

# **A QUEST FOR ROOTS**

The lives of women significant in India's History



# A QUEST FOR ROOTS

The lives of women significant in India's History

*Edited by*  
**REKHA MODY**



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## **Dedication**

*The fifteen women members of the Constituent Assembly played critical roles in shaping the Indian Constitution and advancing social justice. Their diverse backgrounds and contributions reflect the inclusive and progressive spirit of the Assembly, laying the foundation for a democratic India. The term of the Constituent Assembly was 9 December 1946 to 26 November 1949, it dissolved on 26 January 1950.*

*Ammu Swaminathan, Annie Mascarene, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Mehta, Kamla Chaudhry, Leela Roy, Malati Choudhury, Purnima Banerjee, Renuka Ray, Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kriplani, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.*



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

We dedicate this edition to the fifteen women members of the Constituent Assembly of India. These trailblazing women played a pivotal role in shaping the Indian Constitution, particularly in safeguarding the rights of women. Their contributions ensured that the Constitution enshrined the principles of equality, justice, and non-discrimination.

Some key provisions that reflect their efforts include:

Article 14: Ensures equality before the law, Article 15: Prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, Article 16: Ensures equal opportunities in public employment, Article 21: Protects life and personal liberty. Their work laid the foundation for future generations to build upon, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India. May this book inspire a new generation of She leaders, thinkers, and changemakers to continue the quest for a more just and inclusive society.

This book contextualizes the experiences of women in India from the earliest recorded times to the mid-20th century. In this third edition, we present a more diverse, pan-Indian, and comprehensive collection than ever before, highlighting voices and narratives that enrich our collective understanding of women's history. Read as a single text, the stories of these women's lives form a richly varied tapestry. When each profile is placed in the whole, patterns and motifs become visible, as if many needles had worked on the quilt and covered it with beautiful designs.

We have had to rely largely on secondary sources; however, we had done our best to cross-check our facts. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of eminent scholars, Late Dr. Vidya Niwas Misra, Prof. Gerry Forbes, Dr. Rimi B Chatterjee and our esteemed members Late Rita Dalmia, Neeru Poddar and Piyashi Roychowdhury. My heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Pankaj Mittal for her prologue for this third edition.

Regards

**Rekha Mody**

10th September 2025

## FOREWORD

Stree Shakti is working for the cause of women's upliftment and awakening, but it does not have a feminist bias. On the contrary, this organisation is giving a new orientation to women's power for fulfilment in life, not only for itself but also for those who come into the sphere of its influence. This organisation is not working for women as a power, but for the power, which emanates from her and sustains all human life. Stree Shakti has before it the ideals of Indian women in the past, who played important roles in the fields of education, administration, public welfare, social reform, creative arts, and academic pursuits.

When we conceive of Shakti in an Indian cultural context, Shakti is a capacity rather than a power. She is a source of energy to man. Man can function only when his capacity is activated. No male god in the Hindu Pantheon functions without being activated by the female energy. In other words, it is a concept of complementarity between man and woman rather than that of equality. Egalitarianism has led to undesirable conflicts. Complementarity is the principle in consonance with the corresponding modern theory in physics. The entire Cosmos functions in harmony and harmony alone. The Indian way of living has been based on harmony, not only between man and woman, but also between men, women and nature. To elaborate, one harmony leads to another and brings happiness to all.

Women play a key role in maintaining the harmony in the family, in a narrower sense, as well as in the broader sense; the entire Cosmos being one family. Women play an efficient role in education as well as in the management, and they are the instrumental factor in making Indian family life more durable. Women have been the main factor in furthering the dynamism in Indian culture.

I am deeply impressed by Rekha Mody as a person who has respect for the elders, and who is full of affection for children and works for women in difficult conditions. She does not merely patronise them but restores confidence in them through love and care. I heartily bless her endeavour to bring into focus the ideal of women of India.

**Dr. Vidya Niwas Misra**

Varanasi, 1999

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## Prologue

*Third Edition of A Quest for Roots*

In the grand narrative of Indian civilization, the stories of countless remarkable women have too often remained in the shadows—unrecorded, unrecognized, and unsung. *A Quest for Roots* is a compelling and necessary corrective to that historical oversight. It is not merely a collection of biographical sketches; it is an invocation of memory, a celebration of resilience, and an affirmation of the enduring contributions of women across centuries.

Now in its third edition, *A Quest for Roots* presents an even more expansive and inclusive portrait of Indian womanhood—cutting across geographies, faiths, castes, and classes. Through meticulously curated life stories, the volume brings to light the accomplishments of women who built institutions, inspired movements, shaped cultural legacies, and redefined the parameters of possibility. Whether queens or reformers, artists or administrators, philosophers or social workers, these women stepped beyond the confines imposed by their times and left behind enduring legacies that continue to inspire.

This edition's dedication to the fifteen women members of India's Constituent Assembly is particularly timely and poignant. These pioneering figures played a foundational role in enshrining the principles of justice, equality, and non-discrimination in our Constitution. Their vision and tenacity helped lay the groundwork for the rights and freedoms we cherish today. Their stories, like those of their foremothers and successors in this volume, are testaments to the transformative power of women's leadership.

What sets this work apart is its ability to connect the past with the present, enabling today's readers—especially young women—to draw strength and inspiration from those who came before them. In doing so, *A Quest for Roots* nurtures a sense of historical continuity and cultural rootedness. It contributes meaningfully to the broader discourse on gender equity, reminding us that the empowerment of women is not merely a contemporary ideal, but a legacy deeply embedded in India's civilizational ethos.

The editorial vision of Ms. Rekha Mody and the efforts of the Stree Shakti team deserve the highest commendation. Their commitment to uncovering and disseminating these narratives reflects a profound respect for the role of women in shaping the nation's intellectual, social, and spiritual fabric. The book not only preserves these stories for posterity, but also inspires new generations to step forward with courage, creativity, and conviction.

As India looks ahead to its future as a global knowledge society, the recognition of women's contributions—past and present—is not simply a moral imperative, but a strategic one. Books like *A Quest for Roots* are essential instruments in this journey, reminding us that true progress lies in acknowledging all who have shaped it.

I commend this volume to all readers—as a source of knowledge, inspiration, and hope.

  
(Pankaj Mittal)

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# INTRODUCTION

The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all — it is very tiresome.

Jane Austen

Although women have always formed at least half of the population, they have not been given their due in history. Gerda Lerner, the historian who introduced Women's History as a subject of serious inquiry, urged us to keep in mind the difference between what happened (history) and what was written down (History). Unfortunately, History with capital H made men's lives and activities their prime subject and ignored, marginalized, and even erased women's deeds and activities.

Reclaiming women's lives for History has been a major part of the women's history project since the 1970s, but practitioners struggle with inadequate archives as well as deliberate efforts to hide women's achievements. Those of us who write women's history firmly believe women acted, thought, created, invented and rebelled throughout history, and believe that with diligence, we can "restore" them to History. At the same time, we demand that the master narrative of History tell a more complete story of human development.

In India, the British colonial government introduced new methods and institutions for record keeping but evinced little interest in understanding or recording the lives of Indian women. Indian women were of concern only when they claimed to be rescuing female victims of cruel customs perpetrated by their menfolk, or when the government feared they might fuel rebellion. In these situations, androcentric and cultural blinders hampered colonial chroniclers who might have recorded the lives of Indian women. One example will serve

to illustrate this point. Observing the conjoined customs of seclusion and sex-segregation, the British saw them as absolutes (either a woman was in *purdah* or she was not) and set about encouraging women to throw off the veil. In their view, a veiled woman was oppressed and an unveiled woman emancipated; British women teachers, doctors, and missionaries would enlighten *purdahnashin* and make them loyal subjects. The project failed, not because of the personnel involved, but because the colonizers misinterpreted the custom they wanted to end.

Nationalist historians have also failed to tell women's story, preferring a narration featuring "great men" who made the nation. When the first histories of Indian women were written after independence, male authors wrote glowingly of free and powerful women in ancient India and returning to greatness in post-independence India. Neera Desai's *Woman in Modern India* (published in 1957), the first analytical history of Indian women, challenged these accounts. In this groundbreaking and prescient work, Desai argued there was no "golden age" for women, antiquity was patriarchal, and even the "great women" lived under male domination. Under Muslim rule, Indian women suffered further restrictions on rights and freedom as the dual customs of *purdah* and polygyny took hold. The British brought new ideas and technology, which they then utilized to exploit the fire country economically and politically. There were bright spots, Desai argued, but the serious historian would have to search them out and explain how women's lives improved during these periods.

Since Deasi, and especially since the 1970s, historians have used new approaches and archives to write women's history. Methodologies borrowed from oral history, feminist theory and post-modernism, along with an expanded notion of "the archive" have proved valuable in the recovery of women's history.

As professional historians we can be proud of the new approaches and publications, but still lament our lack of the new approaches and publications, but still lament our lack of success in changing the main narrative of history. While a few college students can articulate the role of gender in post-partition India, far more school and college students reiterate an androcentric account of events. Clearly, influencing the basic narrative of History is the challenge ahead.

It is within this context that I want to applaud the completion of this new edition of *Quest for Roots*, a biographical dictionary of Indian women. The women documented within these pages range from Vedic saints to medieval queens and contemporary scientists. Although this is a serious attempt to be comprehensive, no biographical dictionary can be comprehensive when the field of research is still being explored. *Quest for Roots* is a major step forward towards the goals of making women's history part of the historical narrative.

**Geraldine Forbes**

Syracuse September 2009



## **LADY ABALA BOSE (1864–1951)**

Lady Abala Bose was the wife of the world-famous scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, and a political and social reformer in her own right.

She was the daughter of the social reformer Durga Mohan Das. She and her sister were among the first women accepted as students by the University of Calcutta, and Abala later went to Madras for medical studies. She married Jagadish Chandra in 1887. In 1896, she visited Europe and observed how girls' schools were run. On her return, she was elected secretary of the Brahma Balika Shikshalay, which she worked tirelessly to improve, even beginning self-defence classes for the students. She introduced the Montessori Method to India. In 1919, she formed the Nari Shiksha Samiti. In 1928, she formed the Bengal Women's Educational League, which pressed for female representation on educational bodies and a gender-sensitive syllabus.

She also campaigned, along with Margaret Cousins (q.v.) Sarojini Naidu (q.v.) and others, for women's franchise, and was one of those delegated to meet Edwin Montagu when he visited India to negotiate the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. In 1925, she established a home for widows, and ten years later, a Women's Industrial Co-operative Home in Kolkata. This was later converted into a rehabilitation centre for women refugees from East Pakistan. She founded the Sister Nivedita Adult Education Fund, and the Sadhana Ashram.

## **ABBAKKA (1525–1570)**

Abbakka Rani or Abbakka Mahadevi was the queen of Tulu Nadu and fought the Portuguese in the latter half of the 16th century. She was born at the temple town of Moodabidri into the matrilineal clan of the Chautas, who were Jains and reckoned succession from maternal uncle to niece. Her mother's brother Tirumala Raya made sure she was trained in martial arts, diplomacy and stagecraft, and crowned her queen at the rich and busy port town of Ullal, the state capital. Though she was a Jain, all communities and races were represented in her administration and her army. The basis of her power was the spice trade. Ullal was a major spice port and had a commanding position on the west coast of India, from where the Portuguese hoped to carry out their campaign against their sworn enemy, the Zamorin of Calicut. They made many attempts to capture Ullal, but Abbakka kept them at bay for more than four decades, earning herself the title of 'Abhaya Rani' (the fearless queen). As part of her strategy to foil the Portuguese, she married Lakshmappa Arasa, the powerful king of the Banga dynasty of Mangalore; however, the alliance did not last and Lakshmappa turned on her in the end. She also allied with the, Muslim rulers of various states in Karnataka and Kerala.

The Portuguese had taken Goa in 1510 and laid waste to Mangalore in 1525. Now, judging Abbakka to be a major impediment to their plans, they demanded tribute, but she refused to pay up. On this pretext, in 1555, Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira attacked Ullal but was repulsed. Two years later, the Portuguese plundered Mangalore again. In 1568, João Peixoto, a Portuguese general, and a fleet of warships were sent by the Portuguese Viceroy António Noronha to capture Ullal, and this time they were successful, overrunning the royal palace. Abbakka escaped and took refuge in a mosque. That night, she gathered around 200 of her soldiers and attacked the Portuguese camp. General Peixoto was killed, seventy Portuguese soldiers were taken prisoner and the rest scattered. Admiral Mascarenhas, was killed and the Portuguese

were driven out of Mangalore fort. Harsh reprisals followed, and the Portuguese recaptured the fort in 1569, as well as the town of Kundapur. Now Mangalore became a Portuguese fiefdom and was united with Portugal against her. In 1570, she formed an alliance with the Bijapur Sultan of Ahmed Nagar and the Zamorin of Calicut, who sent his general Kutty Pokar Markar, to help her destroy the Mangalore fort, a campaign that cost him his life. Abbakka was captured, but even after she had been jailed, she continued to fight to the death.

Her story is still a legend in Karnataka, and is often enacted in Yakshagana, a popular folk theatre style in Tulu Nadu. In Ullal, the Veera Rani Abbakka Utsava is an annual celebration held in her memory, on which occasion the Veera Rani Abbakka Prashasti (award) is given to distinguished women. On 15 January 2003, the Indian postal department issued a commemorative cover on her. A bronze statue of her stands in Ullal and another in Bangalore.

## **AHALYABAI HOLKAR (1725–1795)**

Ahalyabai was a princess married into the house of Holkar, rulers of Indore, who ruled Indore as regent after her husband's death, and is remembered for her bravery.

Daughter of Mankoji Shinde, she was born in Aurangabad. At the age of eight, she impressed the Peshwa, the titular ruler of the Maratha nation, with her pleasant behaviour and looks, and he took her under his wing and married her to Khanduji, the son of his trusted assistant Malharrao, but Khanduji neglected her and indulged in various pleasures. Malharrao became the virtual ruler of the Marathas after the Peshwa's death and entrusted all state responsibilities to his daughter-in-law. He trained her in the fine points of revenue collection, writing dispatches and management of the army, and on many occasions she accompanied him on campaigns. On one such campaign, her husband

died, and she prepared to commit ritual suicide (*sati*) on his pyre. Her father-in-law Malharrao persuaded her to live and rule Indore as regent for her son, Malerao, who was the nominal *subedar*, or titleholder. Indore, under her rule, became an island of peace and prosperity in a sea of violence, and was proverbial for justice and wisdom.

In the beginning of her reign, a Rajput clan rose in revolt, and she personally crushed it. Similarly, when a Bhil tribe grew troublesome, she arrested their leader. She used force and compassion as and when they were required. Raghoba, the Peshwa's uncle, once planned to invade Indore, but Ahalyabai organised a women's regiment and sent a message to him: 'It seems that you want to meet me in the field. I am prepared. I am but a woman, and it will not add to your glory even if I am defeated. But think of the consequences in case the reverse happens.' This showed Ahalyabai's shrewd understanding of political realities. Raghoba, in the end, visited her and apologised.

In spite of the glory she earned for herself, her son-in-law's death and the *sati* of her only daughter were a great shock to her. She retired to her palace and lived a life of austerity till her death on 13 August 1795. She has been described by Sir John Malcolm in these words, 'The success of Ahalya Bai in the internal administration of her domain was altogether wonderful . . . . She certainly appears, within her limited sphere, to have been one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed.'

Ahalyabai's many public works remain as monuments to her goodness in the form of highways, wells, ghats, rest houses and temples. The road from Calcutta to Varanasi and the temples of Somnath in Saurashtra, of Vishnu at Gaya and of Vishweshwara at Varanasi are some of her works surviving today.

*Piyashi Roychoudhury*

## AHILYA RANGNEKAR (1922–2009)

Ahilya Rangnekar was a freedom fighter and politician. She was born in Poona. She was the youngest among eight children. As a young girl, she organized a demonstration of girl students to protest the death of Mahatma Gandhi's secretary, Mahadev Desai, in British custody at the Aga Khan Palace. She was jailed for three months at Yerawada, where she hoisted the Indian tricolour inside the jail premises. The Communist leader B. T. Ranadive was her elder brother. She graduated from college and joined the Communist Party of India in 1943, and was active in the movement for a united Maharashtra, and with the Girmi Kamgar Union. In 1943, she also was one of the founders of the Parel Mahila Sangh, later the Janwadi Mahila Sangh, part of the All India Democratic Women's Association. She later became the national working president of the AIDWA, and in 2001, she became its patron. In 1945, she married P.B. Rangnekar. She was involved in the Navy Ratings Mutiny of 1946. She fasted for twenty-one days during the railway strike of 1948. From 1961 to 1980, she was a corporator of the Bombay Municipal Corporation.

She was known as '*ranragini*' (firebrand) for her participation in the 1972 'rolling pin marches' against price hikes, protests for the rights of tribals, anganwadis and labourers. She protested the Emergency and was jailed along with Durgabai Bhagwat (q.v.) and Jaywantiben Mehta in Arthur Road Jail. She was elected to the Lok Sabha in the 1977 election. She was a member of the Lok Sabha from 1977 to 1980, representing the Mumbai North Central constituency. In 1975, she was elected to the general council of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, and in 1979, she became its vice president. From 1983 to 1986, she was the secretary of the Maharashtra state unit of the CPI (M), and of the party's central committee from 1978 to 2005.

## AIDEU HANDIQUE (1920–2002)

Aideu Nilambar Handique was a film actor. She was the first woman to act in Assamese films and played the eponymous heroine of *Joymoti*, the first ever Assamese film, made by Jyotiprasad Agarwala in 1935. A cousin of Aideu showed a picture of her to Jyotiprasad, and he asked for her to be brought to his tea estate and prepared to play the part of Joymoti. Not unnaturally, Aideu was frightened and unwilling, so Jyotiprasad coached her on what to do: how to walk, how to speak, how to look sad or happy. The film was made, with her father's consent; in it, she had to call her co-star 'bongohordeo' (husband), and there was also a scene where she was beaten up. She came back to her village, Panidihingia, to face ostracism and hostility as she had spent time with men in a camp, and moreover, she had addressed her co-star as 'husband'. She got no offers of marriage, while *Joymoti* was her only film; she did not get any other roles. She did not even get to see the film as there was no cinema hall near Panidihingia. Only in 1985, when the golden jubilee of Assamese cinema was celebrated, did the state government give her a cassette of the remains of the film, as the stock had been partially destroyed. She was also given a pension of a thousand rupees a month, though it was seldom paid on time. She was frail in her last years and died after a long illness. In 2006, Arup Manna made a documentary, *Aideu*, on her life.

## AIZAZ RASUL (1909–2001)

Born into the princely family of Malerkotla, Begum Aizaz Rasul emerged as one of the most remarkable women leaders of pre- and post-independence India. Married at a young age to Nawaab Aizaz Rasul, a young landowner, she became actively involved in politics

at a time when few women, especially from the Muslim aristocracy, stepped into public life.

With the enactment of the Government of India Act of 1935, both she and her husband joined the All-India Muslim League and entered the electoral sphere. In the 1937 provincial elections, Begum Rasul was elected to the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, marking the beginning of her distinguished political journey.

She was the only Muslim woman member of the Constituent Assembly of India, where she played a critical role in the debates on minority rights. Her political career extended well beyond independence. She was elected to the Rajya Sabha (1952–1956) and later served multiple terms in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly (1969–1989). Over time, her perspective on Muslim political representation evolved. When invited to a convention discussing Muslim reservations in legislatures and services, she responded with concern:

*“As communal feelings have grown and the concept of Hindutva has gained popularity, it is time now to think anew of how to improve the educational and socio-economic conditions of Muslims.”*

Begum Rasul also made significant contributions to women’s sports in India, particularly hockey. She served as President of the Indian Women’s Hockey Federation for over two decades, and later led the Asian Women’s Hockey Federation, working tirelessly to promote women’s participation in sports.

Defying many traditional norms, including the purdah system, Begum Rasul became a symbol of progressive Muslim womanhood. Her autobiography, *From Purdah to Parliament*, is a compelling narrative of her life, offering rare insights into the personal and political struggles of a Muslim woman in India’s transformative years. To quote her, “There was much propaganda against me, especially a ‘Fatwa’ by the Ulemas that it was un-Islamic to vote for a non-purdah Muslim woman.”

Begum Aizaz Rasul remains a pioneering figure in Indian constitutional history, remembered for her commitment to democratic

values, minority rights, women's empowerment, and national integration.

## BEGUM AKHTAR (1914–1974)

Begum Akhtar was born Akhtari Bai Faizabadi. She belonged to an aristocratic family of Lucknow that had fallen on hard times. Later in life, she claimed that her father, Asghar Hussein, had been a judge, and that he had objected strongly to her taking up singing. However, the truth was her mother, Mushtari Begum, sang for a living, and was technically a *tawaif*. Mushtari Begum soon realised her daughter had the talent to reach the top. Begum Akhtar sang with her mother on stage when she was thirteen, and gave her first public performance at fifteen, where the head of HMV records became an instant fan and persuaded her to cut a record. Her face and eyes were very expressive, and she knew perfectly the *bhao batana* style of emotive singing.

She trained under Ustad Ada Muhammad Khan of the Patiala gharana. She became an expert in light classical, especially the *ghazal*. She was also acting in films, beginning in 1933 and ending with *Roti* in 1942, which was her biggest success. From 1943, she studied under Ustad Wahid Khan of the Kirana gharana. In 1946, she married Istiaq Ahmad Abbasi, the Nawab of Kakori. Her husband did not want her to sing and wanted her to live the life of a respectable woman. She struggled to give up smoking and be properly submissive, but she pined without her music, and at last, he was forced to capitulate. She gave a recording in 1949 and sang for Lucknow Radio. She blossomed, and he relented and allowed her to start giving concerts again. Her new respectability brought her many admirers and students, and for them she reinvented her past, hiding her origins in the *tawaif* subculture. Later on, when one of her solidly respectable students, Shanti Hiranand, wrote her biography, all of that was omitted or glossed over. This was

as Begum Akhtar wanted it; unlike singers like Gauhar Jan, she was embarrassed by her difference and wanted to be accepted in high society.

Begum Akhtar was influential in popularising *ghazals* as well as the light classical styles of *thumri*, *dadra*, and so on. Her fine style and classical excellence set standards of musical achievement in this field. She had a mesmerising stage presence and easily established a rapport with her listeners. In 1968, she received the Padma Shri, and in 1972, the Sangeet Natak Academy Award. Such notables as Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Ustad Ameer Khan praised her work. Begum Akhtar always said she would like to sing till the last day of her life, and this desire of hers was granted, for in 1974 she died immediately after performing in Ahmedabad on 30 October. The Government of India awarded her the Padma Bhushan posthumously in 1975.

## **ALPANA BANERJEE (1934–2009)**

Alpana Banerjee was a singer in Bengali. She sang as a child and was talent-spotted as a teenager by Gauri Prasanna Majumder and Rabin Chatterjee, who were noted names in Bengali film music and friends of her father. She sang with artists such as Utpala Sen, Sandhya Mukhopadhyay, who was a very close friend, Shyamal Mitra, with whom she dueted many times, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay and Hemanta Kumar Mukhopadhyay. She also sang with Lata Mangeshkar and was directed by Pandit Ravi Shankar in *Nagini Kanyar Kahini*. Other artists she worked with were Rabin Chatterjee, Nachiketa Ghosh, Sushil Majumdar and Ali Akbar Khan. She was a playback singer for nearly fifty Bengali films. She later gave up her film career to care for her children, though she stayed in the public eye and occasionally performed. She was often the guest of honour at Bengali Music functions, TV and radio shows. She became very popular on the radio. She married Sridhar Mukherjee in 1959. She recorded many popular

songs for children, including the well-loved ‘Hatti Ma Tim Tim’, ‘Agdum Bagdum Ghoradum Shaje’, ‘Chhotto Pakhi Chandana’ and ‘Ami Alpana Enke Jai’.

## **SISTER ALPHONSA (1910–1946)**

Sister Alphonsa was a Christian saint and social worker. She was born Anna Muttathupadathu in Kundamalur, Kerala. When her family wanted to get her married, she burned herself so badly that she was disfigured. In 1927, she joined the Franciscan Clarist Convent and took the name Sister Alphonsa. She soon began working for the care of the sick and needy. She was, however, ill, and remained so till her early death at the age of thirty-six on the eve of Independence. She was buried at Palai in Kottayam, and her tomb rapidly became a place of pilgrimage. Pope John Paul II beatified, that is recognized that she had gone to heaven, Sister Alphonsa in 1986, the first step on the way to declaring a person a saint. In May 1999, a disabled child began to walk after visiting Sister Alphonsa’s tomb. This miracle was accepted as such by the Catholic Church, and it added weight to the plea for her canonization. She was canonized in 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI.

## **AMAL PRABHA DAS (1911–1994)**

Amal Prabha Das was a reformer and a Gandhian who along with her mother, Hemaprabha Das, set up a Sabarmati-style ashram in the Sarania Hills near Guwahati.

Amal Prabha was the child of Hema Prabha and Hare Krishna Das. In 1934, Gandhi visited Assam and stayed at her parents’ house. Amal Prabha got to see his work at close quarters, and this inspired her to

walk the path of service. In 1927, she was denied admission to Cotton College, as she was a girl; ironically, this same college was later to offer her a job, but she declined. She travelled to Calcutta and studied applied chemistry, becoming the first Assamese woman to get a postgraduate degree. She also studied clinical pathology there. Having completed her studies, in 1939, along with her mother, she visited the Maganbari Centre of Self Development at Wardha to learn about village uplift. The family then set up an ashram on Gandhian lines in Sarania, and they began to train local people in handicrafts and small-scale forest-based industries. When Kasturba Gandhi (q.v.) died in 1944, her grieving husband set up the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust and appointed Amal Prabha to supervise its work in the Northeast. The Sarania Hills ashram now became the Kasturba Ashram, and Gandhiji stayed there in 1946 and formally inaugurated the Gram Sevika Vidyalaya. Gandhi is said to have commented about Amal Prabha, 'Yeh ladki chatur hain, kam kar sakti hain,' (this girl is clever, she can work). The Kasturba Ashram helped set up 21 gram sevika kendras or centres of village uplift in different parts of the region, including some in Arunachal Pradesh, which are still operational. In 1950, when a devastating earthquake ravaged Assam, hundreds of members of Kasturba Ashram and the gram seva kendras volunteered for relief work. The Kasturba Kalyan Kendra was established at Lakhimpur for people rendered homeless by the earthquake. Amal Prabha also set up the Guwahati Yubak Sevalal with school and college students to fight untouchability. The members of the Ashram also worked in Vinoba Bhave's Bhudaan movement in Dhakuakhana and Dhemaji. The draft of the first Gramdan Act was prepared by the Kasturba Trust and enacted by the Government of Assam. At Guwahati, Mahendra Mohan Lahiri donated land for the Assam Go Seva Samiti. She received the Padma Vibhushan and the Jamnalal Bajaj Award.

## AMALA SHANKAR (1919–2020)

Amala Shankar, alongside her illustrious partner Uday Shankar, was instrumental in bringing Indian dance to the global stage. In 2012, at the age of 93, she graced the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival for the screening of the restored version of *Kalpana* — a film written, co-produced, and directed by Uday Shankar, in which Amala played the role of Uma. With characteristic wit, she remarked, “I am the youngest film star you have seen at Cannes this year.”

Born as Amala Nandy on 27 June 1919 in Batajor village, Magura District, Bengal Presidency (now in Bangladesh), she was raised in an environment that valued nature and rural life, thanks to her father Akhoy Kumar Nandy. Her journey into the world of dance began in 1931 when, at just 11 years old, she attended the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris. There she met Uday Shankar and his family.

Amala soon joined Uday Shankar’s dance troupe, performing internationally and learning deeply from the pioneering choreographer. Their bond grew stronger, and in 1939, while staying with the troupe in Chennai, Uday Shankar proposed marriage. They were married in 1942. Their son, Ananda Shankar, a noted musician, was born later that year, followed by their daughter, Mamata Shankar, a celebrated dancer and actress, in 1954.

As a dance couple, Uday and Amala Shankar became iconic. One of their most memorable performances was the depiction of Shiva and Parvati, featuring elaborate costumes and headgear inspired by the classical bronze sculptures of Nataraja. Their choreography often drew from Indian mythology and the *Natya Shastra*, blending tradition with innovation.

Following the closure of Uday’s Almora Centre, Amala settled in Calcutta, where she founded the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre (USICC). Dedicated to nurturing young talent from the age of five, the centre became a cornerstone of Indian dance education. Even in

her nineties, Amala remained active; at the age of 92, she performed in the dance drama *Sita Swayamvar*, portraying King Janaka.

Beyond dance, Amala was a gifted visual artist. She painted with her fingers rather than brushes, and her first exhibition was held at Genesis Art Gallery in Kolkata in 1991. She also supported various social causes, including *Stree Shakti – The Parallel Force*, and contributed to cultural discourse through initiatives like *A Quest for Roots*, which she released in 1999.

A devout follower of Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, her spirituality was an integral part of her life. Amala Shankar received numerous honors for her contributions to the arts, including the Padma Bhushan from the Government of India in 1991 and the Banga Bibhushan Award from the Government of West Bengal in 2011.

Her legacy lives on through her students, her family, and the countless lives she touched through her passion for Indian dance, and the countless lives she touched through her passion for Indian dance and culture.

## **AMIRBAI KARNATAKI (1906–1965)**

Amirbai Karnataki was an actor and singer in Hindi films. She was born in the village of Bilgi, in the district of Bijapur in Karnataka, into a middle-class family. Amirbai later stated that she came from the Kalawant tradition of musicians from Rajasthan; however, her family disapproved of her singing and acting on screen, and she became estranged from them in later life. She had five sisters, of whom one of the elder ones, Gauharbai, preceded her into films. A brother, Raj Mohamed Kuntoji, became a police officer in Belgaum. Amirbai finished school in Bijapur and went to Bombay at the age of fifteen. She came to the notice of talent scouts from HMV. She impressed them

by singing a qawwali song. This record proved a hit. Gauharbai helped Amirbai get a role in the film *Vishnu Bhakti* in 1934. She followed this with *Yasmin* (1935) and *Narsi Bhagat* (1940). In the 1930s, she was linked with, and probably married to, a man called Himalaywala; some sources claim he was abusive to her. Later, she married Badri Kaanchwala, the editor of *Paras*. Amirbai's first few films did not get her noticed, until she sang Anil Biswas's songs in *Kismet* (Bombay Talkies, 1943). She reached her peak by 1947, singing both onscreen and as a playback singer. She continued with *Haqdar* (1946), *Vidya* (1948) and *Sipahiya* (1949). She also composed music for *Shehnaaz* (Wahab Pictures, 1948). However, the rise of Lata Mangeshkar caused her to leave playback singing and continue with acting, doing character roles as she got older and acting in Gujarati and Marwari films. Her later films were less successful; *Lav Kush* (1951) and *Bedardi* (1951). She appeared in *Deewana* in 1952, followed by *Mashooka* (1953), *Mr X* (1957), *Boy Friend*, *Dark Street* (both 1961). She had a paralytic attack in 1965, died four days later and was buried in her hometown. She was known as *Kannada Kokila*. Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent fan of her song 'Vaishnav Jan'.

## AMRAPALI (SIXTH CENTURY BCE)

Amrapali (Pali: Ambapali) was a famous courtesan of the kingdom of Vaishali in ancient India, a cultured, wealthy and accomplished woman who renounced the world to become a follower of the Buddha.

Mahanama, a rich Shakyan noble of Vaishali, found the baby Amrapali in his mango grove, hence her name, which means mango bud or blossom, and since he was childless, adopted her. She grew to be an exquisitely beautiful girl, and many rich and noble suitors sought her hand. The question of whom she should choose was likely to cause social and political difficulties, so Mahanama decided to

place the matter before the Assembly of the Lichchhavi *gana* (clan) to which he belonged. The members of the Assembly were so struck with Amrapali's amazing beauty that they decided that she was a *striratna* (jewel of a woman) and could not belong to one individual but should be enjoyed by all: *gana bhogya*. The custom is probably a relic of ancient group marriage as practised by the Lichchavis.

This decision was a shock to Amrapali's father, but he dared not disobey the Assembly. Amrapali saved his position by agreeing to abide by the decision, but only if the Assembly would fulfil five conditions: she should be provided with a house in the best locality, only one customer at a time would be allowed inside her premises, her fee would be 500 *karshapanas*, if there were a general search for an enemy or a culprit her house could be inspected only on the seventh day, and no watch could be kept on persons entering and leaving her house. The Assembly accepted all the conditions, and thus Amrapali became a courtesan. The courtesans of the day were well-versed in the sixty-four arts, and Amrapali excelled in all of them. She entertained many kings, nobles and rich merchants and amassed great wealth. King Bimbisara of Magadha had a son by her called Vimala Kondanna, who was recognised by Bimbisara as his son and enjoyed a high position in the royal court. Later, Vimala renounced the world and became a Buddhist monk.

During one of his wanderings, the Buddha was attracted by the cool shade of Amrapali's beautiful mango grove at Kotagrama. He decided to spend some time there, and when Amrapali heard of this, she hurried there to pay her respects. She was very deeply influenced by his discourses, and the Buddha honoured her invitation for a meal at her house. Later, she served food to him and his companions at the mango grove, then gifted the grove with its buildings to the *bhikkhu sangha* for the establishment of an arama or monastery. Soon afterwards, she heard a discourse by her son Vimala and decided to become a *bhikkhuni*. She realised the impermanence of worldly existence and gained an insight into truth when she saw the changes that had overcome her

once beautiful body. She obtained *arhat*-hood, or spiritual perfection, wrote many poems about her spiritual transformation, and remains one of the most renowned followers of Buddhism. Some of her poetry is collected in Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, volume 1 (New Delhi: OUP, 1993).

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **AMRIT KAUR KAPURTHALA (1887–1964)**

Amrit Kaur was a politician and writer, serving as the first Central Health Minister from 1947 to 1957. A princess of the royal house of Kapurthala, she was a patriot and a firm believer in non-violence.

She was born on 2 February 1889 to Raja Sir Harnam Singh of the Ahluwalia royal family of Kapurthala. Her father converted to Christianity; this debarred them from succeeding to the throne of Kapurthala, but their prestige remained intact. Her early education was in England at the Sherborne School for Girls, and she later studied at Oxford. She was fond of sports, especially tennis. She never married, devoting all her time to the eradication of social evils.

She came under the influence of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, her father's friend, and later also Mahatma Gandhi. From 1931 to 1933, she served as president of the All-India Women's Education Fund, responsible for the opening of the Lady Irwin College at New Delhi. In 1938, she became the President of the All-India Women's Conference. She served as Gandhi's secretary for 16 years and was a prominent member of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly from 1946 to 1950. She participated in the Salt Satyagraha and was arrested. Later, she condemned the Communal Awards. She went to Bannu in the Northwest Frontier Province or NWFP, to advocate the cause of the Indian National Congress, was convicted on 16 July 1937, and

imprisoned on a charge of sedition. During the Quit India Movement, she faced a ruthless *lathi* charge at Simla and was arrested at Kalka.

She was the first woman to be appointed as a member of the Advisory Board on Education, and resigned in August 1942 in the wake of the Quit India movement. In 1945, she was the Indian delegate to the UNESCO meeting in London and the next year at Paris. She was responsible for the building of the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, and initiated schemes for the expansion of maternity homes, schools for nurses, and the control of diseases like malaria, leprosy and tuberculosis. She was associated with the YWCA and was president of the International Red Cross and the Indian Red Cross Society. She served as a member of the first Lok Sabha from 1952 to 1957 and then entered the Rajya Sabha that year. She was re-elected to the Rajya Sabha for a second term in 1958, where she served till the end of her life. She also led the Indian delegation to the WHO in 1948, 1949, 1951 and 1953. She died in 1964 of heart failure.

*Reena Jain*

## **AMRITA PRITAM (1919–2005)**

Amrita Pritam was a writer in Hindi and Punjabi. She was born in Gujranwala, Punjab, in 1919. Her parents were not well off; her father was a preacher of the Sikh faith, while her mother was a poet. She lost her mother when she was eleven, and soon after, she and her father moved to Lahore. These early experiences made a deep impression on her, and she began writing in Punjabi while still in school. Her first collection of poetry, *Amrit Lehran*, was published in 1936 when she was only sixteen, and she produced five more collections by 1950 in spite of her father's opposition to this 'frivolous' pursuit. Hoping to 'steady' her mind, he got her married in 1936 to Pritam Singh, an editor to whom her father had promised her in early childhood. She

remained married to Pritam Singh till 1960, and they had a daughter and a son before they divorced.

Disturbed by the growing violence and unrest leading up to Partition, she and her husband left for Delhi in 1947. There, Amrita began to write in Hindi, hoping to reach a new audience. She still wrote a few poems in Punjabi, and the most famous of these is *Aj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu* addressed to Waris Shah, the author of the Punjabi epic *Heer-Ranjha*, and bewailing the savagery and waste of Partition. In 1950, she wrote her most famous novel, *Pinjar* (The Skeleton), which was published in 1970 and made into an award-winning film of the same name by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi in 2003.

Amrita got a job with All India Radio, which she held till 1961. She also edited a Punjabi literary journal, *Nagmani*. After her divorce she had an infatuation with Sahir Ludhianvi (1921-1980). Best known, for his film lyrics, Ludhianvi, born Abdul Hayee, was an atheist and a realist, deeply committed to social justice and a mordant critic of abuses, but incapable of looking after himself or dealing with the practicalities of life. She also had a long-standing relationship with the artist Imroz, who nursed her through her final illness. With him, she edited the literary journal *Nagmani* for three decades.

She wrote more than 75 books: 28 novels, 18 compilations of verse, five anthologies of short stories and 16 collections of essays and articles. A few of her works have been translated into English, French, Japanese and other languages. Her autobiographical works are titled *Kala Gulab* (Black Rose, 1968) and *Raseedi Tikkat* (Revenue Stamp, 1976).

Amrita won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 for her long poem *Sunehere* (Messages) and the Padma Shri in 1969. She was awarded many D.Litt degrees honoris causa from universities, including Delhi (1973), Jabalpur (1973) and Visva Bharati (1987). She received the Bhartiya Jnanpith award in 1982 for *Kagaj te Canvas*. She was nominated to the Rajya Sabha between 1986 and 1992. She received the

International Vaptsarov Award from Bulgaria in 1979. She was made an Officer *des Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in 1987. Her work is equally popular in India and Pakistan. She won the Padma Vibhushan in 2004, as well as the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship for lifetime achievement.

## AMRITA SHERGIL (1913–1941)

Amrita Shergil, also written Sher-Gil, was an avant-garde poet and painter. She is known for the lyrical boldness of her canvases and the bohemian colour of her life. There were many rumours and stories of her lovers during her lifetime. Khushwant Singh has described her in his 2002 memoir, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*.

Her father, Sardar Umrao Singh Majithia, was a scholar and Sikh noble. He met Marie Antoinette Gottesmann, a Jewish Hungarian musician and opera singer of Budapest, when Antoinette visited the daughter of Maharana Ranjit Singh in the Punjab in 1911. They were married and moved to Budapest, where Amrita was born on 30 January 1913. She spent her early life in Budapest and began to paint at the age of five. She came to India in 1921 with her parents, staying in Simla and in her father's family home in the Punjab. In 1924, her mother took her to Italy, where Amrita briefly trained in art at Florence, but they returned to India that same year. In 1929, when she was sixteen, the family again returned to Europe. Amrita began to study art at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere in Paris. She then shifted to the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, becoming the first Asian to study at that noted art school. At the age of twenty, she was elected an associate of the Grand Salon in Paris, once again the first Asian to achieve this distinction.

In 1934, she returned to India, becoming active in the art scene and holding group and solo shows. In 1936, she was awarded a gold

medal at the All India Fine Arts and Crafts exhibition. That year she travelled through Ajanta, Ellora and South India. She was especially moved by the humanism of the Ajanta cave paintings. She became engrossed in the life of the people of rural Punjab and the hills around Simla. She captured them and their lives in a series of perfectly composed paintings, which have a sense of sensuous melancholy. Her style at the time incorporated many elements of miniature art. Her trip to Ajanta and South India brought a greater fluidity to her work. She painted mainly in oils and sometimes used pastels. Her dislike for the Bengal School is well known. In 1938, she married her cousin Dr Victor Egan and moved with him to Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. In 1941, they moved to Lahore. A few months later, she became ill and died. Although the cause of her death has never been determined, it has been suggested that a failed abortion had led to fatal peritonitis. She was only 28. Subsequently, her husband was taken into police custody because Britain had declared war on Hungary. He was later released.

Her famous paintings include ‘Siesta’, ‘Storyteller’, ‘Ganesh Puja’, ‘Hillside’, ‘Hill Scene’, and ‘Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool’. Some of her greatest work was done after her visit to South India. ‘Brahmacharis’, ‘South Indian Villagers Going to Market’, ‘Banana Sellers’ and ‘Brides’ Toilette’ are imprinted indelibly on the minds of Indian painters. These paintings established a new genre, a totally new way of using colour, far removed from the paler, lighter hues of the impressionist painters, and raw pigment used by Indian folk artists. She was an extraordinary colourist. Her sister Indira was the mother of the artist Vivian Sundaram.

## **AMMU SWAMINATHAN (1894–1978)**

Ammu Swaminathan was born in 1894 into an upper-caste Hindu family in Anakkara, in the Palghat district of present-day Kerala. At the

age of thirteen, she married Subbarama Swaminathan, a self-made man from a middle-class Kerala Iyer family who had earned scholarships to study at the Universities of Edinburgh and London, rising through significant hardships to become a respected intellectual.

A pioneering voice in India's freedom movement and women's rights activism, Ammu Swaminathan emerged as a key figure in early 20th-century reformist circles. In 1917, she co-founded the Women's India Association (WIA) in Madras, alongside stalwarts such as Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, Malathi Patwardhan, Mrs. Dadabhoi, and Mrs. Ambujammal. The WIA was instrumental in advocating for women's suffrage, education, and social reform.

In 1946, she was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India from the Madras Constituency. There, she played an active role in debates, particularly focusing on social and educational reform. During the final discussion on the passage of the Constitution on November 24, 1949, she proudly proclaimed: *"People outside have been saying that India did not give equal rights to her women. Now we can say that when the Indian people themselves framed their Constitution, they have given rights to women equal with every other citizen of the country."*

In post-independence India, Ammu Swaminathan continued her public service. She served as the President of the Bharat Scouts and Guides, and in 1975, she was honoured as "Mother of the Year", recognizing her lifelong contributions to society and national development.

She was also the matriarch of a distinguished family. Among her children were Govind Swaminathan, who served as the Advocate-General of Tamil Nadu (1969–1976), and Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan (Sahgal), a renowned freedom fighter, INA officer, medical doctor, and later a Rajya Sabha member. Captain Lakshmi was also nominated as a presidential candidate in 2002, underscoring the family's enduring commitment to public service and national progress.

## ANANDAMAYI MA (1896–1982)

Anandamayi Ma was a mystic and cult leader close to many important people of the 1960s and 1970s. Originally from Bangladesh, she made her home in the Dehra Dun hills and received many celebrated devotees, including Kamala Nehru and Indira Gandhi (q.v.).

She was born Nirmalasundari Devi on 30 April 1896, in the village of Kheora, now in Bangladesh. Her parents, Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya and Mokshada Devi, were not well off, but content and respected in society. Nirmala's education was elementary, yet she did well in school; she explained that she always had a premonition as to what questions would be asked and could prepare for them. Her religious education was similarly perfunctory; all she knew was that the lord of the universe was very big, that he had to be worshipped to secure his mercy, and His name was Hari. In later days, she characterised her spiritual inspiration as '*kheyal*' or the spontaneous upsurge of Divine Will. At first, she showed little sign of her spiritual power, appearing to be of below-average intelligence.

In 1909, at the age of 12, she was married to Ramani Mohan Chakravarty, who came to be known as Bholanath. It was Bholanath who proclaimed her to be his guru when she was only 18. He opened his doors so that people could come and be blessed by her. Anandamayi Ma's following began to grow when Bholanath was transferred to Bijatpur. She experienced trances in which one or more of her limbs would be twisted by paralysis; her temperature would fluctuate, and she would lie like one dead for long intervals. As the changes progressed, *mantras* and *shlokas* would well up in her mind, though she knew no Sanskrit. She was open-minded about other religions. The best known of her devotees was Jyotish Ray, later known as Bhajji. He gave her the name Anandamayi, meaning 'filled with joy'.

In 1924, Bholanath was appointed trustee for the Shahbag Gardens and other properties of Nawabzadi Pyari Banu in Dhaka, and they

lived in that city for two years. Anandamayi Ma's following grew, and stories of her miracles spread. She took to visiting the Siddheshwari temple in Dhaka, and her followers built an ashram for her there. Another was built later at Ramna, where she performed a *Kali puja* and installed an image of the goddess; this was razed during the Bangladesh war. In 1927, Anandamayi began her wanderings across North India, though she returned often to Dhaka. This spread news of her in the north, and in 1932, she finally settled in Raipur near Dehra Dun, making her home in a dilapidated Shiva temple. Soon, the ashram was flourishing thanks to the efforts of her devotee Hari Ramji, who also helped set up the Almora Vidyapeeth for boys. Shortly afterwards, the Sri Anandamayi Kanyapeeth for girls was set up in Varanasi and affiliated to the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University.

## **ANANDIBAI JOSHI (1865–1887)**

Anandibai Joshi was, along with Kadambini Ganguly (q.v.), one of the first Indian women to qualify as a doctor. She fought hard against tough odds to get her degree, though she died too young to establish herself in her profession.

She was married to Gopal Vinayak Joshi, a widower twenty years older than her, when she was nine years old. Her birth name was Yamuna, but her husband renamed her Anandi, the 'happy one'. Gopal Joshi, a postal clerk, was determined to educate his wife. After the death of their first child when Anandibai was 14, a tragedy she was sure could have been averted had the child received adequate medical attention, she decided she would become a doctor. Gopal took a job in Bombay (now Mumbai), then Alibag, and finally in Calcutta. He encouraged her against the opposition and discrimination she faced, which grew to the point where they became convinced that she could only study abroad. However, his support of her was erratic and unpredictable,

and he could turn on her suddenly and abuse her without warning; dealing with his tantrums soaked up a lot of her energy and probably hastened her death. Gopal wrote to a missionary named Royal Wilder, asking if he could help the couple move to America so Anandibai could study there. Wilder agreed only on the condition that they convert to Christianity. They refused, but Wilder wrote about the correspondence in a local paper, and Theodicia Carpenter, a rich American from New Jersey, saw the articles, came forward and offered to help Anandibai study in America.

Anandibai was already ill with the first symptoms of the tuberculosis that would ultimately kill her. Theodicia Carpenter sent her medicines from America, but to no avail. In spite of her failing health, Gopal decided to send her alone in 1883 to America, as they could not afford to go together. As a student at the Women's Medical College in Pennsylvania, she was happy, but a lack of funds led to her overworking and neglecting herself, and her health worsened. She also refused to wear Western clothes in the punishing cold of North America. Nevertheless, she completed her thesis on obstetric practices among the ancient Hindus. Gopal Rao joined her in 1885, but on her return after her graduation in 1886, her illness was diagnosed as the last stage of tuberculosis. She died shortly after her return to India, and her ashes were placed in the Carpenter family cemetery in New York. An early American feminist, Caroline Healey Dall, wrote a short biography of Anandi in 1888, and in 1912, Kashibai Kanitkar wrote a biography of her in Marathi. S.J. Joshi wrote a fictional version of her life in his Marathi novel *Anandi Gopal*, translated into English by Asha Damle and published by Stree in 1992.

## ANDAL (EIGHTH CENTURY)

Andal (also Antal) was an Alwar saint-poet of the Bhakti movement writing in Tamil, the oldest Indian language, barring Sanskrit. The Alwars were great Tamil Vaishnava poet-saints. Her origins are shrouded in mystery as she was a foundling. Her most famous work is the *Tiru-p-pavai*.

The legend of her birth goes like this. A famous Bhakti poet named Periyalwar Vishnuchitta, whose duty it was to grow and collect flowers for the local temple in Villiputtur, found a baby under a tulasi plant in his garden and decided to bring her up. He gave her the name ‘Godai’, or gift of the earth. Godai was so devoted to the Lord that early in the morning, she would creep out and secretly twine the flowers meant for the worship of the Lord around her limbs, fantasizing that she was thus married to him. One day, Vishnuchitta found a hair among the flowers and demanded to know what she had been up to. She confessed, and Periyalvar was forced to throw away the flowers as polluted. However, the Lord then appeared to him and said that only the flowers that had adorned the girl were acceptable to him. Periyalvar then realised that Godai was a true bride of the Lord. He gave her the name ‘Andal’, meaning ‘she who rules’, and married her to Lord Vishnu in his avatar of Sriranganatha at the temple of Srirangam. She is said to have disappeared into the image while her marriage was being solemnised. She is still worshipped as the wedded wife of Narayana or Vishnu. She died young, hence there are few ascertainable facts available about her.

