-conscious, the family made up another note, saying that she exonerated her father-in-law, compared him to God. She was made to say that she was hypersensitive and that it was her fault that she had tried to kill herself and she was forced to sign it. She thought this was a compromise that might keep her out of jail. So she got together with the husband again and had another child. When the child was five years old, the husband ran away with that child, and when she was asking for custody, the husband and lawyer said that she had murdered and killed one child and now she might want to kill the other. So it was a really difficult case. We fought this case for seven years," she says.

But she adds a note of warning. There are no easy victories in these matters. "There are many cases, child sexual abuse cases, the father-in-law abusing his daughter-in-law, grandfather molesting the grand-daughter. These are gruesome cases. They are also not overnight victories. You can't say that you've won even when a case is decided in your favour."

In an interview by Madhushree Datta carried on the India domain of Global Feminism: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship (Sound & Pictures Archives for Research on Women, SPARROW, 2003), Agnes says: "I don't think there is a women's movement in a sense that we understood it in the 1980s. There are certain campaigns for women's rights. We come together for certain issues. But I don't think there's a women's movement that speaks in a single voice".

We asked her to expand on what she meant.

"I don't see it as possible. There are Dalit women's movements in different parts of the country, each fighting for different problems, some asking for labour rights, some for forest rights. They don't come together with middle-class women nor do middle-class women know much about their needs and situations. For us, here the most important issue is violence against women. We prioritise that and work on legal remedies. We concentrate on it not because there was a gang rape in Delhi or something happened in an abandoned mill in Mumbai. This has been our area of endeavour for the last twenty-five years. And we are the only organization that helps women at this stage. I think the women's movement is concerned with campaigns for changes in law, but they do not work on implementation or making laws accessible. They don't worry about the fact that most women don't know their rights. You don't. Chances are your teachers don't. They may teach you many things, but they don't teach you about your rights because they don't know them either. Academicians may have read their theory books and know the names of great feminists, and that is well and good. But they don't know the realm of rights. Most women don't. So what is the point of asking for new laws, when women don't know what to do with those laws or how to use them? They get married and begin to have problems and don't know if they can complain, they don't know

who to complain or where to complain. To me, if an educated woman kills herself because she does not know her rights, something is wrong with our system, with our education.

“Think about it like this. If you don't like a job you come out of it, you take something else. You choose to be an air hostess, then you have a bad experience and you don't want to be an air hostess, you find a way out. You are educated and you have another option but in marriage we don't think so at all. So what is it that makes women deal with situations in this manner? There are many basic things that we don't know. For instance, many women are not sure what constitutes a valid marriage and what is not a valid marriage. What and where are my rights? If something goes wrong, who do I contact? What do I do? Where is my local police station? What is a registered marriage? What happens to my rights if my marriage is not registered? Where do I go and register my marriage? These are very simple things,” she says.

“Or take abuse,” she continues. “I am a woman who is being abused. What do I do? Where do I go? I need a lawyer. I know I need a lawyer but I find that the lawyer is exploitative. So you may have all the laws, you may know the laws also, but you don't know how to access your rights and for us every training that we do at the student level, teachers level, any level, the first step is to know how to access rights, how do I protect them. Suicide is not an answer and a better law is not the answer. That will not stop suicide, a better law will not stop rape. You can hang all the rapists but rape will still happen. If I don't know how to secure my environment or if I cannot secure my environment, what good does a law do? What are the situations I need to avoid? If something happens, what should I do?” she asks.

“What makes girls very vulnerable is when something happens to them, they don't want to confide in their parents. And why that happens, why that silence falls, is the biggest question. Why don't we live in homes which give our girls full freedom and full security and a feeling of confidence, of being

wanted? Whatever happens to a girl, whether it's rape or harassment for dowry, can a girl go to her mother and confide in her? Can she be sure that her mother will treat her problems with respect? Because everyone has problems and they overcome them in one way or another or learn to live with them. Why is it that women seem to think that suicide is the only response to having a problem? So, better laws will not change the situation, it's our whole approach to life that has to change," she says.

Agnes recounts another incident: "I came back from the IAS Academy at Mussoorie, just imagine this is the IAS. They were telling me about a girl who is madly in love with a guy. She comes from the upper strata of society; he doesn't. Everyone knew that his marriage had been fixed in his hometown. He told her that he would go there, he would convince his parents, he would talk his way out of the marriage. So off he went but, I believe, at the airport only the girl's family had a big procession to welcome him. That was all it took. He sent her a message saying 'I am sorry. It will not work out between us'. The girl was shattered; her entire life was ruined. Everybody around her could read the signs. They knew that the boy was going to behave this way. Only she didn't know and she went into a depression and when they were supposed to come back for the next year of their training, she was a broken woman. This is what happens at the IAS level, at the peak of the pyramid of our society? What's wrong? Why are these girls so badly affected? Perhaps she feels she can no longer face society. Perhaps she just lost balance. This is not an isolated case. So what is the point in education? There must be something wrong in education itself. According to me that should be the most important thing in this article or anywhere else: how do I secure my life? How do I secure my rights? I think that is the mantra everybody should know."

At a conference organized by the non-governmental organisation on adolescent sexuality, Aangan, Ms Agnes was on the dais speaking about how silence can be dangerous, how a

certain kind of reluctance to talk about sexuality can actually get in the way of justice, how our inability to talk about sex can weaken a case of abuse or even rape. She offered the example of a woman coming into the police station with her young daughter. The mother, she said, tells the police officer that 'galatkaam' (something wrong) has happened with her daughter. The young police officer, she says, is also embarrassed and does not know how to ask what he has to find out. So the young mother repeats what her daughter has told her that "*Budda* uncle ne '*keeda*' *daala* (the old man inserted a worm, but the word *keeda* also has the idiomatic implication of penis). In court, the defence says that the record says that the accused inserted a '*keeda*.' He produces a picture of a worm, an earthworm perhaps, and asks the child whether this is a '*keeda*.' The girl says it is and the case is now dangerously compromised. All because we cannot call a spade a spade."

Agnes says: "The problem is that none of you are married."

She laughs and asks again, "Any of you married?"

We admit that we aren't.

"Suppose you're married and someone asks you, 'Ma'am how was your first night? When you had sex the first time, how did you feel? Please describe it.' There see, you're laughing."

We are.

"You start laughing because you are uncomfortable. But this was not rape, it was just consensual sexual intercourse. So how do you talk about that? There's step 1, step 2, step 3, isn't there? What did you feel? What did he feel? Were you happy? Do you feel normal? Go on and describe it. Can you do this? Now reverse roles. Your friend has married. Will she be able to answer these questions? Will you be able to ask her? Will she be able to tell you? How do you expect a person socialized like that to describe what happened? A mother in a slum may know that something has happened to her daughter but she doesn't have the language to describe it. So what they say is borrowed from the films: '*Izzat loot liya*', '*Galat kaam kiya*', '*Ang pe haath lagaya*' (Her honour has been destroyed, something bad was

done to her, he put his hand on her body, etc.) But what does all this mean? That is the kind of language that they are accustomed to, and so that's what they use. But what does it actually mean in law? Our laws are very specific. They tell you that anal intercourse comes under this section, attracts this penalty, so also for vaginal intercourse, oral intercourse. There are very specific penetrations ... now all of them constitute a case. But if women are not able to say this, the police will not be able to write it. Women are not brought up to use that language. Nobody teaches them. I once was with a group of married women. I, the women and the course coordinator who was a man. I said let's set aside *balaatkaar* (rape) for a while and let's talk about consensual sex. What happens? And once we have decided that, we can go on to say what is *balaatkaar*. They could not say. So I said, 'Okay, forget that, how do you become pregnant?' And even that they weren't able to talk about this either. Then they said, 'Let the man go out', and these were social workers in the community," she says with a sigh.