Andal has left two works: *Tiru-p-pavai* (30 stanzas) and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* (143 stanzas). The quality of her work is comparable to the best by poets of the period. In *Nacciyar Tirumozhi* she narrates to her friends the wonderful dream she has had of her marriage to Krishna. Her description of the rituals is so vivid, elaborate, and in such sensuous colours, that they are generally sung at Vaishnavite marriages. Her passion for her divine lover is that of a voluptuous woman for a man, not the ethereal longing of a lost soul in search of the eternal. Yet, there

is a delicacy in her handling of the love theme. ‘What is the fragrance of Krishna’s lips?’ she asks his flute, ‘Smell they of myrrh? Or do they smell of lotus flowers?’ Her description of nature is vivid and shows extreme sensitivity to beauty.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **ANIS KIDWAI (1906–1982)**

Begum Anis Kidwai was born in 1906 in Barabanki and spent her early life there. Her father, Sheikh Wilait Ali, was a prominent lawyer, and he also wrote for the humour columns of Maulana Mohammed Ali’s *Comrade* and Raja Ghulam Hussain’s *New Era*; his writing was appreciated for its biting wit and style. The family was patriotic yet orthodox, and Anis’s father was a strict disciplinarian. Anis, confined at home, was a self-taught student. She satisfied her inborn taste for literature by listening to the tutors engaged to teach her brothers and thus became well-versed in Urdu and English.

Anis married her cousin Shafi Ahmed Kidwai in 1920 and lived with him first in Allahabad and then in other cities, wherever her husband’s job took them. Shafi, the brother of Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, was a freedom fighter and a close friend of the Nehru family. Rafi Ahmed was imprisoned regularly for his activism, and his family, including Anis and Shafi, faced regular political persecution. From 1921 to 1923, she served as a secretary of the Women’s Congress Committee.

In 1947, Shafi was killed in Dehra Dun fighting a brutal communal attack. Realising that her personal tragedy was part of a wider disaster befalling the women of the subcontinent, Anis left the security of her home, gave up the *burqah*, and went to Delhi, where she worked tirelessly together with Subhadra Joshi and Mridula Sarabhai to help the victims of the communal bloodbath that followed Independence.

She helped to rehabilitate thousands of refugees who had fled from Pakistan to Delhi and established in Lucknow a home for lost and kidnapped women and children, both Hindu and Muslim. From 1956 to 1968, she was a member of the Rajya Sabha and a member of the court of Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, as well as presiding over numerous welfare and educational institutions and associations.

Though self-taught, Anis had an amazing command of Urdu and wrote in lucid and chaste prose. Her book *Azadi Ki Chhaon Mein*, published in 1974, gives a description of her own experiences with refugees, with communal brutality, the corruption and venality of administrative officers and the efforts of Gandhiji to combat them. The book won her an award from the Urdu Academy of Uttar Pradesh. Another book, *Ab Jinke Dekhne Ko*, published in 1980, received an award and was based on her acquaintance with freedom fighters. *Nazre Kush Guzre* is a collection of her essays, where she tackles serious problems of life in her own style. The Sahitya Kala Parishad honoured Anis for her contribution to literature. She also authored *Char Rukh*, a book on the lives and work of writers and poets. She passed away in 1982, on an auspicious Friday in the Ramzan month, leaving behind a son and two daughters.

## **ANITA AWACHAT (1942–1997)**

Anita Awachat was a doctor specialising in addiction. She was born Anita Sohoni in Gholwad and grew up in Thane. Her family called her Sunanda. Her mother taught sewing, and her father ran a hostel for Adivasi students. She studied at Fergusson College. While, there she met her future husband, Anil Awachat. They both studied medicine at B.J. Medical College, where she supported herself by giving private tuition to fellow students, including Anil. They were married in 1968

without their parents', approval as she was older than he and not considered pretty. She interned in Thane, seeing many cases of dog and snake bites. She saved some money by staying with her parents. She also worked at the Thane Mental Asylum. At that time, she noticed there was no special facility for drug addicts who were accommodated in the asylum, where there was no means to rehabilitate them. She and Anil lived for a while with his parents, but they mistreated her severely, and the couple had to move out and rent a flat in a poor locality. By now they had two daughters.

Anil began writing and publishing at this time. After reading his book *Gard*, P.L. Deshpande gave them a donation to start a de-addiction and rehabilitation centre for drug abusers. They founded Muktangan Rehabilitation Center in 1986. After two years, they received government funding. In 1989, Anita was diagnosed with breast cancer. She fought on, in spite of metastases detected in 1991. She appeared cured for a while, then in 1995 the cancer recurred. She continued to work for Muktangan till the end in 1997. It is now one of the best institutions of its kind, staffed by many of its cured ex-patients, the 'Muktangan-graduates'. It is the only rehab centre with ISO 9001:2008 certification. The 120 residential clients had a treatment regime of five weeks on-campus treatment with follow-up from 20 follow-up centers all over Maharashtra. It has a 'Nishigandh' ward with all-female staff where women can be treated with no questions asked. Her daughter Mukta Puntambekar now runs the centre.

## **ANNA CHANDY (1905–1996)**

Anna Chandy became India's first woman judge in a district court in 1948, and in 1959 at the Kerala High Court. She was probably the second woman in the world to become a High Court judge, and she held that position till 1967.

Born to a Christian family at Elaphi, Travancore, she became one of the early women to hold a postgraduate degree in 1926 and entered Law School in 1927. She was called to the Bar in 1929, specialising in criminal law. She founded and edited a journal called *Shreemati* in which she championed women's rights.

Travancore was a Princely State and had been the first such state to set up its own democratic legislative assembly, as early as 1888. In 1904, the Maharaja of Travancore inaugurated the Shree Mulam Popular Assembly (Praja Sabha), a non-legislative advisory body. Two-thirds of this body were elected, and the rest nominated. Between 1932 and 1934, Anna served on it. She became a first-grade Zilla Munsif in 1937, probably the first woman to reach that position. In 1943, she became an Additional District Judge and in 1948, District Judge. This paved the way for her appointment to the High Court in 1959. After her retirement in 1967, she sat on the National Law Commission.

In 1971, the *Malayala Manorama* serialised her autobiography, which was subsequently published in Thrissur by Carmel Books in 1973 under the title *Atmakatha*. Her husband, P.C. Chandy, an inspector general of police, helped and supported her all the way. She was a member of the Travancore Vidhan Parishad.

## **ANNA MANI (1918–2001)**

Anna Modayil Mani was a physicist and meteorologist. She was born to a wealthy traditional Syrian Christian family of Travancore, the seventh of eight children. Her father was a civil engineer and landowner, as well as an agnostic, and his ideas influenced his young daughter.

From an early age, Anna showed much promise. On her eighth birthday, she refused the traditional gift of a pair of diamond earrings, opting instead for a full set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. By the age

of twelve she had read all the books in the local library. As a teenager, she witnessed the Vaikom agitation of 1925, where Dalits in the city of Vaikom agitated to be allowed to use the road adjacent to a temple. This strengthened her resolve to promote social justice in India, though she never joined any group. She was introduced to socialist politics in college, associated with left-leaning people and read socialist literature. Initially, she wanted to study medicine, but later switched to physics and took an honours degree in 1939 from Madras University.

In 1940, she was awarded a scholarship to do research at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and joined C.V. Raman's team there. C.V. Raman was then embroiled in a controversy with Max Born and Kathleen Lonsdale on crystal dynamics, so she set to work on the spectroscopy of diamonds and rubies. It was gruelling work as the diamonds were so small, and Anna would spend long hours in the lab. There were other difficulties as well: Raman was intensely conservative and did not approve of any contact between men and women in his lab. Abha Sur, Anna's biographer, recounts how Raman maintained a strict separation of sexes in his laboratory. Women were neither allowed to participate in formal discussions nor to talk informally with male colleagues. Anna recalled how he would mutter 'Scandalous!' every time a male and a female student walked together by his window, something he could see even while bending over a microscope. Anna developed a very hard carapace of cheerful indifference to this treatment, but she never shrank from speaking out about prejudice in her colleagues.

Her hard work in the lab paid off, and between 1942 and 1945, she published five single-authored papers on diamond crystallography. However, in 1945, Madras University denied her a Ph.D. on the grounds that she did not have an M.Sc. degree. They ignored the facts that Anna had graduated with honours in physics and chemistry, had won a scholarship for graduate studies at the Indian Institute of Science, and had published five single-authored papers. The same thing happened to her fellow researcher, K. Sunanda Bai, who eventually became so

discouraged that she committed suicide, cutting short a promising career in biochemistry. According to Anna Mani, Sunanda Bai's last wish was to be granted the Ph.D. degree that she so rightfully deserved, posthumously. Officials at Madras did not fulfil her wish, ostensibly for bureaucratic reasons. Though Anna had accepted with grace the ostensible reasons Madras University had given for denying her a Ph.D. degree, she keenly felt the injustice of their decision in Sunanda Bai's case. Her completed thesis, however, found an honoured place in the library of the IISc.

She then went to England on a scholarship. This was, however, for meteorological instrumentation, so she ended up working in this field as well. She returned in 1948 and joined the Indian Meteorological Department at Pune. She continued to work for over two and a half decades on meteorology in India, including atmospheric ozone, solar radiation, wind energy and international instrumentation standards. She also started a company to manufacture meteorological measuring instruments and gauges. She promoted the selection of Davos as the World Radiation Centre. She campaigned to have ozone research put at the forefront of the assessment of climate change. In 1967, she worked with the World Meteorological Organisation, revising and updating international standards. In 1975, she acted as WMO adviser to Egypt on radiation research. She retired in 1976 and joined the Raman Research Institute as visiting professor. She published two books, *The Handbook for Solar Radiation Data in India* (1980) and *Solar Radiation over India* (1981). In 1987, she was awarded the K.R. Ramanathan Medal by the Indian National Science Academy.

## **ANNIE BESANT (1847–1933)**

Annie Besant was a Fabian socialist, a Theosophist, a passionate crusader for women's rights, and a founder and first President of the

Indian National Congress. She is sometimes remembered as the mentor of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a young farmer's son whom she considered the prophet of the new century, though he himself renounced messiah-hood when he came of age.

Annie Besant was born in London on 1 October 1847. Her father, William Page Wood, was half Irish and half English, while her mother was of pure Irish descent. They were a well-to-do middle-class family but faced a financial crisis on the sudden death of Mr. Wood. Subsequently, Annie met Miss Marriyat, who took care of her education. In 1866, she met the Rev. Frank Besant and married him. Their marriage was not a compatible one, with the couple finally separating in 1873. Together with Charles Bradlaugh, she became the editor of the *National Reformer* and, declaring herself an atheist, she was elected Vice President of the National Secular Society in 1874. The following year, she published a text advocating birth control, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, and she and Bradlaugh were prosecuted for these publications, which were deemed obscene at that time. The sentence was overturned on appeal, but Annie lost custody of her daughter. In 1877, she published *The Gospel of Atheism*. She had a close personal relationship with the socialist Edward Aveling, which broke up in 1885, and she joined the Fabian Party that year, and became one of the organisers of the Match Girls' strike in 1888. She also campaigned for better working conditions for dock workers.

In 1889, she chanced to read Helena P. Blavatsky's (q.v.) *Secret Doctrine*, which completely transformed her. She met Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, a movement that combined Western occult philosophy, with Buddhist and Hindu teachings, was greatly influenced by her personality and ideas. That year, Annie joined the Society, and in 1907, she was elected President, a position she held till her death.

She came to India for the first time in 1893 to attend the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, near Chennai. In 1895, she settled in Varanasi and completed her translation of the

*Bhagvad Gita*. In 1898, she laid the foundation of the Central Hindu College of Varanasi. This institution later formed the nucleus of the Varanasi Hindu University. To discourage early marriages, she refused admission to the institution to married girls. She learnt Sanskrit and studied the sacred books of India.

In October 1913, she spoke at a public meeting at Chennai, recommending that there be a Standing Committee in the House of Commons for discussing Indian affairs. This Committee would go into the question of how India might attain her freedom. To facilitate her political campaign, she began a weekly newspaper called *Commonweal* in 1914. In June that same year, she purchased the *Madras Standard* and renamed it *New India*, which became her chosen platform for India's freedom. With a nod to her Irish roots, she called this freedom 'Home Rule' for India. Her firm belief was that India should have its freedom but should remain a part of the British Commonwealth. She explained her plan for the establishment of the Home Rule League at a meeting at Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1916 and tried to persuade others like Bal Gangadhar Tilak to accept her view, but without success. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi and the mass movements he initiated, her popularity waned. A whole lifetime of fighting by constitutional means and within the law had left her with a deep mistrust of massive lawbreaking, even when apparently non-violent.

In 1916, Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras, asked her to leave India, but she refused to go. A few months later, she was placed under house arrest, only to be released once more. She established the Indian Boy Scouts' Association in 1917, and the National College in South India. In 1917, she started the Society for the Promotion of National Education, and the next year, the National University. She was a prolific writer and wrote about 300 books, including a memoir and numerous commentaries on Indian philosophy. Her political work helped to win freedom for India while her spiritual interests won respect for India in the eyes of the West.

## **ANNIE MASCARENE (1902–1963)**

Annie Mascarene is remembered as the first woman to join the Travancore State Congress, the first woman to be part of the Travancore State Congress Working Committee, and then the first minister in Travancore State.

Annie Mascarene was born on 26 May 1902 in Trivandrum, of Latin Christian parents. Her father, Gabriel Mascarene, a low-paid Government servant, nevertheless, ensured a very good education for her. She did a double MA in history and economics in 1925, then served as a lecturer in a college in Ceylon. On her return after three years, she took her LL.B. degree.

Seeing the miserable condition of her people, she gave up her practice and joined the Nivarthanam Movement, fighting for representation of Christians, Ezhavas and Muslims in the public service and State Legislative. She interacted with Gandhiji and was motivated by him. In 1938, she joined the Travancore State Congress, becoming a member of the State Legislative Council in 1948. In 1949, she was elected Minister of Health and Electricity in the newly formed Travancore-Cochin state. Disgusted with the corruption she witnessed there, she later resigned from the Congress party. She was a member of the Constituent Assembly and was elected to the first Lok Sabha in 1952 as an Independent. In the next election, she was defeated and retired from active politics. She never married.

## **ANUPAMA (THIRTEENTH CENTURY)**

Anupama is remembered in the legend surrounding the building of the Jain temples at Mount Abu and the Dilwara temples. She is said

to have advised her husband and his brother to use a cache of buried treasure they found to build temples at Shatrunjaya and Girnar.

Anupama was the daughter of a merchant, Dharaniga, from the town of Chandravati at the foot of Mount Abu. She was married to Tejapala, who with his elder brother, Vasthupala, was minister to the King Viradhavala of Dholka. They were wealthy Jains, and legend has it that when they went on a journey to bury some of their wealth, their digging unearthed yet more. They asked Anupama, whom they went for advice on all matters, what they should do with this treasure. She replied that it must be placed on the top of a mountain, so that it might not fall into the hands of others, as it had fallen into theirs. Thus began the building of the Vimala Vasahi temple to the twenty-second Jain tirthankara Neminatha and other temples on Mount Abu and Mount Girnar. The entire complex of Jain temples on these mountains was built between 800 and 1200 CE, but the ones built by Anupama are the most famous.

True to Anupama's prediction, no other of the family's public works, of which there were many, has survived. Anupama herself was learned and accomplished. She was called the '*shad-darshana-mata* or the mother of the six philosophical systems, for her impartial patronage of and interest in philosophy. She is said to have composed the *Kankana-kavya*. The *Samara-rasu* of Ambadevi-suri states that Tejapala and Vasthupala dug a lake on Mount Shatrunjaya in her memory.

After Anupama's death, Tejapala was grief-stricken. His family guru rebuked him for such an unmanly show of grief, reminding him that, when he had been newly married to Anupama, he had been so disappointed at her plain and unremarkable looks that he had offered rich gifts and food to the Kshetrapala (head priest at the temple) to annul the marriage.

## **ANUPAMA NIRANJANA (1934–1991)**

Anupama Niranjana was a doctor who was prominent in speaking out for women in India. Her birth name was Venkatalakshmi. She fought her family to get herself educated, graduating from the Mysore Medical College in 1956. That year also saw her marriage to the Kannada writer Niranjana, against her family's wishes. Anupama had a hard fight after that, both with her husband's paralysis after a stroke and her own cancer. Nevertheless, she brought up her two daughters Tejaswini and Semanthini, and continued to write. The year 1976 saw her publish *Madhavi*, a novel, followed by *Ele* (Thread, 1980), and *Ghoshha* (Rallying Cry, 1985). Her novel *Runamuktalu* was made into a successful movie in 1984. She also published a number of books of advice for young women on health and social issues. Her daughter Tejaswini is also a writer and academic and has translated several of her mother's works from Kannada into English. The Karnataka Lekhakiyara Sangha awards the Anupama Award for Kannada writers each year in her name.

## **ANUSUYA BAI KALE (1896–1958)**

Anusuya Bai Kale worked for tribals and for the recognition of women's rights in Madhya Pradesh. Her father was a lawyer and Chitpavan Brahmin, her mother was his second wife. In 1916, she was married to P.B. Kale, a widower. In 1928, Anusuya was appointed a member of the Central Provinces Legislative Council and an Inspector of Women's Prisons, and the following year she joined the International Labour Organisation and toured the Central Provinces with the International Whitley Labour Commission. In 1930, she resigned from the Legislative Council and again travelled with Gandhiji in the Central Provinces, campaigning against untouchability. She was the

President of the Nagpur Congress Committee in 1935 and presided over the Central Provinces Harijan Conference in Mohapa in 1936. She was elected to the Central Provinces and Berar Legislature in 1937 and then became Deputy Speaker.

Some time later, an educational inspector was convicted of raping a young girl, was sentenced, but released by a Congress minister. Anusuya succeeded in getting a commission of enquiry to look into the case; it found against the inspector, and the minister was forced to resign. In 1937, Anusuya convinced the All India Women's Conference to take up women's political problems as well as social ones. In 1942, she worked to save seven Gonds convicted of anti-government activities from the gallows and also endeavoured to better the lot of tribals. She was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1952 and 1957.

## **ANASUYA SARABHAI (1885–1972)**

Anasuya Sarabhai was a social and labour activist. She founded the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association in 1920, which later grew into the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). She followed Gandhi, but would not describe herself as a Gandhian.

She was born on 11 November 1885 and married at 12, though the marriage was later annulled. In 1911, she went to England and studied at the London School of Economics, and was influenced by Fabian socialism and the suffrage movement. Her brother Ambalal Sarabhai was also an activist.

Ahmedabad had about 100 establishments engaged in the weaving of turbans, 50 in the manufacture and sale of carpets, and 70 shops producing and marketing silk goods. The seeds of militant but non-violent trade unionism were first sown in the second decade of the twentieth century by 'Anasuyaben', as she was called. She organized

Ahmedabad's cotton textile labour, along Gandhian lines of thought and worked in close cooperation with other socialists, notably Shankarlal Banker. She remained President of the Labour Association till her death.

## APALA (VEDIC PERIOD)

Apala, regarded as a *brahmavadini*, is a character mentioned in the Rig Veda. The hymn 8.91, which is a strange mix of reality and fantasy, has been ascribed to her. It is said that her husband discarded her, as she was afflicted with a skin disease that prevented her hair from growing. In the hymn, she narrates how she met and worshipped Indra and how his boon freed her of her disease. Knowing *soma* juice to be Indra's favourite drink, Apala gathered the *soma* plant and crushed it between her teeth to extract the juice. Attracted by the sound, Indra appeared to her and drank the juice from Apala's lips. In return, he blessed Apala with three boons: that her father's head, his fields and her skin would be 'fruitful'. The verse also declares that he passed her 'through the eye of the car, the cart and the yoke' so that she became beautiful and her skin radiantly fair. It is not clear what this means, except to indicate some sort of purification ritual. A few words from the hymn:

*The fully kindled Fire, bright against the firmament,  
Facing the dawn, shines far and wide.  
Vishwavara proceeds towards the east with obeisance,  
Praising the gods, with oblation and ladle full of butter...*

From this, we may gather that women in Vedic times may have been allowed to make independent offerings to the gods, a right they no longer enjoyed in later times.

## **ARATI GUPTA SAHA (1940–1994)**

She was the first Asian woman to swim the English Channel. She was born in Calcutta, West Bengal, India. She began swimming at the age of four, and her talent was spotted by Sachin Nag. From 1945 to 1951, she won 22 State competitions and set an all-India record in 1949. In 1952, India became the first Asian nation to send women athletes to compete in the Olympics, in Helsinki. Arati, along with Dolly Nazir from Mumbai, represented India in swimming, participating in the women's 200 metres breaststroke.

Inspired by Mihir Sen, the first Asian and Indian to swim across the English Channel from Dover to Calais on 27 September 1958, Arati decided to try this crossing for herself. On 29 September 1959, just five days short of her nineteenth birthday, she became the first Asian and Indian woman to swim the English Channel. She swam from Cape Gris Nez in France to Sandgate in England, a distance of forty-two miles, which she covered in 16 hours and 20 minutes. On arrival, she hoisted the Indian flag at Sandgate. She was awarded the Padma Shri the following year. She died on 23 August 1994 from jaundice. In 1998, a set of stamps was issued to commemorate her.

## **ARUNA ASAF ALI (1909–1996)**

Aruna Asaf Ali was a prominent freedom fighter and social activist and became famous for hoisting the Congress flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay during the Quit India Movement in 1942. She was born Aruna Ganguly in a Bengali Brahmin family, grew up in Nainital and was educated at Lahore. Refusing to hear of her parents' plans of marriage for her, she took up a job teaching at the Gokhale Memorial School for Girls in Kolkata. Shortly afterwards, she met Asaf Ali, a

Muslim barrister from Delhi, some 20 years her senior, and married him against her parents' wishes in 1927. Since her husband was involved in politics, she too was drawn into the movement and came under the influence of Jai Prakash Narayan, Achyut Patwardhan and Ram Manohar Lohia.

Though she did not hold a university degree, she was a voracious reader and studied politics, economics and Marxist literature. She became a radical nationalist and an advocate of uncompromising struggle against British Rule. She participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement in the 1930s, and went to jail. On 9 August 1942, she hoisted the Indian flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Mumbai. Subsequently, she went underground with her socialist friends in 1943, hoping to organise the fury of angry mobs into a disciplined resistance to the British and dislocate the war effort. In her book *The Resurgence* (the title is an echo of Garibaldi's 'Risorgimento'), Aruna said: 'Telegraph wires are cut, fishplates on railway lines are removed, bridges are dynamited, industrial plants are put out of order, petrol tanks set on fire, police stations burnt down, official records destroyed—they are all acts of dislocation. But a bomb thrown at a marketplace or a school or a *dharmashala* [a shelter for pilgrims] is not dislocation. It is either the work of *agents provocateurs* or misdirected energy.' Gandhi disagreed with Aruna's tactics, though he had great respect for her personal bravery. In 1947, she came out of hiding and was elected President of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee.

Her radical views came into conflict with Congress politics in the post-Independence period. In 1948, she joined the Socialist Party, only to break with it two years later, forming the Left Socialist Group and taking an active interest in the trade union movement. This was avowedly loyal to the aims and ideals of the Soviet Union—some thought excessively so. In 1958, she became the vice-president of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). But she had become so disillusioned that she never sought public office again.

She was elected the first Mayor of Delhi in 1958. Innumerable honours, both national and international, were bestowed on her, including the Lenin Prize and the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration. She was awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously.

*Piyashi Roychoudhury*

## **ASHAPURNA DEVI (1909–1995)**

Ashapura Devi was a Bengali novelist who portrayed the hopelessness and claustrophobia of women's lives under patriarchy in the mid-twentieth century. She is best known for her trilogy of novels, *Pratham Pratishruti*, *Subarnalata*, and *Bakul Katha*.

She was born on 8 February 1909. She grew up in Calcutta, where her father was an artist and her mother a literature-loving housewife. Married at a young age into a traditional family, Ashapura could not finish her education, but at home she was allowed to read Bengali magazines and books. She wrote her first stories for young adults during the 1930s. Her first adult story was in 1937, 'The Husband's Lover', in which she touched the changing and contradictory expectations men have of women: that they should be traditional, obedient wives and at the same time, stimulating, glamorous lovers to show off to others.

Her novel of protest, *Pratham Pratishruti* (translated by Indira Choudhury as *The First Promise*, Orient Longman, 2004) shook the complacent foundations of genteel Bengali *bhadralok* society. First published in 1964, it was the first volume of a trilogy that was to explore the space provided to women and the possibilities of occupying that space in middle-class society. In *Pratham Pratishruti*, the heroine, Satyavati, is a tomboy who refuses to fit into the childhood prescribed for her. Her marriage is the usual mixture of torture with boredom, but somehow, she survives with her spirit intact and even opens a school

for girls. Her hopes centre on her daughter Subarna, whom she wants to bring up with the advantages she never had, but her husband's family whisk Subarna off to the village and get her married in secret. Satyavati arrives too late to stop the ceremony, and in a memorable scene, merely gets back on the bullock cart and rides away again, never to return. The second volume of the trilogy, *Subarnalata*, published in 1967, describes Subarna's married life, but Subarna is a meek and cowed version of her mother, tamely accepting all the indignities heaped upon her. When she asks her husband to build her a balcony in their new house, it seems as if a window will open for her onto the outside world, but when she walks through the finished house, there is no balcony. Her husband has forgotten. The last volume, *Bakul Katha* (1974), is a pale shadow of the first two.

In all, Ashapura wrote more than 150 novels and countless short stories. She won the Rabindra Memorial Prize in 1966, the Bharatiya Jnanpith and the Padma Shri in 1976. She received honorary D.Litt. degrees from the Universities of Jabalpur, Rabindra Bharati, Burdwan, and Jadavpur. She received the Haranath Ghosh Medal from the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1988, and the following year Vishwa Bharati University honoured her with the title *Deshikottama*. She won the Jagattarini Gold Medal from the University of Calcutta in 1993 and the Fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi in 1994.

## **ASHOKA GUPTA (1912–2008)**

Ashoka Gupta was a freedom fighter and a dedicated social worker. She worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi, and her life spanned huge changes in India's polity and women's lives.

Ashoka was born the second daughter of Kiran Chandra Sen and Jyotirmoyee Devi (q.v.) in November 1912. Her father died when she was six, and the family lived a peripatetic life in Jaipur, Delhi and Calcutta, while her mother struggled to establish herself as a writer.

Ashoka was educated at St Margaret's School in Kolkata. She had a brilliant education and was first among female candidates for the matriculation examination. She joined Bethune College, opting to study mathematics honours.

While still in college, she married Shaibal Kumar Gupta, a district judge and member of the ICS. As her husband was transferred around the country, she got to travel and see India. In 1938, her husband was transferred to Dhaka. In Dhaka in 1936, she became a member of the All-India Women's Conference. Her involvement with the AIWC was lifelong; she became its President in 1986 and was its Patron at the time of her death. After her husband's transfer to Bankura, she worked to alleviate famine there in 1942–43. The couple then moved to Chittagong. In Noakhali, she met Mahatma Gandhi on his historic visit in 1945 and was inspired to work for the rehabilitation of refugees. She documented extensively the human rights abuses that were occurring during the time of Partition and how they affected women and children. After the Partition she continued to work for social uplift. During the Bangladesh War, she and her husband set up the Bangladesh Anushandhan Committee, to investigate atrocities and help the affected. As she says of her life in her memoir, 'These were decades of political tumult and turmoil, when no thinking Indian could remain a mute spectator but was dragged willy-nilly into this maelstrom of activity.'

She was a member of the Central Social Welfare Board, assigned to Orissa, Tripura and Rajasthan, a member of the advisory committee of the Bengal Board, on the Board of the LIC, of the Karma Samiti of Viswa Bharati, and of the board of the Kasturba Trust. She was the President of the All-India Women's Conference for five years, she was also the state chief commissioner of the Indian Scouts and Guides Associations for three years, president of the SOS Children's Villages, president of Buniyadi Vidyapeeth, patron of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust and the Indian Society for Sponsorship and Adoption.

She was a recipient of the Jamnalal Bajaj Award for lifetime achievement for her work with women and children. Her memoir,

translated into English by Sipra Bhattacharya and Ranjana Dasgupta and titled *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, was published by Stree in 2008.

## **ASIMA CHATTERJEE (1917–2006)**

Asima Chatterjee was the first woman to receive a D.Sc. (in chemistry) in 1944. She spent her whole life teaching chemistry at Calcutta University and inspiring generations of students to work in the field. She is known for her work on vinca alkaloids, now used in cancer drugs, and for the development of anti-convulsives and anti-malarial drugs from plants.

She was born in a middle-class family and encouraged to study at a young age. She was first class second in chemistry from the Scottish Church College, then in 1938, she was awarded an M.Sc. from Calcutta University in chemistry. Two years later, she became the founder-head of the department of chemistry at Lady Brabourne College, and in 1944 she obtained her D.Sc. from Calcutta University and was appointed honorary lecturer there.

In 1947, she went to the L.M. Parks University of Wisconsin to study naturally occurring glycosides with L. Zechmeister. She then moved to the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena to study carotenoids and provitamins. From 1949 to 1950, she was at the N.L. University of Zurich, studying with Paul Karrer, biologically active alkaloids, soon to be a lifelong interest. In 1950, she returned to India and began to do research on plant extracts, alkaloids and coumarins. Four years later she was appointed Reader at the Department of Pure Chemistry, Calcutta University, which remained her intellectual home for the rest of her life. The early years of research were very hard, as the stipends and research grants given to university professors were woefully inadequate for serious research. There were hardly

any scholarships for research assistantism and even these had to be supplemented with part-time work.

In 1972, she was able to set up a Special Assistance Programme for the study of chemistry in her department under the University Grants Commission, and funds began to come her way for research. In 1985, this was upgraded to a Center of Advanced Studies on natural products. She set up a regional research laboratory on plant remedies and Ayurveda in Salt Lake, Calcutta. She produced the anti-epileptic drug Ayush-56 from the plant *Marsilea minuta*, and anti-malarials from *Alstonia scholaris* (*chhatim*), *Swertia chirata* (*chirata*), *Picrorhiza kurroa* (*kutki*) and *Caesalpinia crista*. She published around 400 papers in prestigious journals and was extensively cited.

She received honorary D.Sc. degrees from Benaras Hindu University, and the universities of Burdwan, Kalyani and Vidyasagar. She also received a fellowship from Watumull University, US, in 1948 and from the International Science Academy in 1960. She was elected a Fellow of the Indian National Academy of Sciences in that year, received the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Award in 1961, and the C.V. Raman Award from the University Grants Commission in 1962. In that year, she was elected to the Khaira Professorship of Chemistry, one of the most coveted chairs at the University, which she held till 1982. In 1974, she received the Prafulla Chandra Ray Award. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1975, and that year became the first woman to be appointed general president of the Indian Science Congress. She was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1982 to 1990.

## **AVANTI BAI (1831–1858)**

Avanti Bai is remembered for fighting the British when they tried to annex Ramgarh, her husband's fiefdom, under the Doctrine of Lapse. She was born to Rao Jujhar Singh, the landlord of Mankedi

in the district of Seoni in Madhya Pradesh, and was married to the Gond king Vikramaditya Singh, grandson of King Gajraj Singh of Ramgarh, now in Jharkhand. Avanti Bai had two sons, Aman Singh and Sher Singh, but both were underage when their father died. Avanti Bai accordingly took the administration of the kingdom into her own hands, but in 1851, an English Resident was appointed to keep an eye on the state. Humiliated, Avanti Bai turned on the British when the war of 1857 broke out. The British cited the Doctrine of Lapse and, on the grounds that the princes were underage, attacked and tried to annex Ramgarh twice, but she raised an army of 4000 men and led it herself against them. In these encounters, her sons were killed.

Avanti Bai vowed to win back her land from the British. She raised an army of four thousand men and led it against the British in 1857. A fierce battle ensued, and Avanti Bai fought most valiantly but could not hold out for long against the superior strength of the British army. When her defeat became imminent, she fled to the forests of Devharigarh, where she killed herself to avoid capture, thus becoming a martyr.

## **AVANTIKA BAI GOKHALE (1882–1949)**

Avantika Bai Gokhale was born to Chitpavan Brahmin parents in Tasgaon and lived in Indore. She was married at the age of nine to Baban Gokhale, and her husband began her education before he left for London and China. She acquired a first-class degree in midwifery in 1901 and read extensively on her own. Her husband lost his fingers in two accidents while handling machines in 1898 and 1903 and came home to stay with his wife. She was then earning from her practice as a midwife, and they decided to remain childless, as she was now the only breadwinner. Her practice gradually improved, and in 1912, she joined the Social Service League. In 1913, she accompanied the Raja

of Ichalkaranji to London and met G.K. Gokhale, Sarojini Naidu, and many prominent English people. She visited some London hospitals and learnt many useful medical tips.

On her return, she met Gandhiji and visited him in 1916 at Sabarmati. She participated in the Champaran *satyagraha* and wrote Gandhiji's biography in Marathi, published in 1918 with a preface by B.G. Tilak. In 1918, she started the Hind Mahila Samaj, mainly teaching embroidery and sewing to women, and remained its president for life. She worked for the Bombay Municipal Corporation for some years from 1926, helping to improve conditions in the slums and chawls of the city. She adopted Indu, a Saraswat girl, trained her in nursing, and provided for her marriage. She lived simply and always wore khadi, presenting Gandhiji with a pair of handmade *dhotis* on his birthday every year.

## AVANTISUNDARI (NINTH-TENTH CENTURY)

Avantisundari, an accomplished Chahamana or Chauhan princess, was a rhetorician, poet and writer. She inspired her husband, Rajashekhara, a court poet of the Gurjara Pratihara King Mahendrarman and later the Kalachuri King Yuvaraj I. Avantisundari wrote in Sanskrit and Prakrit, and her views on aesthetics were treated with respect. Her husband cited her views on poetics in his famous work *Kavya-mimansa*. According to her, a poetical composition that gives pleasure to connoisseurs should be looked upon as perfect. Though she and her husband had different views, they nevertheless seem to have been able to work and write together. Rajashekhara quotes Avantisundari says that a suitable subject for poetry is made so by the possession of several traits or qualities, and that the expression of one or more of these traits constitutes the style and eloquence of

a poet. Three of Avantisundari's stanzas are cited in Hemchandra's *Desi-namamala*, where the meanings of certain Prakrit expressions are illustrated. Unfortunately, no more of her work has been discovered.

## AVVAIYAR (FIRST CENTURY)

Avvai or Avvaiyar (the suffix is an honorific) was probably the name of more than one Tamil mystic poet, since the dates of the poems attributed to her vary widely. Probably the first Avvaiyar lived during the Sangam period (c. first and second century CE) at the time of the Tamil chieftains, Pari and Athikaman. She wrote fifty-nine poems collected in the *Purananuru*. The second Avvaiyar lived in the thirteenth century during the Chola period. She is probably the author of many of the short didactic or aphoristic poems attributed to this composite figure. One of the stories about her (or one of her) says that she was found as a child in an inn near Tiruchinapalli. Though never educated, she sang exquisitely and was famed as a seer and mystic, as 'she who sang for a cup of porridge'. There may also have been a third Avvaiyar.

## BAHINABAI (1628–1700)

Bahina (the suffix ‘bai’ means woman or wife) was a Vaishnav poet-saint and devotee of Tukaram. At 13, she was indelibly impressed by Tukaram’s intense chants or *abhangas* in praise of Lord Vitthal, a form of Vishnu.

She was born in 1628 at Deoghar in today’s northern Maharashtra and married at the early age of five to a learned Brahmin and widower aged 30, Ratnakar Pathak, by whom she had a daughter and a son. Homeless due to a family feud, they were given grudging asylum by a Brahmin of Kolhapur named Bahirambhat. From there, they travelled to Pandharpur, where Bahinabai heard Tukaram’s soul-stirring songs. On one occasion, a *sadhu* praised Bahinabai for her religious fervour, at which her husband, angry at her forwardness, beat her so severely that she was unconscious for three days. While in this near-death state, Bahinabai had a vision of Tukaram, who came to her, placed his hand upon her head and bid her to sing. She awoke, and a song in praise of the saint came unbidden to her lips. She became a follower of Tukaram and began to go into occasional trances in which she would compose songs. Soon her renown as a poet spread, but her husband accused her of breaking the rules laid down for Brahmin wives. He decided to leave her, but on the eve of his departure, he suddenly fell ill. Bahinabai nursed him back to health. These events are told in her poetry or *abhangas*. Her husband repented, and the family moved to Dehu, where they regularly listened to the *kirtans* or song sessions of hymns by Tukaram.

Bahinabai had a mystical perception of life; she claimed to have seen her own death and to have found it ‘a good omen’. Through her verse, she spoke about her previous births. She referred to her own son

as *kalyanbandhu*, fellow aspirant or friend. Her work is conceptually and poetically very complex.

Rita Dalmiya

## T. BALASARASWATI (1918–1984)

Balasaraswati was a proponent of *dasi attam*, the original sacred-erotic dance discipline of the *devdasis* or women dedicated to temple service. She represents the other side of Bharatanatyam, the side that dancers like Rukmini Devi Arundale tried to dilute and transcend.

Balasaraswati's great-great-grandmother, Kamakshi Ammal, had been a court dancer. Her grandmother was one of the most famed *veena* players of South India and was known as Veena-Dhanam in homage to her prowess. Her mother, Jayamma, was a classical singer. Balasaraswati herself was an exponent of the true Bharatanatyam as it had been practised at the Tanjore court in the heyday of Indian classical culture. She actively resisted attempts to sanitise the dance and transform it into a 'drawing room' art that young Brahmin girls could practice without fear of 'pollution'. Her own style was sensuous and unconstrained; she made great use of *padams* and *javalis*, the traditional components of *shringara rasa*, the essence of love and seductive grace.

Her training began when she was four under Guru Kanjeevaram Kandappa Pillai. On reaching adulthood, as was the tradition of the *devdasis*, she was placed under the patronage of Chidambaram Chettiyar. She emerged as a great dancer as she united superb technical mastery with an almost superhuman ability to become the *rasa* through *abhinaya*, or the dramatic presentation of the essence of the soul of a lovelorn woman, pining for Krishna. Uday Shankar saw her perform in the South and was very impressed by her dancing. He commented 'As long as Bala Saraswati lives, the real spirit of Bharat Natyam lives.' Her daughter Lakshmi, born in 1943, also became a superb dancer.

In the 1950s, she began to work with both *devdasi* and caste dancers to revive the traditional *dasi attam*, staging technically pure forms of the dance around the world. She did not hold with Rukmini Devi's practice of decorating the stage with images of gods; to her, the temple and the stage were distinct. Satyajit Ray made a documentary film on her. Her art transcended the boundaries of culture and country; she won many accolades when she performed in the West. Clive Barnes admiringly commented that she 'made her hands wreath through the air like the unfolding of flowers.' *India Today* classified her as one of the 100 prominent Indians who have shaped the destiny of India. She received an honorary doctorate from Rabindra Bharati University.

## **BASANTI DEVI DAS (1880–1974)**

Basanti Devi Das was the wife of Chittaranjan Das, later known as Desh Bandhu. She was active in the Congress and campaigned also on a few social issues, including education for women. Basanti Devi College in Kolkata is named after her.

She was born in Kolkata and went to school at Loreto House. At the age of seventeen, she was married to Chittaranjan Das. She managed his household and had three children with him. In 1917, when Chittaranjan became involved in politics, she too followed suit. She campaigned for the sale of *khadi* and was arrested. Shortly after, her son and husband were imprisoned too. This occasioned a campaign to get her released by many of the prominent figures of the day, including Rabindranath Tagore. She was released, but her husband remained in jail, so she took over his political work, becoming President of the Bengal Provincial Congress in 1921. She headed the Chittagong Provincial Conference in 1922 in his stead. Chittaranjan Das was released, but in 1925, he died in Darjeeling. Her daughter Aparna's inter-caste marriage was the first such in Bengal to be celebrated with full Hindu rituals and without the government's sanction of a registration certificate.

## **BHARATI (EIGHTH-NINTH CENTURIES)**

Bharati, also known as Ubhaya-Bharati, was the wife of the great philosopher Mandana Mishra. She acted as an umpire in a contest between the Advaita philosopher Sankaracharya and her husband. The contest began with the stipulation that whoever would be defeated would renounce the world. When she realised that her husband was likely to lose the contest, she prepared to leave the house, for it was not fitting for a married woman to live without her husband. At this, Sankaracharya begged her to stay. For 17 days, the contest continued. Then, to discomfit Sankaracharya, a bachelor, Bharati resolved to ask questions on the *Kama Sutra*. Sankaracharya requested that they put off the discussion for a month. It is said that at this time, he entered the body of the dead king Amuruka and experienced love with his queens. After the stipulated time, he resumed the discussion with Bharati, who was satisfied with his answers, and Sankaracharya, in turn was impressed by Bharati's scholarship and wisdom. Later, he built a temple at Sringeri and dedicated it to her.

## **BHIKHAIJI RUSTOM, MADAM CAMA (1861–1936)**

Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama, née Patel, a revolutionary activist, had a great impact on the struggle for Indian Independence. She was the first freedom fighter to publicly unfurl the Indian flag on foreign soil. She announced to the world India's decision to fight the British. She advocated the use of force to gain Indian Independence, declaring in revolutionary zeal, 'Freedom is a conquest and never a bequest.'

She was born in Mumbai on 24 September 1861, to a prosperous Parsi family, and received her primary and secondary education at the

prestigious Alexandra Girls School. On 3 August 1885, she married Rustomji Cama, a lawyer. Their marriage did not work, and she resolved to lead her own life. In 1896, she became a nurse at a public charity hospital in the city and looked after plague patients, an action unexpected in one of her class and background. At a time when women had few rights and no real prospects, Bhikhaiji distinguished herself by becoming one of the first Indian women journalists. She caught the plague herself, survived, but was severely weakened and went to Britain in 1902 to recover. There she met Shyamji Krishna Verma, and through him, Dadabhai Naoroji, whom she helped in his unsuccessful election campaign of 1906. She was deeply impressed by the '72 good Indians' who formed the first National Congress. Her intense patriotism and her impatience with the existing political scenario made her a militant nationalist. She trained students in bomb-making and the use of guns. She found a means to smuggle revolutionary literature into India and travelled in Europe and America to tell people of the conditions in India and gain their support. She was the moving spirit behind the 'Abhinav Bharat' organisation working among Indians living in Europe.

On 22 August 1907, Bhikhaiji was invited to speak to the thousand delegates of the second International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany. At the end of her fiery and eloquent speech, she dramatically unfurled a tricolour in green, gold, and red, bearing a crescent and a sun. Waving it aloft, she exclaimed, 'this flag is of Indian independence.... In the name of this flag, I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to co-operate ... in freeing one-fifth of the human race.' Not unnaturally, her activities were closely watched by British government agents, and secret reports describe her as 'anarchical, anti-British and irreconcilable'. In 1909, to avoid arrest, she left London for Paris, where her home became the headquarters and meeting place for young terrorists and revolutionaries. She nearly managed to help V.D. Savarkar to escape from British custody in Marseilles, but arrived too late to meet him. She toured as part of a campaign to raise awareness of Indian political realities, visiting Egypt in 1910. She was also a staunch campaigner for gender rights and women's suffrage. In 1920, she met

with an accident in Paris and subsequently fell seriously ill. When war broke out in 1914, she was forced to take refuge in Bordeaux and was interned in 1915. This greatly worsened her health.

In 1936, after suffering a stroke, she was allowed to visit India, where she died at the Parsi General Hospital in Mumbai in August. She had her tombstone inscribed with the words: 'Resistance to tyranny is obedience to god.' Today, her portrait hangs in the Indian Parliament. In Delhi, the Bhikhaiji Cama Palace has been constructed in her memory, while in Mumbai, Madam Cama Road was named after her.

## **BEGUMS OF BHOPAL (1801–2002)**

Begum Nawab Qudsia was born in 1801, and with her began a line of woman rulers who united and enlightened Bhopal under them. She ruled for 18 years, and was succeeded by her daughter Begum Nawab Sikandar, who ruled till 1868 and was succeeded by Begum Nawab Shah Jahan. Begum Shah Jahan's daughter, Begum Sultan Jahan, was proclaimed heir apparent and succeeded her mother. Begum Sultan Jahan, who ruled from 1901, has left a description of the court in her autobiography, *An Account of My Life*. This builds on memoirs left by her grandmother and mother and shows the many responsibilities and difficulties they faced, as well as their strong commitment to social progress and justice, especially for women.

Begum Shah Jahan attended the Delhi Durbar of 1903 and was one of the most striking and brilliant figures there. She has also left an account of her training at the hands of her grandmother, which shows the meticulous care that these women invested in preparing the future ruler for her responsibilities, and she has written with regret of how her mother's second marriage caused a rift with her, which never healed. The history of Bhopal under the rule of these enlightened women is a valuable addition to our picture of India before Independence. The

last of the line was Begum Abida Sultan (1913-2002), who married Sarwar Ali Khan of Kurwai. She was the presumptive heir to the throne of Bhopal, but she renounced the title and emigrated to Pakistan in 1950, where she joined the foreign service. His younger sister Sajida stayed behind and carried out the ceremonial roles of the Bhopal ruling family. Abida Sultan spent her last years in Karachi, where she died on 11 May 2002.

## **BINA DAS (1911–1986)**

Bina Das was a revolutionary and freedom fighter. She was a member of the Chhatri Sangha revolutionary society. Her parents, Beni Madhab Das and Sarala Devi, were idealistic and politically aware. After the 1928 session of the Congress, Bina joined a circle of revolutionaries whose leader was Bhupal Bose. In 1932, she catapulted herself into history by attempting to shoot the Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson, at the convocation where she was to receive her degree. She missed, was caught and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. Some years later, in 1941, she became the secretary of the South Kolkata Congress Committee, and in 1940, accompanied Gandhiji to Noakhali. She was a member of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from 1946 to 1951. She married Jyotish Chandra Bhaumik. She wrote of her time in politics in her book *Srinkhaler Jhankar* (The Rattle of Chains).

## **BINODINI DAS (1863–1941)**

Binodini Dasi was a stage actor renowned for her dramatic and passionate performances. In the nineteenth century, actors were regarded as little better than prostitutes, but Binodini was nevertheless

a star. She debuted on stage at the age of eleven, acted in over 50 plays and portrayed some 60 roles. Girish Chandra Ghosh called her 'a living goddess' and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee gave her the credit of being greater than him in breathing life into the character of Mrinalini that he had created.

She was born into a Kolkata family who had once been entertainers but had degenerated into prostitution. She hated her home, including the fact that she was married very young, but her husband refused to accept her. But at the age of nine, she came into contact with the famous singer Ganga Baiji and learned music from her. This was the turning point in her life. Not only was Ganga Baiji an independent professional supporting herself, but she attracted a galaxy of cultured people who came to hear her sing. Soon, they noticed Binodini's talents, and she got her opening on the stage. She was an instant success, though life was hard.

In the first years of her career, a wealthy male patron whom she looked on as her partner supported her. This man married some years later, leaving Binodini devastated both emotionally and financially. Then Gurmukh Rai offered to finance a theatre if she would set it up. This she did, founding the famous Star Theatre, only to find that the very colleagues who encouraged her in her venture came forward to take it away once it had become a success, alleging her status as 'prostitute' made her unfit to manage it. By 1886, though she had tried to live for a time as a simple actress without a male protector, she had been ostracised from the theatre. Not much is known about her life after that, except that she lived quietly in the parts of the city given over to 'vice', where people would not throw her past career in her face. She published her autobiography under the title *Amar Katha* in 1913, in the form of letters to Girish Ghosh.

## CHAND BIBI (1547–1599)

Chand Bibi was the daughter of Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar and the wife of Ali Adil Shah of Bijapur, and these two relations tore her life in half. She was married during a short and aberrant period when the two powerful kingdoms, long-standing enemies, were allied against Vijayanagar. Adil Shah recognised her talents and allowed her to accompany him on horseback when inspecting the troops, and generally to involve herself in the management of the kingdom. So, when in 1580 Adil Shah was murdered and his minor son ascended the throne, Chand Bibi became the regent. For some years, she ruled, but her minister, Kamil Khan, began to grow hungry for power. She neutralised him with the help of another noble, Kishwar Khan, who became minister in his stead, but Kishwar Khan too began to foment rebellion. He succeeded in turning the nobles against her, and she was dragged out of her apartment and imprisoned in the fortress of Satara. However, the nobles turned against Kishwar Khan and restored her to power. Perhaps justifiably suspicious of her compatriots, she appointed an Abyssinian (Habshi) as minister. Further complications ensued, with Chand Bibi trying to preserve a precarious balance between the various factions.

Meanwhile, affairs in Ahmadnagar were a little better, and now Mian Manjhu rose against Nizam Shah, killed him and took the throne. Feeling himself under threat from Chand Bibi, Manjhu called upon Prince Murad (later Shah Jahan) to help him, and Murad's army was at the gates of Ahmadnagar before Manjhu realised his mistake. He appealed frantically to Chand Bibi to come and save her homeland from

the Mughal menace. This she did, fighting heroically at the head of her troops; on one occasion, rushing out of the palace barefoot, veiled and carrying a drawn sword to repair the breached ramparts. Incredibly, she kept Murad and the dreaded General Khan-i-khanan at bay. Finally, Murad was content to go away with Berar as his prize. However, Khan-i-khanan returned with Akbar's son Daniyal and surrounded the city. Chand Bibi now realised that victory was impossible and wished to conclude an honourable peace with Daniyal. However, true to type, the Amirs rose against her and killed her before the settlement could be negotiated. This could not save them, and Ahmadnagar became part of the Mughal Empire. Though Chand Bibi failed to save her kingdom, she inspired her people, and for a short time, held back the most powerful force in India of that time.

## **CHANDRALEKHA (1928–2006)**

Chandralekha was a radical and innovative dancer-choreographer, who began in the tradition of classical Bharatnatyam but moved out of it to create her own distinctive style.

Born Chandralekha Prabhudas Patel, she spent her childhood in Saurashtra, then moved to Pune, then Aden. Her father, a doctor, was agnostic and fostered in his daughter an intense passion for reading and books. Her mother was very religious and often took her daughter with her on visits to temples, which exposed the young Chandralekha to classical sculpture, an influence that was to appear later in her dance. At the age of 13, Chandralekha had her first quarrel with her family, and under pressure from them, she went to Bombay to study law. However, this did not last, and aged 17, she left for Madras to train in classical Bharatnatyam as a student of the guru who had taught T. Balasaraswati (*q.v.*). A major factor in this decision was her meeting in

Bombay with the actor and poet Harindranath Chattopadhyay, brother of Sarojini Naidu (*q.v.*), and for a short time husband of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay (*q.v.*) and she remained close to him all her life. The two great influences on her dancing were Rukmini Devi Arundale (*q.v.*) and T. Balasaraswati. They represented the two poles of Bharatnatyam: the cleaned-up middle-class version and the original *dasi attam*, the dance of the servants of god. Chandralekha's independent mind led her to move closer to the form which Balasaraswati practiced. However, her early dance remained within the classical continuum.

From 1962, she spent more time on choreography, but in another decade or so, she became disillusioned with classical dance, finding it rigid and unconnected with the realities of life. In 1959, she choreographed a piece called *Devadasi*, in which she attempted a historicizing of classical dance in order to reinstate *dasi attam* at the heart of it. She took up writing in the 1960s, even publishing a book of poems titled *Rainbows on the Roadside: Montages of Madras*. In 1972, she produced the startlingly original *Navagraha* but was by now disillusioned and took an extended break. She became an activist, campaigning for women's rights and the environment. She continued to exercise her aesthetic talents in writing and designing posters and pamphlets.

In 1984, she was invited to take part in a dance program at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Bombay, for which she created a mix of pieces, some traditional, some experimental. She set up the Chandralekha Dance Group and began to experiment with choreography, producing a number of revolutionary compositions such as *Angika* (1985), *Lilavati*, *Prana*, *Sri*, (1992) *Yantra* (1995), *Mahakal*, *Raga* (1998), *Shloka*, and *Sharira* (2000). *Angika*, her first piece, combined *kalaripayattu* from Kerala with classical dance. In *Yantra*, a work said to be influenced by Shankaracharya's *Soundaryalahari*, the dancers move in patterns that evoke the triangle, the ancient symbol (*yantra*) of the goddess. The world of Indian dance had never seen anything like it, and an immediate

storm of controversy arose over her work. *Sri* was shown at the House of World Cultures in Berlin in 1992 during the Indian Festival. She set up her own centre for the cultivation of dance, Mandala, at Elliot's Beach in Madras (Chennai).

Chandralekha received many prizes for her work, such as the International Dance Umbrella Award in Great Britain, the GAIA Award in Italy in 1990 for her work for environmental causes, the Sangeet Natak Academy Award in 1992, and the Kalidasa Samman. She was invited three times to the Tokyo Summer Festival, twice to the Festival der Frauen (Women's Festival) in Hamburg, and many other major international venues. She never married, but had a long-term relationship with the writer, critic, photographer and stage lighting designer Sadanand Menon. She died in 2006 from cervical cancer and was cremated in a secular ceremony by Sadanand Menon and the painter Dasharath Patel.

The theatre personality Rustom Bharucha wrote her biography, *Chandralekha: Woman, Dance, Resistance*.

## CHANDRAMUKHI BASU (1860–1944)

Chandramukhi Basu was born in a Christian family, the daughter of Bhuban Mohan Basu, in Dehra Dun. She passed her First Arts examination from Dehradun Native Christian School in 1880, then became one of the first non-Hindu Indian girls to be admitted into Bethune College. Along with Kadambini Ganguly (q.v.), she received her Bachelor's degree in Arts from Bethune College and School in 1883, thus becoming one of the first woman graduates in India. She went on to become the first woman to receive an MA from Calcutta University in 1884.

She became a lecturer at Bethune College in 1886, two years before the college separated from the school. Subsequently, she

became the principal of Bethune College, the first female head of an undergraduate college in India. She retired in 1891 to Dehra Dun because of her bad health.

Her sister Bidhumukhi Basu became, along with Virginia Mary Mitra (Nandi), one of the first women medical graduates from Calcutta Medical College in 1890, and her sister Bindubasini Basu graduated in medicine from CMC the following year.

## **CHANDRAPRABHA SAIKIANI (1901–1972)**

Chandraprabha Sakiani was an activist and reformer. She was born Chandrapriya Majumdar in the village of Daisingiri in Assam, the seventh child of Ratiram and Gangapriya Majumdar, and had a sister, Rameswari (later Rajaniprabha). She chose the name ‘Chandraprabha Saikiani’ for herself. The two girls would wade through deep waist mud every day to study in a boys’ school several kilometres away, as there was no girls’ school. Chandraprabha won a medal on completing primary school, but she and her sister could not continue their education any further in the village. Their enthusiasm impressed Nilkanta Barua, a school sub-inspector, and he arranged for them to study and stay at the hostel at Nagaon Mission School. There, Chandraprabha’s fiery nature manifested itself, as she several times protested the high-handed treatment of the girls by the missionaries, who would punish girls who refused to convert.

In 1919, Chandraprabha was the only female delegate at the Assam Chhatra Sammelan at Tezpur, but she spoke eloquently on the need to ban the opium trade. She started a small school for girls near Nagaon. In 1925, she attended the Asom Sahitya Sabha at Nagaon. The practice was for women to sit separately and listen from behind a screen while the men talked. Chandraprabha stood up and launched a scathing attack

on this practice, deriding the women for allowing such restrictions to be put on them. The women were so inspired that they pulled down the screens. The following year, she set up the Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti and launched it at Dhubri right after the Asom Sahitya Sabha session held there that year. This organization campaigned for women's and children's rights, including education and freedom from harassment. It put an end to child marriage in Assam and campaigned against dowry. Chandraprabha also allied with the Congress and was active in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932, going to jail then and again in the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1942-43.

Chandraprabha then met and fell in love with the writer Dandinath Kalita, with whom she had a son, Atul. They never married, and Chandraprabha had to face social stigma for being an unwed mother. Nevertheless, she brought up her son with great fortitude and courage, and Dandinath supported her with small amounts of money as far as he was able, though he married another woman. The Assamese novelist Nirupama Borgohain wrote *Abhiyatri* (1999), a fictionalized account of Chandraprabha's life, translated by Pradipto Borgohain into English. The book won a Sahitya Akademi Award. In 1972, Chandraprabha was awarded the Padma Shri shortly before her death.

## CHENNAMMA (1778–1829)

Chennamma was one of the first Indian rulers to take up arms against the British. Like Lakshmibai of Jhansi (q.v.), she too received training in sword-fighting and horsemanship at an early age. She was born at Kakati, a small village near Belgaum, and was married to Malla Sarja, lord of the fiefdom of Kittur in what is now Karnataka, Chennamma's stepson, Shivaling Rudra Sarja, ascended the throne, but

died with no natural heir in 1824, and the British, under the Doctrine of Lapse, refused to recognise his adopted son as the rightful claimant.

The Chief Agent of Dharwar, one Thackeray, slighted the royal family by appointing two *sardars* or local lords as rulers. Chennamma got her own sardars to back her and appealed to the Governor against Thackeray's behaviour, but Thackeray went on the offensive and positioned guns before the gates of Kittur, ordering her to surrender or be breached. Chennamma had fortified the kingdom in secret and also enlisted the help of her neighbours; now her men swooped down on the British guns and cut down the gunners, carrying off the artillery inside the kingdom. They also captured a number of British soldiers from the camp. Inside Kittur the Rani treated her prisoners with courtesy and consideration and released them on the assurance that her kingdom would go unmolested. This was not to be: Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay (now Mumbai), ordered the storming of Kittur. On 30 November, the British attacked with 200 guns. It took them 24 hours to breach the defences, with heavy losses on both sides. Finally, the Rani was forced to surrender on 4 December. Chennamma and the senior queen were detained at Baihongal, where she died four years later.

Her story became the stuff of legend. In 1962, B. Ramakrishnaiah Panthulu made a Kannada language film, *Kittur Chennamma*, based on her.

## CHENNAMMAJI (1671–1696)

Chennammaji was the queen to King Somashekara, of the Nayaka dynasty, who jointly ruled the kingdom of Keladi (in what is now Karnataka) with his brother around 1661. Chennamma formed part of the triumvirate, and epigraphic evidence shows that the two kings and the queen ruled together. Even when Somashekara became

the sole king, Chennammaji had an equal share with him. When he finally died in 1677, she took over sole charge. Some of the nobles and the head of her army plotted to take power for themselves, involving the ruler of Mysore, but she defeated him in battle and forced him to make terms. In the meantime, several local rulers of the principalities of Sodi, Sirsi and Vanavasi declared war but were also routed and forced to flee. She also defeated another local king, Dalavay Timmappa, and took his son prisoner.

Rajaram, son of Shivaji, took refuge in Keladi while fleeing Aurangzeb. The Mughal empire declared war on Chennammaji, but she won through superior strategy and captured some of Aurangzeb's generals. Ultimately, a treaty was signed. Aurangzeb was so impressed with her generalship that he sent her gifts and left her kingdom in peace. An account of her rule is to be found in a Kannada work called *Keladinripa-vijaya*, and a Sanskrit work, the *Shivatattva-ratnakara*, written by her adoptive son Asavappa Nayakka, I who succeeded her. She built a town named Somashekharapura after her husband and dedicated it for the use of Brahmins and scholars. She built monasteries for wandering monks and established charitable trusts under her own name in several temple towns.

## CHIMNABAI I (1864–1884)

Born Laksmi Bai of Tanjore, she was the first wife of the Maharaja Sayajirao III Gopalrao Gaekwad of Baroda, whom she married in 1880. He was an enlightened prince, who after ascending the throne, established Baroda College as one of his first public acts. Coming from the cultured court of Tanjore, Chimnabai I was trained in classical dance and Carnatic music and brought her own dance troupe to Baroda. Other masters and virtuosos followed them, including Nattuvanar Appaswamy

and his wife Kantimati, who had studied with Kannusamy and Vadively, two members of the Tanjore Quartet. Appaswamy and Kantimati's son took the name Tanjorekar and the family continued to teach music and dance. They left for Lucknow but were recalled to Baroda in 1949 by the reigning raja to teach in the Music Department in the Kalavan Palace, later absorbed into the Maharaja Sayajirao University. Later, the Tanjorekars established the Tanjore Dance Music and Art Research Centre at Baroda. Chimnabai was instrumental in making Baroda a flourishing centre of Indian classical dance and music. However, she died young from tuberculosis before she could consolidate her efforts. Sayajirao married Lakshmibai Mohite in 1885, who became Chimnabai II upon her wedding.

## CHIMNABAI II (1872–1958)

She was the second wife of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda and followed the equally eminent Chimnabai I of Tanjore. Born Lakshmibai Mohite, she was the daughter of Baji Rao Amrit Rao Ghatge, of a well-known Maratha family of Dewas, Princess Gajrabai (the suffix 'bai' denotes wife or woman) was married to the Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III of Baroda, on 28 December 1885. In 1887, she travelled extensively abroad with her husband, and he began to educate and shape her to become his assistant in the business of bringing progress to Baroda. Her husband, writing in 1901 in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*, hinted that it had been her influence that convinced him to encourage his subjects to educate and emancipate their daughters.

In 1907, an Anglo-Vernacular School for girls was established in Baroda. In 1911, the Maharani co-wrote *The Position of Women in Indian Life* with S.M. Mitra, in which she lamented the failure of so

many schemes to enlighten women, because women themselves were not free to take control of these schemes. The Maharani showed that she did not shrink from following her principles in private when her daughter Indira Raja refused to marry the crown prince of Gwalior in 1912, instead of marrying the Brahmo heir to the throne of Cooch Behar. The Maharani supported Indira in this, though her father refused to attend the wedding. Indira Raja later became the mother of the activist Gayatri Devi. In 1914, at a prize-giving ceremony at the Nyaya Mandir, the Maharani was seen in public sitting next to the Maharaja, thus signalling her abandonment of *purdah*. The Maharani was elected the first President of the All-India Women's Conference in 1926.

## CHUNI KOTAL (1965–1992)

Chuni Kotal was the first woman graduate among the tribe of the Lodha Shabars. Born in 1965, in Gohaldohi, in Medinipur, rural West Bengal, Chuni Kotal survived childhood poverty to become the first Lodha woman to graduate from high school in 1983. She worked for a time for the Jhargram office of the Integrated Tribal Development Programme, surveying the welfare of local villages. She then took a degree in anthropology from Vidyasagar University in 1985, and two years later, she became hostel superintendent at the Rani Shiromoni SC and ST Girls' Hostel at Medinipur. Here, she faced discrimination because of her tribe. As yet undaunted, she returned to Vidyasagar University to do her M.Sc. However, she was continuously insulted and harassed by her upper caste professors and university administrators. In 1991, after losing two years, she complained to the education ministry, and a high-level enquiry commission was set up. However, this commission soon got bogged down in procedural details. On 14 August 1992, she left for Kharagpur, where her husband, Manmatha Shabar, also a high school graduate, worked at the Railway workshop.

They had kept company since 1981 and had had a civil marriage in 1990. Here she committed suicide on 16 August. Her death united the Lodha Shabar community in protest and became the focal point of a movement spearheaded by the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, questioning the liberal credentials of Bengali society. Her life received attention from scholars studying the Indian caste system, such as Professor Nicholas B. Dirks at Columbia University and Professor Jan Breman at the University of Amsterdam. Mahasweta Devi wrote about her in *Byadhkhanda* (1994) and *The Book of the Hunter* (2002). Since 1993, the BDSS has organized the Annual Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture.

## CORNELIA SORABJI (1866–1954)

Born in 1866 in Nasik, Cornelia came from a Parsi family that had converted to Christianity, and the seven children were ‘brought up English’. She graduated from Poona’s Deccan College in 1884 with first-class marks, the first woman to do so and the only one till 1911, but the automatic scholarship to England was withdrawn because of her sex. She took a job teaching English to male students at a college in Ahmedabad, and finally, in 1889, friends arranged a scholarship for her at Somerville College, Oxford, to study law. She could not become a barrister as the laws in Britain did not allow women to do so, but Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol and then Vice Chancellor of Oxford, conferred a special degree on her in 1893, allowing her to become the first woman to sit for the advanced law degree. She joined a solicitor’s firm as a trainee and in 1894 returned to India. Back home, she worked tirelessly to give legal help to women, especially widows. In 1919, women were finally allowed to become barristers, and Cornelia went back and qualified in 1923 at the age of 57. She wrote *India Calling* in 1934, a memoir of her life helping the *purdah* women of Bengal.

She seems to have been a woman very much on her own, unwilling or unable to forge close friendships, prickly yet willing to help those in trouble, and scathing about those she felt were mistaken in their politics or their beliefs. In 1954, after a prolonged and tragic spell of mental illness, she died at the age of 88.

## D

### **DADI JANKI (1916–2020)**

Dadi Janki was a revered spiritual teacher a tireless humanitarian, and a globally respected leader of the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya (Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University).

Born on 1 January 1916 in Sindh (now in Pakistan), she displayed a deep spiritual inclination from a young age. Accompanying her father on pilgrimages, she actively advocated vegetarianism and compassionate service. Despite receiving only three years of formal education, her unwavering clarity of purpose and profound conviction shaped her extraordinary journey.

Joining the Brahma Kumaris movement in the 1930s, she committed herself to a life of celibacy and service. Following the Partition of India in 1947, the community relocated to Mount Abu, Rajasthan. In 1974, Dadi Janki was asked to establish the Brahma Kumaris' presence in the West. Although initially hesitant due to her limited English proficiency, she soon won hearts in London and beyond, founding new centers and inspiring thousands with her wisdom and simplicity

In 2007, Dadi Janki succeeded Dadi Prakashmani as the Administrative Head of the Brahma Kumaris, guiding the institution until her final days. Known for her boundless energy and compassionate leadership, she continued to address gatherings of tens of thousands at Mount Abu well into her centenarian years. Dadi Janki attained *mahasamadhi* on 27 March 2020 at \*\*Mount Abu at the age of 104.

She was a prominent speaker at the Rio Earth Summit, Habitat II in Istanbul (1996), and the Millennium World Peace Summit (2000) in New York. She was also a Patron of the World Congress of Faiths, a member of the World Council of Religious Leaders, and the Global Peace Initiative of Women.

Among her many accolades, King Abdullah II of Jordan conferred upon her the Grand Cordon of the First Order of *Al Istiklal* in 2004. In 2021, the Government of India issued a commemorative postage stamp in recognition of her contributions to spiritual upliftment and social service.

## **DAKSHAYANI VELAYUDHAN (1912–1978)**

Dakshayani Velayudhan was a pioneering Dalit leader, staunch Gandhian and ardent supporter of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s advocacy for Scheduled Caste rights. Born in 1912 in Mulavukad village, Ernakulam district (Kerala), she belonged to the Pulaya community, one of the most marginalized groups of her time. She was among the first generation from her community to receive formal education, completing her B.A. in 1935 and her Teachers Training Course (TTC) from the University of Madras in 1938, with support from the Cochin State government scholarships.

Her marriage to fellow Dalit leader and future M.P.R. Velayudhan was solemnized at Sevagram in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi, with a leprosy patient officiating the ceremony—symbolizing their deep commitment to social reform.

From 1935 to 1945, she worked as a teacher in a government high school in Trichur and Tripunithura. In 1945, she was nominated to the Cochin Legislative Council, and a year later, she became the first and only Scheduled Caste woman elected to the Constituent

Assembly of India. She served as a member of the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950) and the Provisional Parliament (1950–1952), focusing on issues of decentralization, moral safeguards for the Scheduled Castes, and inclusive education.

To honour her legacy, the Government of Kerala has instituted the Dakshayani Velayudhan Award, recognizing women who contribute significantly to the empowerment of other women in the state.

## **DARSHAN RANGANATHAN (1941–2001)**

Darshan Ranganathan was a researcher in organic chemistry. She was born Darshan Markan to Shanti Swarup and Vidyawati Markan in Delhi, where she spent her youth. She graduated in chemistry and joined Miranda House as a lecturer, eventually becoming Head of the Department of Chemistry. She got her Ph.D. from Delhi University under Professor T.R. Seshadri in 1967. She did postgraduate work in the US under Professor D.H.R. Barton, having won a Senior Research Scholarship of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851. She returned to India in 1969, married Subramania Ranganathan the following year, and began independent research at IIT Kanpur where her husband was a faculty member. For various reasons, she was prevented from joining the faculty; however, she funded her research with a series of independent fellowships. She did pioneer work in protein folding. With her husband, she edited *Current Highlights in Organic Chemistry*. In 1993, she accepted a post at the Regional Research Laboratory, Trivandrum, and in 1998, became the director of the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology in Hyderabad. She died of breast cancer at the age of sixty.

She was a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences. She also won the A. V. Rama Rao Foundation Award, the Jawaharlal Nehru Birth

Centenary Visiting Fellowship, Third World Academy of Sciences Award in Chemistry in 1999 for her work in bio-organic chemistry, and the Sukh Dev Endowment Lectureship.

## DAYAWATI MODI (1915–1994)

Dayawati Modi was a pioneering philanthropist and social reformer, best remembered for her unwavering commitment to education, women's empowerment, and community development. Affectionately called *Maji*, she rose to prominence not through wealth or power, but through her deep empathy for the underprivileged and her unshakable spiritual resolve. Despite receiving limited formal education, she cultivated a lifelong love for learning and literature, drawing inspiration from the *Vedas* and especially the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which served as her moral and spiritual compass.

Born in 1915 in Kasganj, a modest village in Uttar Pradesh, she lost her mother at a young age. Undeterred, she educated herself and nurtured a deeply reflective inner life rooted in Indian scriptures. In 1932, she married industrialist Rai Bahadur Gujar Mal Modi and became part of a large joint family in Patiala. She managed the needs of this household of nearly a hundred members with remarkable dedication and efficiency.

A turning point in her life came in the mid-1930s. At her suggestion, Gujar Mal Modi relocated to Begumabad—later renamed **Modinagar**—where he established his first sugar mill, laying the foundation of what would become the Modi Group of Industries. In 1935, Gujar Mal offered Dayawati a choice: she could either spend their growing wealth on personal luxury, such as jewellery, or use it for the betterment of society. Without hesitation, she chose the latter.

This decision marked the beginning of her extraordinary journey in public service.

Driven by the ideals of *sevā* (selfless service) and *karma yoga*, Dayawati Modi focused her energy on building institutions that would bring lasting change. She played a crucial role in founding numerous educational institutions, particularly in and around Modinagar. These included Dayawati Modi Public Schools and Junior/Middle Schools, many of which were established in her honour by her husband and sons as a tribute to her vision.

In 1954, she founded the Samaj Kalyan Parishad, a pioneering initiative aimed at vocational training, adult education, and the rehabilitation of widows—at a time when such issues were often marginalized in public discourse. A firm believer in women’s self-reliance, the education of girls, and the cause of widow remarriage, she championed progressive values within a deeply traditional milieu.

Her spiritual worldview was closely tied to her service ethic; she was a devout disciple of Anandamayi Ma, from whom she drew spiritual strength and insight into her life’s mission. She would meet the women of Modinagar every Monday at the Lakshminarayan Temple, built by the family for the city and completed in 1963. Following her husband’s passing in 1976, she lived independently for 18 years yet remained a guiding force for her children and the people of Modinagar. She firmly believed that every woman, at the very least, deserved respect as an individual and the right to economic independence.

In 1982, she was honored with the Shiromani Award for Sikh Studies and served on the Planning Committee of the All-India Women’s Conference. Her intellectual contributions were recognized internationally when Cambridge University included her in its *Who’s Who of Intellectuals* in 1978. To commemorate her enduring legacy, the family instituted two awards reflecting her wide-ranging interests: the Dayawati Modi Award for Art, Culture, and Education, and the Dayawati Modi Stree Shakti Samman.

A true *karma-yoginī*, Dayawati Modi, exemplified the ideal of attaining spiritual fulfilment through purposeful action. Her legacy lives on through the institutions she built, the lives she touched, and the enduring spirit of compassion and selfless service she embodied

## DEVIKA RANI ROERICH (1908–1994)

Devika was an actress and film entrepreneur who set up Bombay Talkies, then retired into obscurity.

She was born Devika Rani Choudhuri, the daughter of Colonel M.N. Choudhuri, the first Indian Surgeon General of Madras, and Leela Choudhuri, a niece of Rabindranath Tagore. Devika Rani was educated in England and studied drama at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. She also studied architecture and design and was soon working as a textile designer at a leading art studio in London. In 1928, she met Himanshu Rai, the producer of films like *The Light of Asia*, *Shiraz* and *A Throw of Dice*. Rai persuaded Devika Rani to join his production unit. She returned to India with his team to work on the costumes and sets of *A Throw of Dice* under the guidance of the art director Pramod Roy. In 1929, she married Himansu Rai and returned with him to Germany. Rai was the only Indian producer with the Berlin studio UFA. There Devika Rani learnt the finer points of costume designing, make-up, set design, and other branches of production as well as acting under Eric Pommer, Pabst, Max Reinhardt and other famous directors. This was the time of change from silent to talking films, and with Himansu Rai she experimented in the new medium. They returned to India to produce, their first international talking picture, *Karma*, in both English and Hindi, variously produced under the titles *Fate* (UK), *Nagin Ki Ragini* (India: Hindi title) or *Song of the Serpent* (UK).

In 1934, Himansu Rai and Devika Rani founded Bombay Talkies Limited in Malad, Bombay, with backing from businessmen such as F.E. Dinshaw, Sir Firoze Sethna and others. The studio rewrote the standard of motion picture production in India, bringing in experts from Europe who trained young Indian men and women in the arts and techniques of film production. It produced a vast number of producers, directors, stars, musicians, writers and technicians who rank among the best in the country.

Devika Rani's international style of acting and fresh approach established a new tradition. She acted in numerous classics of the Indian screen, among them *Jawani Ki Hawa* (1935), *Jeevan Nayya* and *Achyut Kanya* (1936), *Savitri*, *Jeevan Prabhat* and *Izzat* (all 1937), and *Durga* (1939). They brought her many honours from the film industry and the public. In *Achyut Kanya*, for example, she played Kasturi, an untouchable girl who fell in love with a high caste boy (Ashok Kumar). In 1940, however, Himanshu Rai died, leaving Devika to look after his legacy as a partner in Bombay Talkies and also a producer. Although, she had to share control with Sashadhar Mukherjee. She rose to the challenge with *Punarmilan*, *Kangan*, *Bandhan*, *Basant*, *Kismet*, and *Hamari Baat* (1943), etc., sending Bombay's Talkies' stock skyrocketing. Some of the artistes trained and launched at this time were Leela Chitnis, Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, Mumtaz, Shanti, and many others. All was not well, however, and in that same year, Sashadhar Mukherjee and a number of regular Bombay Talkies actors left to form a new studio, Filmistan. Consequently, in 1945, at the height of her film career, Devika Rani decided to leave Bombay Talkies, and marry Svetoslav Roerich, a Russian painter, and retired to her vast Tataguni estate in Bangalore. She continued her involvement with the arts, however, and was nominated to the National Academy of Dance, Drama, Music and Films, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi, and was a member of the Executive Board of the National Academy, the Lalit Kala Akademi, the National Handicrafts Board and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

In 1958, the President of India conferred the Padma Shri on Devika Rani for her contribution to Indian films. On 21 November 1970, she was awarded the first Dadasaheb Phalke Award for service to the film industry. She also received the Soviet Land Nehru award in 1989. After her death, her priceless collection of artworks and artifacts was the centre of a legal battle between the Indian and Russian governments as well as the relatives and claimants of her estate.

## **DHANVANTHI RAMA RAU (1893–1987)**

Dhanvanthi Rama Rau was a campaigner for women's reproductive rights and could be called the Margaret Sanger of India.

Born in Hubli of Kashmiri stock on 10 May 1893 and brought up in Allahabad, she obtained an MA from Madras University and began her career as a lecturer at Queen Mary's College. She became a founder member of the Women's Indian Association in 1917 and campaigned for the Sharda Bill in 1927–28. From 1929 to 1938, she lived in London with her husband, Benegal Rama Rau, as representative for the All-India Women's Conference. For her services, she was decorated with the Kaiser-i-hind medal in 1938. When Benegal Rama Rau was posted to South Africa as High Commissioner in 1939, she went with him and organised the Indian women of Durban.

She worked in famine relief in Bengal and Bombay in 1943, and in 1946, she was elected president of the AIWC. After Independence, in 1949, she embarked on the work for which she is best known. The controversy and debate over Margaret Sanger's ideas on birth control had interested her keenly, and Margaret herself had visited India several times at the AIWC's instance back in 1922–27. Now Dhanvanthi set up the All-India Family Planning Association and campaigned to have family planning made one of the goals of the first Five Year, Plan. In this, she had to fight ignorance and superstition strengthened by the

Mahatma's aversion to artificial contraception. She also served as the President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. She worked tirelessly for women's reproductive rights and to keep concern for the health of mothers and children uppermost in the government's approach to population control. In 1959, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan for her contributions to society. Her daughter, Santha, is well known as a writer, and her granddaughter, Aisha Wayle, became the first woman to own a London investment company. Her memoir is titled *An Inheritance*.

## DHRUVA DEVI (FOURTH CENTURY)

Dhruva Devi was a queen of the Gupta dynasty. She reigned as the wife of Chandra Gupta II (380–415 AD) and mother of Kumara Gupta (415–455 AD). Previously, she had been married to Chandra Gupta's brother, Rama Gupta. She was a great patron of poets and gave shelter to many scholars in the Gupta court.

The contemporary playwright Vishakhadutta recorded her story in his plays, *Devichandraguptam*, *Shringarprakash* and *Natyadarpan*. The Hindi writer Jai Shankar Prasad, in his 1932 play *Dhruvswamini*, has portrayed Dhruva Devi as a powerful woman who questioned the very basics and provenance of marriage as well as its religious significance.

Famed for her beauty and intellect, she was first married to the weak and cowardly son of Samudra Gupta, Rama Gupta. Some time later, the mighty Saka ruler of Ujjain demanded of the Guptas that they hand over Dhruva Devi as a condition for peace. Rama Gupta, reluctant to go to war, decided to give in to the threat and send the queen to the enemy. Chandra Gupta, the king's younger brother, tried to dissuade him, but without success, so Chandra Gupta impersonated Dhruva Devi and killed the Saka king. Dhruva Devi then repudiated Rama Gupta in public. A learned Sanskrit scholar, she was able to cite scriptural

authority to show that by surrendering her to the Sakas, Rama Gupta had lost his moral right over her, and their marriage had no meaning. Kautilya Chanakya, in his treatise on statecraft, *Arthashastra*, had clearly proclaimed a woman's right to marry again in specific conditions: 'A woman has the right to denounce a husband who is mean, has left for an unknown destination, has committed a crime against the ruler, endangers the life of his wife or is impotent.' According to the Pauranic rishi Parashar, a woman may remarry in five conditions: 'when her husband is lost, dead, departed for an unknown destination, impotent, or defiled.' Dhruva Devi, aware of the religious sanctions for her action, left Rama Gupta and married his brother Chandra Gupta instead.

Chandra Gupta took the title of Vikramaditya. His reign is renowned for the cultural and intellectual achievements of his people. Historical evidence exists in the form of coins inscribed with the word 'Rupkriti', that may refer to the Dhruva Devi-Chandra Gupta incident. A seal found at Vaishali also commemorates her. Her example must have inspired her daughter career as a peacemaker, Prabhavati Gupta (q.v.). She also had two sons, Kumara Gupta and Govinda Gupta.

## **DIDDA (924–1003 )**

Didida was a queen of Kashmir and dominated the history of that kingdom between the years 958 and 1003. She was the daughter of Simraja, King of Lohara, and the granddaughter of the Shahi king Bhima or Bhimapala of Udabhabdapura. She was married to the Kashmiri King Kshemagupta in 950. According to Kalhana's *Rajtarangini*, a chronicle of Kashmir composed in the mid-12th century, Didida had such an influence on her husband that he 'became known by the humiliating appellation of Didida Kshema'. Kalhan's statement is supported by the copper coins of Kshemagupta, which bear the name 'Di-Kshema'. In

958 after the death of Kshemagupta, Didda raised her son Abhimanyu to the throne under her guardianship.

Courage and diplomacy, along with vice and profanity, reached their zenith under Didda's regency and rule. During Abhimanyu's rule, Didda discovered that many nobles were conspiring to seize the throne of Kashmir and turned them out of the palace in spite of their great influence. When these nobles rose in rebellion against her, she quickly bought off their Brahmin supporters. One of the bribed Brahmins was Yashodhar, and when he became powerful and rose in turn, she crushed him with the help of her minister Naravahana and the valiant Kashmiri force, the Ekangas. Kalhana says eloquently of Didda, 'Those treacherous ministers who for sixty years ... had robbed 16 kings, from King Gopala to Abhimanyu, of their dignity, lives and riches, were quickly exterminated by the energy of Queen Didda.' Didda also built a number of monasteries, temples and cities.

Didda encouraged nepotism on the one hand, while on the other, she ruthlessly crushed her followers if she felt them to be disloyal. Many high officials served as her panders, and they are said to have visited her bedchamber without hindrance. She had an affair with her minister Phalguna, who conquered Rajauri, and with a young herdsman named Tunga Kashi, who crushed a formidable rising of the Damaras in her reign. In 972 A.D., King Abhimanyu died. After his death, Didda installed his son, Nandigupt, on the throne. But she held the reins of the government in her hands. Unable to control her desire for power and her promiscuity, she led a violent pogrom against her grandson, in which she is said to have employed witchcraft, and ascended the throne of Kashmir in 981. Didda kept her country united despite many problems through her success in controlling conspiracies, assassinations and political intrigues. She lived till 1003, and before her death, selected her brother's son Sangramarala of Lohara as her heir, thereby securing a change of dynasty without any political upheaval.

*Piyashi Roychoudhury*

## DINA PATHAK (1922–2002)

Dina Pathak was an actor. She was born Dina Gandhi in the town of Amreli, near Bhavnagar, to an orthodox Brahmin family. Her father was an engineer. Her elder sister Shanta Gandhi (q.v.) also acted and danced. Shanta's rebellion may have made it easier for Dina to step out of the home. Even as a teenager, Dina acted in plays and won acclaim. As a college student in Bombay, she became involved with activist theatre and agitated against British Rule. She studied acting and dance under Rasiklal Parikh and Shanti Bardhan, having joined the Indian National Theatre and later the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), along with Shanta and their younger sister Tarla Mehta. Although Dina made her film debut with a Gujarati film, *Kariyawar* (1948), she primarily remained a theatre actor till the 1960s. She performed the lead in *Mena Gurjari* as well as Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Vijaya* and *Biraj Bahu*, and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at Natmandal. She also taught the new theatre along with Rasiklal Parikh and Jashwant Thaker, introduced the techniques of the Beijing Opera through her experiments, actively promoted Bhavai, and directed original Gujarati drama.

Moving back to Bombay, she reentered films as a character actress in Basu Bhattacharya's *Uski Kahani* (1966), for which she won the Bengal Journalists' Association Award. In Basu Chatterjee's *Sara Akash* (The Whole Sky, 1969), she played the mother while in Saeed Mirza's *Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho!* (Summons for Mohan Joshi, 1984) she played the wife. She worked in children's theatre as well as with cultural organizations like Loknatya and Navnatya. In 1969, three films starring her were released: Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Satyakam*, *Saat Hindustani* with Amitabh Bachchan in his debut role and Merchant Ivory Productions' *The Guru*. She appeared in Gulzar's *Mausam* (1975), Basu Chatterjee's *Chitchor* (1976) and Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1977), with Smita Patil (q.v.). In 1979, she played the mother to Amol Palekar's character in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Golmaal* and in 1985

she starred in Palekar's 1985 film, *Ankahee*. She won critical acclaim for Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Khoobsurat* in 1980, closely followed by *Bhavani Bhavai* that year. In 1980, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. She played in the popular TV series, *Malgudi Days*, Shankar Nag's adaptation of R.K. Narayan's eponymous classic. In 1984, she starred in David Lean's *A Passage to India*, and the following year, she was seen in Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*, the year after in Govind Nihalani's *Tamas*, and once again she worked with Gulzar in *Ijaazat* (1987). In 2002, she appeared in Deepa Mehta's Indo-Canadian *Bollywood/Hollywood*, for which she was nominated for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role at the 23rd Genie Awards. She died just before the release of her last film, *Pinjar* (2003).

She had two daughters, Supriya Pathak and Ratna Pathak. Supriya Pathak, a TV actor, is married to Pankaj Kapoor, while Ratna Pathak is married to Naseeruddin Shah.

## **DURGA KHOTE (1905–1991)**

Durga Khote was an actress and film producer of the early period of Indian cinema. Unlike many of the other female actors of the time who came from traditional performing castes or communities, Durga Khote came originally from the middle class.

Born in a conservative Brahmin family in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Durga was married young and was a widow before she was twenty-six. Desperate to support her children, she took the only work available to a woman without qualifications. There was a great dearth of female actors in cinema then, with women's roles often being taken by men, and the few tawaifs or professional entertainers who had entered films were treated like royalty. For Durga, the convent-educated widow of a lawyer, it was a risky but smart move to make. She began with Marathi

cinema, taking a small role in *Farebi Jaal* in 1931. Mohan Bhavnani persuaded her to star in his *Trapped* in 1931. In those days, studios used to tie up artists with contracts that bound them to work only for a particular studio; Durga refused to be bound and kept her contracts open, working with other studios if she saw fit.

In 1937, she became a pioneer in another field when she produced and directed *Saathi*. She acted on stage and in ad films. She was associated with the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association and the Progressive Writers' Association, and she campaigned against Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1977–78. Her entry into films paved the way for other women from the upper layers of society to follow her example, such as Shobhna Samarth (q.v.). She acted in *Mughal-e-Azam*, playing Akbar's queen Jodhabai. She was awarded the Sangeet Natak Academy Award in 1958. In 1983, she won the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. She was also awarded the Padma Shri. Her autobiography is titled *I, Durga Khote*.

## **DURGA NARAYAN BHAGWAT (1910–2002)**

Durga Bhagwat was a writer, Sanskritist and amateur archaeologist. She was born in Indore, where her grandfather was Diwan (minister). Her mother was only seventeen when she was born, so she was brought up mostly by her grandmother. She was a tomboy as a child, demanding to be allowed to go to school (unprecedented for a girl child at the time) and fantasizing about joining a circus and performing feats of daring. In spite of her tomboyish nature, she also learned to knit and cook, both of which she enjoyed. When the time came to choose a subject of study for her graduation, she wanted to do history or economics, but her father chose Sanskrit for her. She fell in love with the language, teaching herself aspects of it that her professors were

unwilling to impart. Sanskrit led her to Pali, and she wanted to do her Ph.D. thesis on the tribal cultures of Madhya Pradesh, but in this she was thwarted by her guide, the redoubtable G.S. Ghurye, who forbade her to do any more research or writing. Dr Ambedkar interceded for her and urged Ghurye to let Durga complete her research, but to no avail. She observed many antiquities on the bed of the Narmada but was not allowed to publish any articles on them.

She then turned to writing in Marathi and translated Banabhatta's *Kadambari* from Sanskrit to that language. Her excursions into the forest continued, until some time in the 1940s she came in contact with an unidentified poisonous plant that made her desperately ill. Recovery took years, and this led her to spend more time reading and writing. She began to write critical studies of religion and published a study of the Mahabharata in Marathi. In 1976, she was elected President of the 51st Marathi Sahitya Sammelan, held in Karad. At this gathering, she launched a scathing attack on the government's policies, for which she was jailed during the Emergency of 1977. Released, she campaigned against Congress in the 1977 general election and remained opposed to it for the rest of her life. She therefore boycotted all government honours and refused all state awards.

## **DURGABAI G. DESHMUKH (1909–1981)**

Durgabai G. Deshmukh was the first woman member of the Planning Commission. A freedom fighter, nationalist and social worker, she was also a member of the Constituent Assembly and the Provisional Parliament in 1946–52.

She was born on 15 July 1909 at Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, to a Hindu Brahmin middle-class family. Her father's early death meant the family had to face hardship during her childhood. Her mother was

the secretary of the district Congress Committee. At the call of the Congress to adopt Hindi as a national language, Durgabai learnt the language from a neighbourhood teacher. In 1923, she started a Balika Hindi Pathshala in Cocanada, South India, to teach girls in the new national language. Gandhiji awarded her a gold medal for her efforts. She joined the *khadi* movement, participated in the Salt Satyagraha and was imprisoned for three years in 1930. In prison, she learned English, and on her release, she enrolled at the Andhra University and in her MA examination secured five medals. She went on to acquire a law degree from Madras University and practised at the Madras Bar for a few years. She was then elected to the Constituent Assembly and the Provisional Parliament. She married C.D. Deshmukh in 1953. He became India's first finance minister and later Governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

In 1958, she headed the National Committee on Women's Education, formed the Andhra Women's Association and served on many committees. She worked relentlessly for the country's laws to be simplified, modernised and cleared of the colonial debris left behind after Independence. She was a powerful orator and used her gifts to the full in service to the cause she had chosen to fight for. Her last years were given mainly to social work. She was the founder chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board and compiled the *Encyclopaedia of Social Work in India*. She pioneered the creation of a nationwide network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Durgabai received the Paul G Hoffman Award, the Nehru Literacy Award, and the UNESCO Award for outstanding work in the field of Literacy. Along with her husband, she received Padma Vibhushan in 1975, for their respective contributions in public affairs and social work. The National Commission for Women instituted an annual award in her name to voluntary organisations for excellence in women's welfare and development.

## DURGAVATI (1524–1564)

Durgavati, a queen of the Gonds (in what is now the State of Madhya Pradesh), defended her kingdom from an attack by Baz Bahadur of Malwa, as well as the onrush of Mughal imperialism. Abul Fazl describes her with these words: She was not lacking any of the essentials of bravery and of effort, and did great things by dint of her farseeing abilities. She had great contests with Baz Bahadur (of Malwa) and the Minas (Afghans of Sironj in Malwa) and was always victorious.... She was a good shot with gun and arrow and continually went hunting....'

Daughter of a Chandel Rajput ruler of Mahoba, Rani Durgavati was the Regent of Gondwana in the sixteenth century as her son Bir-Narayan was a minor when he ascended the throne. In 1564, Akbar ordered Asaf Khan to subdue Gondwana, but Rani Durgavati refused to accept Mughal suzerainty. She led the charge and so inspired the soldiers with her example that her army inflicted two defeats on the Mughal invaders. She wanted to complete their rout by attacking them by night, but her men would not consent. When fighting resumed the next day, her son was seriously wounded. At this, her army scattered; but she fought on until two arrows pierced her. She was overwhelmed but refused to flee, instead stabbing herself to prevent her capture by the enemy.

William Sleeman, in his *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, writes, 'Her tomb is still to be seen where she fell, in a narrow defile between the hills; and a pair of large, rounded stones which stand near are, according to popular belief, her royal drums.... The travellers who pass this solitary spot respectfully place upon the tomb the prettiest specimens they can find of crystals.... Durgawati so inspired me that I could not resist the temptation of adding one to the number when I visited.'

*Piyashi Roychoudhury*

## E

### **EDITH M. PECHEY-PHIPSON (1845–1908)**

The daughter of a minister of the Anglican church, Edith pioneered medical education for women in England; in 1869, she was admitted, along with Sophia Jex-Blake and others, to Edinburgh University, where she won the Chemistry prize in her first year. As was to happen with Cornelia Sorabji (q.v.), she was denied this prize and the Hope scholarship because she was a woman. Edinburgh would not let her qualify in medicine, so she transferred to Bern University; she and Sophia got their licences from the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland in 1877.

In 1883, she came to India through the Medical Women for India Fund, and became director of the Cama Hospital, then just established. She campaigned for improved health facilities for Indian women and tried to raise consciousness of the dangers to health of child marriages. She married the Fund's secretary, Herbert Phipson, learnt Hindi, and set up a school to teach nursing to the women of Mumbai. In 1881 she became the first woman elected to the Senate of the University, of Bombay; she was also a member of the Asiatic Society. When plague broke out in 1899, she helped fight it. She left India in 1905, returning later to endow the Pechey-Phipson Sanatorium for Women and Children near Nasik.

### **ELA RAMESH BHATT (1933–2022)**

Ela Bhatt was a Gandhian legal scholar turned social activist who dedicated her life to the empowerment of India's informal women workers.

She was born on 7 September 1933, in Ahmedabad, did B.A. in English in 1952 from M.T.B. College, Surat; LL.B. with a gold medal in Hindu law in 1954 from L.A. Shah Law College, Ahmedabad. She joined the Textile Labour Association in 1955 to head the women's wing; there she encountered the stark struggles of self-employed women.

In 1972, she founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)—a trade union representing informal women workers such as street vendors, weavers, and home-based producers. Within 3 years, SEWA registered as an official union and grew from 7,000 members to over 220,000 by 1995, and today it has more than 2.1 million members across 18 states. She launched the SEWA Cooperative Bank in 1974, empowering women with access to micro-loans, financial services, it today boasts over 2.1 million women across 18 Indian states.

To address financial exclusion, Bhatt established the SEWA Cooperative Bank in 1974, offering microloans and financial services to working-class women—demonstrating a repayment rate and solidarity model that inspired microfinance efforts worldwide.

Ela Bhatt's visionary leadership went beyond SEWA. She co-founded Women's World Banking (WWB) in 1979 and served as its Chair (1984–1988), promoting microfinance as a tool for women's empowerment globally. She chaired international networks such as Home Net, Street Net, and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), advancing the rights of informal workers.

A member of India's Rajya Sabha (1986–1989), she also chaired the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and contributed to the Planning Commission of India. From 2007 to 2016, she served as a founding member of The Elders, a group of global leaders convened by Nelson Mandela to work on peace, human rights, and development.

Ela Bhatt received numerous honours: Padma Shri (1985) and Padma Bhushan (1986) from the Government of India, Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership (1977) Right Livelihood

Award (1984) for organizing home-based producers. Also received the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament & Development, Niwano Peace Prize, Radcliffe Medal (Harvard), and honorary doctorates from Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, Dubbed a “gentle revolutionary.”

She passed away in Ahmedabad on 2 November 2022, aged 89. Ela Bhatt’s legacy lies in her unwavering Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, self-reliance, and bottom-up social transformation. SEWA’s model has become a beacon for feminist economic organizing worldwide, showing how collective strength and cooperative finance can empower the most marginalized.

## FAIZUNNESSA CHAUDHURANI (1834–1903)

Faizunnessa Chaudhurani carries the distinction of being the first Muslim woman to campaign successfully for women's education. She grew up in Paschimgaon in Comilla, now in Bangladesh. Her family were aristocratic *zamindars*, landlords in the *khandani* or aristocratic mould, isolated from both the Hindus of all castes and the common Muslims, who spoke Bengali as opposed to the aristocratic Urdu and Persian. After 1857, the old Muslim nobility had grown more insular, and the community spent much of its spiritual energy commemorating a time of past glory rather than looking to the future. In this atmosphere of intense conservatism, it is astonishing that Faizunnessa was able to teach herself Bengali and Sanskrit as well as Urdu and Persian.

She had a happy childhood, of which we can grasp from her diary and from a short note she added to her fable *Rupjalal*. Her childhood studies were interrupted when Mahmud Ghazi Chaudhuri, a distant uncle of hers, saw her and became infatuated with her. After her father's death, Chaudhuri prevailed upon her mother to marry her to him. Initially, the relationship was stable, but it seems that Faizunnessa returned after some time to her parents' home. There she dedicated herself to the service of society, the management of her vast estates and the furthering of her plans for Muslim women's education.

In 1873, when even the most liberal male Muslim thinkers did not think it necessary for Muslim women to know more than the alphabet, Faizunnessa succeeded in setting up an English medium school for girls, the Faizunnessa Girl's Pilot High School. In this, she had the assistance of Kali Charan De, a Brahmo reformer of Comilla. The school observed complete *purdah*, and later a hostel was added to it.

Reactions to the school were decidedly mixed, although many of its students subsequently made their mark in the world. This was some years before the establishment of the Eden School for Girls in Dhaka, and four decades before Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein (q.v.) was to set up the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in Kolkata. In the last years of the nineteenth century, Faizunnessa established a free madrasa (Muslim traditional school) at her home, the seed of what is today the Faizunnessa Degree College, and in 1901, she set up an English middle school named after her daughter, Badrunnessa.

In 1889, she received the title of Nawab from Queen Victoria, an honour for which the Magistrate of Comilla had recommended her. This was startling news to the Muslim community and to the world in general. Faizunnessa herself observed strict *purdah* all her life. She is the author of the long verse novel *Rupjalal*, one of the earliest long works by a Muslim Bengali woman. It is the story of the love affair of Jalal and Rupbano, and its tone is a peculiar mixture of the medieval Islamic fable and modern quasi-historic writing in the mode of Bankim Chandra.

## FATIMA BEGUM (1892–1983)

Fatima Begum was an actor and India's first female film director. She was probably born into an aristocratic family of the Princely State of Sachin in Gujarat, and in 1906, she married the Nawab of Sachin. She was the mother of actors like Zubeida (q.v.), Sultana and Shehzadi. She first appeared on the Urdu stage, then shifted to the new medium of films, appearing in Ardeshir Irani's silent film, *Veer Abhimanyu*, in 1922. In 1926, she became India's first female director when she directed *Bulbul-e-Paristan*. That year, she established Fatima Films, which was renamed Victoria-Fatima Films in 1928. Here she wrote, directed and produced her own films, while also acting at Kohinoor

Studios and Imperial Studios. The last film in which she acted was *Duniya Kya Hai?* (1938). Her legacy was carried on by her daughter Zubeida.