"One woman put her finger right on the problem: 'If we're not able to talk about this in front of him, then how will we tell the police?' If you want him to go out, what will happen when the police are in the room? It began a discussion about how to talk about these subjects. Such difficulty, such blushing, just to talk about ordinary everyday sexuality. Even if I ask you, 'Okay tell me exactly what happens when you're with your boyfriend' none of you will be able to tell and then the law expects the survivor to be graphic. For example, in one case the girl was illiterate, she had never gone to school, so she had difficulty describing what happened to her. When asked about the father raping daughter, she was asked about how long it lasted: six minutes, one hour, or six hours. The girl said that it had lasted six hours and everybody laughed. The girl had no concept of time. And then she is discredited and the case can be dismissed because she is seen as giving false testimony. Here she is, a young girl, never been to school, and standing up for her rights. Around her, there are men, all men. The judge is a man, the

lawyer, the prosecutor, the policeman, all men. She's alone, she's ten years old, she's been raped, and she must tell these men, again and again, what happened to her and she must never make a mistake. She must face cross-examination and if she gets a detail wrong, she is discredited.

"In the case of a gang-rape, it gets worse. Imagine what she's able to say, what she's able to not say. But perhaps it is even more difficult to imagine the questions. What did he do to you? How did he do it? How many times did you feel 'warmth' inside you? Did you feel good when you felt the warmth? Now what is the young child supposed to be saying and thinking when she is getting raped? And what is this about feeling good? She's so scared about what's going to happen. Somebody's holding her arms down, someone's gagging her mouth, and she's being raped. Her clothes are being taken off. What will she experience?

"And the people asking these questions have no idea what this girl has gone through AT ALL. Nobody's bothered. Unless you're familiar with the language, how do you know what is meant to be reported, or written in an FIR?"

"The female police officers are also young, also self-conscious... she won't write down what is being told to her even if someone is giving details. Then the woman being prosecuted is also self-conscious. She won't tell. How can the court expect a proper description? So there's such a wide gap from what exactly the situation is and what the law is. The police also wrote '*keeda daala*,' mother also wrote '*keeda daala*.' Nobody asks where the '*keeda*' comes from. So you cannot get an understanding of rape through that. There were violations. Now where is the '*keeda*' coming from? Now we'll never know. Nobody asked the child.

"Unless you're taught all this in school, how will you know? Even as a law student, a post-graduate student, or whatever, you have to learn how to speak about sex because the law will not move unless you speak. If someone tells you, your daughter, your friend, that she has been raped, you cannot

leave it at that. First you ask her, how many times did it happen? How did it happen? Then you explain this and see that the police record it correctly. Unless you can be as accurate as that, how will this game stop? According to me, in high school, in college, everybody should be taught all this...rather than saying what is the law? What is working? What is not working? We need to learn to use language to describe what happens to us.”

The problem, we suggest, is that in a situation where even sex education is seen as suspect, how will women learn to talk about sex and sexuality when they are always being told it is not part of our *sanskriti*, our culture?

“Rape is all we talk about. Rape is forcible sexual intercourse, but if we don't talk about intercourse, then how will it all stop? Are we not capable? What are we saying? Women should go and report, and know what to say. We all agree on this. But we do not want to give women access to the language that will allow her to access to the law. On one level, '*sanskriti*' demands silence from women. On another level, the law demands you to speak. It also demands accuracy. The woman must say what happened to her. We are speaking English here and we all know the words for these acts. What happens to a girl child who only speaks Hindi? Or Marathi? What are the words for anal intercourse? For oral sex? Does she know them? Does the social worker know? How will they communicate to the law what happened? So much has to change before we can invoke the law to help the woman. She must be able to give details. She must say he took me here, he pulled off my clothes, and he gagged me. And then when she goes home in blood- and semen-stained panties and tells her mother what has happened, her mother must not give her a bath and wash the clothes or destroy them. They must be kept for evidence. Do we know all this?”

Agnes sees the worst side of human nature again and again. How does she deal with such cases on a daily basis?

“Without hope, you cannot function. The young people

working with me are my source of hope; that they still want to come work with me to learn is a source of hope. The women whose cases we fight become stronger after the case is won. They become confident that they will be able to move on in life. We have seen that this confidence can be infectious: even the children begin to succeed, they do very well in exams. There is this myth that children from broken families don't do well. That's nonsense. All my children did extremely well in education. Even after going through the troubles we did, they did everything that they wanted. They won awards, they won gold medals. Women can move on."

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The easiest tag that is attached to Agnes is that she is a feminist. Here is the conversation as it happened:

SCM Student: Ma'am are you a feminist?

Agnes: I am. Do you consider yourself a feminist? What does it mean to you?

SCM Student: Yes. What does it mean to you?

Agnes: No you first.

SCM Student: For me it means seeing woman as equal, neither superior nor inferior but equals.

Agnes: Neither superior nor inferior but different. They are not superior or inferior but they are also not the same as men. They are different. Their needs are different. To me it means fighting for the rights of those women who are deprived of their rights and entitlements. You have to create conditions for women to have equal rights and that's been my work. Many people feel that being a feminist is a stigma, that being a feminist is being a man-hater. A feminist does not wear makeup; a feminist doesn't want to look good, a feminist will always wear shabby clothes, a feminist does not want to get married. There are so many misconceptions, down to that old one about wearing bras. Feminism has nothing to do with bras. At every public forum, strong women on the panel say

everything, that they are successful, they head corporates, they are successful but add, 'I am not a feminist. I am married, I have children and a loving husband'. They are afraid of this word. But I say, 'Excuse me, I don't know what it means to you but I am a feminist'. People reply: 'I am a normal person, I look after my family. I love to cook for my husband and children.' As though a feminist doesn't have to cook at home!

Tip two: Do not ask what Majlis means or why it was chosen as the name of an organization fighting for women's rights. Once again, we stepped in it. And Agnes pointed out our hidden biases.

SCM Student: What does Majlis mean? Why Majlis, why that word?

Agnes: What name should it have been? Majlis is a gorgeous word; it means 'association' and 'coming together'. It suggests collective action and the strength that comes together from uniting. What does Majlis indicate to you? Why does this question get asked? Everybody asks this. What comes up in your mind to ask this question?

SCM Student: It is not a common word. It has an Urdu origin.

Agnes: Fine. It's of Urdu origin. Hindi films are full of words of Urdu origin and no one asks, why did you use a word like that? So now, let me ask you another question. What is the next thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word Majlis?

SCM Student: That you work with Muslim women?

Agnes: Yes, that it is a Muslim organization. It is an Urdu word so the first thing they ask is how many Muslims are there. Next question: are you a fundamentalist? So Majlis means Urdu word; Urdu word means Muslim and Muslim means fundamentalist. We chose this name in 1991 before the Bombay riots. By the time the Bombay riots happened in 1992 and 1993, the authorities didn't even want us to register in that name. And that's the reason we kept the name; to prove the point of how difficult it is to be a Muslim in this world, to have Muslim identity. So imagine if you're born with it what you have to go

through. Even if you're not born with it and it's just a name, a word, things become difficult. For FCRA (Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, an act regulating the contributions NGOs may receive from abroad), for registration, for everything, they ask: are you a Muslim? It so happens that I am not and my colleague is not but imagine how difficult things would become if we were. However, we don't specifically work for Muslim women; we work for all women. So to answer the question we chose Majlis to give the organization a multicultural identity. So people ask us why we didn't name it Stree Shakti or Durga Vahini or something like that which are Sanskrit words. Again, Sanskrit means Indian, but if you have an Urdu word it does not equal Indian though we have lots of Urdu words in our Hindi films and we claim them quite proudly.