## **FATIMA JINNAH (1893–1967)**

Fatima Jinnah's brother was Mohammed Ali Jinnah, with whom she lived after their father died when she was eight. She was educated in the Western mode, studying dentistry, though in 1929 her brother's political career began to make demands on her time, and she accompanied him to the Round Table Conference that year. In 1934, she joined the Muslim League, opposing orthodox attitudes to women and working for their social upliftment and emancipation. She led the All-India Muslim Women's Committee on its founding in 1938. She toured India, organising collectives and student federations and promoting adult education. She also established the Fatima Jinnah Women's College in Lahore.

After the creation of Pakistan, she helped her brother to manage the hospitality of the Governor General's house, but his early death sent her into retirement. She came back into the public eye in 1954, once again campaigning for the Muslim League, and became a fearless critic of totalitarian government. She was prevailed upon to stand against Ayub Khan in 1965 as a consensus opposition candidate; she lost the elections amid orthodox horror at the thought of a woman becoming head of state and allegations that Ayub Khan had rigged the polls. Her campaign evoked a strong response from the people, and in Dhaka, she won a majority of the votes. She became known as Madar-i-Millat, or Mother of the Nation.

## **FATIMA SAAM, BIBI (TWELFTH-THIRTEENTH CENTURIES)**

Fatima Saam was the adopted sister of the Sufi saints and brothers Fariduddin Ganj-i-shakar and Sheikh Najibuddin al-Mutawakkil. She was also a good friend of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. She was a poet of some accomplishment herself, a fact which was not always easily acknowledged by her male counterparts. Fariduddin is supposed to have declared that he thought she was a man in a woman's form. She has no work of her own, but her sayings are frequently quoted in texts such as the *Akhbar-al-Akhyar*. One such couplet says, 'You seek love, and at the same time you seek life. You want to have both together, but you can never have them'. She wrote most often of charity, saying that the generosity that made a man give another a piece of bread and a glass of water was better than all the sterile penances of ten thousand prayers and fasting. In this, her philosophy was a down-to-earth one and as humanistic as that of the better-known male Sufi saints.

## **FAZILATUNNESSA ZOHA (1899–1977)**

Fazilatunnessa Zoha made history in 1925 as the first Muslim woman to be awarded a degree, and this was in mathematics. Subsequently, she also did her Master's in the same subject. She came from a simple Muslim family of Tangail and had little in her background to foreshadow this feat. In 1921, she passed her Matriculation (as the school-leaving examination was then called) handsomely from the Eden School of Dhaka. She went to Calcutta to study mathematics at Bethune College, then returned to Dhaka University, which had been founded the same year she completed her Matriculation, to study for her master's degree. She was the first Muslim alumna of Dhaka University. Her achieving her MA in 1927 was a national event, and Nazrul

Islam wrote a poem commemorating it. The editor of the progressive periodical *Saugat* organised a reception for her in the teeth of orthodox horror. Fazilatunnessa did not let her training go to waste; she took up a position at Bethune College teaching mathematics, became head of the department and then Vice Principal till 1947. When the country was partitioned, her family decided to live in Pakistan, and they moved to Dhaka. Fazilatunnessa became Principal there of Eden College.

## **GAIDINLIU (1915–1993)**

Gaidinliu was a freedom fighter and activist who fought for the cause of the Nagas both before and after Independence.

She was born in the village of Nangkao in Nagaland. At an early age, she was influenced by a leader of Naga resistance to the British, Jadonang. The British executed him in 1931, and Gaidinliu took his place. She exhorted the Nagas in their villages to resist the British and arm themselves against the soldiers; she declared her intention to see that the Naga nation no longer paid taxes to the government or supported it with forced labour as porters. She began a new religion, called 'Haraka', meaning 'not impure'. The British reacted brutally, mounting a hunt of mammoth proportions. In spite of large rewards offered for information about her, the villagers shielded her from the authorities. In March 1932, a large number of villagers attacked a British outpost, and though they were repulsed, the government decided to stamp out all resistance. In October, Gaidinliu began to supervise the construction of a large wooden fortress near Polomi village. The British received reports of this, staged a surprise attack and captured her. She was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment.

In 1937, the Congress tried to get her released; Jawaharlal Nehru especially was moved by her plight and campaigned eloquently to get the young girl's sentence struck down, conferring on her the sobriquet of 'Rani' meaning queen. However, she was not released till Independence in 1947.

Her troubles did not end with Independence. She was not allowed to return to Nagaland after her release and spent another 14 years in exile. In 1957, however, the Naga agitations started. Gaidinliu heard

that her religion, Haraka, was under attack, and she raised an army to defend it and to press her demand for a Zeliangrong Administrative Area, comprising the areas of Zemi, Liangmei and Rongmei in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. After six years of living underground, the government got her to come out of hiding. She ceased to organise the movement, but continued to campaign for peace and understanding in the Northeast.

## **GANGUBAI HANGAL (1913–2009)**

Gangubai Hangal was a Hindustani classical singer of the Kirana gharana. She was born in Dharwar, Karnataka, to Ambabai, a devdasi and classical singer in the Carnatic tradition, and given the name Gandhari, which was later shortened to Gangubai, possibly because she came from the Gangamat caste, originally boatmen. Her father Chikkar Nadgir was a Brahmin patron of her mother's. Her grandmother Kamlabai was also a renowned singer. As a low caste child, she was shunned by the respectable people of her hometown and stigmatized as a 'gaanewali', a singer, regarded as equivalent to a prostitute. After she became famous, these people welcomed her into their homes. In later years, she spoke candidly about these incidents.

In 1928, she shifted to Hubli, having acquired the patronage of Gururao Kaulgi, a Brahmin lawyer many years her senior. He wished to marry her, but she would not let him lose caste for her, insisting that he marry his cousin. She later became good friends with his wife and children. In fact, she supported him and his legal family financially. With him, she had two sons, Narayan Rao and Babu Rao, and a daughter, Krishna, who also became a classical singer, died of cancer. She never lived with her 'husband', retaining her own name and rights just as her mother had done.

Her mother Ambabai, supervised her initial musical training, and musician friends of her mother's also helped to train her. Gangubai then decided to change styles and learn North Indian classical music, and in 1937 apprenticed herself to Rambhau Kundagolkar, better known as Sawai Gandharva, a student of the famous maestro Abdul Karim Khan. Every day she would travel 30 kilometres by train to study with him, and when they saw her walking down the street, people would jeer at her. Her musical debut was at the Bombay Music Circle. Jaddan Bai (q.v.) convinced her to go to Calcutta and sing at a function there. The organizers were initially skeptical that this teenager could sing, but when they heard the extraordinarily powerful voice that emanated from the tiny body, they were convinced. Her exposition of khayal quickly brought her fame, and she became an overnight celebrity. Having transitioned from a Southern style to a Northern one, and with a deep, powerful voice that could out-sing any man; her style transcended boundaries of caste, gender and geography.

She received many awards, including the Karnataka Sangeet Nritya Academy Award, 1962, the Padma Bhushan in 1972, the Sangeet Natak Academy Award in 1973, the Sangeet Natak Academy Fellowship in 1996, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2002. She was diagnosed with bone cancer in 2003 but recovered after treatment. However, she began to have cardiac problems, which finally killed her. Her autobiography is titled *Nanna Badukina Haadu (The Song of My Life)*, as told to N.K. Kulkarni, translated into English by G.N. Hangal and published by Sahitya Prakashan, Hubli. The Hangal Music Foundation of Hubli carries on her legacy.

## **GANGUTAI PATWARDHAN (1900–1998)**

Ganga (Gangutai) Patwardhan was an educationist. She was born at Mahad in Raigad district, Maharashtra. Her father tried to get her

married off at the age of twelve, but she flatly refused and insisted that she be admitted to the famous Huzoor Paga School in Pune. She was supported in her demand by her brother-in-law, Bapusaheb Chiplunkar, who taught at Hinge Stree Shikshan Sanstha, set up by the late Dhondo Keshav Karve, and where she was eventually admitted. Having completed school, she got herself admitted to Bharatvarshiya Mahila Vidyapeeth, now known as SNTD University for Women, Baroda. She then went to England to do a course in Montessori teaching. On her return, she married a widower, Narayan Mahadeo Patwardhan, on the condition that he would observe Gandhian brahmacharya (renunciation). They married despite opposition by Narayanrao's relatives, as they were of the same gotra. After the death of her brother-in-law Gangutai became vice-principal of the Training College for Women at Baroda, and later she served as vice-chancellor of SNTD University for Women for ten years.

Gangutai was associated with the Karve Stree Shikshan Sanstha, the Nutan Bal Shikshan Sanstha, Kanya Shala and the Girl Guides. She was the first recipient of the prestigious Baya Karve award instituted by Karve Stree Shikshan Sanstha. She received the FIE Foundation Award and the Deenanath Mangeshkar Award. Her eyes were donated according to her wishes. Her autobiography in Marathi is titled, *Chakoribaheer: Ek Atmakathan* or 'Outside the Courtyard' (Pune: Sadhana Press, 1974) (Outside the daily grind).

## **GARGI VACHAKNAVI (VEDIC PERIOD)**

Gargi was the daughter of the sage Vachaknu and was one of the illustrious participants of the *brahmayajna*, a philosophic congress convened by King Janak of Videha, recorded in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. During the discourse on *atma*, she challenged the sage Yajnavalkya, with a series of questions, perturbing the great seer who

had silenced many eminent scholars. She asked him ‘The layer that is above the sky and below the earth, which is described as being situated between the earth and the sky and which is indicated as the symbol of the past, present and future, where is that situated?’

He replied, ‘The layer of air is situated in the ether.’

Gargi went on: ‘Salutation unto Thee, O Yajnavalkya. Thou hast answered well my questions. Now prepare for the others. Where is that Ether pervading?’

‘Gargi, it is in the region of the Gandharvas.’

She continued, ‘Where is that region located?’

And the sage said, ‘It is in the realm of the sun.’

‘Where again is that situated?’

‘Gargi, it is in the region of the moon.’

‘Where is that again?’

‘It is in the region of the stars.’

‘Where is that region located?’

‘Gargi, it is in the region of the Gods... Oh, Gargi, ask me not anymore; thou art asking that which is not to be asked. Cease thy queries, lest thy head drop down dead on the floor.’ Yajnavalkya added, ‘O Gargi, what you are asking, the Brahman designates as akshara.... The Sun and Moon are regulated by the order of Akshara Brahman; the Earth and Sky are transfixed by Him; the minutes and seconds, days and nights, half months and months, seasons and years are regulated by the layer of this Akshara.... Besides this Akshara, there is none that sees, none that hears, none that thinks, none that knows. It is imperishable Brahman who is pervading this sky.’

Gargi is also credited with the composition of several hymns in the Rig Veda.

## GAUHAR JAN (1873–1930)

Gauhar Jan was one of the most influential singers in Hindustani classical music ever. She was born Angelina Yeoward. Her father, William Robert Yeoward, was an Armenian Jew who married Victoria Hemming, an Anglo-Indian singer and dancer, in 1870. Angelina was baptised as a Methodist at Azamgarh. Victoria divorced her husband in 1879 and took her baby daughter to Varanasi, where in 1881 she converted to Islam, taking for herself the name Malika Jan, and called her daughter, Gauhar Jan. Malika Jan wrote poems in Urdu under the guidance of Hakim Bano Sahib Hilal of Banaras and published a *dewan* titled *Makhzan Ulfat-i-Malika*, with 106 *ghazals* and some songs. Having spent eight years in Varanasi perfecting her music under Kalu Ustad and Ali Baksh of Lucknow, Malika Jan moved to Calcutta and sang as Badi Malika Jan because there were two other Malikas in the circuit.

Gauhar Jan's maiden performance was in 1887 before the Maharaja of Darbhanga, himself an accomplished singer. She was adept at *bhao batana*, or expressing the feelings of the song and the emotions of the character through face, gesture, intonation and expression. She drove around in a four-horse open carriage and could not bear to go anywhere without it, so it was shipped by train wherever she went. Rabindranath Tagore allowed her to sing his songs set to her own tunes, a privilege not allowed to anyone else. She would visit Bombay during the racing season, spending the day at the Mahalakshmi racecourse, and the evenings and nights at concerts. At a time when respectable women were covered from head to toe, she wore slit skirts and midriff-baring outfits and was rumoured never to wear the same gown or jewellery twice. She had a wicked sense of humour and once entertained her friends by singing English folksongs parodically in the style of *ghazals*.

In 1902, on 14 November, a rudimentary recording studio was set up in two hotel rooms in Calcutta by Frederick William Gaisberg and his assistants, who were on their first recording expedition to the East

for the Gramophone Company, then only four years old. Their local agent had lined up for them some Western-style cabaret singers, but Gaisberg wanted more. Looking for local talent, he went to the police, trawled theatres, palace mehfiles, and other less than savoury places. At last, an artist was found. Said to be a famous dancing girl. The ‘girl’ showed up punctually with a huge entourage, positioned herself before the weird contraption with its huge recording horn and fat wax tablet, and began to sing. She had been told that she had to sing the *ghazal* in exactly three minutes. She did not tell Gaisberg that a *ghazal* takes several hours to sing and could take all night. She simply did it, like the professional she was. In the process, she radically changed Indian music. Her early records were labelled ‘First dancing girl, Calcutta’. She recorded up to a quarter of the 600 discs the Gramophone Company got out of that expedition, singing in seven languages out of the twenty she was reputed to be able to sing in. Till 1920, she recorded regularly, turning up in ever more elaborate gowns and enjoying herself hugely.

She was a staunch supporter of Gandhi and the Congress and raised massive amounts of money for the cause. However, respectable Congresswomen objected to her presence, and on one occasion, she was asked to keep away. Deeply hurt, she continued to raise money for the party. It is said that Gandhi once ducked out of one of her fundraisers, sending a representative instead of coming himself, and Gauhar Jan, piqued, sent him only half the money.

She was attached to the court of Darbhanga and Rampur before going to the Mysore court, where she died in 1930. Her services to music were not recognized either by the state or posterity, although she enjoyed rock star status in her lifetime and immortalized Hindustani classical music for the world.

## GAURA PANT, 'SHIVANI' (1923–2003)

Gaura Pant, who wrote in Hindi under the name 'Shivani', was a popular author of the 1960s and 1970s and a pioneer in writing women-centric fiction. She was born Gaura Pande in the Princely State of Rajkot, Gujarat, where her father was a teacher in the court, on October 17. Her parents were Brahmins from Almora in Kumaon. Her mother was among the first students of the Lucknow Mahila Vidyalaya and became a Sanskrit scholar. Later, her father took up a post at Rampur, before the family moved to Orcha, where he held an important position.

In 1935, when she was twelve, her first story was published. She, and her brother, and her sister were sent to Shantiniketan to study at Visva Bharati. There she added Bengali to her repertoire of Sanskrit, Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi and English; she even wrote a book in Bengali about her experiences called *Amader Shantiniketan*. Rabindranath Tagore himself visited their Almora home a few times. Shivani graduated from Visva Bharati in 1943 and decided to take up writing seriously. In 1951 her first adult short story was published in *Dharmayug* under the name 'Shivani', and her pseudonym began to be known among the reading public. She soon began to write novels regularly, creating an oeuvre of about forty works, many of them set in her native Kumaon. She also wrote non-fiction, producing two travelogues and a book called *Apradhini*, a collection of interviews with women serving life sentences. She married Sukdeo Pant, a teacher and civil servant, and two of her daughters, Mrinal Pande and Ira Pande, went on to become writers themselves.

Shivani's most popular novels, such as *Chaudah Phere* and *Krishnakali* were serialised in *Dharmayug* and *Saptahik Hindustani*. Her novel *Kariye Chima* was filmed, while others, such as *Surangma*, *Rativilaap*, *Mera Beta*, and *Teesra Beta* were serialized for television. She was awarded the Padma Shri for her contribution to Hindi literature

in 1982. Ira Pande wrote a memoir of her mother in English titled *Didi: My Mother's Voice*.

## GAURI DESHPANDE (1942–2003)

Gauri Deshpande was a writer in Marathi and English. She was born in Pune to Irawati Karve (q.v.) and Dinkar Karve, one of the sons of Dhondo Keshav Karve. She went to Ahilyadevi School, then Fergusson College in Pune, where she took an MA in English literature. Her first poem in English was *Between Births* (1968), followed by *Lost Love* (1970) and *Beyond the Slaughterhouse* (1972). After her mother's death in 1970, she wrote a memoir of her in Marathi for a newspaper, and this opened up the field of Marathi writing to her with the idea of 'kahani' or women's tales. She started with *Ekek Pan Galawaya* (1980), then *Teruo Te Ani Kahi Door Paryant* (1985), *Ahe He Ase Ahe* (1986), *Niragathi Ani Chandrike Ga Sarike Ga* (1987), *Dustar Ha Ghat Ani Athang* (1989), *Mukkam* (1992), *Vinchurniche Dhade* (1996), *The Lackadaisical Sweeper* (1997) (a collection of short stories in English), *Goph* (1999), and *Utkhanan* (2002). She translated Sunita Deshpande's *Ahe Manohar Tari* as *And Pine for What Is Not*. She translated the 16 volumes of Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights* into Marathi. She divorced her first husband, Avinash Deshpande, and later married Surinder Singh. She had children from both husbands.

## GAURI PARVATIBAI (1802–1853)

Rani Gauri Parvatibai was a queen regent of the Princely State of Travancore during her brief reign from 1814 to 1829. Some of the credit for the high literacy rate prevailing in present-day Kerala is attributed to her.

She was preceded by her sister Rani Gauri Lakshmbai, who had been regent for her minor son, Parvatibai's nephew, Swati Thirunal, from 1810 to 1814, and had managed to carry out some very integral reforms in the fields of administration and social work. Rani Gauri Parvatibai had the vision that without mass education, no reform can be permanent; hence, she carried out reforms with zeal in the field of education. She was counseled in her projects by her brother-in-law Raja Raja Verma of Changansery, and by her husband, who was of the Royal family of Kilmanoor. Her mother was the senior queen of the Attingal dynasty.

The first thing she did was appoint a new dewan and declare the state to be the monopoly trader in pepper and tobacco to raise funds for her ambitious plan of reform. She carried on many of the reforms of her sister and gave more freedom to Christians and the lower castes. Then in 1817, she passed the Travancore Education Bill, a landmark piece of legislation that fostered the spread of education and literacy in Kerala. She gave tax relief to the farmers and had a code of conduct for tax officers. She restricted the practice of dowry among Brahmins and tried to bring about equality between all classes. She facilitated the founding of presses both by missionaries and private enterprise. She opened schools for both boys and girls and was hospitable to Christian ideas of education, too. Her programmes were carried on even after 1829, when her nephew Swathi Thirunal ascended the throne. His reign is known as the golden age of Travancore, and it was built on the foundation of his aunt's farsighted policies.

## **GAYATRI DEVI (1919–2009)**

Gayatri Devi was the third Rani of Jaipur from 1939 to 1970 through her marriage to Man Singh II, known as Sawai Man Singh. Along with Leela Naidu, she was chosen as one of the world's ten most beautiful women by *Vogue*.

She was born in the family of the rulers of Koch Bihar in North Bengal. Her father, Raja Jitendra Narayan, was the younger brother of the heir to the title, but succeeded him when Gayatri Devi was a child, while her mother was Indira Raje of Baroda (q.v.), daughter of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III and Chinnabai II (q.v.), Gayatri Devi was educated at Shantiniketan and in Switzerland, then in London. In a replay of her mother Indira's tempestuous wedding of Jitendra Narayan of Koch Bihar, Gayatri became infatuated with the ruler of Jaipur, Sawai Man Singh II, when he saw her in London and asked to marry her. Her mother laughed this off as a joke, but the fourteen-year-old Gayatri was deeply impressed. For the next few years, she pursued him relentlessly, undaunted by the fact that he already had two wives and was many years her senior. Finally, in 1940, she prevailed upon her parents to let her marry him. They were also worried because they were comparatively Westernised, but they knew that the Jaipur court would be conservative to the extreme. Gayatri Devi did find it hard to adjust, but Man Singh supported her throughout the difficult transition. In Jaipur, she set up three schools for girls, including the Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls' School, and she revived the once flourishing art of blue pottery.

After Independence, she went into politics, standing for election in 1962. She won the Jaipur Lok Sabha seat by the world's largest landslide, winning 192,909 votes out of 246,516 cast, confirmed by the Guinness Book of Records. She was re-elected in 1967 and 1971, running for the Swatantra Party of C. Rajagopalachari, the second Governor-General of Independent India, against the Congress. When in 1971, the Privy Purses of the princes were abolished, the government of Indira Gandhi (q.v.) managed to imprison Gayatri Devi in Tihar Jail for five months on a flimsy tax evasion charge. She had lost her husband in 1970, and she now retired from politics, passing up the chance to contest the 1977 elections in which Indira Gandhi was defeated. Her memoir *A Princess Remembers* (1976) recounts her life in full and frank detail.

## GEETA BALI (1930–1965)

Geeta Bali was an actor. She was born Harkirtan Kaur, a Sikh, to a Mohyal family in pre-partition Punjab. The Mohyals were Brahmins who had left the occupation of priests to become soldiers. They moved to Mumbai around the time of Partition and lived there in great poverty. However, Geeta's charm and talents started to get her breaks in films. She made her debut in 1948 with *Jalsa* and *Sohag Raat*. She worked with her future brother-in-law, Raj Kapoor, in *Bawre Nain* (1950) and with her future father-in-law, Prithviraj Kapoor, in *Anand Math* (1952). In 1955, she did a cameo role with Shammi Kapoor on Kedar Sharma's *Rangeen Raaten* on location at Ranikhet in the Kumaon region. In that romantic setting, the two actors fell in love. Shammi Kapoor was then not yet a star, and he was a year younger than her. Four months later, they eloped and got married at the Banganga temple at 4 am on 23 August. There was no vermilion, so Shammi applied Geeta's lipstick to her parting as a sign of marriage. Unlike other actresses who gave up films after marrying into the Kapoor family, Bali continued her career. They had two children. Later, her niece, Yogeeta Bali, also made it into films. Her secretary was Surinder Kapoor, the father of the producer Boney Kapoor and actor Anil Kapoor. She died on 21 January 1965, of smallpox. Vaccination was known in the 1930s, but possibly the poverty of her early life had prevented her from being vaccinated as a child. Her films include *Baazi* (1951), *Raag Rang* (which she also produced, 1952), *Coffee House* (1957). Her last film *Rano*, was left unfinished. She received a Filmfare Nomination as Best Actress for *Vachan* (1955), and another nomination as Best Supporting Actress for *Kavi* (1954).

## GEETA DUTT (1930–1972)

Geeta Dutt was a playback singer in Hindi films as well as a singer of Bengali songs. She was born Geeta Ghosh Roy Chowdhuri into a rich landowning family in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. In 1942, when she was twelve, her parents moved to Dadar, Mumbai. There, her singing was overheard by composer/music director Hanuman Prasad, who offered to train her. She debuted in *Bhakta Prahlād* (1946), where she sang only two lines. But these were so impressive that she was made playback singer for *Do Bhāi*, and this film made her name. Though she began by singing devotional and serious songs, in *Baazi* in 1951, the composer S.D. Burman was sure she could sing some peppy numbers, and this brought out the perkiness of her voice. *Baazi* was directed by Guru Dutt, who was soon to play a big role in her life. Soon she was in demand to sing Westernised songs, such as club numbers and other items. Thenceforth, she worked regularly with S.D. Burman, who used her ‘Bengalines’ to effect in *Devdas* (the famous film adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Bengali novel, 1955) and *Pyasa* (1957). She also worked with O.P. Nayyar, who helped her to increase her emotional range, and with Hemant Kumar. Some other popular composers for whom she sang were Shankar-Jaikishen and Madan Mohan. Her personal life was troubled. While recording for *Baazi*, she met and fell in love with Guru Dutt and married him two years later. At first things went well, and Geeta sang some of her best songs in his movies. She remained very busy in spite of having three children. By 1957, Guru Dutt was having an affair with Waheeda Rahman, and Geeta had developed an alcohol problem. He had planned to make *Gauri*, India’s first Cinemascope production with Geeta as its star, but the project fell through.

Geeta’s singing was affected. In 1958, S.D. Burman had fallen out with Lata Mangeshkar as a playback singer and wanted Geeta to become his main collaborator again, but she was not able to meet his standards, and he dropped her for the young Asha Bhonsle. In 1964,

Guru Dutt died from a combination of alcohol and an overdose of sleeping pills. He had attempted suicide twice before. Geeta suffered a severe nervous breakdown. Money was now a problem, and her attempts to revive her singing career and break into Bengali movies were not as successful as she had hoped. She gave stage shows at Puja functions and sold discs of her Bengali songs. She acted in the Bengali movie *Bhadu Bharan* (1967) and sang for *Anubhav* (1971). This was her final appearance, as a few months later she died of cirrhosis of the liver. Her phenomenal career led her to produce more than a thousand songs under about a hundred different music directors. She also sang in many Indian languages, including Marathi, Bengali, Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Punjabi.

## **GEETA MUKHERJEE (1924–2000)**

Geeta Mukherjee was a politician, an activist, and also a children's writer. She was born Geeta Roy Choudhury to an upper-middle-class Bengali family. Her father was a Rai Bahadur. She went to school in Jessore, now in Bangladesh. As a student, she joined the Bengal Provincial Students' Federation (BPSF) in 1939, and was active in the campaign to get freedom fighters released from the Andaman Cellular Jail. She went to Ashutosh College in Kolkata and graduated in Bengali literature. In 1942, she joined the CPI and married Biswanath Mukherjee, a communist leader. In 1945, she addressed a rally supporting the postal workers' strike; she was the only woman student speaker.

The Communist Party was banned in 1948, and she and Biswanath Mukherjee were imprisoned without trial for six months in the Presidency Jail in Kolkata. They were eventually released, and Geeta continued to serve as the secretary of the Students' Federation till 1951 and remained active in student politics for some years. When

the Communist Party split in 1964, she stayed with the CPI and did not join the Marxists. She was elected to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly twice, in 1967 and 1972, from Tamluk in Midnapore. In 1978, she was elected MP for Panskura and represented that constituency till her death. She was elected to the National Council of the CPI in 1978 and to its National Executive in 1981, and was made one of the national secretaries at the Seventeenth Congress of the party held in Chennai in 1998. She was thus the first woman secretariat member of any Indian communist party. She was a member of the Executive Council of the National Federation of Indian Women from 1965, a member of the National Commission for Women in 1988 and of the National Commission on Rural Labour in 1986. She was also a member of the Press Council.

Geeta Mukherjee was particularly known for taking up women's issues. She campaigned on behalf of women beedi workers and against the practice of dowry. She insisted that the CPI cadres should refrain from taking dowry in private while condemning it in public. In 1998, she made headlines when, along with Brinda Karat, she alleged that the Communist parties were reluctant to take in women or to let them rise in the party hierarchy. She crossed swords on the issue with a veteran CPM leader Harkishen Singh Surjeet, and this provided further impetus to the campaign for the Women's Reservation Bill, which she had taken up as a project in 1996. It is even reported that she turned down a ministerial post in I.K. Gujral's cabinet so that she could devote all her energies to the Bill. She was tireless in raising questions on women's issues in Parliament and always did her homework when she asked them. Under her chairmanship the report of the Joint Select Committee on the Women's Reservation Bill was published quickly.

She was also a writer and wrote several books in Bengali for children, including *Bharater Upakatha* (Folktales of India) and *Chotoder Rabindranath* (Tagore for Children). She translated Bruno Apitz's *Naked Among Wolves* into Bengali. She loved poetry and used to read and recite Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. She

had undergone heart surgery in 1990, but it did not fully cure her, and she died in Calcutta on 6 March 2000 of a massive heart attack, two days short of International Women's Day.

## GHOSHA (VEDIC PERIOD)

Ghosha was one of the 27 women known as *brahmavadinis*, though some of these 'women' seem to have been abstractions or fictions. Ghosha is one who appears to have been human, and the author of two hymns in the Rig Veda. Her grandfather, Dirghatamas, and her father, Kakshivat, both composed several hymns in praise of the Ashwins. Two entire hymns of the Tenth book, each containing 14 verses, are attributed to her. Her first hymn praises the Ashwins, the heavenly twins who are also physicians; this accords well with the legend that she suffered from some disfiguring disease, perhaps leprosy, and remained unmarried as a consequence in her father's house. The second, a more personal one, expresses Ghosha's intimate feelings and desires. She implored the Ashwins,

This praise song have we made for you, O Ashwins,  
Have fashioned it as the Bhrigus built a weapon  
Have decked it as the bride is for the bridegroom,  
Presenting it to you as our own offerings.

It is said that, invoked by her two hymns, the Ashwins worshipped by her forefathers, cured her of the disease and made her worthy of wedded happiness. The second hymn is explicit about her desires and deep feelings for married life:

The woman has been born, let him, desirous of a maiden,  
approach her.  
For him, let the spreading creepers grow along with rain.

Let the stream flow for him as if down an incline.  
 For him who is not to be conquered, let there be the rights  
 of a husband.

## GIRIJA DEVI (1929–2017)

Girija Devi's life shows how passion, resilience, and cultural pride can transform a musical tradition, keeping it vibrant, dignified, and alive for generations. She was one of the most influential vocalists in the Hindustani classical tradition, especially known for her mastery of the Purabi Ang Thumri style of the Banaras (Seniya) gharana. She earned the honorific title “Queen of Thumri” for her contributions to this semi-classical genre.

Born in Varanasi to zamindar Ramdeo Rai, who supported her musical education from a young age, began formal training at age 5 in khyal and tappa under Sarju Prasad Misra, later studying with Chand Misra, a child, appeared in the film *Yaad Rahe* at age nine.

In 1949, on All India Radio, Allahabad, with her first public concert in Bihar in 1951, despite societal resistance—upper-class women weren't expected to perform publicly—she forged a path for both herself and future female artist Repertoire extended beyond thumri to *dadra*, *kajri*, *chaiti*, *holi*, *khyal*, *tappa*, and folk music from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar served as a mentor at ITC Sangeet Research Academy (Kolkata) and Banaras Hindu University (1990s onward) even late in life (into her 80s), she continued to tour and record, demonstrating remarkable dedication.

She was the recipient of Padma Shri in 1972, Padma Bhushan in 1989, Padma Vibhushan in 2016, as well as the Sangeet Natak Academy Award (1977), Fellowship (2010), and GiMA Lifetime Achievement Award (2012) “Girija: A Lifetime in Music” (2018),

which won national and international awards. Lasting legacy cemented by a quote from Ustad Bismillah Khan: “There is Baba Vishwanath, there is Maa Ganga and there is Girija.

A proud torchbearer of Banaras gharana’s traditions, her audience included students and connoisseurs alike. Girija Devi passed away due to cardiac arrest in Kolkata on 24 October 2017, at the age of 88. Her demise marked the end of an era, yet her voice continues to resonate, inspiring countless performers and lovers of Indian classical music.

## **GULBADAN BEGUM (1523–1603)**

Gulabdan Begum was the sister of the famous Mughal emperor Humayun and the daughter of Babur, and has left an account of her brother and father in her Persian memoir *Humayun Nama*. Women of the Mughal dynasty learnt Persian as an accomplishment and spoke Turkish, the intimate domestic language of the Timurid families. The *Humayun Nama* was completed around 1587, when Gulbadan was well into old age. Gulbadan Begum’s account is ‘the most valuable contemporary record of the period’. It is an outstanding historical document and places her among the world’s renowned scholars. In it, we have an insider’s view of one of the most fascinating families the subcontinent has known – nomadic and used to rough living, highly cultured; feared and fearless in war, yet sentimental and tender with each other. They were the early Mughals, descended from two of the most fabled and feared leaders of Asia, Chinghiz Khan and Timur the Lame.

Gulbadan was the daughter of Dildar Begum, the junior wife of Babar, the first ruler of the Mughal Empire. Gulbadan, with her brother Hindal, was adopted by Babar’s first queen, Maham Begum, mother of Humayun. Babar was a statesman of distinction and a sensitive poet. He spent 19 years ruling Kabul as preparation for the realisation of his dream, the conquest of India. Yet he loved his home so much that, in

his camp in Sikri, he burst into tears at the sight of melons from Kabul. He wrote his autobiography *Babar Nama* in the Turkish language. He would perhaps have been surprised to know that of all his children, it was the youngest daughter who would follow his example. Gulbadan's account begins with an affectionate portrayal of Babar, then goes on to detail his relations with his many sons, not omitting an honest yet indulgent and understanding description of Humayun's many mistakes and failings. As Babar became Emperor of India when she was a mere toddler, and her teens encompassed the time of strife and suffering when Sher Shah Suri threatened to drive the Mughals, with Humayun at their head, back to Kabul, Gulbadan was well placed to serve as historian. As for her own life, she married Khwaja Khizr Khan. Her daughter, Ruqayya Sultan, grew up to marry Emperor Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor. Akbar admired the literary talent of Gulbadan Begum and encouraged her to write about the reign of Humayun.

A devout Muslim, she made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1575, returning in 1577. The details of her *haj* are mentioned in *Humayun Nama*. Gulbadan lived a full life and died at the age of 80 in 1603. Akbar was fond of her, though as an orthodox Muslim she did not approve of his freethinking ways, and Humayun appears, after her royal father Babar, to have been her favourite Mughal. Humayun's wife, Hamida, who features largely in the book, was with Gulbadan till the last days of her life. At her funeral, Akbar accompanied her bier and carried it on his shoulders for part of the journey.

Only one copy of the *Humayun Nama* has survived, and that was lost for three hundred years. Annette Beveridge, a Persian scholar, translated it into English in 1899 and the Royal Asiatic Society published it in London in 1902. The original manuscript has been preserved intact in the Museum of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata.

## HABBA KHATOON, 'ZOONI' (1554–1609)

Habba Khatoon, Zooni was a poet and queen of sixteenth-century Kashmir. She was nicknamed 'Zooni' or 'of the moon'.

Habba's father Abdul, was a poor peasant of the village Chandrahara near Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley. Habba was a child prodigy and composed scintillating verses. Her fame soon spread as a singer. When she reached puberty, she was married off to a poor peasant, but was not happy. King Yusuf Shah of the Chak dynasty heard about her, came to hear her songs and was enchanted by her voice. He got her divorce and made her his queen. Some time later, the Mughal Emperor Akbar attacked the kingdom, captured the king and annexed Kashmir in 1587. Habba escaped and began to wander over the Kashmir countryside, captivating people with her singing. She became known as Zooni. She composed *lols* or traditional short lyrics and sang with a musical instrument. The film director Muzaffar Ali, of *Umrao Jan* fame, started to make a film on her in the late twentieth century, but due to various hitches, the film was never finished.

## HAMSA WADKAR (1923–1971)

Hamsa Wadkar, an early film actor in Marathi cinema, had to go into the entertainment industry at an early age to support herself, and her family managed successfully to live off her earnings.

Entering films at the age of 11, Hamsa supported her alcoholic father with her work in Marathi films and put her brother through

school. Her first film was *Vijayachi Lagne* (Vijaya's Marriage) in 1936, and it was an instant hit. She was married at 14 to the neighbour's son, Jagannath Bandarkar, who had pursued her relentlessly; she gave in more from weariness than affection. Her life with him proved to be no different from that with her family; he exploited her just as they had. As she recounts in her autobiography, *Sangatya Aika* (I'm Telling You, Listen) in 1970, she ran away from him several times, once living in practical *pardah* for three years in the home of a rich landlord before she was compelled to send for Bandarkar. Her autobiography was a frank account of her experiences as a woman working in Marathi cinema and caused quite a stir because of the influential men who had been linked with her, though their names were not mentioned. Shyam Benegal's film *Bhumika*, starring Smita Patil (q.v.), was based on her life.

## HANSA MEHTA (1897–1995)

Hansa Mehta was an activist and politician. She was born on 3 July 1897, in Surat, into a progressive Nagar family. Her father was Diwan in the Princely States of both Baroda and Bikaner. While young, she was influenced by the reformer Aurobindo Ghose and Sayaji Rao III, the progressive ruler of Baroda. In 1918, she graduated with honours in philosophy from Baroda College and left the following year for England to study journalism and sociology. There she met Sarojini Naidu (q.v.) and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (q.v.). Coming back to India, in 1924, she married outside her caste—her husband, Jivaraj Mehta, was one of the most promising medical men in Mumbai.

Encouraged and inspired by him, Hansa started work in 1926 as a member of the committee for Bombay Municipal Schools. She also served as the president of the Bhagini Samaj. She campaigned against the Simon Commission and picketed shops selling foreign goods and liquor. She was active in the Indian National Congress, going to jail

in 1930 and 1932. Her unusual brilliance and valuable experience proved to be a great asset when she served as a member of the Bombay Legislative Council in 1931. She represented the Congress from Mumbai in the Constituent Assembly. She was a fellow of Bombay University and SNDT University. From 1945, she was associated with Baroda University, and soon after, in 1949, she was appointed Vice Chancellor of the Maharaja Sayaji Rao University of Baroda, a post she held for many years. The Home Science faculty of Baroda University was the first of its kind in India, and the credit for establishing both this and later the Lady Irwin College of Home Science in New Delhi, goes to Hansa Mehta.

Despite her busy schedule Hansa, lent her support to many organisations working for the welfare of women. She served as a secretary to the National Council for Women and was president of the All-India Women's Conference and vice president of the International Alliance for Women. From 1947 to 1952, she represented India in the Joint Human Rights Commission and became its chairperson in 1950. In 1958, she became a member of the working committee of UNESCO. She researched and wrote 20 books focusing on the problems of women and children, 16 of them in Gujarati. She also translated into Gujarati some of Shakespeare's plays and parts of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Many universities conferred on her an honorary degree of D.Litt. In recognition of her outstanding contribution to the development of education in India, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1958.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## HARDEVI (1859–1926)

She was a pioneering woman from Lahore of the 19th century, who took up the crusade for women's education and worked tirelessly against social injustices like purdah and the plight of widows.

The daughter of the celebrated architect of Lahore, Rai Bahadur Kanhaiyalal, she herself was a child widow. She travelled to London with her brother (1886–1888) and published two books about her travels, *London Yatra* (1888) and *London Jubilee* (1889). She is credited with the book '*Simantani Updash*' (1882), a feminist treatise, though it was published in the name of an anonymous Hindu woman. Hardevi published a magazine called *Bharat Bhagini* (1889–1911) for more than two decades to educate women.

Her writings and activism had contributed significantly to the passing of the law (1891) for setting the Age of Consent for consummation of marriage of girls to the age of 12. Hardevi took the revolutionary step of remarrying Roshan Lal in 1890, causing a lot of controversy in the Kayasth community she belonged to. She established *Nari Shilpa Laya* in 1902 to teach handicrafts to women for self-reliance.

Though Hardevi had looked up to Queen Victoria and the British for support of women's rights, she eventually became critical of the British exploitation of her country. The British government jailed her for acts of sedition in 1910. Perhaps she was the first elite woman to have suffered in jail during the freedom movement of India.

Hardevi should be remembered in the canon of Hindi literature for earliest feminist treatise, like *Social Justice for Women* (1889). She was not only a writer of many books, including a novel, *Hukumdevi* (1892) but also a pioneering organiser of women's gatherings to further the feminist cause.

She had established many institutions, like *Sundari Ashram* for old, helpless women and *Vanita Buddhi-Vikasini Sabha* in Lahore.

The Bombay Guardian took note of her exceptional public oratory espousing the terrible state of widows in India.

## **HAZRAT MAHAL (1820–1879 )**

She was one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah, Nawab of Awadh (now Uttar Pradesh) when the British annexed it in 1856. She made a brave if doomed attempt to take back the kingdom from the British during the war, was captured and exiled to Nepal. She was born Muhammadi Khanum and given the name Hazrat Mahal when she entered the royal harem. Not much is known about her early life, but she may have been sold into the Nawab's service, as was the practice in those days. The Nawab was a well-known collector of accomplished women who were known as '*paris*' or 'fairies' of the palace. A trained singer and dancer, Hazrat Mahal appears to have received some education in the royal harem. She was said to have been comely and undoubtedly possessed an aptitude for organization and command.

Awadh had been ceded to the British nine years before the outbreak of war, and Hazrat Mahal and her young son Birjis Qadar had elected to stay behind in Lucknow while Wajid Ali Shah shifted his glittering court to Kolkata. When the people rose in 1857, they put Qadar, then 10 years old, on the throne and declared Hazrat Mahal regent. In the short time she had to rule the kingdom, she made several intelligent decisions and appointed both Hindus and Muslims to high posts. It was only a few months, however, before the might of the British army arrived at the door and quickly scored a victory against the demoralised Awadh soldiery. Hazrat Mahal attempted to marshal her troops by leading them herself from elephant-back on the field. The army rallied and pushed the British beyond Varanasi and Allahabad. However, this spread her forces out and it was only a matter of time before the British were again

pressing their advantage. At last, the resistance began to crumble, and she and her son fled with a few attendants to Nepal.

The British offered her terms of surrender, declaring that she would have ‘all the consideration which is due to her as a member of a royal house, but political powers she shall never have, and she will do wisely to secure by prompt submission a generous treatment and an honourable position for the rest of her life.’ Hazrat Mahal rejected these terms with contempt. When the Queen of England issued a proclamation bringing the ‘revolt’ to a close, she issued a counter-proclamation which was a merciless criticism of the fair words and bland phrases of that document, counselling the people not to have faith in it, saying, ‘faith is the unvarying curtain [for deceit] of the English and also [the disposition] never to forgive a fault, be it great or small’. She applied for asylum to the Nepal government and was granted it, though she had to make do with a meagre allowance of Rs 400 a month and is said to have paid with all her jewellery. The British, for their part, never allowed her to return to India, and she died in exile in 1879.

## **HELENA PETROVNA BLAVATSKY (1831–1891)**

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a self-proclaimed seer, spiritualist and leader. Daughter of Helena Hahn, a writer who advocated women’s rights, Helena married at 17 the Count Nikifor Vassilievich Blavatsky, a man forty years older than herself, quickly left him, and became a wanderer in Europe. She became deeply interested in spiritualism and the occult. Between 1867 and 1870, she travelled in the Himalayas, but because of the sensitivity of the British government to threats from Russia, she was compelled to abandon her travels there.

She claimed to be in psychic contact with a master called Morya, who revealed secrets of occult knowledge to her, and to be in psychic,

contact with a group in Tibet. With the help of these masters, she claimed to be able to perform miracles, though many were sceptical of her powers. She went to the United States in 1873, and two years later she set up the Theosophical Society there with Colonel Henry Steel, Olcott and others. In 1875, she also married Michael Betanelly for a while, but soon separated from him; the divorce was finalized in 1878. Her Society was based on the theory that the spiritual knowledge and ancient occult traditions of the world have been psychically broadcast down the ages by a group of adepts. The theory amalgamated the arcane knowledge of Egyptian, Chaldean, Tibetan, Hindu and other civilisations.

In 1878, she and Colonel H.S. Olcott came to India to establish the Society's headquarters at Adyar near Madras. Two of her assistants there later exposed her miracles as conjuring tricks requiring their connivance to perform, but the force of her personality nevertheless drew followers to her creed. She was undoubtedly learned in occultism and could quote and comment extensively on passages from ancient writers. Her most famous work was *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. In her later years, she wrote a few books on her theories, including *Isis Unveiled* and *The Key to Theosophy*. At the time of her death, it is estimated that her followers numbered over 100,000. She was instrumental in bringing Annie Besant (q.v.), who succeeded her as Head of the Society, to India.

## **HOMVATI DEVI (1906–1951)**

Homvati was a Hindi writer of short stories and a poet. Born in Meerut on 20 November 1902 and became a widow at a young age. Her four-story collections are titled *Dharohar*, *Swapanbhang*, *Apna Ghar* and *Gote Ki Topi*. *Gote Ki Topi* ran to several editions. The Hindi

film director Kishor Sahu tried to make an unauthorised film on her famous story ‘Sindoor’, but she did not allow him to get away with it and sued him for infringement of copyright.

Homvati depicted the social injustice inflicted on women and their silent fight against it. Most of her heroines belong to the middle class and are sensitive to their social limitations, but nevertheless they represented the new women who questioned social restrictions and began to ask for their rights. This heralded a new era in Hindi literature. She is now regarded as a pioneer storywriter in Hindi. After her death, the famous Hindi writer ‘Agyey’ paid a tribute to her by dedicating one edition of the Hindi magazine *Pratik* to her memory. She also wrote two poetry collections, *Udgaar* and *Ardhi*.

## SANCIYA HONNAMMA (17TH CENTURY)

Honnamma was a slave in the court of the Wodeyar king Chikkadevaraya (1672–1704) of Mysore and was probably taught to read and write by one of the poets of the household. She had the duty of preparing *paan* (betel leaves wrapped around areca nuts, quicklime and spices) for Rani Devajamma and the royal household, for her nickname ‘Sanciya’ is derived from the word for ‘bag’, referring to the kit used in preparing *paan*. The royal couple came to know of Honnamma’s ability to compose poetry and suggested to a poet of the household, Aḷahiya Singararya, that he take her as a disciple. Under his guidance she studied Sanskrit and Kannada classics, the Bhagavad Gita, *smritis*, and *shāstras*. She wrote in Kannada, and her best-known work was the *Shadibadeya Dharma* (Duties of a Devoted Wife). Legend has it that she was favoured in court because of this work, and that the court poets praised it. Her songs are still sung today. Their content is traditional,

upholding accepted values, but they show sympathy and perceptiveness absent from many such moralistic writings. Here is a sample:

For money's sake, for trust  
And friendship's sake  
Don't give a girl to a walking corpse  
Bereft of virtue, youth and looks.

Don't say, 'we're poor people, where  
Can we get jewels from?'  
Instead of spending on yourself  
Provide your daughters with clothes and ornaments.

## **ILA MITRA (1925–2002)**

Ila Mitra was an activist for tribal rights, an amateur sportsperson and a politician. She was born Ila Sarkar on 18 October 1925 to a well-known family of Jhenaidah district in East Bengal. Her father, Nagendranath Sarkar, was the Accountant General of Bengal. She was to have represented India in the 1940 Olympics, which were cancelled due to the outbreak of war. Ila came to Kolkata to continue her education, and there she met other young people who were active in the freedom struggle. She passed her Intermediate Arts examination in 1942 and got her bachelor's degree in 1944. She joined the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Association for Women's Self-Defense) and the Communist Party.

A year after graduating, she married Ramendra Mitra, also a Communist Party member and the son of a rich landowning family of Chapai Nawabganj. Ila went with her husband to his rural home and taught in a village school for girls that her husband had set up with his friend, Altaf Mia. In 1946, she began to organize the villagers, who were mostly tribals, to take part in the Tebhaga movement, an agitation for justice for sharecroppers. The movement became a broad-based revolt against oppression, primarily centred in North Bengal. Word of her work spread among the villagers, and they soon became fiercely attached to her, affectionately calling her 'Rani Ma'. Ila Mitra also went to riot-torn Noakhali when Gandhi spoke against communal violence.

Independence came and went, but the Santhal rebellion continued till 1950. In January 1950, hostilities peaked, leading to a clash between police and villagers in Nachole in the district of Rajshahi in the then East Pakistan, and savage police reprisals. Ila was arrested while trying

to escape and was held at Rajshahi Central Jail, where she was tortured and raped as police tried to extract the names of the other agitators from her, but she did not give in. She was tried, for treason, and at her trial she recounted the brutalities that had been committed on her by the police. She was sentenced to life imprisonment. However, in 1954, her health had broken down under the torture and the harsh conditions, and she was sent to Kolkata for treatment. She did not return and enrolled for her MA in Bengali at Calcutta University. She also involved herself with the Communist Party of India again, and was elected to the Legislative Assembly four times, from 1962 to 1972. In 1971, she campaigned extensively for support for the Bangladesh War of Independence.

Ila Mitra was also a writer and translator. For her translations, she won the Soviet Land Nehru Award. The Central Government of India awarded her the Tamra Patra for her role in the Independence movement.

## **INDIRA GANDHI (1917–1984)**

Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister of India for nearly two decades. In spite of controversies, it is impossible to question her contribution to making India a force to be reckoned with in the diplomatic community of the world, and her absolute commitment to the nation.

The daughter of the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was born on 19 November 1917 at Allahabad in the family house of her grandfather, Motilal Nehru. In 1930, at the age of 13, she founded the Bal Charkha Sangh and the Vanar Sena, comprising children who helped the Congress Party during the Non-Co-operation Movement. In 1936, her mother Kamala died when Indira was only 19. Her girlhood was spent in boarding schools in Switzerland and India. The most compelling influence in her life at this time was her father, who wrote her long letters, subsequently published as *Letters*

*of a Father to His Daughter.* She attended Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan in West Bengal and Somerville College, Oxford.

In 1942, at the height of the Quit India Movement, she met and married Feroze Gandhi, né Mehta, a Parsi journalist who had been given his surname by Mahatma Gandhi himself. She had two sons, Rajiv in 1943 and Sanjay in 1946. There were rumours of trouble with her marriage, and she started spending time with her father, organising his social calendar and hosting functions. Nehru, then Prime Minister of India, had the opportunity to groom Indira to be a political leader. In 1955, she entered the political arena as an ordinary member of the Congress Working Committee, becoming the President of the All-India Youth Congress the following year. In 1959, she became President of the Indian National Congress. Feroze Gandhi died on 8 September 1960.

Indira was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1964 and became the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting in 1966. During these years, she developed from a shy, introverted, sometimes insecure woman to a confident, mature leader, honing her skills in comparative obscurity. In 1966, two weeks after the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri on January 10 at Tashkent, she was sworn in as the Prime Minister of India. Many believed that she would be just a figurehead, but in three years, they were proved wrong. Finding that the senior members of the party were trying to control her, she engineered a split in the party in 1967, retaining in her own group those who would back her. In 1969, she nationalised the country's banks. She promoted India's space programme and maintained her father's stand of non-alignment with the power blocs of the Cold War. Despite much international pressure, she never abandoned India's nuclear programme. Her motto as the leader of the country was 'never negotiate from fear and never fear to negotiate', and in this spirit, she opened a dialogue with Pakistan after the Indo-Pak war of 1971, which culminated in the Simla Agreement and the recognition of Bangladesh. At the same time, she negotiated the Indo-Soviet Friendship treaty. This period marked the height of her popularity; the people were solidly behind her, and India's eminent

painter M.F. Hussain even painted her as the goddess Durga riding a lion.

Indira advocated and promoted equal rights for women and their social and economic emancipation. She instituted many programmes for the benefit of the underprivileged and the handicapped. She laid great emphasis on the cultural revival of India, promoted crafts and encouraged schemes for the removal of poverty, though many thought her work in this area lacked long-range vision. She was an accomplished orator, and her presence in any forum was larger than life. However, many accused her of allowing a personality cult to grow around her in the Congress and in the nation. She was referred to as 'the only man in parliament'. Her supporters declared 'Indira is India', though Jayaprakash Narayan famously pointed out to her, 'You are not immortal, India is'. The culmination of this was her declaration on flimsy grounds of a state of Emergency in 1977, on the advice of her younger son, Sanjay. It was an open secret that the stimulus for this gesture had been the Allahabad High Court's striking down of the election results that had brought her to power. Rather than submit to the democratic process again, she decided to give the country a taste of authoritarianism. There are still people in India who reminisce fondly about how the trains ran on time during the Emergency, but most commentators were critical of the damage done to India's civil liberties, population control programme, and democratic credibility. Anyone who spoke against her at this time was jailed without trial. Confident that she had convinced the nation of her fitness to rule, she went to the polls and was ignominiously defeated the following year. The government of Morarji Desai tried rather clumsily to prosecute her for the excesses of the Emergency. The Congress split again, with Indira, this time naming her faction the Congress(I), 'I' for 'Indira'.

Having vindicated democracy, the people of India acknowledged that there was none to replace her when they returned her to power in 1980. She got over the grief of Sanjay's death in a plane crash and the bitterness that developed between her and her daughter-in-

law, Maneka, and embarked upon the last phase of her career, when secessionist forces on India's western border threatened to fragment the country as never before.

Much ink has been spilled over the Khalistan episode in India's history and the rights and wrongs of the police action that Indira ordered in the Golden Temple precincts in 1984. But it cannot be denied that Indira herself had no doubt about its necessity: she intended it not against the Sikh community but against terrorists. Hence, she retained her faithful Sikh bodyguards and was tragically done to death by one of them on 31 October 1984. As the Eighth Lok Sabha unanimously resolved on her death: 'This House mourns the loss of one of the greatest Indians of the twentieth century. Future generations, rising above the turmoil of our times, will look with love and gratitude on the magnitude and splendour of Indira Gandhi's achievements.'

Her legacy has continued, both in the Congress party's tremendous reliance on the Nehru family for figureheads and in her unfortunate example of being a target for political assassination. Her eldest son Rajiv, reluctantly following in her footsteps, also fell victim to terrorist forces seeking revenge. The Congress has made mighty efforts to involve his widow, Sonia Gandhi, in the politics of the nation, thus proving the durability of Indira's influence long after her death. Her grandson Rahul Gandhi is now active in politics.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **INDIRA GOSWAMI (1942–2011)**

Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami and affectionately called Mamoni Baideo, was a distinguished Indian writer, poet, scholar, and editor from Assam, acclaimed for her bold literary voice and social activism. Her writings foregrounded the lived

realities of women, caste and class injustices, and the marginalised communities of India's Northeast.

Indira Goswami was born on 14 November, 1942, in Guwahati, the largest city in the State of Assam, to Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi. She studied at Latashil Primary School, Pine Mount School in Shillong, and Tarini Charan Girls' School in Guwahati. She majored in Assamese literature at Cotton College and earned a master's degree from Gauhati University. In 1962, Goswami met Madhevan Raisom Ayengar, a young engineer from the southwest state of Karnataka. They soon fell in love and tied the knot in 1966, after eighteen months, she lost him in an accident.

In 1971, Goswami moved to Delhi, where she joined the Modern Indian Language Department of Delhi University as the Professor of Assamese. She would write most of her books during the next few years. Goswami adopted the pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami and published *The Chenab's Current*, her first novel. Later, Goswami became head of the language department, and it was during this time that she wrote two of her classics: *Pages Stained with Blood* and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. Her experiences in Vrindavan and as a widow were tied together in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja*, which described a community in Vrindavan that faced poverty and sexual exploitation. Her candid autobiography, *Adhalekha Dastaveja*, published in 1988 and its English translation, have won critical acclaim in India.

Her Ph.D. Research Work: "Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra," a comparative study of Tulsidas's Ramayana and the fourteenth-century Assamese Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali, was published as the book *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*, which was awarded the International Tulsi Award from Florida University.

She was the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1983), Assam Sahitya Sabha Award, 1988; Bharat Nirman Award, 1989; Sauhardya

Award, 1992; Katha Award, 1993. Jnanpith Award (2001), and Prince Claus Laureate (2008).

She also wrote *Jatra*. It spoke about the problem of insurgency that Northeast India (of which Assam is a part) has experienced since Indian independence. Not only did Goswami write about this insurgency, but she also acted as a mediator between the United Liberation Front of Assam, the Assamese rebel organization. Goswami's efforts led to the formation of the People's Consultative Group, which helped the two groups come to a negotiation. She passed away on 29 November 2011, leaving behind a rich literary heritage.

## INDIRA RAJE (1892–1968)

Indira Rajee was a princess of Baroda who defied her parents and broke off her engagement to the Scindhia ruler of Gwalior to marry the ruler of Koch Bihar. She also served as regent of Koch Bihar for her son. She was the only daughter of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda and his wife Chimnabai II (q.v.), and was betrothed very young to Madho Rao Scindia of Gwalior. Aged eighteen, Indira attended the Delhi *Durbar* of 1911, where she met the dashing Jitendra, younger brother of the then Maharaja of Koch Bihar. Compared to Gwalior, Koch Bihar was a small and marginal state, but Indira and Jitendra were undaunted. Braving scandal and diplomatic difficulties, they decided to marry.

Indira then wrote to Madho Rao, breaking off the engagement. Madho Rao Scindia sent a terse telegram to Indira's father in Baroda, asking, "What does the princess mean by her letter?" Indira told her parents what had happened, and though the ruler of Gwalior withdrew gracefully, Indira still had a battle on her hands convincing her parents to let her marry Jitendra. They hardly knew him and thought of him as a playboy and an upstart. He was summoned and told to stay away from

Indira, but Indira herself refused to break off ties with him. Finally, her parents realized that they had little chance of marrying her off now. They agreed to let the couple marry provided it happened in London, away from prying eyes. The pair had a quiet Brahmo wedding at a London hotel, as Jitendra's mother Suniti Devi (q.v.) was the daughter of the Brahmo Samaj reformer Keshab Chandra Sen.

Within days of the wedding, Jitendra's brother died of complications arising from his excessive drinking in 1913, only two years after assuming the title. Indira was now the wife of the ruler, which compensated her somewhat for her loss of status, and they had five children, including Gayatri Devi (q.v.). However, Jitendra, too, drank himself to death in a few years, leaving Indira to act as regent for her minor son Jagad Dipendra Narayan. Her duties did not stop her from being a fixture on the party circuit, and her name was linked to various eminent men, including the Duke of Kent. Her second daughter Gayatri (q.v.), became the third wife of the Maharaja of Jaipur, at a very early age and later went into politics. Indira's elder son assumed the title in 1936, and she thereafter spent most of her time in Europe, returning to Mumbai and dying there in 1968.

## INDIRA SANT (1914–2000)

Indira Sant was a poet in Marathi. She was born Indira Dikshit and grew up in southern Maharashtra. She studied at Rajaram College in Kolhapur and Fergusson College in Pune, where she met and married Narayan Sant. He died a decade later, leaving her with three children. She taught at a teacher's training college in Belgaum and wrote children's fiction. In the 1950s, she focused on feminist poetry describing the hardships of wives, mothers, and daughters, beginning with *Shela* (Stole, 1950), then *Mehndi* (1955). Her style is between the modernist and the romantic traditions. Her son Prakash is also a writer

in Marathi. Her younger sister Kamla was also a writer. In 1984 she received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her work *Garbhareshami*. Her collected memoirs are titled *Mrudgandha*.

## IRAWATI KARVE (1905–1970)

Irawati Karve was an anthropologist who studied Indian social systems. She was born in Mynjin in Burma, as her father, Hari Ganesh Karve, was working as an engineer there, and she was named after the River Irrawaddy. At the age of seven, she was sent to Pune to be schooled at Huzoor Page, one of the first schools for girls in Maharashtra. There she befriended Shakuntala Paranjpye (q.v.), who took her to stay at her home. Here she was exposed to a wide range of people and ideas. The ideas included anthropology, and the people included Dinkar Karve, professor of chemistry at Fergusson College and son of Maharshi Dhondho Keshav Karve, pioneer in women's education. Dinkar later became her husband.

Having graduated from Fergusson College, Irawati got her M.A. in sociology under the famous scholar G.S. Ghurye, who succeeded Sir Patrick Geddes as the head of the department of sociology at Bombay University in 1924. She then went to Berlin and obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Eugenics and Human Heredity in 1930 under Professor Eugene Fischer. On returning to India, she spent some time as Registrar of SNDT College in Pune, then taught at the Deccan College Post-Graduate Research Institute. where she remained all her life. Here she began investigating the origins of the caste system, using not only traditional anthropological sources of data but also epics, folklore and ethno-history. She believed in the in-depth study of local populations and proposed that castes differed in status from location to location. She studied kinship terms, relationships and family structures in the

epics and the Vedas. She was elected President of the Anthropology Section of the Indian Science Congress in 1957. She was also offered a lectureship at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. She wrote many books, including *Kinship Organisation in India* (1953), *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* (1961), *Maharashtra: Land and People* (1968), and *Yuganta*, a critique in Marathi and English of the Mahabharata, in which she dissects the human aspects of the epic. This last book became immensely popular and is still selling thirty years after her death. It won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1968. She also wrote *Paripurti*, *Bhovara*, *Amachi Samskruti*, *Samskruti*, and *Gangajal* in Marathi. Her daughter Gauri Deshpande (q.v.) also became a writer.

## ISMAT CHUGTAI (1915–1991)

Ismat Chughtai was an Urdu writer who focused on the ambiguities and traps of women's sexual lives, both with respect to men and women. For this, many people stigmatised her work as 'obscene', a word that tends to get thrown around rather frequently when women transgress male prerogatives and write about sex.

When she was studying at Aligarh Muslim University, she and her friends were made to sit behind a curtain at the back of the class, but they did not care so long as they had access to education. She fought a long battle to come out from behind that curtain and lay claim to education of a more fundamental kind — terrified by stories of first nights from her married friends, she searched desperately for ways to learn about sex, and this motivated her to speak of the tragedies such ignorance brought in its wake, and who pays the price for them. She is a master of the Urdu short story, and is best known for her story *Lihaf* (The Quilt) of 1941. She has also written the novels *Ziddi* (The Stubborn One) 1941, and *Tehri Lakir* (The Crooked Line) 1943. Three

popular collections of her stories are *Choten* (Wounds) 1943, *Kaliyan* (Buds) 1945 and *Chhui Mui* (Touch Me Not) 1952.

In 1944, an obscenity case was brought against her short story *Lihaf*, which describes (somewhat unsympathetically) two women who find sexual release with each other under a ‘quilt’, which is a metaphor for society’s blindness to women’s physical needs. She took the accusation with great courage, spending time in Lucknow with her husband and the writer Sadat Hasan Manto during the trial. Desperate to indict her, a hardliner alleged that the line ‘She was collecting *ashiqs* (lovers)’ was obscene, at which the judge pointedly asked, ‘Which word is obscene; “collecting” or “*ashiqs*”?’ Ismat was confident of winning and sure enough, under examination, the case against her began to crumble. She was exonerated and, paradoxically, became even more famous because of the case.

In 1976, she received Padam Shree . She is remembered as a frank writer, to quote her, “When I started writing, there was a trend -- writing romantic things or writing like a Progressive. When I started to write, people were very shocked because I wrote very frankly [...] I didn’t write what you’d call ‘literarily.’ I wrote and do write as I speak, in a very simple language, not the literary language.”

## J

### **J. JAYALALITHA (1948–2016)**

She was one of India's most influential and charismatic political leaders. Widely revered in Tamil Nadu as *Amma* (Mother) and *Puratchi Thalaivi* (Revolutionary Leader), she left a legacy in both cinema and politics.

Born in Mandya district, Karnataka, Jayalalithaa lost her father at a young age and was raised by her mother, Sandhya, who was an actress. Academically gifted, she studied at Bishop Cotton Girls' School in Bangalore and Church Park Convent in Chennai. Despite her scholarly brilliance and interest in law, she was drawn to cinema at her mother's urging to support the family.

Jayalalithaa was fluent in multiple languages and trained in classical dance and music. She debuted as an actress at age 16 in the Kannada film *Chinnada Gombe* (1964) and quickly rose to fame in Tamil cinema. She starred in over 140 films, often alongside the legendary actor M.G. Ramachandran (MGR). Their on-screen partnership was hugely popular and cemented her star status.

Her transition from film to politics was dramatic and significant. Encouraged by MGR, the founder of the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), Jayalalithaa joined the party in 1982. After MGR's death in 1987, the AIADMK split, but Jayalalithaa quickly consolidated her position as the undisputed leader of her faction. She became Tamil Nadu's first woman Leader of the Opposition in 1989 and went on to serve six terms as Chief Minister between 1991 and 2016.

Jayalalithaa's tenure was marked by a mix of populist welfare schemes and strong leadership. Her government launched many

innovative programs, such as the Cradle Baby Scheme to prevent female infanticide, Amma Canteens offering subsidized food, and Amma Pharmacies. These initiatives earned her immense popularity among the poor and middle classes.

However, her career was also marred by controversy and legal battles. She faced several charges of corruption and was even convicted in a disproportionate assets case, which temporarily barred her from office. Despite this, her popularity remained undiminished. Whenever she was ousted from power, she staged strong comebacks, highlighting her remarkable political resilience.

Jayalalithaa was known for her authoritarian style of governance and cult of personality. Admirers revered her with fervour, often comparing her to a goddess. She was a shrewd strategist who maintained tight control over her party and government while cultivating a carefully crafted public image.

Jayalalithaa's death in December 2016 marked the end of an era in Tamil Nadu politics. Her passing plunged AIADMK into internal conflict and left a void in the state's political landscape. Despite her controversies, she is remembered as one of Tamil Nadu's tallest leaders—an actress who became a formidable politician, a woman who broke barriers in a male-dominated field, and a figure who left a lasting imprint on the state's history and Indian politics.

As a film personality, she won the Tamil Nadu State Film Awards and three Filmfare Awards South. In 1972, she was awarded the Kalaimamani by the Government of Tamil Nadu. She received several honorary doctorates and other honours; including a D.Litt from the University of Madras and an Honorary Doctorate from Mother Teresa Women's University in 1991. She was recognized as Best Chief Minister (2004) in a nationwide poll by India Today, named CNN-IBN Indian of the Year – Politics (2015) for her strong leadership. A biopic film based on her life, *Thalaivii* (transl. Female leader), with Kangana Ranaut, in a lead role, was made in 2021.

A memorial was built for her in 2021 at a cost of ₹500 million. The Jayalalithaa Memorial, also known as the Amma Memorial, is shaped like a phoenix, symbolizing her enduring legacy and resilience.

## JADDAN BAI (1892–1949)

Jaddan Bai of Allahabad was an accomplished singer of the *tawaif* school and was also the mother of Nargis Dutt (q.v.). She was born and brought up in the village of Chilbila, in Meja near Allahabad. Rumours abounded about her origins; she was the daughter of the most famous kothewali of Allahabad, Daleepabai, and her father was rumoured to have been Motilal Nehru; certainly, the industrialist supported her financially. Her beauty and singing were greatly admired. Once she sang in Calcutta, to the delight of K.L. Saigal, who heard her. Present at the same soiree was a Punjabi businessman called Uttamchand Mohanchand. So smitten was he with her and her singing that he persuaded her to become his wife, even converting to Islam and taking the name Abdul Rashid for her. She already had two sons, Akhtar Hussein and Anwar Hussein (nothing is known of her first partner), and with Mohan Babu as her new husband, she now became the mother of Nargis. Typically, rumours of someone else having been the father circulated. She moved from Kolkata to Mumbai in the mid-1930s, the better to pursue her career in films.

K.L. Saigal developed a great regard for Jaddan Bai and helped her become an actor, music director and producer as well as a singer. He particularly appreciated the classical foundations of her thumri singing and the mellowness of her delivery. Having launched Nargis in her career as a child artiste, Jaddan Bai named her new production house Nargis Art Concern and used it to get work for her director sons. The first film she financed was her son Akhtar Hussein's *Romeo and Juliet*.

## JAHAN ARA (1614–1681)

Jahan Ara was the daughter of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal (q.v.). She was an accomplished writer and scholar, but her life was clouded by the tragedy that overtook the sons of Shah Jahan. She shared with her brother, Dara Shikoh, a deep sense of mystic insight and a devotion to the Chishtiya saints. She wrote a collection of essays on the lives of the Chishtis called *Munis al-Arwah* (The Companion of Souls) and added a beautiful hall to the Chishti shrine at Ajmer. On her thirty-first birthday, which was celebrated with great ceremony, her clothes happened to catch fire and she was badly burnt. She never married but looked after Dara Shikoh's children and even arranged the marriage of one of his daughters as if she were her own.

When the brothers fell out, her sympathy was of course, with Dara Shikoh, and she pleaded for his life with Aurangzeb, but in vain. Shah Jahan was shut up in Agra Fort, and though Aurangzeb treated her kindly, granting her an estate and a handsome annuity, she shunned the court, preferring to share her father's exile. After her death, she wished to donate her fortune to the Ajmer shrine, but Aurangzeb permitted only a-third of it to go to the shrine, since, he argued, according to Islamic law, a bequest could not be more than one third of one's estate. Like her father, Jahan Ara was a great builder and layer-out of gardens, leaving us the Jami Masjid at Agra and the mosque of Mulla Nadakshi in Kashmir. She is buried in a latticework enclosure of her own design at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya shrine at Delhi, and as she wished, only grass covers her grave.

## JAHNAVI (16TH CENTURY)

Jahnavi was a Vaishnav spiritual leader and the wife of Nityananda. During the reign of the Palas in Eastern India, there had been a tradition of women teachers and sages of Buddhism, but the Muslim invasions and the influence checked that trend. With the revival of Vaishnavism, women once again took to the road for religion. Chaitanya placed Radha above Krishna in the Vaishnava pantheon, thus paving the way for women to take part in religion. One such woman was Jahnavi, junior wife of Nityananda, one of Chaitanya's spiritual successors. She was well read in the Bhagavat Purana and other Vaishnava texts. She had, moreover, the personality to impose her will on the naturally anarchic sect. She contacted the *Goswamins* [Vaishnava spiritual leaders] of Vrindavan, thus connecting Bengal with the fountainhead of Vaishnavism. This tended to suppress local characteristics that had begun to develop exclusively in Bengal, but it made for a greater unity and a sense of mission among the Vaishnavas.

## JAMUNA BARUAH (1919–2005)

Jamuna Baruah was an actor. She was born Jamuna Gupta, the fourth of the six daughters of Puran Gupta, near Agra, but came to live in Calcutta. She became involved in films, doing a small role in *Mohabbat Ki Kasauti* (1934). The director of this film was Pramathesh Barua, brother of Nihar Barua (q.v.). Their acquaintance quickly turned into romance, and they married, although Barua had been married twice before. She had her first major role in her husband's famous *Devdas* in 1936, playing Parvati or Paro to his Devdas. She went on to make a number of movies in Assamese, Bengali and Hindi, notably *Grihadaha* (1936), *Maya* (1936), *Adhikar* (1939), *Uttarayan* (1941), *Shesh Uttar* (1942), *Chander Kalanka* (1944). All of these were directed by Barua,

but she also did a number of films without him, notably *Debar* (1943) and *Nilanguriya* (1943). She stopped acting after Barua died in 1950. Her three sons by Barua were all minors at the time, and the Gauripur estate refused to grant them their share of the property. She went to court and fought for her children's rights, eventually being allowed to keep the house with its vast lands.

## JANABAI (1298–1350)

Janabai was a member of the Varkari sect of poets and saints. This sect was one of the most influential in central Maharashtra and was opposed to caste distinctions and social inequities. As with many other luminaries of the sect, like Tukaram and Jnaneshwar, Janabai belonged to a low caste. At the age of seven, she was given into domestic bondage as a *dasi* in the house of the father of the famous saint Namdev. Namdev too spoke out on behalf of the downtrodden and the oppressed and fought against the unjust treatment of lower castes by high caste rulers. Yet, in his father's house, Janabai still had to work long hours at gruelling domestic tasks. Her poems capture the sense of the drudgery of her life and her resentment at the restrictions she lived under. In one of her poems, she imagines herself taking to the open road, a woman singer laughing at the restrictions of patriarchy; in others, she imagines the god Vithoba as her invisible assistant, her companion in her menial routine. Some lines from a poem of hers:

Won over by devotion  
 The Lord does lowly chores!  
 Says Jani to Vithoba,  
 How shall I pay your debt?

## **E.K. JANAKI AMMAL (1897–1984)**

Edavaaleth Kakkat Janaki Ammal was a path-breaking botanist and geneticist who studied the hybridization of Himalayan plants. She studied the genetic makeup of plants at a time when the discipline had barely been invented and made pioneering contributions to our understanding of how plants cross-breed in the wild. She is renowned for her work in phytobiology, evolution studies, ethnobotany and phytogeography.

She was born at Tellicherry in Kerala. Her father was a sub-judge in the then Madras Presidency. She grew up in Tellicherry, then went to Madras to join Queen Mary's College. In 1921, she got an honours degree in botany from Presidency College and began to teach at Women's Christian College. In 1925, she went to the University of Michigan in the US as a Barbour scholar and obtained a master's degree there. She returned to Michigan again in 1931 to get a D.Sc. On returning, she taught from 1932 to 1934 as Professor of Botany at the Maharaja's College of Science, Trivandrum. She left to join the Sugarcane Breeding Institute, Coimbatore, where since the 1890s, the scientists C.A. Barber and T.S. Venkataraman had been producing crossbred strains that were drought-resistant and disease-resistant strains of sugarcane under the Co brand name. There she specialized in cytology or the study of the structure and functions of the cell, as well as experimenting with sugarcane hybridization and creating several new hybrids of sugarcane strains with other species such as sorghum.

In 1939, she left for Britain, where she spent the war years working at the John Innes Horticultural Institution in London, where she studied European plants. In 1945, she co-wrote *The Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants* with C.D. Darlington. In this work, she set out her findings on plant polyploidy and its implications for hybridization. After the war, till 1951, she worked as a cytologist at the Royal Horticultural Society at Wisley. But Jawaharlal Nehru was looking for qualified people to set up the institutions of the new India, and appealed to her

to return and rebuild the Botanical Society of India, which was losing personnel after the exodus of the British. She heeded his appeal and reorganized the BSI, then headed the Central Botanical Laboratory at Allahabad. She was an officer on special duty at the Regional Research Laboratory at Jammu, where her interest in mountain flora began. She did comparative studies of different regions of the Himalayas and showed how Chinese, Burmese and Malaysian strains of plants had mixed there. She even spent some time at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. She continued in government service till 1970, when she became Professor Emerita at the Centre for Advanced Study in Botany at the University of Madras. There, she continued to research and publish. Her work ranged over many areas of interest, from garden plants to the food species of tribals.

She was a Founder Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences in 1935 when the institution was set up by C.V. Raman. In 1956, the University of Michigan conferred an honorary LL.D. on her, and in 1957, she was awarded the Padma Shri and made a Fellow of the Indian National Academy of Sciences. In 1999, the E.K. Janaki Ammal Taxonomy Award was instituted in her name, and the first award was given in 2000. The herbarium at the Regional Research Laboratory, Jammu, where she worked, is now named after her.

## **JANKI BAI ALLAHABADI (1880–1934)**

Janki Bai of Allahabad was a Hindustani classical singer and courtesan of great fame. Her parentage is rumoured to have been Muslim, but the name by which she was known was Hindu. She was known as *chhappan chhuri* (fifty-six knives) because, as a novice, she was stabbed fifty-six times by miscreants who wanted her to sing for them. It is not known exactly when or where this happened, but some sources say it was in Benares, where she was on her way to the

house of a notable to sing. Other accounts describe the incident as happening in Allahabad in a house by the Grand Trunk Road. Her guru was Moinuddin Khan. Her fans affectionately called her Bulbul. She excelled in thumri and trained many women singers in the art form. Every Dussera, she would visit the mehfil of the Maharaja of Bettiah to sing for the occasion. She was also a regular performer for the Nawab of Patiala. The Rani of Jaunpur used to visit Allahabad every January to hear her sing.

## **JENNIFER KENDAL KAPOOR (1933–1984)**

Jennifer Kendal was born in Southport, UK, to a family of actors. Her father, Geoffrey Kendall, and mother, Laura Liddell, spent many years touring India with Shakespeareana, a travelling theatre group, mainly performing Shakespeare. Her younger sister Felicity also became an actor. The story of the Kendals is told in the book and film (1965) *Shakespeare Wallah*, starring Jennifer, Felicity, Jennifer's husband Shashi Kapoor and other members of the Kendal and Kapoor families.

Jennifer met Shashi Kapoor, son of Prithviraj Kapoor and brother of Raj and Shammi Kapoor, when he was touring India with the Prithvi Theatre, as she was with Shakespeareana, they met in Calcutta in 1956. Shashi Kapoor was then 18 and Jennifer 22; he was captivated watching her play Miranda in *The Tempest*. Shashi managed to persuade his parents to accept Jennifer, but for Geoffrey Kendall, the loss of his daughter also meant the exit of his heroine and manager. The couple had to wait two years before they could be together, during which Shashi toured with Shakespeareana. In 1958, when he asked again, he was refused, but Jennifer went ahead with the marriage anyway. She and her husband worked with Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai, and also starred together in a number of films. She appeared in *Bombay Talkies*, 36

*Chowringhee Lane, Ghare Baire, The Far Pavilions, and Heat and Dust.* Of their three children, Sanjana Kapoor and Kunal Kapoor went into films, while son Karan, after a brief stint in television, is now a photographer. Jennifer died from cancer in 1984.

## **JHALKARI BAI (1830–1890)**

Jhalkari Bai was a lieutenant of Lakshmibai of Jhansi (q.v.) and helped her in her campaign against the British. She was a Dalit girl from a poor family in a village near Jhansi. Legend has it that she encountered a tiger while collecting firewood in the jungle and killed it with her axe. She married a man called Pooran Kori, who was a soldier in the Jhansi army, and through this connection, she was introduced to the palace. Her bravery and spirit came to the notice of Lakshmibai, who took her in and trained her for the Durga Dal, or elite troupe of women soldiers who aided Lakshmibai in her campaigns. Many of the women of the Durga Dal, such as Mandar, Sundari Bai, Mundari Bai and Moti Bai, became famous in their own right and celebrated in the folk songs and *rasos* of the region. These women, mostly from surrounding villages, were trained in swordfighting, horsemanship, and the use of artillery and firearms. Jhalkari Bai had a striking physical resemblance to Lakshmibai. When the fall of Jhansi was imminent, this gave Lakshmibai an idea. Lakshmibai escaped from the fort and fled in secret to Kalpi, while Jhalkari Bai dressed up in her clothes and conducted the final campaign. Her husband was killed in the final offensive, and she was captured and forced to surrender in May 1858. She conducted herself like a queen, and General Hugh Rose was delighted to have captured the dreaded Lakshmibai. When Rose asked her what should be done with her, she is said to have shouted, ‘Hang me!’ Rose was deeply impressed with her bravery, but on prolonged questioning, he began to doubt her identity. Finally, he realized he

had been duped, but by then he was so impressed with her that he let Jhalkari Bai go.

Jhalkari Bai's story has provided material for many poems and books. Brinadban Lal Verma's 1975 novel, *Jhansi ki Rani*, is the prime source for material on her for later works. These include a ballad called *Virangana Jhalkari* by Biharilal Harit (1995), and a play titled *Jhalkari Bai Natak* (1990) by Mata Prasad, Dalit scholar and Governor of Arunachal Pradesh.

## JIJABAI (1594–1674)

Jijabai was a woman of high birth and the mother of Shivaji. She was the daughter of a powerful landowning family. Her father was a noble of the court of Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar. She was married to Shahaji, a feudatory of Nizam Shah and holder of the estates of Poona and Supa. Some years after her marriage, her father Lakhaji Jadhavrao crossed over to the Mughal camp, while Shahaji remained a loyal follower of Nizam Shah. Shahaji suffered a series of reverses in the ensuing war, and when he finally had to flee before the forces of Jadhavrao, Jijabai was pregnant with his son, the future Shivaji. Shahaji left her behind, trusting that her father would treat her kindly.

Her father invited her to his fortress, but she preferred to stay at the fort of Shivneri. There she meditated on the state of the Maratha country, as it trembled with the repeated shocks of attack and counterattack between the Mughals and the resistance. She prayed fervently to the guardian goddess of the fort, Shivai, that her son would do something to end the wars. In due course, Shivaji was born and named after the fort's presiding spirit.

Shahaji had meanwhile become Chief Minister to Ali Adil Shah of Bijapur. Shivaji stayed with his mother, who managed the *jagir* of

Poona on her own. He learned the rudiments of administration from her and was fired with the desire to free his land from the Mughals. It was Jijabai who celebrated Shivaji's victory over the Mughal general Afzal Khan in song. Once, defeating him in chess, she demanded that he free the fort of Kondana as forfeit. When Shivaji left Poona to organise the resistance, she stayed behind to manage the estate. Her influence made Shivaji instruct his men always to respect women, whoever they may be. Jijabai was also free of the caste fastidiousness of many of her compatriots; she gave her own granddaughter, Sakhubai, in marriage to Bajaji Nimbhalkar, who had once been a Muslim.

## **JIND KAUR (1817–1863)**

Jind Kaur was a princess of the Punjab and a figure in the 1857 War against the British. She was the daughter of Sardar Manna Singh, a Jat of Chachar in the Gujranwala district of undivided Punjab. Her father was very keen to marry her off to the prince of the Punjab and pestered him constantly. At last, the old prince reluctantly agreed and sent his 'arrow and sword' to the village, symbolizing his consent. This custom stemmed from the Sikh practice of symbolic marriage, originally a measure against sati. Jind Kaur became the last and seventeenth wife of Ranjit Singh and became his only surviving widow and guardian of Duleep Singh, his minor son, in 1839. Immediately, the Punjab was thrown into a bloody war of succession. Ranjit Singh's illegitimate son Kharak Singh first succeeded him, but died within months, apparently due to poison. His successor was crushed by a falling archway. Then Jind Kaur declared herself Regent for her son in 1843 and put men close to her in high positions; this did not save them from being assassinated by rival factions. In 1845-46, in the middle of this turmoil, the British declared war on the Punjab. Jind Kaur lost, and the British deposed and banished her to a fort near Lahore. From there, she was shifted to

several locations, managed to finally escape from the fort of Chunar in Uttar Pradesh in 1849. She left a defiant note to the British, claiming to have got out ‘by my magic’. The British confiscated her jewelry and rescinded her pension, but they could do little else as the King of Nepal had given her asylum, with a palace and a pension in Kathmandu. In 1860, she was eventually permitted to see her son Duleep Singh in Calcutta, and with him she travelled to London, where she died.

## **‘JODHA BAI’ (1542–1622)**

‘Jodha Bai’ is the name under which, in modern times, the princess titled Mariam uz-Zamani Begum Sahiba has been known. She was born Rajkumari Hira Kunwari Sahiba, alias Harkha Bai or Karkha Bai, and the eldest daughter of the Raja of Amber, the Kacchwaha Rajput, Raja Bharmal. The kingdom was later known as Jaipur. She was the sister of Bhagwandas and the aunt of Man Singh I of Amber, who later became one of the ‘nine jewels’ in the court of her husband. She married the Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar in 1562, and was the mother of Emperor Nuruddin Salim Jahangir, Akbar’s heir and successor. She was Akbar’s third wife and the juniormost of his three chief queens after Ruqayya Begum and Salima Sultan. She was 22 days older than her husband. On her marriage, the princess was given the title Mariam-uz-Zamani (Mary of the Age). As a chief queen, she could issue royal orders in her own name. She built many gardens, wells and mosques around the kingdom. The mosque of Mariyam Zamani Begum stands at Lahore in her honour, while her tomb is near Akbar’s at Agra. She also owned and managed the ships that took pilgrims on the Haj pilgrimage. In 1613, her pilgrim ship the ‘Rahimi’, was seized by the Portuguese along with the passengers and cargo. In retaliation, Emperor Jahangir ordered the seizure of the Portuguese town of Daman near Goa.

No contemporary text refers to her as Jodha Bai, and the origin of this name appears to be James Tod's nineteenth-century text, *The Annals of Rajasthan*. In writing that book, Tod often relied on hearsay or bardic songs, and he sometimes did not get it right. It is possible that she was confused with her daughter-in-law. In 1586, she got her son, Prince Salim (the future Jahangir), to marry her niece, Manmati (Manbhawati Bai, also called Jagat Gosain), who became the mother of Prince Khusrau Mirza (the future Shah Jahan). It is this queen who was also known as Jodha Bai. The controversy was in the news when some Rajput organizations protested Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodha Bai* (2008) for distorting history. However, in the 1960 film *Mughal-e-Azam*, the character of Mariam-uz-Zamani, was called 'Jodha Bai' without sparking any protests.

## JOYMOTI (C. 1680)

Joymoti was the wife of Godadhor or Godapani Singha, who became the ruler of Assam. She was tortured to death by another Assamese prince, Sulikphaa (Loraa Rojaas), she would not tell him where her husband was hiding. Her son, Rudra Singha, had a lake named Joysagar dug at the spot where she was tortured. Between the death of Chakradhwaj Singha in 1670 and the accession of Gadadhar Singha in 1681, there was a period of turmoil in Assam. Then in 1679, a fourteen-year-old boy-king (Lora Raja) was set on the throne and given the title Sulikphaa, while the real power behind the throne was Laluk Sola, his counselor. During the bloody purge of the preceding years, Godapani had fled and was now in hiding. Determined to crush all possible challengers, Laluk Sola captured Joymoti and tortured her to find out where Godapani was hiding. She was severely tortured for seven days without a break and died on the seventh day. Some weeks later, Laluk was murdered, and Godapani came out of hiding. He was

crowned and took the title of Suphatphaa. His son succeeded him in 1696 and created the Joysagar lake in memory of his mother, as well as a mausoleum for her. March 27 is observed as Sati Joymati Divas in Assam. The first Assamese movie, *Joymati* was made in 1935 by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was based on the play by Lakshminath Bezbarua.

## JYOTIRMOYEE DEVI (1894–1988)

Jyotirmoyee Devi was born in the Princely State of Jaipur in 1894. Her father, Abinash Chandra Sen, was the eldest son of a Bengali family that had lived in Jaipur since 1857; his father, Sansar Chandra Sen had begun as a schoolmaster and risen to the post of Dewan to the Maharaja. Jyotirmoyee grew up in Rajasthan, receiving little formal education but observing keenly all that she saw around her. She also read extensively in her grandfather's well-stocked library. At the age of 10, she was married to a lawyer, Kiran Chandra Sen, and went to live with him in Patna. He encouraged her to read English and helped her get hold of books; they were a literary family who mixed with many of the leading figures of Bengali literature.

Yet despite this encouragement, Jyotirmoyee might never have written had she not tragically lost her husband at the end of World War I. Barely 25 with six small children, she returned to her parents' house, leaving one child with her husband's family. There she lived under the rigid rules of orthodox Hindu widowhood. Jyotirmoyee turned to literature for solace. She read John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, and this led her to think deeply on the question of women's rights. Conservative in her own behaviour, she nevertheless made it a rule always to treat her sons and daughters equally. She now began to write the trenchant, luminous Bengali short stories for which she is remembered. Set in Rajasthan, Delhi and Bengal, they are unsentimental yet deeply sympathetic. She also has non-fiction to her credit, writing

especially about the rights of women and Dalits. Her collection of short stories, *Sona Rupa Noy* (Not Gold and Silver) won the Rabindra Puraskar in 1973.

## JYOTSNA BHOLE (1914–2001)

Jyotsna Bhole was an actor and singer in early Marathi theatre and the wife of the music director Keshavrao Waman Bhole. She was born Durga Kelekar was born in 1914 in Goa and trained as a Hindustani classical vocalist. She debuted on stage as a classical singer at the age of 13. When her husband co-founded the theatre company Natyamanwantar in 1933, she acted in many of their productions, thus becoming one of the first female stage actors from the middle class to be seen on stage. Natyamanwantar was a highly intellectual group that had studied European modernist theatre in great detail and wished to reproduce it on the Marathi stage. They were heavily influenced by Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw and Konstantin Stanislavski. Later on Leela Chitnis (q.v.) also acted with this company.

Jyotsna played the heroine in their inaugural production *Andhalyanchishala* (School for the Blind) in 1933. Natyamanwantar closed down in 1935 after a glittering but short career, and she then joined M. G. Rangnekar's Natyaniketan in 1941 and played the lead character in his *Kulavadhu* (Wife of the House) in 1942, a play heavily influenced by *A Doll's House*. She became one of the most respected singer-actresses in Marathi theatre, retiring in the 1960s. She also wrote a few plays and an autobiography.

She was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi fellowship in 1977, the Vishnudas Bhave trophy in 1980, and the Lata Mangeshkar award from Maharashtra in 1995 and Goa in 1999. She was also president of the Akhil Bharatiya Natya Sammelan in 1984.

# K

## KABITA SINHA (1931–99)

Kabita Sinha was a poet in Bengali. Her poetry is innovative and startling, and her novels confront the dilemmas of women directly. She experiments with language in her works and uses words in a modern, surrealistic fashion. Born in Kolkata in 1931, she was married, while still studying botany at Presidency College, to another writer, Bimal Raychowdhury, against the wishes of her family. She was involved in dissident movements in the 1950s. She addressed issues of women's place vis-a-vis men's in poems like '*Ajiban pathar pratima*' (stone goddess, all my life) or '*Apamaner janya fire asi*' (because I crave your insults). She worked for All India Radio for many years and edited a number of magazines. She also wrote under the pseudonym Sultana Choudhury.

She began as a novelist in 1956 with *Charjon Ragi Juboti* (Four Angry Young Women). Some of her best-known novels are: *Ekti Kharap Meyer Golpo* (Tale of a Bad Woman) 1958, *Nayika Pratinayika* (Heroine, Villainess) 1960, *Paurush* (Manliness, 1984, translated as *The Third Sex*). Her collections of poems include *Sahaj Sundari* (Simple Beauty) 1965, *Kabita Parameshwari* (Poetry is the Great Goddess) 1976. Of her later works, her *Momer Tajmahal* (The Wax Taj Mahal) is noteworthy, being an account of her grandmother's life in nineteenth-century style.

## KADAMBINI GANGULY (1861–1923)

Kadambini was the first Indian woman to acquire a Bachelor of Arts degree, as well as the first woman to graduate in the field of medicine (see also Anandibai Joshi) from the Bengal Medical College. After graduation, she went to England for postgraduate study and qualified as an LRCP (Edinburgh), LRCS (Glasgow), and DFPS (Dublin). She practised at the Lady Dufferin Victoria Hospital for Women in Kolkata during the late nineteenth century.

Born in East Bengal, Kadambini was encouraged by her father to pursue higher studies. She fulfilled his dream by becoming the first successful woman candidate in the BA examination of the University of Calcutta. She then qualified as a doctor in the MBBS examination and served for five years at the Eden Hospital before going to London. After completing her studies in Britain, she returned to India and in May 1883 married Dwarkanath Ganguly, a leader of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. Dwarkanath and Kadambini both worked for the emancipation of women and to further the cause of widow remarriage. Kadambini encouraged vocational training for cottage industries in schools for girls and tried to make the young women of Bengal self-reliant.

Kadambini became the secretary of the Bengal Ladies Association. Having spoken from the Congress platform in 1889, in 1906, she was one of the organisers of the Women's Conference held in Kolkata to coincide with the session of the Indian National Congress. In 1908, she organised and presided over a meeting in Kolkata to express sympathy with Gandhi's *satyagraha* workers in South Africa. She started an association and collected money to help the workers in Transvaal. Kadambini condemned the exploitation of labourers in coalmines and in tea plantation areas, and in 1922, she went to different parts of Bihar and Orissa to probe the conditions of women workers on behalf of an enquiry commission set up by the Government.

## **KALPANA CHAWLA (1962–2003)**

Kalpana Chawla was the first Indian woman astronaut. She was born in Karnal, Haryana, in 1961, where her father was a member of the flying club, which gave her early exposure to flying. She studied aeronautical engineering in Chandigarh and got her B.Sc. degree in 1982. That year, she shifted to the US for higher studies, got a master's degree in aeronautics from the University of Texas in Arlington, and a second M.Sc. in the same subject from the University of Colorado at Boulder. While studying for her second Master's degree, she met and married Jean-Pierre Harrison. She completed her Ph.D. at Boulder in 1988, became an American citizen in 1990 and joined the NASA Ames Research Centre for a while.

She was selected by NASA in December 1994 to join the Fifteenth Group of shuttle astronauts. From March 1995, she undertook intensive training at the Johnson Space Centre, specialising in robotics. Her first mission, STS 87, came in 1997 when she was part of the team that flew Space Shuttle Columbia. On this mission, she orbited the Earth 252 times and was in charge of operating the robotic arms used for various tasks around the ship. She also carried out experiments relating to space habitability and concerning the growth of crystals and proteins in space. The main purpose of the flight was to test equipment and tools in microgravity situations for use in the International Space Station and to study the sun's atmosphere.

Her second mission was the ill-fated STS-107 aboard Space Shuttle Columbia once again, which began on 16 January 2003 after repeated delays due to faults and problems with the shuttle. This was intended as a short, intensive trip. The crew, working around the clock in shifts, completed more than 80 experiments.

The shuttle attempted to return to Earth on 1 February 2003, but a hole which had developed in the ceramic tiles on the underside of the fuselage allowed heat to reach the aluminum struts underneath, causing

a devastating mid-air disintegration sixteen minutes before landing. Space Shuttle Columbia blew up over the North American continent, scattering wreckage over a huge area and killing the seven-member crew. No bodies were found.

Kalpana was an FAA, certified flight instructor and accomplished pilot. She was also an enthusiastic ham radio operator. After her death, she was awarded the NASA Distinguished Service Medal and the Defense Distinguished Service Medal. She is a role model for young people all over the world, especially in India. Asteroid number 51826 was named Kalpanachawla after her. A series of meteorological satellites launched by India has also been named Kalpana in her honour.

## **KALPANA JOSHI NÉE DATTA (1913–1995)**

Kalpana was a militant freedom fighter. She was born in Chittagong to a middle-class Kayastha family. Her uncle was a physician with great influence in the town, and from him she got her first exposure to the wider issues of politics and freedom. She matriculated in 1929, came to Kolkata and joined Bethune College. There she came in contact with associates of the revolutionary Surya Sen. She was entrusted with the couriering of explosives to and from Kolkata, and the making of gun cotton, which she did at home under the noses of the authorities.

She was the main architect of the Dynamite Conspiracy to blow up the Court while the Special Tribunal was in session, but the plot miscarried. She was released for lack of evidence. In spite of surveillance, she managed to continue meeting Surya Sen and his group at dead of night. She and Preetilata Waddedar (q.v.) practised shooting with revolvers together. They were supposed to attack the European Club, but Kalpana was arrested a week before the event. In jail, she heard of Preetilata's heroic sacrifice. Later, she escaped from the police several times, only to be captured in 1933 and sentenced to

transportation for life. A year after her release in 1939, she graduated from Calcutta University. Subsequently, she joined the Communist Party of India.

## **KAMAL RANADIVE (1917–2001)**

Kamal Ranadive was a biomedical researcher who studied the link between cancer and viruses. She was born Kamal Samarth to a well-educated family; her father was a professor of biology at Fergusson College. She went to the famous Huzoor Page school in Pune, then studied botany at Fergusson College. She then did a postgraduate degree at the Agricultural College. She married J.T. Ranadive and moved to Bombay. At the Tata Memorial Hospital, she met V.R. Khanolkar, an expert pathologist who founded the Indian Cancer Research Centre. He was to be her Ph.D. guide. She did a post-doctoral programme study at Johns Hopkins University, then returned to India to work at the ICRC, where she began to study tissue cultures. She built up a strong team and encouraged them to work independently as well as with her. She developed a strain of mice with super-resistance to cancer for use as a model for experimental work on the cytology of various cancers. She also studied the leprosy bacillus and developed a vaccine for the dreaded disease.

She founded the Indian Women Scientist Association to further scientific awareness among women and girls. She also did outreach work in health and welfare with tribal women. She was awarded the Padma Vibhushan for her work on leprosy prevention. She also received the Watumul Foundation Award.

## KAMALA DAS GUPTA (1907–2000)

Kamala Das Gupta was a militant freedom fighter. She was born to a respectable Vaidya family of Bikrampur in Dhaka; the family later moved to Kolkata, where Kamala did her MA in history. Up to her joining the university, Kamala was a model student and daughter, but once there, a burning desire to be of use to the nation gripped her. She even tried to quit her studies and enter Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, but her parents disapproved. Finishing her education, she befriended some members of the Jugantar party and was quickly converted from her original Gandhism to the cult of armed resistance.

In 1930, she left home and became manager of a hostel for poor women. There she stored bombs and bomb-making materials for the revolutionaries. She was arrested several times in connection with bombings but always released for want of evidence. She supplied Bina Das (q.v.) with the revolver that she used to try to shoot the Governor Jackson in 1932, and was arrested also on that occasion, but was released. In 1933, the British finally succeeded in putting her behind bars. There she stayed till 1936, and subsequently was placed under house arrest. In 1938 the Jugantar Party aligned itself with the Indian National Congress, and Kamala also transferred her allegiance to the larger party. Thenceforth, she became involved in relief work, especially with the Burmese refugees of 1942 and 1943, and in 1946–47, with the victims of communal rioting. She was in charge of the relief camp at Noakhali that Gandhiji visited in 1946. She also worked for women's vocational training at the Congress Mahila Shilpa Kendra and the Dakshineswar Nari Swabalambi Sadan. She edited the pathbreaking women's journal *Mandira* for many years. She authored two memoirs in Bengali, *Rakter Akshare* (In Letters of Blood, 1954) and *Swadhinata Sangrame Nari* (Women in the Freedom Struggle, 1963).

## KAMALA DAS (1934–2009)

Kamala Das was a poet and journalist. She was born in March 1934 in Thrissur district, Kerala. Her father, V.M. Nair, had edited the famous Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi*. At the time of her birth, he was a corporate executive with the Walford Transport Company in Calcutta, selling high-end imported vehicles to rich patrons. Her mother, Nalappatta Balamani Amma, was a well-known poet, as was her great-uncle, Nalappatta Narayana Menon.