Agnes believes that change begins from within, from inside the minds of people. "It all begins with a change in socialisation, a change in the mind-set, a change in the way girls interact with boys, a change in the way boys think about themselves, about the power that they have. If women did not give them that power, they would not have it. It's not that boys have this power inherently. If you allow a boy to think he matters so much to you that he has the power to rape you, to discard you, to dump you, to marry you, to abandon you, to have an affair, to have another affair, then he will behave in that way. If you don't give him the power, he doesn't have the power. But this is something that you have to learn for yourself. I tolerated abuse for thirteen years and after that, one fine day, I said, 'This is enough and I am going to walk out'. The minute I walk out, the power ceases."

But walking out isn't that easy either. Agnes believes that society still thinks in binaries: a heteronormative pair is at the heart of our way of thinking.

"You have to be married, they say. You may have everything, a good job, a career, your own home, but if you're not married, they want to know what's wrong with you. You have to explain yourself. Some people even suggest that you need help. What's

happening here? I know so many young women who have jobs, careers, exciting lives and they find it difficult to contemplate getting married. When they go out with a man, they begin to discover that he isn't really what he makes himself out to be, he seems to care nothing about her work, he's so full of himself, he's not really sensitive. They don't see how they can marry, given the choices available."

So have things changed? Does Agnes see more women willing to fight back and say that they have had enough?

"Yes. There are many more. But they also feel broken by the time they reach that stage. I see a lot of professional women from out of town who live in Mumbai. They come here to work. They meet a boy and marry him. They set up house. They're both earning about the same amount of money. Their combined income is about two or three lakhs. Then she gets pregnant. She has a child. He starts an affair. One day, he just moves out, so she comes here and says: what are my rights? He's not paying the rent. But then we find he's gone off to the United States. She is still married to him. Now she wants to teach him a lesson. "I gave up my career because he wanted a child and now here I am, carrying the baby. I feel very angry and bitter. I want to file this case. I want to teach him a lesson.

"I tell her there is nothing in this that will teach him a lesson. The only lesson you have learned now is that you have to move on. Just ask him whether he is agreeable to a mutual consent divorce but she says 'No, I want my rights. I've spent so much. I do not want to give him a divorce' I argue that you've already wasted ten years of your life and you will ruin another ten years now just to teach him a lesson which he will never learn. In Bombay, real estate complicates things. The couple is generally living in a rented apartment. The lease runs out after eleven months. The man walks away. The woman and the baby are left with nowhere to go. If she's working, she is not entitled to anything. See, women are taught to think that once you're married and you have a child and a job, you're secure. But again and again, I see that it isn't like that at all. At least if they

own the house, even if he owns the house and he leaves, she has somewhere to stay and in Mumbai, that's not an easy thing, specially for a newly married couple.

“I have a case where this guy was earning 35 lakhs a month when he decided to walk out on his wife and three children. The good thing for her was that there was a flat, and she was staying in it. The first order for maintenance gave her one lakh a month to run her house. This may seem like a lot of money but she had to go from thirty-five lakhs a month to one lakh a month with three children to raise. And still the courts can come up with statements like alimony is a bonanza for women. Then the man decided to go to the US and claim that he has not got a job there so he can't pay. The woman is not working, naturally, as she has three kids to raise as per his standard. But the courts are biased against women from the upper strata of society. They ask questions like: why isn't she working? Is she a babysitter? But if a woman is working, then the courts say she is money-minded and cares only about her career. And then journalists do anti-women stories where they say that the guys have it so hard, those women are just enjoying themselves.”

It is clear that Agnes has a polemical style and a rhetorical manner that makes her a good lecturer and speaker.

“I was giving a lecture to some college lecturers at a refresher course and I asked them what they thought marriage is. They did not know. They kept talking in clichés: marriage is companionship, marriage is friendship, things like that. But in law, marriage is a contract; it's a legal contract which gives both parties certain rights. Now religions may have different ways of looking at things. They say marriages are made in heaven and so a man and a woman put together in this manner cannot be separated.

“The holy book may say that but the same holy book also condones slavery. So are you going to support slavery? What is your attitude to dalits? Is it the same as the holy book's attitude? Do you believe a gay man should be stoned to death? Should a woman taken in adultery be stoned until she is dead?

Is this your God? Is this your religion? You will find in the same religions great compassion, great gentleness. Why is it that we never choose the gentleness? Why is it that the Great Teacher's words, when they are made into religion, immediately turn into patriarchy? To me the Great Teachers of the world saw the all-pervasiveness of patriarchy and wanted to turn away from it, they wanted to turn society away from its attempts at controlling women. But as soon as they are gone, vested interests surface and economic motives are often more powerful than compassion and the desire for equality."

So are women a minority in a patriarchal Indian society?

"We don't call women a minority. We may consider women to be in need of certain protections if they are to overcome all the historical and social disadvantages that had led them to be considered to be the weaker sex. That means you have to create conditions, which would help them to be equal to men. I don't feel women are a minority. They may be, in natural numbers, but that's not the point.

"One of the things that work against women in India is that they have never been united. They are isolated by caste, by creed, by community. It's very difficult to bring women together on a common platform, even for voting purposes. Even if there's a woman candidate, women don't vote for her because she's a woman. You vote for the person your family votes for, or your community, or your area. Nobody votes for women because they are women; they vote because it is a woman from a certain party. And that is why we have that reservation system [where 33 per cent of the seats in local government are reserved for women], to bring women into the decision-making process and to create ways in which they can share power."

Agnes agrees that we are creating a category called women but also believes that this is unavoidable. "We are categorizing women but that is partly because women do have special needs. Women have to have maternity leave, men don't have to have maternity leave. Does that mean 'woman' is a category?

Well then, woman is a category.”

She also feels that Indian women have much farther to go, miles to go before they sleep, than their sisters in the West.

“Women are much more backward. Based on certain indicators, the progress in women has slowed down. When you look at employment, health, and even literacy rates, it is a slow work in progress. Men's literacy has improved, and so has women's literacy. But the gap is huge, so you have to look at that. We also have to look at what kind of rights do women get. For example, how many women have a property share? Do they have a bank account? Who controls the family finances? What is their health status? By looking into these questions, we can figure out how much women are actually valued in society.”

Her colleagues offer their viewpoints. Persis Sidhva, women's rights advocate with Majlis and Programme Coordinator of RAHAT—a collaboration between Majlis and the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Maharashtra, to provide socio legal support to survivors of sexual violence—who has worked with Agnes for five years tries to analyse the influence she has on them. “It's not just a professional influence she has on your life because she influences your thinking *on* everything *about* everything. For me as a lawyer, because I go to court, there is a lot for me to learn from her: how to strategize, what law to invoke and when, how to argue and that is great because any good senior will give you that knowledge; but what I think sets her apart is that she influences our way of thinking on so many things. If you read her writing, whatever she has said is prescient; five years later everyone else will wake up to that reality. So you know she has this knack of recognizing problems, of being able to tell what is likely to be a problem before everyone else is likely to see it.”

Shoba Ghosh, professor of English at the University of Mumbai who has long been associated with Majlis and other women's collectives says, “What I admire greatly about Flavia

is her constant struggle to integrate the different aspects of her life. Feminism is not something she does; it is the lens through which she makes meaning of the world. Her personal life, her grassroots activism, her 'feminist lawyering', and her intellectual engagements in her writing and lecturing, in a fundamental sense, fold into one another, indeed nurture one another. She is warm and humane, but uncompromising – so she will keep pulling you out of your comfort zones and throw your certainties into some crisis. I do not know anyone who is more—how shall I put it?—attentive to shifts, changes and developments in our contemporary moment. The minute there is an issue that concerns her, she puts her thoughts (always nuanced, often polemical) out there through her writings. Sometimes I find myself stunned by the speed and keen insight with which she is able to cut through to the heart of issues, even as the rest of us are struggling to make sense of them. This is the quality that has drawn me to her work from the very beginning.”

“To me,” Ghosh continues, “she has been a crucial and uncompromising internal voice of critique within the Indian women's movement since the 1980s. I know that some of the words I am using seem a bit hyperbolic, but I will venture to say that many of her critiques which were often unpopular even among feminists—such as on the movement's engagement with dowry, or with rape or domestic-violence laws—have actually turned out to be prescient, even prophetic. She anticipated many of the impasses that the women's movement seems to have driven itself into over the last two decades. For instance, she has always argued that the tendency to keep agitating for newer and newer laws may be counter-productive. She has constantly cautioned against picking up piecemeal issues such as marital rape, no-fault divorce, or the two-finger test. To her many issues that may have one meaning in other cultural contexts such as in the West get vastly complicated in our own. Unless our laws and agitations can resonate to the actual and very messy stuff of women's lives,

they might actually work against the very constituencies for which they are being enacted/fought. She was one of the earliest to argue against the Uniform Civil Code, even when other feminists were arguing for it. Now, almost all feminists share her position. Her work on law and women from minority communities is ground-breaking. She was an early and solitary voice calling attention to the role and responsibility of the natal family in domestic violence of various forms. She has shared with us the particular challenges of what she calls 'feminist lawyering'. Majlis keeps putting out into the public domain case studies of women whose struggles it has taken up. I could go on and on—which only testifies to the range of Flavia's engagements.”

Dr Mitra Mukherjee Parikh, Associate Professor, Head of Department, English, S.N.D.T. Women's University, Mumbai and Trustee at Majlis says: “Flavia is a wonderful lawyer not because she practices, writes and theorizes on juridical issues, but as an activist makes sure they are practiced and implemented. She will try to change the mindset of the people, the police, and the judge. She will make them look at the case from the eyes of the victim. She does not just articulate issues related to law and gender but also facilitates understanding of it with her rational approach. She is immensely hard working and gets passionately involved in the cases she is working on.”

One of her colleagues also told us of how Agnes often says she does not believe in leaving her mind alone. This 'not leaving her mind alone' is obviously something that has kept Agnes at the cutting edge of her discourse. Her thought process is so lively that each conversation with her was a learning experience. And a relearning experience.

By Arushi Dutt and Vanessa Carvalho

With inputs from Valencia de Souza, Nakita Rodrigues, Aquila Khan, Mamta Kalambe, Tanmayi Oak, Tejasvi Momaya and Rashmi Chauhan.



PHOTOGRAPH BY APARNA SHUKLA

C S Lakshmi

“Unless you document women's stories and women's work, how will future generations know what our history was? You may know your mother's name, you may know your grandmother's name but beyond that? Those women ancestors of yours must have existed, but who were they? You don't even know their names, never mind who they were, what they did, how they felt, how they lived their lives. I feel it's very important to know that. I feel we lose a little of ourselves when we lose our histories. We are the sum of these women and we have ignored them for too long. It is time to make things right again. Half the story of humanity has been left untold. So what we know is lopsided and inadequate for us to understand who we are,” says C S Lakshmi, founder of The Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW), a non-governmental organisation that won an award in 2014 from the Prince Claus Foundation in the Netherlands, for “...conserving and disseminating eclectic evidence of Indian women's struggles for a more just society; for uplifting women, inspiring dedication, energy and vision; for creating a powerful weapon in the battle to eradicate discrimination against women; for highlighting different ways of seeing, remembering and writing history, countering patriarchal versions and power structures; and for establishing a resource that makes rediscovery of women's histories possible and transmits the legacy to younger and future generations.”

But there's another side to her. Lakshmi is also known as Ambai, a famous and much-awarded writer in Tamil. Three volumes of her stories have been translated into English by

Lakshmi Holmström: *A Purple Sea* (Affiliated East-West Press, 1992), *In a Forest, A Deer* (Oxford University Press 2011) and *Fish in A Dwindling Lake* (Penguin, 2012). The second shared the Hutch-Crossword award for translated fiction. Additionally, there is *Two Novellas and a Story* (Katha, 2003) translated by C T Indra, P Seetharam and Uma Narayana. She has edited an anthology of writings about Chennai called *The Unhurried City* (Penguin Books, 2004). She received the Pudumaipiththan Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award of Tamil Literary Garden, University of Toronto, Canada, for the year 2008, and the Kalaigarnar Mu. Karunanidhi Porkizhi Award for Fiction in 2011. The University of Madras awarded her for excellence in literature in their centenary celebrations on International Women's Day in March 2011.

She has also written a warm and intimate memoir of her early years: *When I was Young: Walking Erect with an Unflinching Gaze* (National Book Trust, 2013). Our narrative picks up from where this book ends.

One of these roles, writer or archivist, would be enough for an ordinary woman. But in C S Lakshmi's case, one role segues, it would seem, into the other. Ambai says that SPARROW was hatched when she was working on a book on Tamil women writers. "I was reading their work and writing about it when it occurred to me that it was not enough for me to just read them. Many of them were alive and I felt I should go and meet them too," she says.

When she went to meet the writers it was to speak to them about their lives in order to understand how they write, why they write and what the life choices they have to make are. While on this journey she realized that unless one knows these aspects of women and their lives, one doesn't know much about them. "As a society, we can't know about women's history just by their actions. We have to know them in the round. We have to know about the politics of everyday life," she says.

It took a while—and a change of city—before this became a reality “When I came to Mumbai, I talked about this to some other like-minded people like Dr Neera Desai [(1925-2009), described by *The Economic and Political Weekly* as the front-runner of women's studies in India] and [noted feminist scholar] Dr. Maithreyi Krishna and they agreed with me that a women's archives was much needed. Women's archives were not something that was considered then at all. Basically they were thinking of documentation centres, which after sometime you can close down. Here I was talking about permanent archives for women's history and they said we would think about it. It took us quite some time to set it up. Initially what we started was a Reaching Out, a small group for outreach, with three of us, myself, Maithreyi and Jyoti Randive—a friend who was part of the Research Unit for Women's Studies. We used to bring out calendars and diaries and other material on women. This was the time when Forum Against Women's Oppression was also started. The 1980s were a very active period in the women's movement. Then in 1988 we decided that we had to register a trust. For women's studies, we needed more than just official documents. We thought that unless we archive this material how could people use it for research? There was a variety of material and not just what women wrote. We were thinking of a multi-dimensional archive which would contain lots of things: women's images in advertisements, in films, in film posters and scripts and cartoons and diaries and letters, oh so many things.”

India has always had a problem with archives and with keeping records. But the problem, Lakshmi maintains, is even more acute when it comes to the lives and times of women. This happens on both the grand scale and at the most intimate level, that of the family. She offers the example of a family she knew who were once making a family tree. “I was helping them. They had four sons so I noted that down, assuming that these were the only children. Some visits later they mentioned a married daughter. I said, ‘You told me that you had only four

sons.' To which the man replied, 'But in family trees, women don't count.' I said, 'You mean all these people came without women? Were they all born without mothers that you're refusing to put them in the family tree?'"

Horried, Lakshmi decided to go ahead and write the daughters' names down and to add the names of the other women in the family.

Lakshmi says, "I think it's as important to know your foremothers as it is to know your forefathers. Asking if women's history is important at all is the wrong question. I think all histories are important and no history should be forgotten. If we must write histories in the future, we must know what the past is. How will we make policies when we don't know how women lived? You can't make policies to improve something when you don't know it existed. You can't have good governance till you know what the politics of everyday life is. Air, water, food and so many things play a role. You can't make policies unless you know that."