Kamala Das grew up in Calcutta and Kerala. She was schooled at home, married at 15 to K. Madhava Das and had her first child the following year. Her eldest son is married to a princess of Travancore. Her husband encouraged her to write. In her interview with Shobha Warrier, she gave him credit for taking pride in her work. But writing was still hard as she had to do all the housework and could only write late at night after the children had fallen asleep. Her collections of poems include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1970) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). However, the sharp reactions to her frankness in poetry and the need to make money, led her to turn to prose and journalism. She also wrote short stories and novels in Malayalam under the name Madhavikutty. Her novels *Palayam* and *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam* were well received. She was poetry editor for the *Illustrated Weekly*. Her childhood memoirs, originally published in Malayalam, were brought together in two volumes in English translation and published by Penguin as *A Childhood in Malabar*.

Her autobiography, *My Story*, was published in 1976. Its frankness about her sexual and emotional experiences shocked many readers, although others found fault with it and regarded the self she revealed as too sentimental and weepy. In 1984, she stood for election to Parliament but did not win. In 1999, she converted to Islam and took the name Suraiyya, apparently because she was at that time in a relationship with a Muslim man. When the relationship ended, she also became

disenchanted with religion. Her independence of mind and originality made her a striking if not always easily understood figure.

## **KAMALA DEVI (C. 1297)**

Kamala Devi was queen to Rai Karan Baghela of Gujarat. When Sultan Ala-ud-din Khilji of Delhi invaded Gujarat, he kidnapped her and took her to Delhi, leaving behind her six-month-old daughter, Devala Devi. Some time later, in 1297, Kamala Devi married Ala-ud-din Khilji, the first recorded marriage between a Hindu princess and a Muslim ruler. Meanwhile, Baghela had fled from Gujarat with his children, and Devala Devi's elder sister had been killed on the journey, though she herself was unhurt.

With Gujarat overrun and the marble city of Patan destroyed, Baghela had to take refuge with a neighbouring Yadava king, who gave him a small principality to rule. There, Devala Devi grew up. The son of the Yadava king became infatuated with her and asked to marry her. The Baghelas considered themselves superior to the Yadavas and did not wish to grant the request. In the midst of this dilemma, in 1308, Ala-ud-din Khilji sent his army to the Yadavas to demand the tribute on which they had defaulted. Kamala Devi is said to have pined for her daughter and asked the Sultan to order that Devala be captured and brought to her in Delhi. Khilji's general Malik Kafur was given orders to seize her. Her father managed to hold them off with difficulty. Baghela asked for assistance from the Yadavas, who agreed, provided he allowed Devala's marriage to the prince. He agreed, and the junior Yadava prince came to escort her to Devagiri with a small force. Malik Kafur came upon the party quite by accident and captured the princess near the Ellora caves in 1303. He took her to Delhi, where she was married to Ala-ud-din's son Khizr Khan.

## KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAY (1903–1988)

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a theatre and film actress as well as a campaigner for the uplift of handicraft workers. She was born in Mangalore on 3 April 1903 to a well-to-do Saraswat family. Her father was the District Collector, and her mother, Girijabai, from whom she inherited an independent streak, came from one of the wealthiest families in Karnataka. The household was a progressive one, and her parents' friends included many important freedom fighters and intellectuals such as M.G. Ranade, Gopalakrishna Gokhale, and Annie Besant. Her early exposure to *swadeshi* thought meshed with her feminist agenda, and she became concerned about how Western methods of factory-based mass production were affecting traditional artisans, especially women.

Widowed at sixteen while she was still at school, she nevertheless went on the stage, an activity quite unsuitable for women from respectable families at the time. She then married the poet-playwright Harindranath Chattopadhyay, brother of Sarojini Naidu, in 1920, and even acted in two silent films. A few months later, she and Harindranath went to London, where she enrolled in Bedford College to study sociology. However, word of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement brought them back to India in 1923, and she joined the Seva Dal, training women as *sevikas* across the country. In 1926, she met Margaret Cousins, and she was inspired to run for a seat in the Madras Provincial Legislative Assembly. She lost by only 200 votes. In the 1930s, she was arrested for invading the Bombay Stock Exchange to sell packets of contraband salt and spent almost a year in prison. In 1936, she became president of the Congress Socialist Party, working alongside Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and Minoo Masani. For her, feminism was inseparable from socialism, and where necessary she opposed her own colleagues when they ignored or infringed women's rights. For instance, when Mahatma Gandhi opposed the inclusion of women in the Dandi march (claiming that

Englishmen would not hurt women, just as Hindus would not harm cows), Kamaladevi spoke out against this stand. Some time in the 1920s, she and Harindranath separated.

When World War II broke out, she was in England and immediately began a world tour to represent India's situation to other countries and drum up support for Independence after the war. However, Independence brought Partition in its wake, and she threw herself into working for the refugees. Her first task was to set up the Indian Cooperative Union to help with rehabilitation. She insisted on setting up a township on cooperative lines, for which Mahatma Gandhi reluctantly assented on the condition that she did not ask for state assistance, and after much struggle, the township of Faridabad on the outskirts of Delhi was founded by 30,000 Pathans from the Northwest Frontier.

In her eyes, theatre was a living art that drew its energy from the people and to preserve the folk traditions in the performing arts, she set up a theatre crafts museum in Delhi. She also set up the National School of Drama in Delhi, and later headed the Sangeet Natak Akademi. She saw no difference between arts and crafts and founded several awards for master craftsmen. The culmination of this enterprise was the setting up of the All-India Handicrafts Board.

She was recognized with the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1966, the World Crafts Council award, UNESCO recognition, and received Padam Bhushan in 1955 and Padma Vibhushan in 1987.

## **KAMALA MARKANDAYA (1924–2004)**

Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor. She was a well-known novelist and journalist. She was born Kamala Purnaiya was born into a Hindu Brahmin family in a small

town in the Princely State of Mysore, She studied history at Madras University, graduating in 1940. She served briefly with the army during World War II. Till 1947, she worked as a journalist and also published several short stories in newspapers. After India declared its independence, Markandaya married a fellow journalist, an Englishman named Bertrand Taylor and moved to Britain, though she still labeled herself an Indian expatriate. They had one daughter.

Kamala's first published novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, was a bestseller and named a notable book of 1955 by the American Library Association. She published ten novels in total: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), and *Pleasure City* (1982). *Nectar in a Sieve* was translated into more than a dozen languages and remains her most well-known work. *Some Inner Fury* is a semi-autobiographical story of a young woman in love with an Englishman during the War of Independence. *The Nowhere Man* was one of the first novels to treat the theme of the Indian diaspora. Set in 1968, it documents the discrimination faced by immigrants in Britain with merciless accuracy.

## **KAMLA CHAUDHRY (1908–1970)**

Kamla Chaudhary was an active participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Elected to the Constituent Assembly from Uttar Pradesh, she later served as a Member of the Provisional Parliament and Lok Sabha. Chaudhary was also known for her fiction writing and commitment to nationalist causes.

Born on 22 February 1908 in Lucknow to Rai Manmohan Dayal, then deputy collector. Despite her family's loyalty to the British Raj, she joined the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, and was

imprisoned multiple times, and became a committed member of the Indian National Congress.

She was a Member of the Provisional Parliament (1947 to 1952) and acted as the Senior Vice-Chair of the 54th Indian National Congress Session. She entered the Lok Sabha in 1962 after winning from Hapur District in Uttar Pradesh. Kamla Chowdhry actively worked towards educating girls in villages and backward areas. She encouraged the Khadi and Village industries, which she felt had the potential to provide employment for young women.

An acclaimed Hindi short story writer, her collections include *Unmaad* (1934), *Picnic* (1936), *Yatra* (1947), *Bel Patra*, among others. Her fiction often explored gender discrimination, peasant exploitation, and widowhood, with a strong feminist viewpoint.

## **KAMALA SOHONIE (1911–1998)**

Kamala Sohonie was a biochemist. She was born Kamala Bhagwat and graduated from Bombay University in chemistry in 1933, topping the university merit list. However, C.V. Raman, the renowned physicist, denied her admission to a postgraduate course in chemistry at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) on the grounds that she was a woman. When Sohonie confronted him, he reluctantly agreed to take her on probation; he did not believe she could do research and felt she would disturb the male scientists. At the age of 82, she recounted this incident to the members of the Indian Women Scientists' Association (IWSA) who had gathered to felicitate her at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) in 1997. 'Though Raman was a great scientist, he was very narrow-minded. Other women such as Anna Mani (q.v.) and K. Sunanda Bai also faced prejudice and hostility from him.

Kamala recounted to the members of the IWSA, ‘I can never forget the way [Raman] treated me just because I was a woman.’ She completed her course with distinction and was admitted to Cambridge University for doctoral research in 1936, where she worked under the Nobel laureate Fredrick Hopkins and went on to make one of the fundamental discoveries in plant biochemistry: that all plants have a common protein binding mechanism. This made her the first Indian woman to get a doctorate in science. She returned to India and set up the biochemistry department at Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi. Later, she became the assistant director of Nutritional Research Laboratory at Coonoor. Her last assignment was to set up the biochemistry department at the Institute of Science in Mumbai, after which she became the director of the Institute. She headed it for the next two decades. However, the early discrimination she had faced continued to rankle in her mind, and it was only late in life that she got the recognition she deserved.

## **KAMINI ROY (1864–1933)**

Kamini Roy was a poet, teacher and writer. She was the daughter of the poet Chandi Charan Sen, and was taught by him at home, learning lessons he set for her from his collection of books, until she was old enough to use his library. She was a mathematical prodigy but gave it up to study Sanskrit, becoming the first woman to graduate with honours in 1886 from Bethune College, where she was a contemporary of Lady Abala Bose (q.v.). That year, she became a teacher, and she published her first collection of verse, *Alo o Chhaya*, in 1889. She wrote for five more years, till she married at the late age of 30, publishing two more collections. She laid down her pen on marriage and, when asked why she no longer wrote, pointed to her children and said, ‘Why, are these not my living poems?’ However, she was widowed in 1909 and lost

her eldest son, a few years later. Once again, she turned to writing; her last major collection, *Malya o Nirmalya*, was published in 1913. She was a member of the Female Labour Investigation Commission in 1922–23.

Her writing is simple and plangent, in contrast to the lush style that was the fashion in those days under the all-encompassing light of Rabindranath's great genius, and perhaps that is why she never received much recognition in her lifetime. She was the president of the Bengali Literary Conference in 1930 and vice-president of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1932–33. She spent her later years living in Hazaribagh.

## **KANAKLATA BARUA (1926–1942)**

Kanaklata Barua was a freedom fighter and martyr. Her parents were Krishna Kanta Barua and Karneshwari Barua of Barangabari in Assam. Her grandfather, Ghana Kanta Barua, was famous for his hunting skills and was called Gahana Chikari or Ghana the Hunter. She lost her mother at the age of five; her father remarried, but she lost him also when she was thirteen. She was able to go to school up to class 3, but then had to drop out and look after her younger brothers and sisters. In 1942, when the Non-Cooperation Movement was at its height, Kanaklata was in Tezpur. A huge camp for revolutionaries had been set up there. Kanaklata joined it and became involved with the setting up of the secret Death Squads (Mrityu Bahini). On 20 September 1942, just a few months short of her eighteenth birthday, she completed her housework and left as if on a routine social visit, but in actual fact, she joined the column of protesters with a tricolour flag in her hand. She was shot in the chest while trying to hoist the national flag at the Gohpur police station as part of the Death Squad programme. She died instantly. Kanaklata immediately became an icon for the freedom fighters of India.

## KANAN DEVI (1916–1992)

Kanan Devi was an early silent film actor, and one of the first playback singers. She was born Kamala Dasi in Howrah, apparently an illegitimate child, and very poor. She made her debut at the age of ten in *Joydeb* (1926) for Jyoti Studios. Her name was changed to Kanan Bala. She worked for Radha Films under Jyotish Banerjee and had a moderate success with *Khooni Kaun* and *Maa* (1934), after which she shifted to New Theatre Studios, where she was trained in all aspects of acting by Raichand Boral and P.C. Barua. She also learned singing under Ustad Allah Rakha and Bhishmadev Chatterjee, and once again she was renamed Kanan Devi. She later studied Rabindrasangeet under Anadi Dastidar. She offered outstanding performances in films like *Mukti* (1937), directed by P.C. Barua and *Sapurey* with eminent co-stars such as Pahari Sanyal. After she withdrew from the New Theatre in 1941, she formed her own production unit, specializing in the stories of Sarat Chandra and churning out one success after another, including *Hospital* (1943), *Banphool* (1945), and *Rajlakshmi* (1946).

She moved to Bombay in 1948, which was the year of the last film she acted in, *Chandrashekhar*. After this, she mainly produced films. She was also the founder of an association of female stars, the Mahila Shilpa Mahal, perhaps the first of its kind in India. Along with a D.Litt. from Rabindra Bharati University, she was honoured with the Padma Shri and the Dada Saheb Phalke Award by the Government of India. Her first husband was Ashok Maitra, but this ended in divorce. Her second was Haridas Bhattacharya, with whom she had her only child, a son, Siddhartha Bhattacharya. She was awarded the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1976.

## KARAIKKAL AMMAIYAR (FIFTH CENTURY)

Karaikkal Ammaiyar or the ‘great mother of Karaikkal’, was a poet and mystic. Her real name was Punitavati. She was the earliest saint-poet of the *bhakti* tradition.

Little is known of the facts of her life, but it is known that she came from a rich Vaishya family, and that Karaikkal was the home of her husband’s family. The story of how she renounced the world and became a poet is obscured in legend. It is said that her husband left her two mangoes, one of which she offered in his absence to a doctor. On his return, her husband demanded that both be served to him. She had only the remainder, so she prayed to the god Shiva, and another mango miraculously appeared in the cupboard. This tasted so sweet that her husband was convinced it could not be the one he had brought, so he demanded to know where she had gotten it. When he found out, he was overwhelmed with awe. Realising that his wife was no ordinary woman, he fled the house and immigrated to the Pandya country. There, he took a second wife, by whom he had a daughter, whom he named Punitavati after his first wife. Ammaiyar followed him and pleaded with him and his new family to let her stay, but they prostrated themselves before her and worshipped her as a goddess. Thus rejected, Ammaiyar left home and totally dedicated herself to Shiva, practicing her devotion in the seclusion of the forest and finally obtaining grace. According to tradition, Shiva granted her two boons – one was that she would lose her beauty and become hideous, so that men would not molest her; the other was that she might witness his celestial dance in person. In iconography, she is depicted as a female demon with long, unkempt hair like the goddess Chamunda.

Although only four of her compositions have come down to us, other great Shaiva poet-devotees have respectfully praised her. In two of these four, she describes Shiva’s dance competition with Kali, and how she herself witnessed this celestial incident as a female ghost in the retinue of Kali. Ammaiyar’s poems vividly demonstrate her

filial devotion for Shiva, unlike the saint-poets of later years, whose devotion was erotic. She celebrates all aspects of the god, terrible and benign. The Shaiva community accepted her as a divine member of Kali's entourage, with whom Ammaiyaar naturally identified herself. Ammaiyaar chose the extreme life of a Shaiva ascetic or *kapalika* (skull bearer) in deliberate defiance of the genteel society of the rich merchants of Karaikkal. She is counted as one of the 63 saints of Shaivism, and her verses are collected in the eleventh book of Tamil Shaivism, the *Tirumurai*.

Rita Dalmiya

## **KARNAVATI, QUEEN OF CHITTOR (C. 1535)**

Rani Karnavati was a queen and temporary ruler of Chittorgarh. She was from Bundi and married to Rana Sangram Singh, known as Rana Sanga of the Sisodia dynasty of Chittorgarh, the capital of Mewar. She was the mother of the next two Ranas, Vikramjit and Uday Singh, and grandmother of Rana Pratap.

After the first Mughal emperor, Babur had captured the throne of Delhi in 1526, Rana Sanga of Mewar led a confederation of Rajput rulers against him, but they were defeated in the Battle of Khanua the following year. Rana Sanga died of his wounds, leaving Rani Karnavati, a widow and regent of Chittorgarh in the name of her elder son Vikramjit. Vikramjit attained maturity but was weak and suffered a defeat at the hands of Bahadur Shah of Gujarat. Bahadur Shah pressed on and attacked Chittorgarh itself.

Rani Karnavati appealed to the other Rajput rulers to help defend the honour of Chittorgarh. The rulers agreed, but they insisted that the princes be sent to Bundi during the war for their personal safety. Karnavati also sent a rakhi to the Mughal Emperor Humayun, offering

him the status of a brother and appealed for help. Humayun was then in the process of reducing Bengal; he abandoned the campaign to ride to her rescue. She is thus remembered every Raksha Bandhan.

Karnavati then prepared to face Bahadur Shah. At first, she tried diplomacy, offering him the spoils of Chittorgarh's defeat of Malwa. This worked initially, but Bahadur Shah returned in 1534, determined to take the fort. Realising that defeat was imminent, Karnavati and the other noble ladies of the court immolated themselves in a mass suicide by fire, while the men donned saffron clothes and went out to fight to the death. All the children were also killed except the princes, who were entrusted to Karnavati's maid Panna Dhai (q.v.), who escaped with them to safety. Humayun arrived too late to save Karnavati, though he did defeat Bahadur Shah.

## **KARNAVATI, QUEEN OF GARHWAL (1600–1650)**

Karnavati of Garhwal was the wife of Mahipat Shah, who ascended to the throne in 1622, but died young in 1631. After his death, his queen, Karnavati, ruled the kingdom on behalf of her young son, Prithvi Pat Shah. In 1638, the king of Kumaon invaded Garhwal, and in 1640, he allied with the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in an attempt to annex the small Himalayan kingdom. Rani Karnavati was having none of it. She was a formidable fighter and used a superior strategy to rout the Mughal forces and captured many of the soldiers. She earned the name 'Nakti Rani' (Nak Kati Rani or nose-cutting queen) as she cut off the noses of the invaders, a punishment normally reserved for criminals. Monuments erected by her are still to be seen in Dehra Dun. She is also thought to have built the Rajpur Canal, which carries the waters of the Rispana River to Dehra Dun. Some years later, Prithvi Pat came to the throne and ruled wisely under his mother's influence.

## KASTURBA GANDHI (1869–1944)

Kasturba Gandhi was the wife of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as the Mahatma. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence is his greatest contribution to mankind, and in this, he gave credit to the example of his wife. As he commented to John S. Hoyland, 'I learnt the lesson of non-violence from my wife when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will on one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering of all [that] my stupidity involved on the other, ultimately made me ashamed and cured me of my stupidity in thinking that I was born to rule over her; and in the end she became my teacher in non-violence.' Gandhi's mother, Putlibai, a highly pious woman, influenced the young Gandhi with her austere ways. And despite the immense intellectual gap between them, Gandhiji had to learn to respect Kasturba's opinion.

Born at Porbandar in 1869, Kasturba (Kasturi) was one of four children. Her father, Gokuldass Makanji, was an affluent merchant. She was illiterate when she was married to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi at the age of 13. He taught her to read and write, and she was a willing learner. In 1896, she went with him to Natal, South Africa. In 1901, after consulting her, Gandhiji took the vow of *brahmacharya*. She was his companion in all his experiments in India and in South Africa. To her, all his disciples were like her own children, like her sons Harilal, Manilal, Ramdas and Devdas. At the Sabarmati Ashram, she looked after the numerous guests and regularly spun *khadi*. On one occasion, she was asked either to give up her notion of untouchability or to leave the Ashram; she was enlightened enough to choose to give up untouchability. Later, she renounced all caste distinctions and adopted a Harijan girl as her own daughter. During Gandhi's experiment in village upliftment in Champaran, Kasturba immersed herself completely in the movement.

She went to prison several times, first in South Africa, later and during India's non-violent fight for freedom. Whenever Gandhiji was

arrested Kasturba plunged into the struggle, addressing meetings, collecting funds and boosting the morale of the people. In 1930 and 1932, she courted arrest by picketing shops selling liquor and foreign cloth. In 1939, she participated in the Rajkot *satyagraha* for political reforms and was detained at Tramba. In 1942, she was arrested while going to address a meeting that was held at the Aga Khan Palace detention camp in Puné. Her health deteriorated; she suffered from chronic bronchitis and contracted terminal pneumonia. As a mark of protest, she gave up all food and drink except water from the River Ganga. On 22 February 1944, she passed away in the lap of her husband, saying, 'I am going now, we have known many joys and many sorrows.' In accordance with her last wish, she was cremated in a *khadi* sari spun by her husband.

Kasturba's disappointment in life was Harilal, her eldest rebel son. Gandhi disowned him, but she could not give him up. Prior to her death, he came to meet her quite drunk, and realising that he was beyond reform, she grieved for him. She learnt to dress like a Parsi and eat with a knife and fork, as her husband wanted her to acquire English manners. Later, when he wished her to lead an austere life at the Ashram, she did that too, without fuss. A small yet elegant woman, she was straightforward and methodical. The Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust was established by Gandhi for the benefit of women living in the villages. She and Gandhi were indeed an extraordinary team. To sum up in his words: 'We were a couple outside the ordinary.'

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **KESARBAI KERKAR (1892–1977)**

Kesarbai was a Hindustani classical singer. Born in the village of Keri in Goa under the Portuguese, she is regarded as one of the founding artists of the modern genre. She began to learn music at the

age of eight under Ramkrishnabuva Vaze in Lamgaon. At the age of 16 she came to Mumbai, and after many complications, realised that only Ustad Alladiya Khan (1855-1946), the founder of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, could teach her. Unusually, she signed a contract with him in 1921, which laid out in minute detail the terms of their agreement; he was to teach her for ten years, and was to be paid a salary, and she would have to follow him to any town or city he settled in. She also studied under Bhaskarbuva Bakhale.

She was particularly known for her range, the depth, resonance and clarity of her voice and the elegant elaboration of her *gayaki*. By the 1920s, she was a well-known singer, and Rabindranath Tagore, a fan, conferred the title 'Surashree' on her in the 1930s, meaning 'ornament of music'. The refinement and classicism of her style were highly appreciated, and she sang before many of the royal houses of India, including Jaipur, Jodhpur, Kashmir and Baroda.

Although her singing was highly sought-after, she made only a few recordings in the 1950s for the HMV and Broadcast labels. A subsequent disagreement with HMV led her to withdraw her music rights from them, and she also forbade them from playing her music on All India Radio. As Goa was a Portuguese territory till 1961, Goa Radio was the only medium that she would allow to play her songs. Her methods of singing were highly unique, and therefore she was particular about how her work was represented. She felt that the booming popularity of recorded music would kill Indian classical forms. A standard classical recital was too long to be represented in full by the technologies of the day, and it depended moreover on close interaction between the singer and the audience. This was not possible through mechanical reproduction. Hence, she never embraced modern methods of recording and commercialisation. Her art remained the privilege of a few.

She was designated a Pramukh Acharya by Sangeet Natak Academy and received the Presidential Award for Hindustani Classical Music in 1953. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan and was the first

awardee of the title of Rajya Gayika by the Government of Maharashtra, both in 1969. The Surashree Kesarbai Kerkar High School now stands in place of her second home in Keri, close to the house where she was born. The Surashree Kesarbai Kerkar Smriti Sangeet Samaroha music festival is held in her honour in Goa each November. The University of Mumbai also has an annual scholarship in music in her name. Kersarbai's rendition of 'Jaat Kahan Ho' in Rag Bhairavi is on the gold-plated copper disc containing music selections from around the world, which was placed aboard the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecrafts in 1977. It was recommended to NASA by the ethnomusicologist Robert E. Brown.

## KHANUM JAN (C. 1790)

Khanum Jan is the heroine of the autobiographical novel *Nashtar* by Hasan Shah of Kanpur, written in 1790 when Shah was twenty. The original text, which was in Indianised Farsi, is no longer extant, but the Urdu translation survives, having been unearthed from Patna Library by Quratulain Haidar. Haider translated the book into English in 2003 and regards it as the first modern Urdu novel. Khanum Jan is a tawaif, a singing courtesan. Hasan Shah, having fallen in love with her, marries her in secret, but they cannot avow their love and Khanum Jan, having failed to escape from the kothi, dies heartbroken. Khanum Jan seems to have influenced the character of Shaib Jan in the film *Pakeezah*.

It seems from the text that Khanum Jan was a real woman, a member of a troupe of tawaifs including accomplished singers of Sufi songs from Kashmir. They were '*deredar*' tawaifs, tawaifs of the camp or *dera*, travelling the land and camping wherever a rich man might take a fancy to one of them, and entertaining the nobles and notables of the area. They were patronised mostly by the army, including the European mercenaries, and the new imperial armies, or

by rich merchants and traders of all communities. In the book, Khanum Jan travels over what is today the Ganga valley of Uttar Pradesh. The girls spoke Persian and Kashmiri, and were very well educated and highly trained actors, dancers and singers.

## **KHONA (6TH CENTURY)**

Khona, or the woman whose story is obscured by the legend of Khona, was a horologist and astronomer. In Bengal, there is a popular legend of a female mathematician-astrologer named Khona or Kshanavati, who is credited with a large number of popular sayings (*Khonar Bachan*) in old Bengali, relating to astronomy, agriculture, timekeeping and the seasons. She is also traditionally believed to have been the wife of an astronomer called Mihira, whose father was called Varaha, but this appears to be an appropriation of the name of Varahamihira, the famous sixth-century astronomer of Ujjain. One of the legends states that she travelled to Ujjain and confounded Varahamihira with her learning and acuity. It is possible that the legend of Khona is based on a real person, but no concrete historical evidence has yet been found to substantiate the story. The name Khona or Kshana means 'moment' or 'point in time'.

## **KOLAVATI (11TH CENTURY)**

Kolavati was the queen of Orissa and a great builder of temples. She belonged to the Solar dynasty by birth and was married to the powerful king Chandrahara of the Somavansi dynasty. Chandrahara was responsible for freeing Koshala and Utkal from the Cholas. He died in 1054, leaving Kolavati and her son Udyotakesari, who succeeded him

as Mahasivagupta IV. As was the practice in Orissa, Kolavati continued to manage large parts of the kingdom, including large building projects such as the Brahmeshwar temple in the Siddhatirtha area at Ekamra, now in Bhubaneswar, was commissioned in the eighteenth year of her son's reign and completed between 1055 and 1065. The temple possesses four smaller temples at four corners and is surrounded by a stone compound. One of the inscriptions, now believed lost, stated that Kolavati presented many beautiful women to the temple. This is possibly one of the early pieces of evidence for the existence of the devdasi tradition, or the practice of dedicating female slaves to service at the temple. They were trained as dancers, musicians and sacred courtesans.

## **KISHORI AMONKAR (1932–2017)**

Kishori Amonkar was one of the most revered and intellectually profound exponents of Hindustani classical music, known especially for her mastery of the khayal genre. Born in Bombay (now Mumbai) on 10 April 1932, she was trained by her mother, Mogubai Kurdikar. She began performing in public as a child, initially accompanying her mother on the tanpura. Her independent musical career blossomed from the 1960s, establishing her as a transformative force in Indian a distinguished vocalist of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. From this rigorous lineage, Kishori imbibed a strong foundation in raga grammar, voice culture, and the uncompromising discipline of traditional performance.

Yet, Amonkar's artistry was never confined by orthodoxy. While rooted in the Jaipur-Atrauli style, she evolved a highly personal approach by drawing from other gharanas such as Agra and Gwalior, as well as from Carnatic sensibilities, prioritizing emotive expression over stylistic rigidity. Her ability to imbue ragas with profound emotional intensity—what many described as “painful melancholy”—made her performances deeply moving and intellectually stirring. While

khayal remained her forte; she also excelled in thumri, bhajan, and film music—notably composing and singing for the acclaimed Hindi film *Drishhti* and earlier contributing to the soundtrack of “*Geet Gaya Patharon Ne*.”

Renowned for her introspective and philosophical interpretations, Amonkar often likened singing to dialogue with a living being, approaching each raga as a living entity with its own emotional and spiritual texture. Her renditions were meditative journeys, marked by slow unfolding, unexpected turns, and soul-stirring climaxes. In her own words, “One should not teach students the limits of this art ... There are none. But one must understand the grammar.”

She was honoured with some of India’s highest awards, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award 1985 and Fellowship 2009, Padma Bhushan 1987, Padma Vibhushan 2002, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi Lifetime Achievement Award 2012.

Her influence extended deeply into the world of music education, mentoring stalwarts like Arati Ankalikar-Tikekar, Padma Talwalkar, Meena Joshi, among others—instilling in them her unique doctrine of freedom guided by knowledge.

Kishori Amonkar passed away on 3 April 2017, just days before her 85th birthday. Her legacy continues to inspire generations of vocalists and listeners alike. By blending tradition with innovation, and grammar with emotion, she reshaped the canvas of Hindustani classical music, affirming her place as one of the towering figures in India’s musical heritage.

## **KRIPI (C. 327 BCE)**

Kripa was probably the ruler of a small kingdom in the Hindu Kush at the time of Alexander the Great. Alexander had a profound effect

on Indian culture and politics when he invaded India, though he was not able to consolidate his victory. One of the most enduring results of his expedition was the inclusion of India in the ambit of places written about and commented on by ancient Greek scholars and historians. Thus, we have independent corroboration of many facts and fables on India of the time. In 327 BCE, Alexander is said to have killed a king of the Swat-Buner region, which lies near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This king is named by early European chroniclers as Assekenos, probably of the tribe of Ashwaka or Ashamaka. The king occupied the fortress of Massaga, north of the pass of Malakand. The Greek historian Curtius recounts how, after his death, Kleophis or Kripi, the wife or mother of the dead king, put up a brave resistance to the Greek troops, but was eventually obliged to surrender. Contemporary historians marvelled at her valour.

## **KRISHNABHABINI DAS (1862–1919)**

Krishnabhabini Das was the wife of Devendranath Das, a lawyer of Bowbazar. He travelled to England on business, and on his second trip there Krishnabhabini went with him. This aroused fierce opposition among her in-laws and in society generally, especially as she had to leave her young daughter behind. Devendranath took up teaching in England and also saw to his wife's education with care and attention. They stayed in England for eight years. Krishnabhabini's book, *England-e Bangamahila* (a Bengali woman in England), written in 1885 under the pen name 'Bangamahila', was so frank about the freedom of Englishwomen that it was proscribed in India.

Despite her own enlightened perceptions, Krishnabhabini had difficulty getting others around her to see her point of view, and she was unable to save her ten-year-old daughter from being married off. Some time later, her husband and daughter died within days of each other.

There is an account in the magazine *Bharati* of 1922 of how she gave up wearing western clothes on her husband's death, took to wearing the *thaan*, the plain widow's sari, and began to observe all the austerities and self-abnegations of the typical Hindu widow. She also devoted herself to promoting the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, the organization established by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, and three branches were opened thanks to her efforts. She wrote her autobiography in verse, titled *Jibaner Drishyamala*. Though she had no formal education, the University of Calcutta appointed her an examiner.

## KRISHNA SOBTI (1925–2019)

Krishna Sobti was a fearless and revolutionary voice in Hindi literature, addressing themes such as Partition, women's identity, and societal oppression with unmatched intensity. She authored eight novels, two novellas, a collection of short stories, and three volumes of literary profiles (the last published under the pseudonym Hashmat). Her reflection on writing encapsulated her deep philosophical approach:

*“Creation, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, in some blessed moment, knocks at the inner being of the writer... A writer's insight searches for immortality within human existence in the eternity of this world.”*

Born on 18 February 1925, in Gujrat (now in Pakistan), Sobti hailed from a family that served in the British colonial administration. She initially pursued higher education at Fatehchand College in Lahore but relocated to India following Partition.

Sobti began as a short-story writer, publishing *Lama* (about a Tibetan Buddhist priest) and *Nafisa* in 1944. Her poignant work *Ai Ladki* (1991) depicted a touching interaction between a mother on her

deathbed and her devoted daughter. Another significant piece, *Sikka Badal Gaya*, tackled the tumultuous impact of Partition.

Her novels challenged social conventions and literary norms: *Dar Se Bichhadi* (1958) explored the struggles of a child born from an interfaith marriage in pre-Partition India. *Mitro Marjani* (1966), a groundbreaking novel set in rural Punjab, depicted a young married woman's fearless assertion of her sexuality, liberating Hindi literature from rigid social realism and conventional portrayals of women's lives. *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* (1972) examined childhood trauma and resilience. *Zindaginama* (1979), considered one of her finest works, provided a vivid portrayal of rural India's complexities. *Dil-o-Danish* (1993) and *Samay Sargam* (2000) further solidified her literary legacy. *Gujrat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan Tak* (2017) offered a semi-autobiographical reflection on Partition and her personal journey.

Writing under the masculine pseudonym Hashmat, Sobti revealed a different literary persona in her *Hum Hashmat* series. She once remarked: "*We both have different identities. I protect, and he reveals; I am ancient, he is new and fresh; we operate from opposite directions.*" A challenger of tradition in every aspect of life, Sobti defied societal norms when, past the age of 70, she married Dogri writer Shivnath. Until the end, she remained a fierce critic of authoritarianism.

Her contributions to literature earned her numerous accolades, including: Sahitya Akademi Award 1980, Shiromani Award 1981, Hindi Academy Award 1982, Shalaka Award 2000, Vyas Samman 2008, Jnanpith Award 2017.

Krishna Sobti passed away on 25 January 2019, in Delhi after a prolonged illness. She remains an enduring symbol of freedom, courage, and honesty in Hindi literature—an original feminist voice who revolutionized storytelling. Her work continues to inspire generations of writers, readers, and thinkers.

## KRUPA BAI SATTIANADHAN (1862–1894)

Krupa was a second-generation Christian, her parents Haripant and Radhabai being the first Christian converts in the Bombay (now Mumbai) Presidency. She was the twelfth of 14 children. Of her brothers, her relationship with Bhasker was significant, as he encouraged her to develop her mind and aspire to make something of herself; his early death was a great blow to her. In 1878, she became the first woman to join the Madras Medical College. When she entered class, the other students all stood up and cheered. She worked hard, but like Anandibai Joshi (q.v.), who also qualified in medicine, her health began to suffer. She graduated with high marks, but by then was already quite ill.

She had married Samuel Sattianadhan, the son of her guardian in Madras, and he encouraged her to write and helped to publish her work. She wrote her first novel, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, in English. This is an acutely observed, sensitively written account of a young Christian girl's growing up, and her perception of her relations both with white Christians and Hindu Indians. Her second novel, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life*, is more accomplished than the first, and gives a hint of what she could have done had she lived. However, when she wrote it, she was on her deathbed with terminal tuberculosis; the last few chapters were dictated to her husband.

## KUNDAVAI (10TH CENTURY–1019)

There were several Kundavais among the members of the Chola dynasty, but the most famous is Kundavai, the elder sister of Rajaraja Chola I. She is chiefly known for the temples she built and endowed.

Her father was renowned as a just ruler. She was married to Vandyadeva, chief of a nearby kingdom. She showed herself impartial to all faiths and endowed a Vishnu temple, a Shiva temple and a Jain temple at Rajarajapuram in the husband's kingdom. She also set up a charity hospital in Thanjavur and provided it with an extensive estate for its maintenance. She spent the last years of her life in her father's house, dying in the seventh year of the reign of her nephew, Rajendra I.

## **A.V. KUTTIMALU AMMA (1905–1985)**

Kuttimalu was a freedom fighter and campaigner for swadeshi, an active member of the Indian National Congress, twice a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly before Independence, and a tireless social worker. She belonged to the Anakkara Vadakkath House in Koottanad, which has produced several famous women freedom fighters and social workers, including Ammu Swaminathan, Captain Lakshmi of the INA, dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai and the former Lok Sabha member Subhashini Ali. Her husband, Kozhipurathu Madhava Menon, was President of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee and Minister in the Madras State.

Kuttimalu volunteered to be part of the movement to promote khadi, or handloom cloth in opposition to foreign imports, in 1930. She picketed shops selling foreign cloth in the city of Calicut the following year. In 1932, during the Civil Disobedience Movement, she marched at the head of a column of women, holding her two-month-old daughter in her arms. She was arrested for illegal public assembly and jailed. She appeared before the British magistrate at the Kozhikode court, where she was ordered to give up her baby, but Kuttimalu refused to let her daughter leave her side, quoting laws to support her arguments. Finally, the court had to let the child remain with her even as she was sentenced to a jail term stretching to 1934.

In 1936, she was elected to the Madras legislative assembly, but in 1940, she again courted arrest during a satyagraha and was imprisoned for a year. Some months after her release, she was again active in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and was jailed for two years in the Amaravathy jail, Tamil Nadu. Once released, in 1944, she was elected President of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. She served on the All-India Congress Committee and the Congress Working Committee. She also served on the Kozhikode Municipality. In 1946, she was once again elected to the Madras Assembly. She is remembered for her efforts to set up model orphanages to rehabilitate abandoned and destitute children. Her work was deeply appreciated by M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and C. Rajagopalachari.

In March 2007, a year-long programme of celebrations in her honour was inaugurated in Koottanad, and in 2008, the Kerala Government commissioned a documentary film on her life, directed by Melilaa Rajashekhar.

# L

## LAKSHMI N. MENON (1899–1994)

Lakshmi N. Menon was a teacher, lawyer, politician and activist. She was born in Triuvananthapuram, to Rama Varma Thampan and Madavikutty Amma. In 1930, she married Prof. V.K. Nandan Menon, an educationist who was sometimes vice chancellor of Travancore and Patna Universities and the director of the Indian Institutes of Public Administration. Lakshmi studied at Madras, Lucknow and London, acquiring high qualifications as an educator. She began her career at Queen Mary's College, Madras, where she taught till 1926, followed by the Gokhale Memorial Girls' School and then the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. She then practiced law till 1935. She was an associate of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu (q.v.) and Margaret Cousins (q.v.), and these friendships fuelled her desire to do something for India.

She was one of the founder members of the All-India Women's Conference, serving for some time as its secretary and president, and also as editor of its magazine, *Roshni*. After Independence, she was principal for a while of the Patna Teachers' Training College. But Jawaharlal Nehru persuaded her to accept an appointment to the Rajya Sabha. Overcoming initial reservations, she served well and fully in this post, going to the UN a number of times as Alternate Delegate from India. In 1949–1950, she headed the UN Section on the Status of Women and Children.

Back home, she served in the Ministry of External Affairs as Parliamentary Secretary from 1952 to 1957, Deputy Minister from 1957 to 1962 and Minister of State to 1967. She also toured the world extensively on India's behalf, on one such tour, charged with explaining

India's stand on China at a crucial time in relations with that country. Retiring from political service in 1967, she turned to social work and to writing, authoring, among other things, a book on Indian women for the Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs series. She helped to found the Federation of University Women in India. In recognition of her services, the nation awarded her the Padma Bhushan in 1957.

## **LAKSHMIBAI, RANI OF JHANSI (1828–1858)**

Lakshmibai, regent queen of the kingdom of Jhansi, was a fighter in the War of 1857 against the British and became an icon of the later freedom movement in India. She was born Manikarnika or 'Manu' to Moropant Tambay and Bhagirathi Bai. Her mother died at her birth, so Manu's upbringing at the court of Baji Rao II in Bithur was different from that of other girls. She was educated in both Sanskrit and Marathi, knew the scriptures and Hindu texts and was fascinated by the stories of Maratha heroes. She was adept at wielding various weapons, excelled in physical culture and was a skilled horsewoman. Her childhood companions were Nana Sahib, the heir apparent to the Peshwa's *jagir*, and his brothers, Rao Sahib and Bala. Tatiya Tope, who was one of the leaders of 1857, was also a member of the Bithur retinue.

In 1850, at the age of 14, she was married to Raja Gangadhar Rao, the King of Jhansi, then 40 years old; her name was changed to Lakshmibai on marriage. Gangadhar allowed Lakshmibai to continue her practice in weaponry and riding. He was a cultured man who enjoyed the theatre and put up well-received plays where he excelled at playing women's roles. The Rani gradually began teaching the use of arms to the women of Jhansi because she thought it important in those turbulent times. They adopted a son, Damodar Rao. On the death of the Raja, the British, though bound by an old treaty to recognise the claim of the heirs to the throne of Jhansi, did not keep their promise

and cited the Doctrine of Lapse as Damodar Rao was not the natural son of Gangadhar. They offered a pension to Lakshmibai, but she refused. It was during these negotiations that the Rani made her famous declaration, '*Main apni Jhansi nahin doongi.*' (I shall not give away our beloved Jhansi). It was, however, not until the events of 1857 that she was able to put her resolve into open practice. With the British engaged in suppressing the revolts, she had a free rein in the affairs of the kingdom, although she faced two challenges to the throne, the first from Sadashiva Khondekar, who claimed a right to be the ruler of Jhansi, and the second from Nathey Khan, who attacked Jhansi with a force of 20,000 soldiers. Though the English had confiscated her weaponry, the Rani, a superb tactician and strategist, defeated the attackers roundly. She began preparations for war, which included training and equipping the Jhansi army. She created the Durga Dal, an elite force of women warriors, many of whom distinguished themselves in battle, such as Jhalkari Bai (q.v.).

On 20 March 1858, General Rose and his army camped outside Jhansi. The battle that followed was ferocious, and the people of Jhansi fought with magnificent courage. The British, however, had a vastly superior force, and after Tatiya's defeat, Jhansi could not sustain the conflict for long. After the fall of Jhansi, the Rani escaped to Kalpi, where she joined forces with Tatiya Tope. Jhalkari Bai impersonated the Rani and was able to keep the British fooled for one week, thus buying Lakshmibai valuable time. The rebels once again challenged the British, and despite her allies' defeat, the Rani, in an astonishing display of military tactics, managed to save a large part of her force from the trap the English had set. After Kalpi fell, the Rani and the Peshwa regrouped at Gopalpur. They took the fort of Gwalior at the Rani's suggestion, but while the British prepared for the decisive battle, the Peshwa's army spent its time in the pursuit of pleasure. The Rani herself led an extremely disciplined and loyal force known as the *Lal Kurtis* or Red Coats, which included both men and women.

On 18 June, the Rani fought her last battle. She cut a magnificent figure in her masculine attire, wielding swords with both her hands with the reins of her horse clamped between her teeth. When Lieutenant, Walker pursued her after the defeat, she outmaneuvered him and administered a salutary lesson. As another group began pursuing her, her horse refused to cross the Sone Rekha canal, a jump that was vital to her plans. The English forces were soon upon her, and though she fought ferociously, she met a hero's death. General Rose said of her, "She was the bravest of them all." Lakshmibai realised the need to involve all communities, castes and religious groups in her war against the colonial powers. She was one of the few leaders in Indian history to be aware of the contribution women could make on the battlefield. The women of Jhansi played a critical role in every area of military affairs, a fact attested by Vishnu Rao Godse, a Marathi writer who visited Jhansi under the reign of the Rani.

## **LAKSHMI SAHGAL (1914–2012)**

Born in 1914 in Malabar (present-day Kerala), Lakshmi Sahgal hailed from a socially conscious family. Her father, S. Swaminathan, was a lawyer, while her mother, Ammu Swaminathan, was a prominent social reformer and later a member of India's Constituent Assembly.

Lakshmi pursued her medical studies at Queen Mary's College, Chennai, earning her MBBS in 1938, followed by a diploma in gynecology and obstetrics in 1939–40. In 1940, she moved to Singapore, where she set up a clinic that served the Indian diaspora and marginalized communities.

After the fall of Singapore to Japanese forces in 1942, she began offering medical aid to Indian prisoners of war and became active in the Indian Independence League. It was during this period that she met Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Inspired by his call to arms, she played

a pioneering role in the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the first all-women infantry regiment of the Indian National Army (INA), where she held the rank of Captain and served as Minister for Women's Affairs in the Provisional Government of Azad Hind. The regiment later saw action in Burma (Myanmar), but following the INA's defeat in the Battle of Imphal, she was captured by British forces in May 1945 and detained in Rangoon until her repatriation in March 1946. Her arrest and trial galvanized public opinion in India, further energizing the independence movement.

In 1947, she married Col. Prem Kumar Sahgal, a fellow INA officer, and settled in Kanpur, where she practiced medicine and worked extensively with refugees displaced by Partition. Her commitment to humanitarian service continued throughout her life, during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, she treated displaced persons in Bongaon the border camps; she responded to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Kanpur by organizing medical relief and intervened during the Bhopal Gas Tragedy with on-ground assistance.

A committed Marxist, she joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1971, and was later nominated to the Rajya Sabha. In 1981, she co-founded the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and served as its Vice President, advocating fiercely for women's rights, secularism, and social equity.

Dr. Sahgal was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 1998 in recognition of her lifetime of service. In 2002, she stood as the Left's presidential candidate, challenging A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and using the campaign to draw attention to issues of structural inequality, communalism, and democratic accountability.

Undeterred by age, she continued treating patients at her Kanpur clinic well into her 90s. Her enduring resolve was summed up in her words at age 92: "The fight will go on." She passed away on 23 July 2012, aged 97, and donated her body for medical research—a final act of service in a life defined by courage, compassion, and commitment to the nation.

## LAXMIBAI KELKAR (1905–1978)

Born Kamal Datey and affectionately known as *Mausiji*, was a distinguished Indian social reformer, freedom fighter, and a pioneer in the field of women's empowerment.

Born in Nagpur on 5 July 1905, Kamal Datey was married at a young age to lawyer Purshottam Rao Kelkar, in keeping with the customs of the time. Following her marriage, she was renamed Laxmibai Kelkar. In 1932, she was widowed and took on the responsibility of raising six sons and two daughters from her husband's previous marriage.

Deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and living near Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, she actively participated in freedom movement activities such as *prabhat pheris* (early morning processions) and meetings. Her exposure to nationalist ideology grew when her sons introduced her to the work of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In 1936, Laxmibai met Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS. Although initially hesitant to extend the organization's scope to women, Dr. Hedgewar agreed on the condition that she would assume complete responsibility. With this support, Rashtra Sevika Samiti was founded on Vijaya Dashami (Dussehra), 25 October 1936, in Wardha, with a vision to instill cultural and national values among Indian women.

Mausiji displayed exceptional leadership, travelling extensively under challenging circumstances while fulfilling her familial duties. She emphasized the relevance of epic ideals from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in contemporary life and firmly advocated for the equal participation of women in nation-building.

She also focused on women's physical and spiritual strength. Drawing from traditional wisdom and modern health practices, she consulted physicians and health experts to redesign Samiti's physical fitness programme, incorporating Yoga and holistic wellness. A devotee of the Divine Feminine, Mausiji introduced the worship of

Devi *Ashtabhujā* (the eight-armed Goddess Shakti). The goddess was represented holding a lotus, Bhagavad Gītā, saffron flag, fire altar (*Agni Kund*), bell, sword, beads, and a protective hand, and her idol was installed in many *Kendras* (centres) across India.

Laxmibai Kelkar passed away on 27 November 1978, leaving behind a legacy of discipline, devotion, and determined service to the nation through the upliftment of women.

## LAKSHMIBAYAMMA UNNAVA (1882–1956)

Lakshmibayamma Unnava was a revolutionary social activist and Gandhian of Andhra Pradesh. She was born in 1882 in Ameenabad, a village in the Guntur district, and belonged to the middle-class Niyogi Brahmin family. Being the youngest in the family, she had a liberal upbringing and also received traditional schooling. She was married to Unnava Lakshminarayana, a writer and philosopher, at the age of ten. His thought had a deep and lasting influence on her, and many of his ideas found expression in her public speeches. Gandhi's ideas also greatly influenced her. Others who inspired her were Subbayamma Duvvuri (q.v.), Ponka Kanakamma and Yaminipurna. They were all her close associates in the Non-Co-operation Movement.

In 1910, she began to work for causes like widow remarriage, and the following year, she entered politics at the provincial level by joining the movement for a separate Andhra province. In 1921, she participated in the Non-Co-operation Movement. Between 1911 and 1942, she was imprisoned six times for participating in this, the Salt Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement.

As a social reformer, she envisaged establishing a school for women so that destitute women, widows and orphans might find a better place in society. In 1923, she founded Sarada Niketan, a residential

school for women from all strata of society. The school conferred *Sahiti* and *Vidhushi* degrees and later obtained affiliation to the Andhra University. Apart from her social activities, Lakshmibayamma was active in politics too. She toured the whole region of Andhra, giving public lectures and exhorting the people to join the freedom struggle. At the time of the Quit India Movement, she made a memorable speech at the Nellore Town Hall. In 1921, she also participated in the Forest Movement. After Independence, she retired from politics, as indisposition and old age made it impossible for her to work as hard as in the past.

After a prolonged fight against illness, Lakshmibayamma died in 1956. Controversies over the management of Sarada Niketan, of which she was the Trustee and guardian, dogged her at the end. Nevertheless, she remains a memorable figure.

## **LALITHAMBIKA ANTHERJANAM (1909–1987)**

Lalithambika was a writer who exposed the true conditions of women's lives in traditional upper caste Nambudiri culture in Kerala. She took as her surname 'Antherjanam', which means 'she who lives inside'.