It is easy to see that she cares passionately about her writing, which is imbued with a deep and intimate understanding of the ordinary woman caught in a crisis. But which comes first, the writer or the researcher? In other words, how does she distribute her time? "Being a writer and an independent researcher are both important to me," she says. "Research came into my life after I finished my Master's degree. But I see now that in my own way, I was constantly researching, even if at that time I didn't understand it as being research. And so the two weave into each other. In the field of research, the language you use is what seems to matter most. People say that the language I use in my research articles is personal and subjective, but I use the same material and the same references. For me, communication is very important. I like to present things in a way that people understand clearly so academic language always takes second place to clarity."

Lakshmi has found a way to balance the demands of these roles. "If I am going to start a story, I like to do it early in the

morning. I get up at four in the morning and then write that first paragraph or first page.” After that she says she can write the story anywhere whether in an office or in a crowd.

Research is much more demanding, she feels. “I have to be able to make time for field trips, for reading, for organising, raising funds and all that goes into making research happen. Right now, there is a research project, which I have already finished but which I have not been able to write up because there is so much SPARROW work to get through. I feel that I am able to do both SPARROW work and writing basically because I try to use my time as best as I can. I don't spend any time socializing, I don't attend weddings, parties and so there is plenty of time. But suppose I am writing a story and my friend or my friend's daughter comes up and says, 'I am feeling terribly low. Can I come and see you?' I will always say yes. A story can wait, but when a person needs me I have to be there. You can't make excuses. So there is a lot of work but adjusting it is in my control as I am not dependent on anybody else.”

Lakshmi says she does not believe in hierarchies. She tells a story that illustrates this. She had gone to a bank that had promised SPARROW some money for an exhibition they were going to mount. When she arrived, the secretary told her that the PRO had asked her to wait as she was in a meeting. So Lakshmi sat down and began to read a book. She read for two hours. Then the manager came out saw her and said, 'Have you been sitting here for all this time?'

Lakshmi said, 'Yes.'

The manager said, 'I forgot about you, I am so sorry. Please apologize to Dr. Lakshmi on my behalf.'

Lakshmi said, 'I am Dr. Lakshmi.'

The PRO was shocked. She explained that she had thought Lakshmi would have sent an assistant to collect the money.

Lakshmi said, 'I don't have an assistant. I come myself and collect all the money.'

The PRO told her secretary, 'Please give her the cheque immediately.'

Lakshmi is often described as a feminist. We ask her for her take on feminism. She seems surprised by this, surprised and faintly annoyed.

“You can't have a *take* on feminism. Feminism is not a theory or a concept outside my life; it is a part of my life. I don't think I start writing a story and say to myself: 'This is going to be a feminist story'. My stories are what I am and they will be informed by my thought processes and my beliefs. So I don't think feminism is an academic concept or theory or a framework which I can use to analyze things and then set aside and go about my daily life. If I couldn't live my beliefs then I feel that both my beliefs and my life would be useless. And finally I'd like to say that it isn't as if feminism is something that you must use to describe yourself. I feel that there are many feminists who don't even know they are feminists. Mothers who decide to educate their children, grandmothers who accept the inter-caste marriages of their grandchildren; women who leave whatever they have to their daughters as well as their sons; the mother who goes to the table and shares the food between the boy and the girl in equal measures; the teacher who gives equal importance to the girl and the boy in the class, these are all feminists as far as I am concerned. 'Feminist' is what you do, not what you call yourself.”

But there are often times when the teacher who accepts the male student and the female student as equals may go home and treat her daughter differently from her son. “I think it is impossible for us as human beings to be consistent in everything that we do,” she says. “Our decisions are sometimes sentimental and sometimes pragmatic. So a woman may make an extremely feminist decision at one level and at other level or in another situation, she may do something that is not normally considered feminist. But to me, she is still a feminist.”

She gives the example of her mother who stood by her in all the important decisions that Lakshmi made. “She supported my desire to study, for instance. Yet, she does the pooja rituals which I do not believe in, but to me that doesn't matter as long

as she doesn't force me to be like her.” So for Lakshmi her mother continues to be a feminist. “Even if she might be mildly surprised to be called one,” she says with a smile.

Definitions are tricky things and Lakshmi illustrates this: “There was a woman who has walked all the way from Burma to India during The Second World War [when Japan attacked Burma and the British retreated in 1942]. My team went and recorded her story. But then some people asked: ‘What is so feminist about walking from Burma?’ I could only say: ‘What isn’t?’ To me, SPARROW will not be constrained to conform to what someone feels fits in with a certain definition of feminism. I feel that in some way keeping some kind of record of what women do and what women have done is a feminist enterprise simply because patriarchal systems work by erasing women’s work. I feel that if you have done something in life, it must be written about.”

Feminism is not a yardstick. “I think many live feminist lives and in life things are such a struggle; I know people who call themselves feminists who have given dowry so that a daughter might get married. I also know what forces them to do it. I don’t want to be judgmental and tell other people how they should be feminists.”

Lakshmi and her husband, the filmmaker Vishnu Mathur, decided to opt out of parenthood so that they might lead the lives they wanted. “We wanted to live life without compromises. He wanted to make only art films, not even ad films where you have to tell lies. So we decided that we would take care of each other. I did not feel it was possible for me to bring a child into the world and then tell the child, ‘These are my principles, so I am not going to take you to McDonald’s. Nor will I say that I am not going give you an education I don’t believe in. I feel a child has to grow up in a society and understand it. In my own life, as I grew up, there were many decisions I took which definitely hurt my parents. It took me time to explain to them that I could defy them but still love them too.

“My students would tell me, 'My parents don't understand me'. I would tell them that they must do what they have to do, but they should also know that they are hurting their parents. You have to live with the fact that you are hurting them. That is how it is. You have to learn to say: 'This may hurt you but it will hurt me much more if I do not do it my way. I love you and respect you but I also love myself and respect myself.' Each of us has to find a way to balance these two in a healthy manner. It takes time for people to understand that. I remember once that a student told me her boyfriend was in the army, and he was coming back for a day. She wanted to spend the day with him. She wanted me to give her attendance. I said that I would give her attendance but I asked, 'Have you told your mother that you are going out with your friend?' She said her mother wouldn't understand; she also said she hadn't tried telling her. So I told her, 'You are going to do this assuming that your mother won't understand. Your mother must be my age. You should go and tell your mother.' When she told her mother, her mother surprised her by understanding. It is just fear that holds us back sometimes.”

She adds: “When I do things according to what I believe, some people may say it is feminist; and some people may say it's not feminist. But I am only answerable to myself in my private life. It is possible in literary theory to look at it as a separate thing, but even in stories I don't write things I feel I would not be able to apply. I apply these things to my life and only then write my stories.”

She says, after a moment of reflection: “I haven't made any compromises at all.” She tells us about the time when as a young woman, she was interested in a married man. “I knew that would mean I would be hurting another woman so I thought about it for a while and then moved on. Of course I went through some dark days but I came out of it soon.”

The world of work offers similar choices. “I am doing work that I like so I don't think I will make a compromise. I never wrote for popular journals that would fetch me money and

more recognition, for instance. In India, many liberals find themselves stumbling when it comes to their own families. But I also know that life is difficult and it forces you to compromise.”

Again, she hastens to offer nuance: “You may do something for a child that you wouldn’t do for a friend but most compromises arise out of some need. If my daughter tells me, only if you offer dowry I will get married. I may say go ahead and get married, but I certainly won’t attend that marriage. This is my decision, of course.”

Lakshmi and her husband consider Khintu Saud, a nineteen-year-old mass media student at Mithibai College, to be their daughter. As Khintu tells us: “My father is the caretaker of a housing society and he brought me here from Nepal at the age of one. We were given a house by the society itself. At the age of two or something, Mamma found me—I call CS Lakshmi Mamma and Vishnu Mathur Babbu—extremely cute and chubby and then they started talking to me. Obviously because they didn’t have children I think they had this sense of connection and because they gave me attention I reciprocated. We sort of talked and I used to come up and eat. Gradually, it became a relationship where I used to stay with them on the weekends. I believe in destiny. It’s some kind of karmic relationship. Then my younger brother was born when I was three years old. So then I think because I was the elder sibling and my mom had another kid, I felt left out and then because Mamma and Babbu gave me a lot of affection I started staying with them. I have been staying with them from the age of three. My parents still live here. I have two younger siblings and we all are studying and doing well. So we are one big connected family.”