Lalithambika's lifework was the exposure and destruction of the hypocrisy, violence and injustice with which women were treated in Nambudiri society. Only the eldest son of a Nambudiri family was allowed to marry a woman of his own caste; the other sons had to marry the matrilineal Nairs. As a result, many Nambudiri women remained unmarried all their lives, in restrictions that amounted to rigorous imprisonment. Their frustration and degradation moved Lalithambika to expose their plight in her celebrated Malayali novel *Agnisakshi* (The Fire as Witness). Married in 1926 to Narayanan Nambudiri, a farmer, Lalithambika found herself transplanted to a home of hard labour and

lingering interior darkness, though she still managed to write. When she had finished her long and hard-working day and put her children to sleep, she would bar the doors and, with only a tiny lamp for company, would sit down to write. This told on her health, and when her chronic eye problem became intolerable, she would write with her eyes closed. Her writings are luminous with anger at the injustice she saw done daily around her.

Her works include a collection of short stories, *Adyathe Kathakal* (First Stories), 1937, *Takarna Talamura* (Ruined Generation) 1949, *Kilivadilude* (Pigeonhole) 1950, *Koddunkatil Ninnu* (From a Whirlwind) 1951, *Mudupadathil* (Behind the Veil) 1955, and *Agni Pushpangal* (Flowers of Fire) 1960. She also wrote a commentary on 13 women in the Hindu epics titled *Seetha Muthal Satyavathi Vate* (From Sita to Satyavati) in 1972.

## LALLA DED (14TH CENTURY)

Lalla was a wandering Shaiva saint and poet of Kashmir. Born into a humble Kashmiri Brahmin family, she was married at an early age into a family where her mother-in-law treated her harshly. When asked to regard her husband as God in accordance with Hindu tradition, she said she would submit to no other god than Shiva. This declaration and her childlessness got her thrown out of her matrimonial house. She was thus freed to be an ardent devotee of Shiva in the Tantric Shaiva tradition, which forbade her to visit temples or worship any image. She became a *yogini*, wandering and preaching the Yogic doctrines as the best means of ultimate absorption into the Supreme. She appears to have been a self-taught Shaiva saint, studying the texts and listening to the philosophy propounded by Shaiva teachers, by which she acquired a profound understanding of *Advaita* philosophy. She practised special

methods of *kundalini* meditation and ascetic techniques to find the object of her devotion in her own inner self.

Initially, her roaming in minimal clothing and her disbelief in the efficacy of formal observance, ritualism and idol worship attracted a lot of criticism, her reaction to which appears in her poems. This changed with time, and later on, she was respected and loved by Shaiva and Sufi saints. According to her, a true saint was ‘the servant of all mankind through his humility and loving kindness’. Lalla earned the title ‘Ded’, meaning granny, for her true affection, spirituality and wisdom. Her couplets, published in modern times under the title *Lalla Vakyan* by the Asiatic Society, give a clear idea of her significance and influence on her contemporaries in Kashmir. She died at a very old age in the hermitage at Bijbehara. To quote from one of her verses, where she sings of the absolute dependence of men on the will of the Almighty:

Be his sin misfortune, be it guilt.  
 Be the guerdon ashes, be it flowers,  
 O Bhagwan, Thou blessest whom Thou wilt,  
 Bhagwan, how wondrous are thy powers!

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **LATA MAGESHKAR (1929–2022)**

Lata Mangeshkar was one of the most revered and influential playback singers in the history of Indian cinema. Her voice, ethereal and emotive, became the defining soundtrack of Bollywood across more than seven decades, earning her epithets such as the *Nightingale of India*, *Queen of Melody*, and *Voice of the Millennium*. She became a cultural icon, her music transcending generations, languages, and boundaries—both geographical and emotional.

Born on 28 September 1929 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, Lata was the eldest daughter of Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar, a renowned classical singer and theatre artist. At birth, she was named Hema, but was later renamed Lata, after a character named *Latika* in one of her father's plays. She grew up in a musically gifted family—her siblings Meena, Asha (Asha Bhosle), Usha, and Hridaynath also became acclaimed musicians.

Lata Mangeshkar began her career in 1942 in Marathi cinema and made her debut in Hindi playback singing in 1947 with the film *Aap Ki Seva Mein*. She rose to national prominence with the hauntingly beautiful song “*Aayega Aanewala*” from *Mahal* (1949). Over her career, she recorded songs in over 36 languages, including Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, and several others.

Her collaborations with legendary music directors such as Naushad, S.D. Burman, R.D. Burman, Madan Mohan, Shankar-Jaikishan and Laxmikant-Pyarelal resulted in some of the most cherished melodies in Indian cinema. With her soprano range and a uniquely emotive expression, she redefined playback singing—moving away from mehfil-style performances to suit both traditional and modern cinematic heroines. She was known for her meticulous diction and emotional depth, and her voice graced the performances of virtually every leading actress from the 1940s through the early 2000s.

Some of her most iconic songs include, “*Lag Ja Gale*” (*Woh Kaun Thi?*), “*Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh*” (*Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai*), “*Tere Bina Zindagi Se*” (*Aandhi*), “*Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya*” (*Mughal-e-Azam*), “*Tujhse Naraz Nahi Zindagi*” (*Masoom*). On 27 January 1963, shortly after the Sino-Indian War, Lata performed the iconic patriotic song “*Aye Mere Watan Ke Logon*”—composed by C. Ramchandra and penned by Kavi Pradeep—in the presence of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was reportedly moved to tears.

She was the first Indian artist to perform at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1974, an event introduced with poetic grace by actor Dilip

Kumar, who said, *“Just as the fragrance of a flower has no colour, just as flowing water or the breeze have no boundaries, and just as the rays of the sun have no religious divide, the voice of Lata Mangeshkar is just such a miracle of nature.”*

Both Madhya Pradesh (1984) and Maharashtra (1992) instituted awards in her honour—testaments to her enduring cultural impact. Lata Mangeshkar received numerous awards and honours throughout her career, including Multiple National Film Awards and Filmfare Awards (she later declined Filmfare Awards post-1970 to encourage younger talent), 1969 Padma Bhushan, 1989 Dadasaheb Phalke Award, 1999 Padma Vibhushan, 2001 Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian honour.

Lata Mangeshkar passed away on 6 February 2022, at the age of 92, due to complications arising from COVID-19. She was accorded a state funeral, and the nation collectively mourned the loss of its most beloved voice. Reflecting the emotion of the moment, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi said:

*“In her voice, we hear the soul of India.”*

## **LATIKA GHOSH (1902–1987)**

Latika Ghosh was an Oxford-educated teacher and freedom fighter. She started the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha in 1928 at the instance of Subash Chandra Bose. The aim of the MRS was to fight for freedom by mobilising cadres of women for political work. It was born out of Latika’s efforts to organise resistance to the Simon Commission, which impressed Bose deeply. He remarked that if he could have ten more women workers like Latika, he could advance the cause of women by a hundred years.

Latika was an expert at mobilising people and staging spectacles that would fire their imaginations and inspire them to fight for the

cause. She vetoed the idea of having Basanti Devi, a veteran of the Non-Cooperation Movement, as president of the MRS, preferred Subash Bose's mother, Prabhavati, as a figurehead as she would appeal to ordinary housewives and lend prestige to the organization as the mother of Bengal's best-known activist. The Sangha was composed of Shakti mandirs, or working cells, which campaigned to raise consciousness among the ordinary women of Bengal. In the year of its foundation, the women in their uniform of red-bordered green saris and white blouses marched beside men, with 'Colonel' Latika leading them, in the procession to inaugurate the annual Congress meeting in Kolkata. This sight made a tremendous impression on the middle-class Bengali community, as all Latika's lieutenants were educated, well-to-do high-caste women from respectable families. Bina Das (q.v.), who later attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal, was one of her officers. She was also a founding member of the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association, set up by Gurusaday Dutt in memory of his wife.

## **LEELA CHITNIS (1909–2003)**

Leela Chitnis was a stage and screen actor of the early years of Marathi and Hindi cinema. Born in Dharwar, Karnataka, in South India, Leela was the daughter of a professor of English and was well educated. Initially, she was a stage actor with Natyamanwantar, an avant-garde Marathi theatre group founded by Keshav Narayan Kale, the authors Anant Kanekar and S.V. Vartak, the music director Keshavrao Waman Bhole and the actor Keshavrao Date. Jyotsna Bhole, Keshavrao Bhole's wife, and Padma Vartak, wife of the author, also acted in the plays, thus making Natyamanwantar a pathbreaker in introducing women of 'good' backgrounds to the stage. The plays done by the group were heavily influenced by high modernist theatre such as the work of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw and Konstantin Stanislavski.

Kale translated Stanislavski's classic *An Actor Prepares* into Marathi. Leela acted in the comedy *Usna Navra* in 1934, just a year before the group shut down. Some time later, she formed her own theatre group, Natyasadhana, but her divorce made her the sole support of her four children, and she had to go into films.

She began working as an extra at the Sagar Movietone Studio and appeared in a few of the mythological films so popular at that time. Ram Daryani gave her an opening in his action films, and in his *Gentleman Daku* (1937), she dressed as a man to play a thief. But by then, she had already gathered a reputation for her role in *Chhaya* the previous year, where she played a woman who rejected a man because his father had died in jail for stealing money to buy medicines for his dying wife. Leela moved from studio to studio, taking work wherever it was available. She worked at Prabhat Pictures in Pune and at Ranjit Movietone, playing Ratnavali in *Sant Tulsidas* (1939) before settling down at Bombay Talkies. Devika Rani had just left, and Leela stepped into the void she left behind to become Ashok Kumar's leading lady. She made four films with him: *Kangan* (1939), *Azaad*, *Bandhan* (1940) and *Jhoola* (1941), and they were all hits. Ashok Kumar claimed that he learned a lot from her style of acting. She was so successful that she was invited to advertise Lux soap, the first Hindi film heroine to endorse an international brand. She produced *Kisise Na Kehna* in 1942 and directed *Aaj ki Bat* in 1955. She kept her links with the stage, writing and directing *Ek Ratri Ardha Diwas*, based on Somerset Maugham's *The Sacred Flame*.

As the 1940s drew to a close, she gave up leading roles to concentrate on character acting, where her stage background gave her an advantage. She appeared in *Shaheed* in 1948, which typecast her as the suffering mother-figure for a whole generation of leading men. Dressed in white, bent and contorted with pain and poverty, she would cough and slave her way through her role, epitomising the 'Ma' for a range of heroes, notably in *Awara* (1951), *Maa* (1952), *Jamuna*

(1961) and *Guide* (1965). She died in Danbury, Connecticut. Her autobiography is titled *Chanderi Duniya* and was published in 1981.

## LEELA NAIDU (1940–2009)

Leela Naidu was an actor in Hindi cinema. She was Femina Miss India in 1954 and Miss World in 1955. Along with Maharani Gayatri Devi (q.v.), she was featured in *Vogue's* list of the world's ten most beautiful women.

She was born to an Indian father, Ramaiah Naidu, a scientist, and an Irish mother. Her first film was *Anuradha*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, in 1960. He saw a photograph of her taken by Kamaladevi Chattopahdyay (q.v.) and declared that he had found his Anuradha. In the film, she plays a musically talented young woman who has to give up her career when her doctor husband's job takes her to a village. The film had songs by Ravi Shankar, including *Jaane kaise sapnon mein kho gayeen ankhian* and *Kaise din beete kaisi beeti ratiyan*. *Anuradha* was a critical success and won the National Award for Best Film and was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1961. She followed this up with *Ummeed* (1962) by Nitin Bose. She was most known for *Yeh Raaste Hain Pyaar Ke* (1963), based on the famous real-life Nanavati case. In this case, K.M. Nanavati, a naval officer, was accused of shooting Prem Ahuja, who had been philandering with his English wife Sylvia, and the trial led to the abolition of trial by jury in India. The controversial role was refused by many actresses of the conservative 1960s, but Leela Naidu had the courage to take it on.

She acted in *The Householder* (with Shashi Kapoor), the first film produced by James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, playing a rebellious young bride. On seeing this film Satyajit Ray wanted to cast her in his English film *The Journey*, with Marlon Brando and Shashi Kapoor, but this was never made. She was passed over in favour of Waheeda

Rahman for *The Guide*, a film adaptation of R.K. Narayan's book of the same name, as she couldn't dance.

In 1969, she made a guest appearance in *The Guru*, but then retired and married the businessman Bikki Oberoi, the son of Mohan Singh Oberoi, the founder of the Oberoi Hotels chain, with whom she had twin daughters. Later, she divorced him and married the poet Dom Moraes, whom she had known as a child, and whom she met at the house of mutual friend Mario Miranda. She spent more than ten years with Dom Moraes in Hong Kong. While there, she worked in radio and even made a few films; one was banned by the Chinese Government because it contained criticism of the state. After she lost her battle for custody over her twin daughters, she fell in love with Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti. She returned to the screen in 1985 to play a matriarch in Shyam Benegal's *Trikaal*. Her last appearance was in *Electric Moon* (1992), directed by Pradip Krishen.

## **LIAQUAT ALI BEGUM KHAN (1905–1990)**

Begum Liaquat was a politician and college teacher. She came from a distinguished Muslim family of the United Provinces and was educated at Lucknow and Kolkata. She taught economics at the Indraprastha College for Women in New Delhi. In 1939, she married Liaquat Ali Khan, a UP legislator, and in 1947, when he became Prime Minister of Pakistan, they crossed the border to live in the new country.

Immediately after Partition, the Begum formed an association of women who acted as nurses, teachers and administrators in the new land. This association grew and in 1949 it became the All-Pakistan Women's Association, and it went on to do sterling work in women's rehabilitation and upliftment. In 1951, Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in Rawalpindi, but the Begum remained active in politics even after his death, going to the Netherlands and Belgium as

an ambassador in 1954, and later also to Italy and Tunisia. She also worked with the United Nations and with the ILO and was chancellor of the University of Karachi. In 1973, she became the Governor of Sindh. In 1978, she received the Human Rights Award from the UN.

## LILA MAJUMDAR (1908–2007)

Lila Majumdar was a teacher and a pioneering children's writer in Bengali who wrote stories that appealed to both boys and girls, a rare feat in the often rather one-sided gender politics of Bengali children's fiction. Born Lila Ray in Shillong, a place that made a deep impression on her, she was the daughter of the younger brother of Upendra Kishore Roy Chaudhuri, the founder of the Ray family to which Sukumar and Satyajit Ray belonged, so she was Sukumar's cousin and Satyajit's aunt, and belonged to a family that was to be of tremendous benefit to children's literature. In 1919, the family came to Calcutta. She was a brilliant student, standing first in her BA and MA in English literature at the University of Calcutta. She became a teacher at the Maharani Girls' School at Darjeeling in 1931, then briefly at Shantiniketan, and then finally at Ashutosh College, Calcutta. However, teaching did not agree with her, and she left to become a full-time writer. For some years, she also worked as a producer for All India Radio.

She illustrated her first story, *Lakkhichhara*, herself and submitted it to her uncle's magazine, *Sandesh*, in 1922. Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhuri had founded *Sandesh* in 1913 (the name means both a kind of sweetmeat and 'news'), and it was edited by her cousin Sukumar for some time after Upendrakishore's death in 1915. Tragically, Sukuamr too died soon after, and the magazine stopped publication for a while. It was revived by Stayajit Ray and Lila Majumdar, was closely involved with its editing until 1994. Many of her stories were written for it.

She married Sudhir Majumdar in 1933, had a son, Ranjan, in 1934 and a daughter, Kamala, in 1938. Her literary career began after her marriage, and she had to fit it around her domestic and familial responsibilities, which she writes of in her memoir, *Pakdandi*. Her first published book was *Boddi Nather Bari* (1939), but her second compilation, *Din Dupure* (1948), brought her considerable fame. Best known for her humour, she was a versatile writer and tried her hand at detective fiction, stories of the supernatural and fantasy. She also wrote a cookbook, a biography of Rabindranath Tagore, and translations of Swift and Hemingway in Bengali and a number of novels for an adult readership, including *Srimati* and *Chine Lonthon*. *Podi Pishir Bormi Baksho* is probably her best-known children's work. Satyajit Ray had plans to film it, but never got around to it; it was filmed by other hands in 1972. Her work for All India Radio led her to write *Monimala*, an epistolary novel for reading in the Women's Hour that she compered. In 1984, she was widowed.

Her book *Holde Pakhir Palok* won the West Bengal state award for children's literature, *Bak Badh Pala*, the Sangeet Natak Academy Award, *Aar Konokhane* the Rabindra Puraskar. She also won the Suresh Smriti Puraskar, Vidyasagar Puraskar, the Bhubaneswari Medal for lifetime achievement, and the Ananda Puraskar. She was awarded the *Deshikottama* by Visva Bharati University. In her later years, she grew feeble and in her eighties, gave up writing. Towards the end of her life, she found it hard to recognize people and suffered bouts of dementia. She wrote over 125 books, including a collection of short stories, five jointly authored titles, 9 translated books, and 19 edited books.

## LILA ROY (1900–1970)

Lila Roy was a revolutionary activist and teacher. She was born in Goalpara, Assam in October 1900. Her father, Girish Chandra Nag, was

a deputy magistrate, and her mother Kunjalata was educated. Her father sympathised with the nationalist movement and the idea of swadeshi. She was educated at Eden High School, and in 1921 graduated from Bethune College, coming first in her class and receiving the Padmavati Gold Medal. That same year, she became assistant secretary to the All-Bengal Women's Suffrage Committee and arranged meetings to demand women's rights. In 1923, she obtained an MA in English from Dacca University. She was then the only woman student at the university. That year, she and her friends founded the Dipali Sangha and established schools that became the centres of political discussion in which noted leaders participated. Later, in 1926, the Chhatri Sangha, an association of women students in Dacca and Kolkata, was founded.

She encouraged girls to learn skills and crafts, and their handiwork was exhibited at the schools run by the Sangha. Aware of the problem of violence against women, she started a Women's Self Protection Fund in 1927–28 for running courses on self-defense. In 1930, she opened the Chhatri Bhavan in Kolkata, a hostel for girl students who were unable to get admission elsewhere due to their anti-British leanings. She was instrumental in forming the Dacca Mahila Satyagraha Sangha, which played an active role in the anti-salt tax movement. She became the editor of a journal, *Jayashree*, which had the blessing of Rabindranath Tagore.

In 1925, she joined the Sri Sangha, a revolutionary society of Dacca. In 1929, she married Anil Baran Roy, one of her old classmates and the leader of Sri Sangha. In 1930, when Roy was arrested, she ran the organisations and later courted arrest. After her release from jail in 1937, she joined the Congress, and the next year founded the Bengal Provincial Congress Women's Organisation. She became a member of the women's subcommittee formed by Subash Chandra Bose. Later, she became a member of the central executive body of the Forward Bloc. When Bose went to jail in 1940, she was nominated as the editor of the Forward Bloc Weekly, and before leaving India, Netaji gave complete charge of party activities to Anil and Lila Roy.

In 1946, she was elected to the Indian Constituent Assembly from Bengal. She worked with the victims of the Kolkata riots and built the National Service Institute for rescue and relief work at Noakhali. In 1947, she founded the Jatiya Mahila Sanghati, a women's organization in West Bengal. In 1960, she became the chairwoman of the new party formed with the merger of the Forward Bloc (Subhasist) and the Praja Socialist Party, but was disappointed with its working. After two years, she retired from active politics. She died in June 1970, after a prolonged illness.

*Manjira Majumdar*

## LILAVATI (12TH CENTURY)

Lilavati was a mathematician and a follower of her father Bhaskaracharya, the medieval mathematician, who codified Indian mathematics and described operations upon the zero, and whose work influenced later Arab mathematicians who took the science to Europe. The first part of his *Siddhanta Shiromani*, the 'Patiganita', dealing with arithmetic, is often called the 'Lilavati' after his daughter. In this, Bhaskara's theories are presented in the form of a dialogue with his daughter, and it is clear from the text that she was an accomplished mathematician in her own right. Legend has it that she became a widow very young and Bhaskara, having tried to prevent her widowhood by astrological means, thereafter, consoled her by teaching her his skills. Bhaskara's theories were far ahead the corresponding European thought on the subject and were only surpassed in the eighteenth century in the West.

## LILAVATI MUNSHI (1899–1978)

Lilavati Munshi was a freedom fighter and politician. She was born Jain and married at the age of 14 to Lalbhai Trikamlal Sheth. The marriage was not a success, and Lilavati scandalised society when, after her husband's death in 1926, she married Kanaiyalal Munshi, a Shaiva Brahmin and a widower. From 1920, she had been associated with the freedom struggle, and this connection now grew. In 1930, she was active in the Salt Satyagraha, then the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932 and 1940. From 1931, she served in the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee, as well as the All-India Congress Committee (1931–34) and Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee (1935–37). She was a member of the Swadeshi Purchase Committee (1936) of the Bombay Government, member, Bombay Municipal Corporation (1935–45), member, Bombay Legislative Assembly (1936–52), member, Senate of the Bombay University (1937–46), president of the Harijan Sevak Sangh (1943–52), president of Hindi Vidyapith and vice president of the Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samiti, member of the Rajya Sabha (1952–58).

While serving the Bombay Municipal Corporation, she was associated with the Children's Aid Society, the Bombay Infant Welfare Society, the Society for the Protection of Children in Western India, Women's Rescue Home at Umarkhadi, Gujarati Stri Mandal, Adam Wylie Hospital, Bhagini Samaj Seva Mandir, among others. She was also president, Bombay Women's Association (1947–48), vice president, National Council of Women in India (1948–53), president, Bharatiya Stri Seva Sangha (1948–66), president, All India Women's Conference (1948–49), president, Nursing Association (1952–57), president, Mahila Ashram, Motinagar, Lucknow (1953–57). She was associated with the founding of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and auxiliary institutes. In 1964, she joined the Committee of Hosts of the International Eucharistic Congress. Her writings in Gujarati include, *Rekha Chitro ane Bija Lekhe* (Pen Portraits and Other Writings: 1925),

*Kumardevi* (A historical play, 1929), *Jeevanmanthi Jadel* (Found from Life: 1932), *Rekha Chitro—June ane Nava* (Pen Portraits—New and Old: 1935)

## LOPAMUDRA (VEDIC PERIOD)

Lopamudra is a character in the Rig Veda, but may have been based on a real woman. In the Rig Veda (I 179 1–2), we find a long conversation between her and the sage Agasthya, her husband, as quoted by Brihaddevata. According to the Mahabharata, Lopamudra was created by Agasthya and given as a daughter to the King of Vidarbha. The royal couple were delighted and gave Lopamudra the best cultural education. She was brought up in the midst of luxury. When she attained marriageable age, Agasthya, who was under vows of celibacy and poverty, asked for her return. Lopamudra agreed and, renouncing all her worldly wealth and not apparently seeing any contradiction in the marriage, left with her husband for the hermitage.

Lopamudra is credited with two stanzas in a hymn dedicated to love where a strange dialogue is portrayed. Tired of her husband's practices of austerity and continence, the wife, who had served faithfully for a long period, feels herself neglected and makes an impassioned appeal for his love and company. She writes:

For many long years in the past, both by day and by night,  
 And in the mornings, have I wearied myself serving you.  
 Now decay impairs the beauty of my limbs.  
 What then? —Let husbands approach their wives.

The ancient sages who attained truth,

And talked of truth with the very gods,  
They did beget children, but did not break their penance  
Therefore, should the wives be approached by their husbands.

The directness and passion of these verses seem to be speaking of a real woman's anguish behind the fiction.

# M

## MABELLE AROLE (1935–1999)

Mabelle Arole was a doctor. She graduated with a gold medal from Vellore Medical College and chose to work among the rural poor. While at the college, she met and later married Dr. Rajanikant Arole. They worked for a mission for two years to get experience, then set up their own practice in Wadala, near Ahmednagar, in 1962. This was a rural area with hardly any doctors. For the next four years, they roamed the district with their mobile clinic, helping and curing people, but they felt they were not doing enough. They then went to the US to study public health. Mabelle studied communicable diseases and child health while her husband studied orthopedics. In 1970, they returned to Jamkhed, a small village where their friend Bansilal Kothari had set up an NGO. There, they began working again. At first, they faced a lot of opposition, then they managed to convince one woman, Janabai, of the efficacy of their methods. Mabelle spent many weeks with Janabai, teaching her how to use a microscope and the principles of basic health. In a few months, Janabai changed her village: the rate of vaccination rose to 80% from 2% and 70% of the women had tubectomies done. In another incident, a woman who had been bitten by a snake was not allowed to enter the temple, where snakebite victims were usually taken, because she was menstruating. She went instead to Mabelle's clinic and was cured. This transformed the way the local people thought about snakebites.

She and her husband wrote *Jamkhed: A Comprehensive Rural Health Project*. Both Drs. Arole served on the Doctors for Global Health Advisory Council from 1998. A Boston-based NGO, John Snow, Inc.

Research and Training Institute, has set up a fellowship in Mabelle's memory for US premedical students to work in India for a year.

## **MAHADEVI AKKA (1130–1160)**

Mahadevi (called 'Akka', meaning big sister) was a poet and mystic of Karnataka. She belonged to the sect of the Virashaivas, or Lingayats, an important Shaivite Bhakti cult of the twelfth century in Karnataka. Her poems or vachanas in Kannada, mostly addressed to Shiva, as 'Chennamallikarjuna', are intensely mystical and individual.

She was born to a religious upper-class Virashaiva family at Udutadi, a town then ruled by a Jain prince, Kaushika. Mahadevi was very beautiful, with exceptionally long, shiny hair. The king, smitten by her beauty, sent a proposal of marriage to her parents, who practised the Shaiva faith of devotion to the god Shiva, a faith incompatible in many tenets with the teachings of Jainism. Mahadevi, fearful that if she refused him, the king's displeasure would come down upon her parents, renounced the world and fled to the Virashaiva headquarters at Kalyani in a quest for refuge and spiritual guidance. Here, with uncommon courage and resolute will, she pursued her faith. Her mad appearance and her nudity, which was covered with nothing more than her long hair, evoked many comments and criticisms. But when someone rebuked her for roaming naked, she answered,

To the shameless girl

Wearing the white Jasmine Lord's

Light of morning,

You fool,

Where's the need for cover and jewel?

This poem is included in A.K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva* (London: Penguin, 1973). Finally, Akka Mahadevi convinced the Virashaivas of her spiritual purity and grasp of Shaivite philosophy, and was accepted into the group of saints, becoming an initiate of the poet and mystic Allamma Prabhu. In all, she wrote about 340 vachanas or short poems.

After staying for some time at Kalyani, it is said that Mahadevi became impatient for complete union with Shiva, her elusive lover. Basaveshwara, the founder of the Lingayat cult, was deeply moved by the young saint's spiritual purity and search for perfection and blessed her. Taking leave of him, Mahadevi went to Srisailam, a sacred hill said to be the abode of Shiva in his manifestation of Chenna Mallikarjuna (meaning either white jasmine, or white Mallika's Arjuna), a name that occurs in nearly all her poems to Shiva and is something of a signature mark. It is said that in 1166 at Srisailam, she realised God in His supreme form and experienced mystic union with the formless.

Mahadevi wrote in the Kannada language and is credited with the authorship of many lyrical compositions, including *Yogangatrividhi*, *Srithiya Vachana* and *Akkagal Pithike*. The story of her life is narrated in the *Mahadeviyakkana Purana*. An idol of Akkamahadevi is worshipped at a temple at her birthplace, Udatadi.

## MAHADEVI VARMA (1907–1987)

Mahadevi Varma was a Hindi poet. Along with Jai Shankar Prasad, Nirala, and Sumitranandan Pant, she was one of the big four of *chhayavad*, the Romantic Movement in Hindi poetry. She was born on the day of Holi in 1907 at Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh, to a simple orthodox mother and an Arya Samajist father. She was educated at a missionary school, while at home she was tutored in Hindi, Urdu and the fine arts. She started composing poems at the age of seven

and discovered and used blank verse at the age of eight. Her parents encouraged her, but they had to bow to prevailing custom, and she was married at the age of nine to Dr. Swarup Narain Varma, though she was allowed to stay and carry on her education at her parents' home. In 1919, she joined Crossthwaite Girls School in Allahabad. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan was a few years her senior there. She did her B.A. in 1929, and in 1932, completed her M.A. in Sanskrit from Allahabad University. After graduation, she refused to go to live with her husband. Instead, she became the principal of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapith and began editing the Hindi magazine *Chand*.

She had participated in poetry soirées even while in school, and when she was in college, critics and readers acknowledged her as a poet and writer of note. Most of the poems in *Nihar*, her first book of verse, were written before she passed her matriculation exam. Published in 1930, *Nihar* is perhaps the first book of modern Hindi verse, which embarks on a spiritual quest and expresses the pain of traversing this lonely path. Here, nature is seen as a reflection of the soul and a manifestation of the mystery of God. Then in 1932 *Rashmi*, in 1934 *Neerja*, for which she received the Seksaria Award, and *Sandhya Geet* followed, which were all progressive steps culminating in *Deepshikha*. She was made a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly in 1952 in recognition of her part in the freedom struggle. In 1956, she received the Padma Bhushan. She was appointed Vice Chancellor of Prayag Mahila Vidyapith in 1960. Her husband died in 1966, and she decided to shift permanently to Allahabad. She was the first woman to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 1979. Her poetry collection *Yama* (1940) received the Bhartiya Jnanpith Award in 1982. She was an equally well-known writer of prose. Her work, *Srinkhala Ki Kariyan*, *Atit Ke Chalchitra*, is much esteemed.

Rita Dalmiya

## MAHAPAJAPATI GOTAMI (6TH CENTURY BCE)

Mahapajapati Gotami was Buddha's aunt and brought him up after his mother Mahamaya, died bearing him. She also persuaded the Buddha, who allowed women to be initiated as *bhikkhunis*, or nuns of the Buddhist order.

Mahapajapati was the daughter of Suppabuddha of the Shakyan village of Devadaha. She and her sister Mahamaya were married together to King Suddhodana, and after the death of her sister, she became the chief queen. She had two children of her own, Sunanda and Nandasundari, to look after, besides Siddhartha. The story of how the young prince of Kapilavastu left home in search of enlightenment and meditated till he attained it at the age of 35, is well known. He then became the Buddha, dedicated to spreading his message among mankind. He admitted disciples as *bhikkhus*, or mendicant monks, and by making them members of the *sangha*.

After King Suddhodana's death and a civil war, which left many women of Kapilavastu widows, Mahapajapati, along with five hundred such women, with cropped hair and yellow robes, arrived at Vaishali asking to be initiated into the *sangha*, but the Buddha refused. Mahapajapati requested Ananda, the favourite disciple of Buddha and a senior *bhikku*, to plead their case. On the third petition, Buddha agreed and permitted women to become Buddhist *bhikkhunis*. After her ordination, Mahapajapati became an active worker for the *sangha*. It is said that she lived to the age of 120 and was recognised as a *rattannunam*, or jewel soul. The *Therigatha* attributes many *gathas* to her.

## MAHASWETA DEVI (1926–2016)

Mahasweta Devi was an eminent Bengali writer, social activist, and a public intellectual whose literary oeuvre and grassroots activism left an indelible mark on Indian literature and society. Widely translated into English and several other languages, her works highlight the plight, dignity, and resistance of India's marginalized communities—especially the tribal populations such as the Lodha and Shabar of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. A committed leftist, Mahasweta Devi dedicated her life to advocating for the rights and empowerment of Adivasis, Dalits, and women, intertwining literature with a deep sense of social justice.

Born on 14 January 1926 into a Bengali Brahmin family in Dacca, British India (now Dhaka, Bangladesh), Mahasweta Devi was raised in an intellectually vibrant environment. Her father, Manish Ghatak, a noted poet and novelist associated with the *Kallol* literary movement, wrote under the pseudonym *Jubanashwa*. Her mother, Dharitri Devi, was also a writer and social worker. She was the niece of the legendary filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, further rooting her upbringing in a rich tradition of art and activism.

Devi received her early education at Eden Montessori School in Dhaka and later at Mission Girls' High School in Midnapore, West Bengal. She completed her undergraduate studies in English at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan—founded by Rabindranath Tagore—and went on to obtain a master's degree in English Literature from Calcutta University. In 1947, she married Bijon Bhattacharya, a renowned playwright and one of the founding members of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

Over her prolific career, Mahasweta Devi authored more than 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories, many of which bear testimony to her lifelong engagement with issues of class, caste, and gender oppression. Her first novel, *Jhansir Rani* (1956), a biographical

narrative of Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi, marked the beginning of a powerful literary journey. Among her most celebrated works are *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest)* and *Rudaali* which was adapted for a film and theatre.

She received in 1979 Sahitya Akademi Award (Bengali), 1986 Padma Shri for Social Work, 1996 Jnanpith Award, 1997 Ramon Magsaysay Award, 2006 Padma Vibhushan, 2011 SAARC Literary Award, 2014 Banga Vibhushan – the highest civilian award from the Government of West Bengal, 2018 Mamoni Raisom Goswami National Award for Literature constituted by Asam Sahitya Sabha. Google commemorated her 92nd birth anniversary with a dedicated Doodle, celebrating her legacy as a fearless writer and activist.

Mahasweta Devi's life remains a compelling example of how literature can serve as a powerful medium of resistance and change. Through her pen and public engagement, she championed the causes of the voiceless and challenged the conscience of the nation.

## MAITREYI (VEDIC PERIOD)

Maitreyi was a hymn-writer. The *Rig Veda* contains about 1,000 hymns, of which about 10 are attributed to her. Yajnavalkya, the famous sage and philosopher, had two wives, Maitreyi and Katyayani. In chapter IV of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, a conversation between Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya has been recorded. Maitreyi was a brahmavadini, while Katyayani possessed the knowledge of ordinary women. When the sage decided to renounce the world and embrace the monastic ideal, he wished to make a settlement of his worldly goods between his two wives. On hearing, this Maitreyi asks her husband, 'My lord, if this entire earth, full of wealth, belonged to me, tell me, should it make me immortal?'

Yajnavalkya replied, 'No: like the life of rich people will be thy life; but there is no hope for immortality by wealth.'

At this, Maitreyi said, 'What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal? What my Lord knows [of immortality] may he tell that to me.'

Yajnavalkya, pleased with this, explained to Maitreyi his doctrine of atman and imparted to her the knowledge of Advaita Brahman, as a means to immortality, which forms the highest teachings of the Upanishad. 'For if there be, as it were, two beings, then the one sees the other, that one hears, perceives and knows the other. But if one divine self be the whole of all this, whom or through whom should he see, hear, perceive or know? .... This thou hast seen taught, this is immortality.'

## **MALATI CHOUDHURY (1904–1998)**

Malati Choudhury was a freedom fighter. She was born to a Brahmo couple, Kumud Nath Sen and Snehadata Sen. They were from Kamarakhanda in Bikrampur, Dhaka, but had settled in Simultala, Bihar. Her father, a barrister, died when she was only two and a half years old, and she was brought up by her mother, a writer and translator. Her mother's father, Beharilal Gupta, had been an ICS officer, and her brothers and cousins later became important civil servants too. In 1921, at the age of 16, she was admitted to Visva Bharati in Shantiniketan. This opened her horizons and exposed her to teachers and students of international repute. There she met Nabakrushna Choudhury, brother of Gopabandhu Choudhury, who came from Sabarmati Ashram to study at Shantiniketan. They were married in 1927 and settled in a small village in Orissa, where they worked to help sugarcane farmers improve their lot. However, their involvement with the Congress grew until they began to work full-time in 1933. That year, they organized

the Utkal Congress Samajvadi Karmi Sangh, which later became the Orissa branch of the All-India Congress Socialist Party. They were arrested and imprisoned.

In 1934, Malati joined Gandhiji in his famous padayatra in Orissa. In 1946, Malati Choudhury set up the Bajiraut Chhatravas (students' hostel) for the children of freedom fighters and tribals at Angul in Orissa and the Utkal Navajeevan Mandal in 1948 at Angul in Orissa. She also founded the Post Basic School at Champatimunda. She accompanied Acharya Vinoba Bhave during his journeys through Orissa for the Bhoodan Movement and went with Gandhiji during his Noakhali visit. She led the Krisaka Andolan to save poor farmers from abuse by landowners and moneylenders. In 1946, she was selected as a member of the Constituent Assembly of India and became president of the Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee.

After independence, she continued to fight for the cause of backward classes. When her husband became the Chief Minister of Orissa in 1951, she launched various rural reconstruction schemes. She was imprisoned during the Emergency. She received the National Award for Child Welfare (1987), the Utkal Seva Sammaan (1994), the Tagore Literacy Award (1995), the Deshikottama (D.Litt. Honoris Causa) from Visva Bharati. She refused the Jamnalal Bajaj Award from the hands of Rajiv Gandhi, because she thought he did nothing to promote Gandhian values.

## **MALIKA PUKHRAJ (1912–2004)**

Malika Pukhraj was a Hindustani classical singer. She was born in a remote village in Akhnoor in the then Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. Her mother left her father, who ran gambling dens in Jammu, before Malika was born. Determined that her daughter should become 'famous', her mother later patched up with him so that her daughter

could be educated in Jammu. Finding that Jammu did not have enough skilled teachers, she took Malika to Delhi, where the young girl learnt the Kathak dance form and polished her Urdu. Malika began to sing in Delhi and was soon earning enough to support the two of them. She was taught by Ustad Allah Buksh, the father of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

The new Raja of Kashmir, Hari Singh, was crowned in 1923, and Malika and her mother returned to Kashmir for the event. Delighted that a native Kashmiri had learned music, the new Raja invited Malika to sing at his coronation and retained her as a court singer on a generous salary. Hari Singh was fascinated by this self-possessed, poised young woman, a fact that did not escape comment in court. The king supervised every detail of Malika Pukhraj's life, including her friends, her singing engagements, and her leisure hours. Malika denied that there was any romantic interest, but tongues continued to wag. She was often the only woman at the evening soirees. The court was a Hindu-majority while the people were mostly Muslims. Certain sections of the public began to say that the Hindu king was taking advantage of his Muslim protégée. Muckraking journalists, such as Diwan Singh Maftun, the editor of the scandal sheet *Riyasat*, made much of her story. Maftun disliked *tawaiifs*, and in Malika, he found an easy target, even suggesting that she was plotting to kill the king.

Amid scandal, she was compelled to leave Kashmir and settle in Lahore. There, people came from far and wide to hear her sing. Her memoirs contain many such interesting snippets, but they do not tell the whole truth, for both her family, who had achieved respectability, and her many male patrons did not want all the truth told. In recognition of her contribution to music, she had received the Presidential Pride of Performance Award and the Legend of Voice from the All-India Radio in the mid-1980s in Pakistan. Her daughter Tahira Syed is a singer in her own right. Her late husband, Syed Shabir Hussain, was a bureaucrat and a wellknown literary figure.

## MALLINATH (19TH JAIN TIRTHANKARA)

Mallinath was the nineteenth Tirthankara of the Jain faith. According to the Jains, their faith has been revealed through the successive ages of the world by the Tirthankaras, each of whom attained perfection and absolute freedom and then preached Jainism to the world. Perhaps it was her disciples who, finding in their guru the characteristics of a prince, gave Malli the name 'Mallinath'. According to the Svetambara Jain canons, Princess Malli was the daughter of King Kumbha of Mithila (in modern Bihar) and Queen Padmavati or Prabhavati. Her fame attracted marriage proposals from the kings of Kosala, Anga, Kashi, Kunala, Kuru and Panchala. When Kumbha refused their proposals, they jointly attacked Mithila. Although Kumbha fought valiantly, it was an unequal siege.

Malli did not want her people to face defeat because of her, so she invited the kings to her apartment. There, they saw a beautiful golden statue of her, so lifelike that they at first mistook it for the real Malli and were taken aback by its beauty. Malli had the hollow statue made earlier and had dropped food into its mouth every day, and while the kings were enthralled by her statue, she opened its casing, releasing a foul smell from the stale food inside. They were repulsed. She then compared the statue to her own self, saying that beneath her external charms lay a similar filthy, transitory arrangement of matter. She also declared her intention to renounce the world. She made the princes realise that the way to genuine happiness lay not in enjoyment but in meditation and the practice of austerity. She soon had many followers. By her excellent conduct, she came to be acknowledged as a Tirthankara. She observed that in gatherings the men sat in the front rows while the women sat behind them; she changed this pattern, and since then in Jain assemblies the women sit in front and the men at the back. She died at an advanced age at Shikharji, in the Parasnath Hills.

*Reena Jain*

## MANIBEN KARA (1905–1979)

Maniben Kara was a social worker and trade unionist. She was born in Bombay into an upper-middle-class family. Her father was a social reformer and Arya Samajist and believed in progress and women's education. She attended St Columba High School, Gamdevi, a missionary school famous for social service. She was impressed by the dedication with which the Principal of the school carried out social work, and she wished to follow suit, but her studies suffered, and she could not complete her Matriculation. So her father sent her to England for studies, and she did a diploma course in Social Science at Birmingham University.

She returned to India in 1929, and organized the Seva Mandir in Mumbai and started a printing press. She came into contact with the Radical Democratic Party. She published *Independent India* for M.N. Roy. She met N.M. Joshi, the father of the trade union movement in India. She began working in the slums of the Bombay Improvement Trust where conservancy workers lived. There she taught women and children hygiene and basic literacy. She formed a Mother's Club and a Health Care Centre and started training volunteer workers to teach women good parenting skills and to send children to school. Inevitably, her work with these marginal people led her to understand the importance of trade unions. She began unionizing port and dockside workers, then textile workers and tailors. She led a series of strikes. Maniben joined the All-India Trade Union Congress and urged workers to fight for the freedom of the country as they fought for their demands. She was arrested on May Day in 1932 and put in virtual solitary confinement. After Independence in 1946, she was nominated to the Central Legislative Assembly with a labour portfolio. The National Council of Women and others who had stuck to applying the traditional definition of social work frowned upon her work. She was also involved with the All-India Railwaymen's Federation, the

Hind Mazdoor Sabha, and was a founder member of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

## MANIKUNTALA SEN (1911–1987)

Manikuntala Sen was a freedom fighter and one of the first women to join the Communist Party of India. She was brought up in Barishal, of which she writes movingly in her memoir *Shediner Katha*, translated as *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*. She grew up in a strict and religious household, but came under the influence of the many freethinkers and revolutionaries who were then active in Barishal, among them Ashwinikumar Dutta, Kailash Chandra Sen, Amiya Dasgupta, Amrita Nag and Jagadish Acharya. As a child, she witnessed the *jatras* of the poet Mukunda Das with their anti-British message, and slowly this brought her closer to the communist fold. She met Gandhiji in 1933 and was impressed by how he exhorted a group of prostitutes to work for the liberation of the country. She taught for some time at a girls' school where she met Shantisudha Ghosh, a member of the extremist Jugantar party. She came under their influence and became convinced of the need for resistance to the British when she saw Shantisudha Ghosh being harassed by the police. She persuaded her family to allow her to go to Calcutta to study.

Always sensitive to the realities of women's lives, she gives a frank account of her experiences in Calcutta as a young student, the harassment she faced from men, and how she and her friends dealt with this. She contacted the Communist Party only to find that the 'real' party was underground (in Barishal, in fact) and she had joined an ineffective rump group. She began travelling in the countryside for party work. There she found that the men regarded her with suspicion, and the women would not break *purdah* to talk to her. She had to work with great patience to get the people to overcome their suspicions of her.

She worked hard for famine relief in 1942 and 1943, visiting outlying villages and enduring great hardship. She helped found the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti as she believed in the need for women to defend themselves; she gives a telling account of how she and a friend were caught in an air raid in Dalhousie and rescued by some soldiers who then wanted to molest them as 'payment'. After Independence, she met and married fellow Communist Jolly Kaul, a Kashmiri. She also acted on the stage with Shambhu Mitra and others. She was elected to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from the Kalighat constituency in 1952, campaigned for the Hindu Code Bill and clashed with rightwing leaders. But she soon realized that the Party itself had an inherent bias against women and that she would not be allowed to rise much further in the hierarchy. In 1962, the war with China caused deep rifts to appear in the Communist Party of India, leading to a split. Unable to choose a faction to adhere to, Jolly Kaul resigned, and Manikuntala withdrew from active politics.

## **MANJUSHREE CHAKI SARKAR (1934–1999)**

Manjushree Chaki Sarkar was a dancer and choreographer. She invented the dance form called Navanritya. Born Manjushree Chaki in Pabna, now in Bangladesh, she suffered the trauma of Partition when her family had to relocate to Kolkata in 1947. She was at the Presidency College from 1951 to 1953, and this was the turning point in her life. She realised that she wanted to dance, and her technical training was now lit from within by a burning desire to express herself through the medium.

In 1958, she got married and spent some years in Africa, where her daughter Ranjabati (q.v.) was born. She started a school of dance there. In the States, she lived for a time in New York. There, she was exposed to new developments in modern dance, pioneered by Martha

Graham and Merce Cunningham. Manjushree used to attend modern dance classes wearing leotards under her sari. She once again founded her own school of dance, where she began developing the form that was to become Navanritya, and also got her doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University. Navanrityam techniques draw on the major classical traditions of India, along with folk forms such as chhau, thang-ta and the Kandyan form of Sri Lanka.

To develop her dance further, she returned to Kolkata in 1979. With her daughter Ranjabati Sarkar and her troupe, now called Dancers' Guild, she did a great deal of research and codification of the dance style and presented many choreographic productions. Several of the former members of the Dancers' Guild have gone on to form their own troupes. Works include *Tomari Matir Kanya*, a version of Tagore's *Chandalika*, *Aranya Amrita*, based on legends of the Bishnois, *Krouncho Katha*, *Parama Prakriti*, and *She Said*, Ranjabati's last unfinished work.

Manjushree was awarded the Shiromani Puraskar, the Uday Shankar Puraskar and the Sangeet Natak Academy award in 1994. Her death robbed Kolkata of a colourful personality and modern dance of one of its most inventive proponents. Dancers' Guild continues to function under Jonaki Sarkar. It has trained over five hundred students.

## **MARGARET COUSINS (1878–1954)**

Margaret Cousins was an activist and freedom fighter. Born at Boyle in County Roscommon, Margaret was educated there and in Derry. She studied music at the Royal Irish Academy and worked briefly as a teacher. In 1903, she married the poet and philosopher James H. Cousins, who shared her interest in theosophy. In 1908, she played an active role in the Women's Suffrage Movement in Ireland and England. That year, James became a Theosophist. She joined the Irish Women's Franchise League, and in 1910, went as a delegate to the

Parliament of Women in London, where she was briefly imprisoned for throwing stones at 10 Downing Street. In 1915, James got an offer to come to Madras and edit Annie Besant's *New India*; Margaret decided to accompany him and work for the Society.

Soon after her arrival, she began to take a keen interest in all matters related to improving the status of women. She was the first non-Indian member of the Indian Women's University, Puné, in 1916. She envisioned and established in 1917 the first women's organization in India, the Women's Indian Association, with 2,100 members in the Madras Presidency alone, which she used very effectively to exert pressure on the government to grant voting rights to Indian women. The association, of which more than 40 branches were established, prefigured the All-India Women's Conference, which came into being in 1926.

The year 1918 was a watershed for the women's movement in India, with a delegation of women, including Margaret, meeting Edwin Montagu and Lord Chelmsford to demand greater reforms for women. That same year, women were granted, though conditionally, the right to vote, and in 1926, she saw to it that they were also granted the right to stand for election to the Vidhan Sabha of Madras. This ensured that they could both vote as women and vote for other women. Margaret also edited the journal *Stree Dharma* for many years. In 1932, she protested the government's policy of rule by ordinance and went to jail for a year. There she used to lead other prisoners in singing Annie Besant's nationalist revision of the British national anthem—'*God Save Our Motherland*'. She contributed to the founding of Lady Irwin College in Delhi, and helped in setting up many smaller schools, colleges and foundations. In 1936, she served as president of the AIWC. She organised many institutions like the Madras Seva Sadan and the Children's Aid Society. She organised a women's deputation to Mr. E.S. Montagu, Secretary of State for India, at Madras, which made the first demand for franchise for women in India. In 1943, she

was struck down by paralysis, and many admirers came to her aid with support and sympathy.

*Amita Sahaya*

## **MARY POONEN LUKOSE (1886–1976)**

Mary Poonen Lukose was a doctor and the first woman Surgeon General of India. Her father was Dr. T.E. Poonen, the first graduate in medicine from Kerala. He got his degree from Aberdeen University in the UK and was the Royal Physician of Travancore. Mary aspired to be a doctor like her father. She secured a first class and won a gold medal in her high school examination, but was denied admission to the science course of the Maharaja College, Tiruvananthapuram, because she was a woman. Instead, she became the first woman graduate in arts from Madras University in 1909. Nevertheless, she remained resolved to become a doctor and so went to London University to study science. She was the first Indian student to join London University's MBBS course. She also passed the London Music Examination at the age of 18.