Khintu believes Lakshmi to be a huge influence in her life. She has seen all the SPARROW films, for instance. She says, “She is seventy and I am nineteen. But I have never ever felt the age gap. She is so young in her way of thinking. I don’t think any seventy-year-old woman can think the way she does

and even work. She is physically still so fit. So more than a mother-daughter relationship, we share more of a friendly relationship. I can talk to her about anything. She has given me advice about relationships, friendships, life, philosophy, physical relationships with people and all that. She taught me about periods and all way before I got it. I was already prepared. She has been supportive about everything. I can do anything and come to her and tell her that I did this.”

Khintu continues, “One of the greatest things I have learnt from her is to be humble. She can talk to any stranger, you know. She helps people; she does things for them without even knowing who they are. I mean I am not like that really. Like if we go to some relative's place she goes to buy a lot of things for them and take and I am like, we don't really need to buy as many things for them, we don't even know properly. She is like, 'No, you should take stuff for them'. She'll buy clothes, sweets and lots of things for them.”

So we asked Lakshmi what she would feel if Khintu were to marry outside her caste. “She can marry anyone; even I have married outside my community. Even if she wanted to marry someone from her own gender, I wouldn't mind at all. The problem is one of giving dowry and of going through the ritual of marriage and having a lavish wedding. If I had a daughter and my daughter wanted a wedding like that, I would say you will have to make this possible yourself and I would certainly not attend.”

Lakshmi has not attended weddings that are lavish. Only rarely if it is a very close relative, she might just go for the reception. “I never go for lavish weddings. I feel that some people believe in rituals, I don't, but some people do. I am fine with them doing the rituals so long as they don't involve me. If a young friend is going through the *Kanyadaan* (where the father 'gives' his daughter to her husband) ritual, I might ask her: 'Do you feel you are a thing that can be given away?' and if she says, 'I don't mind,' who am I to tell her what she should think or not think? People have fought against dowry

their whole life. I know one Saroja Ramamurthy, she was a freedom fighter and for her daughter's wedding, they were asked to give dowry which she refused to give. As the daughter was earning, she herself gave the money. So in a family situation it becomes very difficult. But if I bring up a daughter and she says I want a *sangeet* and *mehendi* and everything, I will feel terribly disappointed.”

Lakshmi herself married when she was in her thirties. “I got married at thirty-two, I didn't believe in marriage at all. I thought that the institution of marriage is very difficult to accept. I thought I wouldn't be comfortable as I am fiercely independent. I thought relationships were a better alternative and that's the route I took until a few people came into my life. I didn't think it was a great sin to have a relationship without marriage. I met this guy who was a filmmaker and he was from the north, from Rajasthan. I never thought I could relate to somebody who could not read my stories in Tamil because my writing was very important to me. In those days, I was not even thinking of translating my scripts. There were many of my friends who were eager to get married so I was introducing him to them. I would invite him home and invite these friends home. After some time he said, 'Could you stop introducing me to people? I am interested in you.' I said, 'Why me? I will be a very bad wife.' He said: 'Did I promise I would make a good husband? I will also be a bad husband. But we can be good friends.’”

She still didn't quite agree with him.

“I thought there was a great cultural divide between us. What language would we speak in, for instance? But after some time I really grew fond of him. He had a room of his own and I would go and sleep over sometimes. I was also sharing a flat with another girl and when she was not there, he would come over. This got quite expensive so we thought it would be easier if we got together.”

One week before the marriage, she tells us, she started looking very sad.

“He asked what had happened. So I said, 'You know, I'm feeling trapped'. He said, 'Me too.'”

He said we should get married because society, especially the middle class, looks down on relationships like ours and we would have to spend a lot of time and energy explaining ourselves or fighting. And so we did it. We had a very different kind of marriage, where only his family and my family would be there. My parents couldn't come, my father was not well and my mother had to take care of him. My brothers and sister came so there was no invitation or anything. As we didn't want to waste our casual leave, we got married on December 25, which was a holiday. We ourselves cooked for everybody. We arranged everything, I bought him a pant and a shirt and a sweater because it was winter in Delhi and he bought me a sari, blouse and a shawl but we forgot the garlands. So when everyone asked where the garlands were, someone ran to the temple and bought two thin garlands. The registrar was shocked. We ordered a cot and a table that's how we started. I had a few vessels that were enough so that's how we got married. We paid thirteen rupees for the registration and a thousand rupees for the cot and the mattresses and that was it. Despite the fact we knew each other well, the first six months were very difficult. For both of us sharing a space with somebody was not easy. You have to learn so many things, even to sleep in a different way because I always stretch out and sleep and so does he. To sleep on the same bed was very difficult. To go and sleep over and make love and then come back to one's own space where one could sprawl where one wanted on the bed was a different thing, it took us a lot of time because both of us realized it's not easy to be married. Now we have been married for thirty-eight years, but if it becomes very bad, it will be very difficult for me to leave him because you can leave a husband, sure, but how can you leave a friend? I don't look upon him as a husband you know because he doesn't play that role nor do I play the role of a wife that we have never played all along. We fight like cats and dogs but we still stick to

each other because we don't have anybody else.”

In full narrative flow, Lakshmi reminds us why she is Ambai, the writer of Tamil fiction. “Once I remember I had a small blue suitcase. I would pack it and say, 'I am leaving you.' As I neared the door he would come and say, “Ay, ay, don't go, I say.” and then I would not go. Once he did not stop me. I went out of the door. Then I went and stood at the bus stop and I was wondering where to go. My sister lives here but she is very busy giving tuitions, my elder brother and my sister-in-law also keep very busy and my younger brother and wife would be at work. I was thinking where can I go? Then I realized this flat is in my name you know, why should I go? I came back and I rang the bell and he opened the door and he said 'What happened?' I said the bus didn't come. From the window in my house, you can see the bus stop; he said 'I saw three buses going'. I told him 'I don't have anywhere to go. This is my flat.' He said, “I am the only friend you have, so we better stay together.” We have functional differences but since we look at life in the same way we are able to stay together. Sometimes we forget we are now old and we don't have to fight, we still fight. There are so many differences that we fight.”

Lakshmi says that she has never hidden what she was doing from her parents. “I never feared as long as I strongly believed in what I was doing. Like, I never at any time would have told a lie to my parents. If they asked me something I would tell them the truth. I never told them a lie. I only kept certain truths away from them because they were far away and I was in Delhi. I believed what they did not know would not hurt them so I did not tell them. But if they had asked me directly I would have told them, I don't think that I would have feared that nor would I have feared the consequences. So I don't think you can do something without deeply believing in what you're doing. Like after my MA, I went to teach in a small town as a teacher and my entire family thought that it was a crazy thing to do, but I believed in it. And that's why my mother came and dropped me there. It was a big mistake because they thought I

was too radical and they threw me out. I couldn't come back home because I thought my father would say, 'I told you so' but I had to do it because I believed in it."

She stayed on in Chennai alone and decided to go to Delhi. These were her decisions. "I knew that they might be the wrong but ones but I told my father, 'Wrong or right, I want to make my own decisions.' I have made many mistakes but they came out of ignorance. I have made mistakes in choosing friends, mistakes in speaking in a certain way. But I feel that I have learnt from those mistakes, that is why I am able to understand another person making a mistake. Unless I make those mistakes how will I understand what that person is going through? That my father thought I should be allowed to make my own mistakes was a great thing. He may have not even thought so because I was so stubborn I would have done it in any case. My mother felt that since she believes so deeply let's stand by her. My mother always said that I may not believe in what you are doing but I will stand up for your right to do it."

Her mother is a recurring figure in her narrative of her life but Lakshmi has never thought of using her in the writing of her fiction. She says, "My mother was never a source of inspiration [for fiction]. I have been generally writing about life and relationships in which women also figure. My mother was a source of inspiration for music." Music is a very important part of Lakshmi's life and until she lost her voice she used to sing and sing quite well. Her mother was a singer and a musician. "I feel that one reason that she was so different from other women of her generation is because she was an artist. She could understand the a person's need for freedom. But for writing she was not at all an inspiration."

Her mother supported her writing. She had started writing when she was very young and her mother appreciated it. "In the early years, I did write in the popular space and she didn't quite like what I wrote. Even later, when I began to write seriously, she didn't always agree with what I had written."

Once her mother attended a marriage in Chennai and a

famous male writer was present. Some relative must have told him that she was Ambai's mother. When Lakshmi first went to Chennai he was already an established writer and so Lakshmi sought him out. In a way, he was her mentor.

“He came over and told my mother; 'I hear you are Ambai's mother, I thought I must come and see you because Ambai has told me so much about you'. So that is the only time that my mother felt that 'Oh she is a writer who is recognized.' Otherwise I was not so very well-known like the popular writers. In literary circles people knew me but that wasn't my mother's circle.”

Her mother was an avid reader. She read everybody and till the end she was reading. Lakshmi remembers, “One story that really made her feel bad was where I had written a story of a girl coming of age and her mother says, 'What is your hurry?' and the girl feels bad. I had called it in Tamil 'Mother commits a murder'. My mother hadn't read that story so she didn't know a thing about it but then everybody used to praise me for that story and so she read it. She felt very bad. She said that sometimes in one's anxiety one says certain things. Many years later, when she was living with me in the 1990's someone wrote me a postcard. He said that he had just started reading stories and that he had read mine and he specifically said 'Mother commits a murder' is a great story. So my mother read that, because it was in a post card and she said that people are still thinking of this story. She realized immediately why a child could feel bad about it and also I feel that throughout her life she lived with guilt. As I said in one of my articles my mother conceived me during the world war years and it was a terrible time of rationing and food was not available. My parents lived in Shivaji Park in Mumbai. She used to carry bags of wheat to the Punjabi family upstairs and take rice from them. No one used lifts during those days. So when she conceived me she wondered whether she could manage a third child. She already had a son and daughter; she thought her family was complete. Why have a third child? She took some spurious medicines to

kill the foetus, but the foetus refused to give up. So finally, when I was born she was very scared that something might be wrong with me physically or mentally. I was a sickly child up to the age of three or four. She used to give me oil massages and try her best to toughen me up. When I did something she did not approve of, she would say, 'From the womb you have developed this stubbornness.' I don't know about that but I suppose to her way of thinking I was a very headstrong child. I would just put my foot down and would do what I wanted. She would say, 'You were always like this'. But I think, throughout her life, she may never have mentioned it but she lived with the guilt that she tried to kill me. Perhaps that was why she went out of her way to do things for me. And the result is that there was an exceptionally strong bond between us. I don't think of her as somebody who tried to kill me. I think of her as somebody who was put in a kind of a situation where she had to think about such drastic steps. I feel that my relationship with my mother is very different. In a way she inspired me to be what I am. She didn't stop me from being what I am. Even this incident, which I have written in one story, I have mentioned this about her, how the mother tells different stories about her life and what the truth is and all that. I don't think she read those stories.”

Lakshmi recalls her sister as saying, “There were so many lovely children in the hospital. Why did you bring this sickly child home?” Her sister, Rajeswari Thiagarajan, 76, who works with SPARROW, tells us stories of her early years: “We were living at Shivaji Park when she was born. There is a difference of six years between us. She used to be very thin, she suffered from whooping cough and she used to get pain in her ears. Then my father went to Bangalore. She was so thin my mother made her learn dancing from a very famous dancer. I don't think she put on any weight. She was always good in studies even in school. When she was doing her final year BA she wrote a story for a Tamil magazine called *Kalaimagal* for which she got a second prize. It is not a literary work but more

sensationalist in nature. We were very angry because she was writing stories when she should have been studying. When the results were out, she was looking in the second class and I was looking for her number in the first class. In those days they only showed the numbers. One woman said, 'Look at this girl she is looking in the second class and her sister is looking in the first class.' So we knew she had got a first class, that was all. When she went to the convocation hall they told her, 'No, no, don't sit here, you're a gold medallist', then she knew. She got one gold medal and two cash awards. She was the first gold medallist in the family and nobody was present. This upset my mother."

That second prize has an interesting story attached which Rajeswari narrates: "Years later when we met the woman who had won the first prize, in Chembur, only then it occurred to me that there is such a vast difference between her and Lakshmi. She essentially had limited aspirations. She wrote a story yes, but she didn't want to pursue a literary career. She was restricted to domesticity and then Lakshmi asked her, 'Have you written anything else?' She said, 'No, I got married and I got a child after many years. Now my duty is to look after the child.' So I somehow felt that it is not that she had missed the bus, but she was not focused on what she wanted to do. She was satisfied with that. But Lakshmi was not like that. She has never let the grass grow under her feet. She has always been on the move. I did the transcription of an interview done by her with Bama. Bama is a Dalit writer. Lakshmi has written about Bama's novel, *Karukku*. She is a Dalit and a Christian as well. So she has written about how women have suffered as Dalits and as minorities.

"She has also met many transgenders. I was going through those interviews when I got to know how transgenders earned a living. I knew they were prostitutes. Yet I didn't know how they had sex. They really suffer because when they are young they are misunderstood. I came to know all that only through Lakshmi. Somehow women like Kalki have done very well. She

has started an organization to look after transgenders, so that they don't go about their old profession and can do something productive. She has persuaded the Tamil Nadu government to give them land on which they can build a house for themselves and do something apart from this physical stuff."

Where do the stories come from? Ambai says, "Writing a story is not difficult, anybody can write a story. We witness so many things in real life. A story is not about repeating what one sees. A story is about how you can put two or three incidents or two or three people together and then watch what happens and see how it all turns out and then capture that on paper. For example, a single character you create may have elements of five women you have known. That is the advantage of writing a story. We don't have to imitate life. You are not telling your reader that this is reality, this is how it works, and this is how it happened."

So she thinks that some of what she writes may have happened to somebody and some of it can be pure imagination and "even within that imaginary situation there can be some real things that may have happened but everything need not have happened to you. It could have happened to somebody else but it may have affected you, it may have touched you, it may have moved you, it may have angered you, and then you let it come out as a story. You only have to decide that I am going to write what I want to write."

She adds: "In a day you meet at least a hundred different people. In a single train journey, you see so many different body languages. In a bus ride so many things can happen. So I feel when you sit down to write all that will come as a story. It need not be autobiographical at all but it is autobiographical in the sense that you're the person who has witnessed all that."

Vishnu Mathur, C S Lakshmi's husband, tells us that they met in 1975 when he was a director with Films Division. "We met in 1975 when I was in Delhi. I was working with the Films Division, as a director. She was introduced to me by my friend who knew her through another friend who was from

Bangalore. Then gradually we became friends. She had just finished her doctorate from JNU and she was working on her book at that time.”

Mathur has been the director of almost all the SPARROW films. Initially he used to try being very fair and tell her, “why don't we invite other filmmakers” But he says even though she did, that equation didn't work out because it's a voluntary organization. “There is not much money. People are not able to afford so much of time. I am the free labour in the family. She does good research and I am a good filmmaker, so it's like a team.”

Lakshmi has lived through the turn of a century, a millennium really. We live in the twenty-first century and one believes that it's now that women are on their way to liberation, but Lakshmi has something more to say about this notion, “I don't think it depends on a time period,” she says. “Even if you go to ancient India there have been some women who have been very assertive and many women who have been controlled. Some people ask if independence made a difference to Indian women. That's actually pretty ridiculous because there were many things which didn't quite change after independence. So I don't know whether a century or a millennium makes much of a difference. What I could say is that many things about women are changing. Some of them are for good but some still need to change. For example let's take a situation where two young students like you coming and talking to me. I could have never done it in my college days. I couldn't have gone and spoken to somebody and asked questions about her life. I don't think she would have answered either. Even when I was doing the women writers book some women writers thought that the questions that I was asking were personal. You see the entire thing about the personal is political. It never occurred to anybody until that time. So that way I feel that things have changed. And young people feel the need to talk to others and find out things for themselves. I think that's a very wonderful thing that has happened. At the same

time if you ask me about educational opportunities or equal opportunities and all that, I would say that has not happened because so long as the last tribal child does not have the same freedom as a child studying in some international school in Bombay, we have not achieved that freedom. Gandhiji said that when a woman can walk down a street at midnight with all her jewellery on and is safe, that is when India would have achieved freedom. I have written one story in which I say we don't really need jewellery; what we really need are toilets. We could do without jewels but I wish all women get toilet access. Only then would we have achieved our freedom. If you travel as much as I have you would know how important the toilets are."

She says, "One of my friends who runs an organization in Tamil Nadu called STEPS, a Muslim women's organization—SPARROW has made a film on her. Sometime in the 1990s, she said that she went to a school and was talking about girls' education. She told them how important education was for all girls. Then one girl got up and said, 'I really agree with what you are saying but how can girls be educated if there are no toilets in schools?' She said, 'I study in a co-educational school where there are no toilets so when I get my monthly periods and I stain my skirt, I get laughed at by the boys around. Don't you think before we provide education we should create an atmosphere where girls can study?' My friend said that it was like slap on her face. I feel that in some things we are so independent and so full of knowledge but in some other areas certain people have been denied of all those opportunities. I feel that unless education becomes uniform, I don't think these inequalities can be removed. Yes, I do think that women have progressed a lot and they have been given a voice and can talk but there are still situations where they are not able to talk about sexual abuse in their own family. We hear every day stories about family members abusing a girl child. So I feel that everybody says that these things are happening too much these days. I feel that no, these things are

being reported more now. Earlier I am sure they were happening but people were not reporting this much. For me even the fact that they are reporting it is something very good. People get to know that families are not as sacrosanct as we claim them to be.”

Her book *Two novellas and a story* (Katha, 2003), includes an essay on space and silence. “I feel that silence plays a very important role in our lives and there are many things that we do just as a gesture and not put it in words. These gestures over a period become symbols and we understand the situation more by the silence than by what is spoken. So very often the space that you occupy in a family or in a society it doesn't allow you to put things in specific words. But you can express them through certain subtleties or observing it through not what has been spoken but what has not been spoken. I feel that the interesting thing about communication is not what people say but sometimes what people refrain from telling you. That is more telling than what they have spoken. I have analyzed some stories in which such a thing happens.”

Lakshmi has also written extensively about coming to terms with one's body and sexuality. “Generally a middle-class Indian girl of my generation or any generation for that matter comes from this atmosphere where the body is not spoken about. During my time menstruation was never mentioned in the house and the body was never spoken about. So I have written an article where I have said that we existed in kind of a bodiless space. We had bodies but they were not spoken about. I feel that the fact that I was a dancer, I was learning dance and that made lots of difference because dance is a language of the body. You have a body and body needs to speak. And here we had a contradictory situation where I had to use my body in dance and at home had to behave as if the body did not exist. So a constant contradiction was there. The fact was that I was aware of that contradiction. So I think that in my writing that became a part of my search. As it was my search in dance and art and it became a search in my writing also. So the body and

sexuality became two very important aspects of my writing.”

Someone with her experience and her vitality must have mentored many people. But Lakshmi says, “I don't think I have mentored anybody. I have a team in SPARROW and I feel that working in SPARROW has affected their lives. But where writing itself is concerned, fiction writing, I don't think I have mentored anybody. And I don't think writing can happen through mentoring. Where research is concerned, I am an independent researcher. I haven't guided anybody in research or anything. I don't think I have been a specific mentor to anybody. Nor has anyone been my mentor. People have been very close to me. There was one senior writer who was fourteen years elder to me. I met her when I was doing my MA, till her death a few years ago we were very good friends. She also lived a very independent life. I lived a very different life but she was never judgmental. I feel that a lot of qualities of how to look at people, how to look at life, I learnt from her. And I understood how much freedom she gave me in my life. She was never ever judgmental about anything. She knew everything about my life. She had a physical ailment so she could not marry but she was the most progressive woman I had ever met. She was a famous writer, R. Chudamani. She was my senior and very close to me. But I still cannot say she was my mentor. There are others who encourage you to write, that can't be mentoring. But I don't specifically encourage anybody to write.” She tells everybody to write. She believes everyone can write, but she hasn't told anyone specifically to write, or that she wants to see them writing. “I don't think young girls need mentoring, they are doing wonderful work themselves. They don't need me or anybody else to mentor.”

She says after years of knowing different stories of such strong women she has actually learnt quite a lot “It makes me very humble. Because you realise that there is so much that you don't know. About how people live, how people think, how they take decisions. You meet a 102-year-old painter and you assume she must be very conservative. When I went to

interview this painter, a friend with me asked her what she thought was wrong with the modern woman. She said, “Why, what is wrong with her?” So the friend said, “No, the modern women wear jeans and all that.” The painter said that they look good in it. Another thing was that she had got married in the thirties and she had insisted that she would marry only in a khadi saree and with no dowry. When women have been like that in thirties, then what are you talking about yourself? I feel, very humbled when I see these people.”

“What if she had not become a writer?” we ask. Lakshmi considers this: “I don't know. If I had not lost my voice I would have been a singer and if I would have not left home I would have been a dancer but I don't think that I would have been a doctor or anything basically because I was very bad in math and science; I was very much interested in healing but I was not good at the subjects which are required for that. I don't think that if I would have not been a writer I would have been something totally different. I would have been in the field of self-expression.”

Writers of fiction are often accused of being self-absorbed, of being the classic navel-gazers. But Lakshmi has found the time to care enough about other women's processes to document them in an archives that has 609 documentaries in 7 languages, 585 popular films in 11 languages, 4,888 books in 11 languages, 4,448 journal articles in 7 languages, 21,025 newspaper clippings in 8 languages, 274 collections of private papers, 1,983 brochures in 9 languages, 3,042 newspaper cartoons (not counting the 8000 plus cartoons by Maya Kamath), 3,578 print visuals, 1,714 posters, 120 calendars, 649 music audio-cassettes and compact discs, 550 oral history recordings, 14,160 photographs, 6,771 media slides.

This you might think would be bigger than most museums but Lakshmi's next project is indeed a museum. “I have been planning it for so long. I want a physical and a digital museum on women's history and history of women. Space is the problem. In Mumbai, it's always about space. So I'm beginning

to think it should be a digital museum.”

Perhaps someday, there will be a museum created for women's history by Ambai, alias C S Lakshmi.

*By Amanda Mendes, Aniketh Mendonca and Srishti Singh
With Farah Thakur, Shagun Pannu, Dikshita Karopady,
Aparna Shukla and Brenna Ribeiro.*

“The human situation is always present (in my work).”

Meera Devidayal, artist

“Without hope, you cannot function.”

Flavia Agnes, lawyer and women’s rights activist

“We lose a little of ourselves when we lose our histories.”

C S Lakshmi, writer, researcher and archivist

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