She then opted for postgraduate study in obstetrics and gynecology at the famous Rotunda Hospital in Dublin and trained in paediatrics at the Children's Hospital, Great Ormond Street, London. Meanwhile, her father died, and she had to return to India in 1915. In 1916, she was appointed obstetrician of W&C Hospital, Thaikadu, becoming the first Indian to hold the post. She continued there till 1917, often having to do Caesarian sections by the light of a hurricane lamp. In two years, she did more than a thousand such operations. She set up training centres for nurses. In the first batch, the daughters of local *dais* or traditional birth attendants joined the course. Gradually, the scheme became extremely popular, and a network of training centres emerged. She went into politics, and in 1922, she became the first woman legislator in Travancore. In 1924, she was put in charge of

the State Health Department of Travancore. In 1938, she became the first woman Surgeon General, not only of India but the world. She established the tuberculosis sanitarium at Nagercoil. She married K.K. Lukose, a lawyer. She was given the title of Vaidyasasthrakusala by Chithira Thirunal. She was President of the YWCA for 50 years and Chief Commissioner of the Girl Guides in India.

## **MATANGINI HAZRA (1870–1942)**

Matangini Hazra was a freedom fighter and martyr to British bullets. In tableaux depicting the freedom struggle, there is often a representation of an old woman with her white hair streaming, carrying the flag of India and leading a crowd of people. This was Matangini Hazra. She was a child widow eking out a humble existence on the margins of society, yet at the end of her life, she felt the call to fight for Independence so strongly that she repeatedly challenged the authority of the British Raj in its name, finally laying down her life for the cause.

She was born Matangini Maity to a poor peasant family in a small village, Hogla, in Tamruk in the Midnapore district of West Bengal. She was unlettered. To secure her future, her father got her married while still a child to Trilochan Hazra, a prosperous 62-year-old widower with a son. Subsequently, she became a widow at the age of 18, returning to live with her father, but later moving to a hut near her husband's former home. She lived a pious life, often helping others in distress. On 26 January 1932, which came to be known during the freedom struggle as Independence Day, a procession was taken out in her village, mostly attended by men. When it passed her hut, she came out and joined it, vowing to fight for the freedom of her country. She was then 62. It was a momentous decision to take at such an age, but she stuck to it with total faith and fortitude.

That year, she joined the Salt Satyagraha, travelling on foot to attend various Congress meetings, interacting with many Congressmen and clashing with the authorities on several occasions. She managed to slip through a heavy police cordon and hoist the national flag over the Tamluk court before she was caught and severely beaten. She gave up opium, which she took because of her painful gout, saying that she would much rather die for her country than from any drug or disease. Despite her poor eyesight, she regularly spun and wore *khadi*. She was jailed more than once, but the police were embarrassed to detain her for more than a few hours because of her sex and age. In 1933 Sir John Anderson, then Governor of Bengal, came to Tamluk to address a well-screened gathering, but in spite of security, Matangini managed to stage a black flag demonstration in front of the dais. She was sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment, no trifling burden for a woman of her years. Her jail term allowed her to come in contact with many other political detenus, and to learn more about the freedom movement. She was powerfully attracted to Gandhi's ideas, and on her release, began to practice them faithfully. This earned her the nickname 'Gandhi Buri' or 'Granny Gandhi' in Midnapore.

On 29 September 1942, she asked the local leadership to allow her to lead a procession to capture the Tamluk court and police station, but her request was turned down due to her age. Her chance came when, amid the chaos, the villagers were ordered to halt by bayonet-clutching British soldiers. Matangini took the lead and prevailed upon the villagers not to falter or waver. Bullets soon followed, and this brave woman, at the age of 72, died with the words '*Bande Mataram*' on her lips, holding the Indian flag. In 1977, the Government of West Bengal erected a statue to her in Kolkata.

## MAVIS DUNN LYGDOH (1906–1962)

Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was the first woman in India to become a cabinet minister. She was born on 4 June 1906, to H. Dunn and Ka Helibon Lyngdoh, Presbyterian Christians of moderate means. Her father's brother, Edward W. Dunn, had been made a Member of the British Empire in recognition of his services to civil engineering. She studied at the Welsh Mission Girls' School, Shillong, the Diocesan College and the Bethune College, Kolkata, where she obtained her BT degree. While in Kolkata, she first met Mahatma Gandhi. She was also the first Khasi woman to qualify to practice law from the University Law College, Guwahati.

Her political career began in 1937 when she was elected a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly as an independent candidate, the first woman to accomplish this. In 1939, Sir Mohammed Syed Saadulla invited her to join his government as a cabinet minister. She did so, becoming the first woman to attain this post at the young age of 33. She held the health portfolio and was able to open the posts of nurses in government hospitals to all trained women, whether they had learned their skills in public or private institutions. This was of great benefit to the Northeast, as there were no state training schools for nurses there.

Mavis was defeated in the elections of 1946 and largely retired from politics, but continued to be active in social work. Throughout her career, she stayed away from party politics, and while this prevented her from being embroiled in the conflicts that often arose within parties, it also meant that she was confined to the sidelines of political action. She was associated with the Government of Assam after independence in an advisory capacity. Just before the end of her life, she toured the West, giving lectures in the US and UK. She was tall and attractive, with a cultured taste and style and a modern way of living; she never married and was the first Khasi woman to drive a car. Her example gave independent India hope that women from marginalized communities might come forward and make their mark in public life.

## MEENA KUMARI (1933–1972)

Meena Kumari was a film actor. She was born, Mahjabeen Bano, the third daughter of Ali Baksh and Iqbal Begum, formerly Prabhawati Devi; she converted from Hinduism to Islam after marriage.

When Mahjabeen embarked on her acting career at the age of seven, she was renamed Baby Meena. *Farzand-e-Watan* or *Leatherface* (1939) was her first movie, which was directed for Prakash Studios by Vijay Bhatt. She became practically the sole breadwinner for her family during the 1940s. Her early adult acting, under the name Meena Kumari, was mainly in mythological movies like *Veer Ghatotkach* (1949), *Shri Ganesh Mahima* (1950), and fantasy movies like *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1952). She took her stage name from Vijay Bhatt's popular musical *Baiju Bawra*, which shot her to fame in 1952. She came to films at a time when talent was superceding glamour; those who came with her were Nargis (q.v.), Nimmi, Suchitra Sen and Nutan (q.v.). Within a year of *Baiju Bawra*, Meena had starred in three hit films, *Daera*, *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Parineeta*. She also acted in popular films like *Mere Apne* and *Dushman*, in which she co-starred with Dharmendra and others.

Her role in *Parineeta* provided the typecasting she was never quite able to shake off, of a tormented, self-torturing woman; tragedy became her forte, though it hid a grimmer reality as alcohol problems and depression began to take their toll. Though her roles tended to lack distinction, she brought to them a powerful acting skill and poetic sensibility; she was a poet in her own right, and after her death, a volume of her Urdu poetry was published under her pen name of Naaz. Besides being a top-notch actor, she was a talented poet, and recorded a disc of her Urdu poems, *I write, I recite* with music by Khayyam. Her last big hit was *Pakeezah*, directed by her ex-husband Kamal Amrohi and released shortly before her tragic death. She became the first actress to win the Filmfare Best Actress Award in 1953 for *Baiju Bawra* in 1962. She won the award again in 1954 for *Parineeta*. She made history by

being nominated for three *Filmfare* Best Actress Awards for her roles in *Aarti*, *Main Chup Rahungi*, and *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*.

## MEERA MUKHERJEE (1923–1998)

Meera Mukherjee was one of India's most celebrated modern sculptors, renowned for her groundbreaking work in bronze and her deep engagement with traditional craft techniques. Seamlessly blending tribal and folk traditions with a modern artistic sensibility, she created a distinct visual language that positioned her among the foremost figures in Indian contemporary art.

Born in 1923 in Kolkata, Meera Mukherjee began her artistic journey at the young age of 14, training at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in the Bengal School style. She later pursued formal education at Delhi Polytechnic, earning diplomas in painting, graphics, and sculpture. In 1953, she received an Indo-German scholarship to study in Munich, where she came under the influence of noted sculptors such as Toni Stadler. This period marked her decisive shift from painting to sculpture.

Mukherjee's artistic trajectory was profoundly transformed through her interaction with Dhokra craftsmen in Bastar and Jharkhand. She immersed herself in the lost-wax (*cire-perdue*) technique of metal casting, which she elevated from craft to fine art, imbuing it with narrative, rhythm, and spiritual grace. She innovated a personal bronze-casting process, the result of which was a malleable, lyrical finish that retained a tactile, earthy quality.

Her sculptures are deeply expressive, often depicting everyday lives imbued with dignity, grace, and cultural resonance. Key works include: *The Musician*, *The Singer*, *Fisherwoman*, *Mother and Child*.

One of her most monumental works is *Ashoka at Kalinga*, a large-scale bronze at ITC Maurya Hotel, New Delhi.

Beyond her sculptural practice, Mukherjee was a scholar, writer, and cultural documentarian. She travelled extensively across India and Nepal, documenting traditional metal crafts and advocating for the artistic agency of rural artisans. As a Senior Research Fellow at the Anthropological Survey of India (1961–64), she systematically recorded the nuances of indigenous craft traditions.

Her writings include *Metal Craftsmen of India* (1979), *In Search of Viswakarma* (1994), Children’s literature, such as *Little Flower Shefali and Other Stories*, capturing everyday themes through simple narratives.

Mukherjee received numerous awards and fellowships, including the President’s Master Craftsman Award (1968), Abanindra Prize (1981), Emeritus Fellowship (1984–86), Padma Shri (1992), Fellowships from Lalit Kala Akademi and the Asian Cultural Council.

Her works are housed in prominent collections, including the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and Lalit Kala Academy. Meera Mukherjee passed away in 1998 at the age of 75, leaving behind a profound legacy that fused traditional craftsmanship with modern expression, cultural outreach, and literary depth. Her work continues to resonate for its integrity, warmth, and soulful connection to Indian life and art.

## **MEHERBAI TATA (1879–1931)**

Meherbai Tata was a social worker and philanthropist. Her father was the educationist H.J. Bhaba, who had personally supervised his daughter’s education and introduced her to European ideas and people. She was beautiful and accomplished, and had a love for English

literature and playing the piano. She married Sir Dorabji Tata, the eldest son of Sir Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata and elder brother of J.R.D. Tata. She was thus uniquely placed to advance the cause of women, belonging to one of India's foremost families, and having access to the drawing rooms of Europe as well as the palaces of India.

In 1904, six years after her marriage, she went on a tour of Europe and was struck by European women's commitment to social work. She felt that a network of women's clubs should be formed among well-to-do Indian women as well. In 1905, she organized an exhibition of women's crafts as part of the Industrial Exhibition in Bombay. But she also exhorted her compatriots to show an active interest in social problems, to visit the slums and talk to poor women rather than set up homes and orphanages.

In 1917, she led a large delegation of women to the Viceroy to protest the condition of indentured labourers in the colonies. She blamed *pardah*, caste differences and lack of education for the divisions between women and their inability to associate with each other and produce social change. Under her aegis, the National Council of Indian Women was formed in 1929. Those who joined were, like Lady Tata, wives of powerful men who could use their husbands' wealth and status for social work, but unlike Lady Tata, they did not feel the necessity of making links with slum women. Thus, the pattern of the Council's work came ever closer to the social work undertaken by 'society' ladies in Europe, in spite of Lady Tata's rather different intentions.

She was a keen sportswoman and especially enjoyed tennis and riding. When playing games, she always wore a sari and was dismissive of women who played in Western clothes. In 1912, she became the first Indian woman to fly. She also drove her own car. She died of leukaemia in 1931. Shortly after her death, Dorabji established the Lady Tata Memorial Trust to help advance the study of diseases of the blood.

## MINAL DEVI (11TH CENTURY)

Minal Devi or Mayanalla, a famous queen of the eleventh century Gujarat, is remembered as an able and just administrator. She was the daughter of Jayakeshin, a king of the Kadamba dynasty in Karnataka and was married to Karna I, a Chalukya king of Anahillapatanawada who met an early death, leaving his queen and young son Siddharaja, Jayasimha. Minal Devi acted as regent for her son, who went on to become a legendary hero. An incident described in Rajashekhar Suri's *Prabandha Kosha* testifies to the fact that she inspired him in many of his warlike exploits. She also managed affairs of state, built several monuments and lakes, and was responsible for the remission of the tax on pilgrims visiting the Somnath temple. Two lakes built in her period were Minalasar or Munsar near Viramgam and Malva at Dhavalakka or Dholka in Ahmedabad. According to legend, there was a house owned by a woman at the proposed site of the lake Malva, which needed to be demolished to give the lake a regular shape. The queen offered a big sum of money to the woman for her house, but she refused, saying, 'I shall be famous with your lake,' thus threatening to sacrifice her life if her house was touched. The queen did not coerce her, showing herself to be a just ruler. This event led to the Gujarati saying: 'If you want to see justice, go to Dholka and have a look at Malva lake.'

Minal Devi is mentioned with high esteem in contemporary literature. A Sanskrit play entitled *Mudritakumudachandra-prakarana* depicts a learned dispute between the Digambaras and Svetambaras, the two major Jain sects. One topic in this dispute is whether a woman can achieve salvation. The Svetambaras here claim that women possessing *sattwa* (identity: an inner quality of goodness) could attain salvation and cite Sita from mythology and Minal Devi in the court of Siddharaja Jayasimha as examples.

## MIRA BAI (1498–1547)

Mira Bai was a Bhakti singer and mystic. The much-loved daughter of Rana Ratan Singh, Mira was born in a village called Kurki in Mewar but lost her parents early and was brought up by her grandfather, Rao Duda in the fortress city of Merta in Mewar. It is said that at the age of five, she was given a *vigraha*, a statue of Lord Krishna, by a mendicant, and became firmly convinced that Krishna was to be her husband. In accordance with royal custom, she was married in 1516 to Prince Bhojraj, son of Rana Sanga, ruler of the Sisodiya clan of Mewar. It was not easy for Mira to reconcile her worldly role with her divine longings. She remained firm in her convictions through many ordeals, and none could dissuade her from following her own way. She spent most of her time singing devotional songs in the palace temple.

In 1521, Bhojraj died, soon followed by Rana Sanga. Mira refused to lead the secluded life of a royal widow. She sang and danced with greater mystic frenzy. Her cymbals and her anklets were heard even in the temple on the outskirts of the city, a public place open to all devotees. Such insubordination had never been witnessed before. The young prince Vikram was so jealous of her rising popularity and strong political connections that he tried to kill her several times. It is said that once a poisonous snake was sent to her in a flower basket, but when she opened it, she found an image of Krishna; on another occasion, she was given a cup of poison, but drank it with Krishna's name on her lips and was miraculously saved.

Wearied of these undercurrents of hatred and intrigue, Mira went back to Merta. She was soon overcome by restlessness and is said to have left for Vrindavan. It is said that in Vrindavan, she met and was inspired by Sant Raidas. She then went to Dwarka, the kingdom of Krishna. The legend goes that Rana Udai Singh, who had succeeded Vikram Singh, called her back. Reluctantly, she asked permission to spend the night at the temple of Ranchhorji (Krishna). The next

morning, that it is believed, her spirit entered the deity, and her lifeless body was found lying at its feet.

Mira Bai's poems and songs, composed in Rajasthani, Brajbhasha and Gujarati, are eloquent with transcendental emotion. Together with Vidyapati, Surdas and Tulsidas, she is one of the most outstanding poets of that time. Her Rag Govind narrating her love for Krishna exemplifies the true spirit of the bhakti movement. She composed between 200 to 1300 prayerful songs called *bhajans*. For the peasants of the region where she lived, she is a symbol of resistance, both to the organised power of the State and the domestic tyranny of the husband.

## MIRA BEHN (1892–1982)

Mira Behn was a freedom fighter. Born Madeleine Slade, the daughter of Admiral Sir Edmund Slade and the scion of an aristocratic family. Her mother had a trace of gypsy ancestry, which Madeleine always claimed gave her wanderlust. She was an untypical child of her class, fond of music yet preferring nature to society balls; Beethoven especially fascinated her. She read Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*, a book based on Beethoven's life, and his book on Gandhi as well, which changed her life. She became a vegetarian, gave up alcohol and studied the Gita.

In 1924, she wrote to Gandhiji, asking to join him, which she did the following year. Life was hard at Sabarmati Ashram, but she bore it well, adopting Indian dress and learning to card and spin. She took the vow of *brahmacharya*, shaved her head and wore saffron in later years, though Gandhiji dissuaded her from converting to Hinduism. She had to serve a long apprenticeship before Gandhi would allow her to enter the political struggle, but at last she proved her sincerity. He gave her the name Mira in recognition of her devotion to him and to the cause. She toured India, gathering information for him to use

to direct his campaigns, and helped him draft the Quit India agenda. After Gandhiji's death, her attachment to India grew thin, and in 1959 she moved to a village near Vienna, where she lived in retirement with Beethoven's music.

Daughter of a British Admiral, Madeleine Slade, renounced the life of luxury and worked in the service of India. She accompanied Gandhi to England in 1931 and undertook a tour of America and Britain in 1934 to enlist sympathy for the Indian cause. She suffered imprisonment in 1932–33 and 1942–44 for the cause of India's Independence.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **MOGUBAI KURDIKAR (1904–2001)**

Mogubai Kurdikar was a Hindustani classical singer of the Jaipur-Atralui gharana and the mother of the singer Kishori Amonkar.

She was born on 15 July to a community of traditional entertainers in the village of Kurdi in Portuguese-ruled Goa. When she was nine or ten, her mother, Jayashree, joined the Chandreshwar Bhootnāth Sangeet Mandali, a travelling theatre company, and the two of them began to act in plays. Shortly afterward, Jayashree died, leaving Mogu alone in the world. It is said that her deathbed message to Mogu was that she must become a famous singer or her mother's soul would not rest in peace. Some time later, the theatre company closed, but Mogu was hired by the rival Sātārkar Stree Sangeet Mandali. She soon became renowned for her acting of Subhadra in the eponymous play and of Kinkini in *Punyaprabhav*. However, professional rivalries with other actors in the company forced Mogu to leave. She moved to the town of Sangli to pursue her ambition of learning music and managed to get some lessons from Inayat Khan of the Rampur-Sahaswan gharana, but he refused to teach her further. By a stroke of luck, the famous singer

Alladiya Khan was in Sangli at that time, being treated for an illness. He happened to hear Mogubai practicing and stopped at her house one day and offered to teach her. Ignorant of who she was talking to, Mogu agreed. It was only much later that she realized what a celebrity he was and what an opportunity had just walked through her door.

A year and a half later, Alladiya Khan's treatment was over, and the teacher and his disciple moved to Mumbai. There, in what was now a familiar pattern, his existing students began plotting to get rid of Mogubai. Among her rivals, allegedly, was Kesarbai Kerkar (q.v.) whose background was similar to Mogubai's. Despairing of her goal, Mogu asked for help from Bashir Khan of the rival Agra gharana, who agreed to teach her if she would perform the formal *gandha-bandan* (thread-tying) ceremony and become a disciple of his friend Vilayat Hussein Khan. On hearing of her betrayal, Alladiya Khan confronted her and demanded that she sever all ties with Bashir Khan and instead become a student of Alladiya's brother, Hyder Khan.

Fearful of offending these powerful artists, Mogu asked for reassurance that she would be taught. True to her fears, though Hyder taught her for a while, he was still under pressure from Alladiya's students, and in 1930, he was forced to leave Mumbai. By then, Moghu was famous enough to carry on as a solo performer, but she wanted the status of being a recognized expert in the field. Her daughter was born in 1931, and she redoubled her efforts to become the best. At last, Alladiya had to acknowledge her determination and become her teacher in 1934. After Independence, her fame spread, and she was hailed as one of the foremost female Hindustani classical vocalists with a host of equally renowned students, including her own daughter, Kishori Amonkar. Mogu received the Sangeet Natak Academi Award in 1968, the Padma Bhushan in 1974 and the Sangeet Research Academy in 1980.

## MOLLA ATUKURI (16TH CENTURY)

Molla, surnamed Atukuri, was a mystic poet and singer. She was born to Kesava of Gopavaram, a village north of Nellore in Andhra Pradesh, a Virashaiva of the potter caste, and her mother died young. She was named Molla (jasmine) as it is the favourite flower of Shiva and was also called Basavi. She wrote in Telugu and was the second woman poet in the language after Tallapaka Tirumamma, the wife of Annamacharya. She translated the Ramayana into Telugu, an act of syncretism as Rama was an avatar of Krishna. Legend has it that a poet of Molla's village was challenged by the court poet to write the *Ramayana* in five days, thus putting the entire village in danger of shame. Molla offered to write the epic and save the reputation of the village. She sat in the temple, writing furiously, and in five days it was done. Written in couplets, in a demotic Telugu far closer to everyday speech than was considered decorous in her time, the poem has a lucidity and energy that is engaging. It also focuses on the character of Sita far more than was usual. Her poetics are expressed in these lines:

As honey sweetens  
 The mouth readily,  
 A poem should make sense  
 Right away.

Obscure sounds and sense  
 Are no better than  
 The dumb and the deaf conversing.

## THE MOTHER (1878–1973)

The Mother was a mystic and spiritual leader. She was born Mirra Alfassa in Paris on 21 February 1878, of a Turkish father and an Egyptian mother. She describes some of the mystical experiences she had during this early period in her book *Prayer and Meditation*. Mirra grew up in Paris and joined one of the big Parisian studios to learn drawing and painting at the age of 16. By the time she finished her studies, some of her paintings had already been exhibited. She had also developed as a gifted musician.

Although Mirra then knew little of Indian religion, she called the special being she worshipped ‘Krishna’. When Mirra was 21, she met an Indian in France who gave her a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* and told her to understand ‘Krishna’ as the Divine within each one of us. In 1906, the 28-year-old Mirra formed a small group called ‘Idea’. The members met regularly and discussed spiritual and occult matters, with Mirra taking the lead. During this time, Mirra met a Polish Jew and his wife. They were very advanced in occultism and lived in South Algeria. She spent two years with them, and on her return from Algeria started another study group called ‘Cosmique’ in which she advocated the New Consciousness. In 1910, Mirra’s husband Paul Richard went to Pondicherry for some political work. There he met Sri Aurobindo several times, a fact he recounted to Mirra on his return to France. In 1914, Mirra and Paul reached Pondicherry. They met Sri Aurobindo, the same day, and Mirra saw before her the Krishna of her vision. She instantly knew her final destiny lay in India. For a brief period during World War I, Mirra had to leave Pondicherry and go to Japan with her husband. In 1920, she returned, aged 42, and began the transformation that was to turn her into the Mother. On 24 November 1926, 24 disciples gathered on the verandah of Sri Aurobindo’s room to witness Sri Aurobindo’s handing over of complete spiritual and material charge of the Ashram to the Mother.

Under the Mother's guidance, the ashram grew from an unknown experiment into a great centre of yoga, attracting devotees from all over the world. In 1950, Sri Aurobindo left this life, but the ashram continued to flourish. In 1952, the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education opened. Two years later, Pondicherry merged politically with India. The Mother declared, 'I am French by birth and early education. I am Indian by choice and predilection.' In 1964, she launched the Auroville project, the city of human unity. In 1968, the foundation stone of Auroville was laid. She died on 17 November 1973 at the age of 95.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **MRIDULA SARABHAI (1911–1974)**

Mridula Sarabhai was a freedom fighter. Born into the wealthy industrialist Sarabhai family of Ahmedabad, she was one of the eight children of Ambalal Sarabhai and Sarla Devi. As a child, she was familiar with Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, though she went on to criticise them later. The family called her 'Boss', and the keepers of the liquor shops she picketed dubbed her 'Pathan'. She helped organize the Youth Conference in Rajkot in 1927. In 1934, she was elected from Gujarat to the All-India Congress Committee. Subsequently, she contested as an independent and won handsomely.

During Partition, she fought at great personal risk to save girls abducted by mobs, and to prevent refugees, both Hindu and Muslim, from being hurt or killed. After Independence, Nehru gave her an office at Constitution House, and from 1946 to 1953, the task of rescuing abducted women on either side of the border, and returning them to their families, was taken up. She was the only person with enough stature to cross the border without a guarantee of personal safety. Her work in these areas gave her a deep acquaintance with border politics and the people in it, including Sheikh Abdullah and Abdul Ghaffar

Khan. She headed the women's wing of the Congress and advised the Constituent Assembly on women's rights.

In 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was arrested and imprisoned by the Indian Government. Mridula immediately protested. She felt Abdullah was the only popular leader who could bring democracy to Kashmir; that India was only alienating Kashmiris by doing this, and displaying hypocrisy since India had criticised Pakistan earlier for imprisoning Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Forbidden by Nehru to speak in public on Kashmir, between 1953 and 1972, she printed and distributed pamphlets, convinced that when people knew the true facts, the situation would change. In 1958, she was dismissed from Congress membership and in 1958 imprisoned without trial in Tihar Jail. This was highly embarrassing for Nehru, but her activities had reached such a pitch that he could no longer ignore them. Though many criticized her stand, none doubted her integrity. As a reporter, she worked for *Gujarat Samachar* in Ahmedabad and for the *National Herald*.

## MUDDUPALANI (C. 1730–1790)

Muddupalani was a poet and courtesan. Her story encompasses not just that of her life, but also the subsequent publishing history of her erotic epic *Radhika Santwanam*, which has been systematically marginalized and explained away, not just by Western Orientalists, but also by scholars in modern India who were otherwise dedicated to reclaiming India's past.

Muddupalani was a member of the court of Tanjore (Thanjavur) under King Pratapsimha (1739–1763), a Nayaka ruler. These kings were highly educated, and the women of their courts could compose verse in as many as eight languages. These women had almost absolute social, sexual and economic freedom, and commanded the utmost respect from those around them. The epic describes the sexual education of a

young girl at the hands of Radhika, Krishna's aunt, who is also having a relationship with him. It describes in detail what pleases a woman sexually. In one section, she takes the initiative and, in another, Krishna appeases the anger of the woman with embraces and kisses. The work was brought out in imperfect editions in the nineteenth century, but Bangalore Nagaratnamma (q.v.), also a courtesan, brought out a definitive edition in 1911 directly from the manuscript. Nagaratnamma's edition was banned, and though no longer proscribed today, it is still very difficult to obtain any of Muddupalani's works.

## MUKTABAI (19TH CENTURY)

Muktabai was an essayist. Little is known about her except that she was a Mang woman, an untouchable. She steps into history because, in 1855, at the age of 14, she wrote an essay in the journal *Dhyanodaya*, a periodical devoted to discussing the new sciences as well as issues of morality and culture. The essay, collected in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds. *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) is remarkable for the passion and lucidity with which it condemns the casual abuse, discrimination and racism faced by untouchable men and women at the hands of caste rulers. Unfortunately, having published the essay, Muktabai disappears from the view of posterity.

## MUMTAZ MAHAL (1593–1631)

Mumtaz Mahal was a Mughal empress. She was born Arzoo Manda Bano Begum and was also called Khudsia Begum. Her father was Wazir Asaf Khan, brother to Nur Jahan. She was married to her

cousin Shah Jahan in 1612 and was his favourite wife. She bore him many children. In 1631, in Burhanpur, she gave birth to her fourteenth child, a daughter, Dadar Ara. The baby died shortly afterwards, to be followed within hours by her mother. The grieving Shah Jahan promised her in her dying moments to build a tomb to commemorate his love for her.

Mumtaz was first buried in Jainabad, and a few years later, her body was transferred to Agra. Over her tomb, Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal, one of the wonders of the world. For this, Shah Jahan instructed his artists to learn the difficult and time-consuming art of *pietra dura*, in which semi-precious and precious stones are meticulously cut to shape and fitted into a lime-based matrix. These panels can be seen in the screens in the Taj's central chamber. The building was completed in 1654. When his son, Aurangzeb, imprisoned Shah Jahan, he had his cell fitted with mirrors so that he could see the Taj Mahal from any angle of the room.

## **MUTHULAKSHMI S. REDDY (1886–1968)**

Muthulakshmi S. Reddy was a doctor and social worker. She was the first woman to be admitted as a medical student at the Madras Medical College, the first woman to be nominated to the Madras Legislative Council, where she was elected Deputy Chairperson, the founder-president of the Indian Women's Association and the first alderwoman of the Madras Corporation.

Muthulakshmi was born in the Princely State of Pudukottah, the eldest daughter of S. Narayanaswami Iyer, an educationist and one-time principal of the Maharaja's College in the State. Her mother, Chandrammal, who came from a family whose women had traditionally danced in temples, insisted on sending her daughter to school. Muthulakshmi's teachers found she could grasp subjects

beyond the capacities of an ordinary child her age. They taught her beyond the syllabus, but with puberty, she had to leave school and be tutored at home. When she applied at the age of 18 to Maharaja's College, the administration was thrown into a quandary. No girl had ever been admitted, and the Principal alleged that her presence would 'demoralise' the boys. Finally, the Raja himself had to intervene, and she was allowed to join.

In 1914, she married Dr. T. Sundara Reddy, FRCS, a brilliant doctor who had to struggle hard to establish himself. In 1917, she was involved with the Women's Indian Association of Madras and campaigned for voting rights for women. She served women and children as a visiting doctor in the Widows' Home and in the Social Service League. She was one of the founders of the Muslim Ladies' Association and an associate of the Sharda Home, Madras Seva Sadan, and the Society of the Indian Ladies Samaj. In 1925, she went to England on a government scholarship to specialise in the diseases of women and children. In 1926, she became the first woman member of the Madras Legislative Council, and in 1928, she was unanimously elected deputy president of the Council. She resigned in May 1930 as a protest, the imprisonment of Gandhi.

During her tenure as legislator from 1927 to 1930, she piloted several reform acts, including the Sharda Act, which increased the marriageable age for boys and girls, and she helped in abolishing the devdasi system. In 1930, in Madras, she piloted and passed an Act for the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic. She established the first Rescue Home and introduced a government scholarship for Harijan girls. She addressed several meetings to plead for Independence and tried with Mrs. Hamid Ali and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (q.v.) to secure political emancipation for Indian women. In 1931, she presided over the fifth meeting of the All-India Women's Conference at Lahore and continued to be its president and vice president until 1935. She became the first alderwoman of the Madras Corporation in 1937 and took an interest in the problems of medicine, education and child welfare.

She established a children's hospital and made medical inspection compulsory in schools. In 1936, she turned her attention to cancer, launching the Anti-Cancer Movement, which eventually helped set up a cancer centre at Adyar. After Independence, she served again on the Legislative Council of Madras from 1952 to 1957. She was the first Chairman of the State Social Welfare Advisory Board from 1954 to 1957. In 1956, she received the Padma Bhushan.

She wrote several books in English and Tamil, her *Autobiography*, *Works of Mrs Margaret Cousins* and *My Experience as a Legislator* to name a few.

## NADIA (1908–1996)

Nadia ‘Hunterwali’, also called Fearless Nadia, was India’s first female action-film actor. She was born Mary Ann Evans (the same name as George Eliot) in Perth, Western Australia, the daughter of a Scotsman Herbert Evans, a volunteer in the British Army, and Margaret, a Greek dancer and actor. She was a year old when her father’s regiment was posted to Mumbai, and four years later, she too came to India with him. There followed a period of wandering with the family, where she learned horseback riding during a stay in the Northwest Frontier Province. She learned ballet under Madam Astrova after returning to Mumbai in the mid-1920s. In 1930, she began working for Zarko Circus, where Madam Astrova had also worked and changed her name to Nadia on the advice of a fortune teller. She was strong and statuesque, had blond hair and blue eyes, and quickly became a draw. She made her film debut with the Arabic film *Makhazane el ochak* (1932), filmed in Egypt. That same year, she returned to Mumbai and walked into Wadia Movietone, a studio run by J.B.H. Wadia, known for doing action films, in search of a job. Reportedly, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her first Hindi film was the hit *Lal-e-Yaman* (1933). Her stunts wowed the public. The year 1935 saw the release of *Desh Deepak* and *Hunterwali*, which earned her nickname. She played a dominatrix-like figure with tight, revealing clothes, tall boots, and a ‘hunter’ or whip. *Hunterwali* was so successful that she was persuaded to star in a sequel, *Hunterwali ki Beti*, some years later. She also starred in *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *Pahadi Kanya* (1936), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940) and *Muqabala* (1942). She played a small role in her last film, *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi* (1970). Her name was linked with many men, and she was married

briefly in the 1930s and had a son. Later, she fell in love with J.B.H. Wadia's younger brother, Homi Wadia, but couldn't marry till 1961 because of family opposition. Homi adopted Nadia's son from her previous marriage. He directed her in many of her later films. They lived modestly in Colaba. In 1993, her grandnephew Riyad Vinci Wadia made a documentary of her life and films, called *Fearless: The Hunterwali Story*.

## NADIRA (1932–2006)

Nadira was a film actor. She was born Farhat Ezekiel (or possibly Florence Ezekiel) on 5 December 1932, into a Baghdadi Jewish family in Nagpada in Mumbai. Her parents divorced when she was four, and she and her brothers were left in the care of her grandmother while her mother worked to support them. Much later in life, when she had become a success, she remembered that they sometimes didn't have enough to eat, so her grandfather would instruct the pani puri wala to fill the pani puris to the brim with tamarind water so that their bellies would be full.

Farhat was still in her teens when she was spotted by Sardar Akhtar, the wife of the great filmmaker Mehboob Khan. Sardar Akhtar took Farhat under her wing, groomed her and renamed her Nadira. Her first movie, directed by Mehboob Khan, was *Aan*, in which she played the fiery princess Rajashree. Her next big success was *Shree 420* (1956), where she played the sophisticated yet vulnerable Maya. Her aristocratic good looks, confident manner, and elegant carriage fitted her very well to play the 'vamp', and she excelled in that role, though she sometimes complained about typecasting. Her career spanned fifty years and over sixty films, including some of Bollywood's biggest hits such as *Waris* (1954), *Pakeezah* (1971), and *Amar Akbar Antony* (1977). She made two films with Merchant Ivory: *Guru* in 1969 and

*Cotton Mary* in 1999. She won the Filmfare Best Supporting Actress Award for her role as Julie's mother in *Julie* (1975). Her last big film was *Josh* (2000), starring Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai. She became one of the best-paid Indian actors in her time and used to drive around Mumbai in a Rolls-Royce.

Nadira was first married for a short time to an Urdu poet and filmmaker named Naqshab. This marriage ended unhappily. She then married a man who turned out to be a gold digger, and this lasted only a week. For the latter part of her life, she lived alone in Mumbai, as many of her relatives had moved to Israel. For the last three years of her life, she kept entirely to her flat, where she lived with her housekeeper, Shobha. In Mahesh Bhatt's *Tamanna* (1997), she played a fading film star, a role that was perhaps a little too close to the bone. In her last months, she suffered a stroke with cardiac complications and died on 9 February 2006.

## NAGARATNAMMA (1878–1952)

Nagaratnamma, known as Bangalore Nagaratnamma, was a scholar and courtesan (devadasi). She is best known for having republished in 1910 *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika), a long poem by Muddupalani (q.v.), an eighteenth-century courtesan of the Tanjore court. This poem contained frank descriptions of sex from a woman's point of view, including a description of a maiden's first sexual experience. The book was banned by the colonial government; all copies were seized and destroyed, and both Nagaratnamma and Muddupalani were reviled as prostitutes and loose women. In 1947 the ban was lifted, but copies of the entire poem are still very difficult to get. An extract was published in *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (New Delhi: OUP, 1997), along with Nagaratnamma's insightful and scholarly preface.

Nagaratnamma was born to Putta Lakshamma, a devadasi, classical musician and scholar, and her patron Subbarao, a lawyer of Nanjangud. She was educated at Nanjangud and Mysore in the traditional skills of the devadasi, dancing, singing, music and scholarship in Sanskrit and Tamil. Her uncle Venkataswamaiah was a distinguished violinist in Bangalore, and she moved there to study classical music under him and Bidaram Krishnappa. Later, she learned music from Munuswami Appa of Bangalore. She became a well-known dancer and influenced other artistes. She drew the attention of Narahari Rao, a High Court judge, who became her patron. She built a memorial around the tomb of the saint Thyagaraja (1767–1847) and established a Trust at Tiruvayaru that organizes performances each year on his birthday, defying cultural norms that prevented women from performing. In her will, where she recounts the reasons for setting up this trust, she states that in 1921 she dreamed that Tyagaraja appeared to her and asked her to devote herself to him and to music. She composed many songs for Tyagaraja.

## **NAIKI DEVI (12TH CENTURY)**

Naiki Devi was a regent queen. She was the mother of the young prince Bala Mularaja of Gujarat, who ruled for only two years, from 1176–78. She was the daughter of Paramardin, who has been identified as Shivachitta of the Kadamba dynasty. During the reign of the young prince, a Muslim force, probably that of Muhammad Ghori, invaded the kingdom. Naikidevi fought the invaders, carrying her young son with her. She held them off at the pass of Gadaranghatta, probably at the base of Mount Abu. Contemporary chronicles mention this battle against a boy king but tell us nothing about the mother.

## NALINIBALA DEVI (1898–1977)

Nalinibala Devi was a poet and writer, the daughter of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and the best-known female poet of her era. Her father was an enlightened man who believed in women's rights. She wrote her first poem, 'Pita', when she was 10 years old. Her father then moved to Calcutta so his daughter could be educated, and there he made her read and broaden her mind. She was married at the age of nine, had four children and became a widow eight years later in 1917. In 1922, her father was jailed for his part in anti-British agitation, and her five-year-old son was burnt to death. She assuaged her sorrow by writing poems and letters to her father in jail. Her first collection, *Sandhiar Sur*, came out in 1928. Later, in 1935, her father's death coincided with that of her son Pabitra. She began writing journals to support herself.

She was President of the Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1954. She was Awarded the Padma Shri in 1957. In 1969, she won the Sahitya Academy award for her poetry collection *Alakananda*. She also wrote children's dramas like *Mirabai*, *Prahlad*, *Parijotor Abhishek*, an essay collection published as *Santipath* (Path of Peace, 1971), a biography of her father titled *Smrititirtha* (Pilgrimage of Memory, 1948) and an autobiography, *Eri Ahaa Dinbor* (Thus Pass My Days, 1976).

## NANDA JHADAV (1969–1999)

Nanda Jadhav was a long-distance runner. Born at Ashta in Sangli district, where her father, Shankar Jadhav was a schoolteacher, she went to school at the Hingne Stree Shikshan Sangstha, and later the Girls' Junior College, Satara. There she came first in a six-kilometre inter-school race. A sports teacher from Kolhapur, Pandurang Mhaskar, was the chief guest at the awards ceremony for the race,

and he was impressed with her performance. He encouraged her to come to Kolhapur, and defying her family, she went. Mhaskar trained her hard; she would get up at 4 am and run through rain and cold. Meghnad Nageshkar got her a scholarship of five hundred rupees a month from a Trust, and she studied up to master's level in commerce from Kolhapur University and did typing and computer courses. She debuted as an athlete in 1984-85 at the all-India Varsity Meet, winning a bronze medal. In 1987, she came first in the cross-country race at the National Games, Pune. She was a national record holder in the 5000m and 10,000m races. After her 10,000m win, her gender was even questioned, but blood tests proved she had normal hormone levels. She was the first woman athlete from Maharashtra to have represented the country at the cross-country-level. She represented Maharashtra in the '85-86 National Games in Delhi, and bagged the gold in the 1500m and the 3000m category in record time. She got three golds in the Kerala National Games, and two in the Pune National Games. She was known for always running barefoot; a friend once gifted her a pair of running shoes from Japan, and she tried to run the Pune Marathon in them but threw them off at the twenty-eighth kilometre. During the fourteen years of her sporting career, she represented India over ten times. She became the first woman athlete from Maharashtra to represent the country in marathons from Warsaw in Poland, to New Zealand, Hong Kong, Belgium and France.

She dreamed of setting up an academy for sportspeople from rural areas, but was able only to build her parents a new house in Satara. She also received a bungalow in Hadapsar. In 1990 and 1991, she won the Pune International Half-Marathon. She won the Allahabad marathon four times, she won a Maruti car at the Mumbai marathon and she also won the Delhi marathon. She married Deepak Shamrao Ghanshyam, a stenographer in an income tax office, and they lived at Pratiknagar in Yerawada. However, her life there was not happy, and her husband apparently tortured her for not bearing a child. Eventually, in 1999, she was admitted to the hospital with severe burns. She stated in her dying

declaration that the stove on which she was cooking had exploded. However, her father alleged that his son-in-law had subjected her to mental and physical torture, because of her childlessness and to take away her property. Her husband and in-laws were arrested but released for lack of evidence. She won the Chhatrapati Award in 1987 for her performance in the 1,000m race.

## NANDINI SATPATHY (1931–2006)

Nandini Satpathy was a politician and writer. She was born Nandini Panigrahi on 9 June in Cuttack. Her grandfather, Swapneshwar Panigrahi, had been involved in the early phases of the freedom struggle. Her father was the writer Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, who wrote *Matira Manusa* (Son of the Soil) and was awarded the Padma Bhushan for his services to Oriya literature. Her uncle, Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi, helped to establish the Orissa branch of the Communist Party of India. So, her early influences combined literature with politics.

She had begun writing in Oriya before her marriage to Devendra Satpathy, who was elected twice to Parliament for Dhenkanal, first on a Congress ticket and then for the Bharatiya Lok Dal. In 1962, she was elected to the Rajya Sabha at the age of 31 and appointed Deputy Minister for Information and Broadcasting in the central ministry headed by Indira Gandhi between 1966 and 1969. Having been re-elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1968, she was asked by Indira Gandhi to run for election in Orissa as the coalition government there had fallen. Nandini won the by-election from Cuttack and became an Independent India's second woman Chief Minister. She was to win the next six assembly polls in a row till 2000, and to serve two terms as Chief Minister. In 1998, she was awarded the *Sahitya Bharati Samman* for her contributions to Oriya literature, which included a translation of Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* into Oriya.

Her tenure was praised by many observers for her commitment to progress and her ability to create consensus, but her closeness to Indira Gandhi was sometimes regarded with disfavour. In 1977, a complaint was registered against her under the Prevention of Corruption Act, which proved to be a test case for how the judiciary should investigate a case against a woman. In a widely appreciated judgment by Justice V.R Krishna Iyer, several points were clarified, such as the provision that a woman has the right to be questioned at her residence in the presence of male relatives, can be brought to the police station only after she is formally arrested, and has the right to be searched only by a woman.

Nandini died on 4 August 2006 in Bhubaneswar, after a long illness. She was survived by two sons; Nachiketa Satpathy, and Tathagat Satpathy, Biju Janata Dal MP from Dhenkanal and editor of the Oriya daily *Dharitri*.

## **NANIBALA DEVI (1888–1967)**

Nanibala Devi was a freedom fighter. She came from a lower-middle-class family; her father was Surya Kanta Banerjee of Howrah. She was married at eleven and widowed five years later. After her widowhood, she tried to pursue her education, but circumstances were not favourable, so she left home and took refuge in a Christian mission in Ariadaha. She acquired some knowledge of English, though the rules of the mission did not allow her to stay long. Having taken refuge with Amarendranath Chattopadhyay, a distant relative and a leader of the revolutionary Jugantar party, she came in contact with freedom fighters and found her avocation. She began to keep house for those who were plotting to help the Germans against the English. She would pose as the wife of a freedom fighter to smuggle letters to him in jail or rent accommodation for him without attracting the attention of the police.

Once her cover was blown, she had to go underground, fleeing from place to place in rural Bengal. Her flight took her to Peshawar, where she caught cholera, and there the police found her. She was subjected to inhuman tortures at their hands, which included the torture of putting chilli powder into the orifices of the body. Released under the General Amnesty of 1919, she continued to be hounded by the police. Her family rejected her, and she began living in Kolkata in great poverty. She contracted tuberculosis but was cured by a wandering holy man; this inspired her to renounce the world and don saffron. Finally, after Independence, she was granted a government pension.

## **NARGIS DUTT (1929–1981)**

Nargis was a film actor. She was the daughter of Jaddan Bai (q.v.), a well-known actress of the early days of cinema, who had been a tawaif and had married Uttamchand Mohanchand. Nargis was born Fatima Abdul Rashid. Her first appearance was in her mother's film *Talash-e-Haq* in 1935, aged six, under the name 'Baby Rani'. At 14, she wanted to go to college and be a doctor, but Mehboob Khan, the great director, pulled out all the stops to persuade her to act in his *Taqdeer* (1943). Mehboob also gave her a new screen name, Nargis, meaning the narcissus flower.

While Jaddan Bai and Akhtar Hussein were shooting at Famous Studio, they had a young visitor. It was Raj Kapoor, twenty-two and ready to launch himself as a director. The Famous Studio had been recommended to him, and he wanted to ask Jaddan Bai what she thought of it, but he arrived minutes after she left. Impulsively, he got her address and raced to her house on Marine Drive. Eighteen-year-old Nargis was in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Raj, introducing himself as Prithviraj Kapoor's son, was instantly enchanted. He told his scriptwriter that he had to write Nargis into the script for his first

film, *Aag* (1948), followed by *Andaz* and *Barsaat* in 1949. She was always his preferred co-star. However, 1957 marked the end of her association with R.K. Studios. This resulted in a downward slide for Raj Kapoor, for Nargis, had given life to his creative endeavour; she was part of the two-figure silhouette that was his trademark, where she drapes herself over Raj's arm as he plays the violin. Nargis went on to make her greatest film ever, *Mother India*, in 1957, for which she won an award at the Karlovy Vary film festival. On the sets of *Mother India*, she met Sunil Dutt, and, certain that Raj Kapoor would never be hers, she married Dutt in 1958 with an Arya Samaj ceremony. In the same year, she was awarded the Padma Shri.

She and her husband set up a school for poor children in Bandra, and the Centre for Special Education for Spastics. Nargis helped set up the Spastics Society of India and was involved with the Scouts and Guides, the War Widows Association and the Meena Kumari Memorial for the Blind. She and her husband were drawn into politics through their friendship with the Nehru-Gandhis, and her son Sanjay and daughter Pooja also followed suit. In 1979, she was diagnosed with late-stage pancreatic cancer. She died on 3 May, four days short of the premiere of Sanjay Dutt's debut film *Rocky*. After her death, a cancer foundation was set up in her name.

## **NASEEM BANU (1916–2002)**

Naseem Banu was an actor and singer in Hindi cinema. Her mother was Chamiyan Bai, a courtesan, who was also known as Shamshad Begum. Shamshad Begum had also sung for films and made a lot of money (there is another playback singer of that name who should not be confused with her). Naseem wished to emulate her mother and was determined to be an actor too. She learnt music, and her beauty got her lots of offers. However, her mother did not wish her daughter to act, as

there was a lot of social stigma in those days, which she had to face. Naseem was unfazed, however, and even threatened to starve herself if she was prevented from acting. She allayed her mother's fears by being successful from the start. Debuting in *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935), a Hindi version of Hamlet in which she played Ophelia, she created a sensation with her role in Sohrab Modi's classic *Pukar* (1939), for which she sang 'Zindagi ka saaz bhi kya saaz hai, baj raha hai aur beawaz hai'. She was known as 'pari chera' or 'fairy-face'. Her other successes included Mehboob Khan's *Nagma*, *Sindbad*, *Talaaq*, *Ujala*, *Begam*, *Jeevan Sapna*, *Anokhi Ada*, *Chandni Raat* and *Sheesh Mahal*. In 1944, she had a daughter, Saira, and in the mid-1950s, she retired from films so as not to compete with Saira Banu's blossoming acting career. Instead, she turned her attention to designing clothing, especially intricately embroidered saris. She was instrumental in getting her daughter married to Dilip Kumar, and the couple used to live mainly in her bungalow on Pali Hill. She designed many of her daughter's costumes. In 1972, she acted in *Pakeezah*.

## NELLIE SENGUPTA (1886–1973)

Nellie Sengupta was a freedom fighter. She was born in Cambridge, England, where she was educated, and where her father kept a guest house. Jatindramohan Sengupta of Chittagong was a student of Downing College at the time and used to visit the family. In 1909 they were married, and Jatindra Mohan returned to Chittagong with his bride. His family received them well. In 1921, Jatindra Mohan was caught up in the struggle for India's freedom, and so, by extension was Nellie. After his imprisonment during the Assam-Bengal Railway, men's strike, she addressed prohibited meetings, protested against the administration's ban on peaceful assembly and hawked khaddar cloth.

In 1931, she was arrested from such a meeting and imprisoned for four months. When Madan Mohan Malviya, the elected president for the banned Congress meeting of that year, was arrested, Nellie secretly consulted Jatindra Mohan, then a state prisoner undergoing treatment at Calcutta Medical College, and stood for election instead, thus becoming the second woman after Annie Besant (q.v.) to head the Congress. She made a fiery speech at the meeting, was arrested and thrown bodily into a police van while delegates and bystanders alike were brutally beaten by the police. Severely embarrassed by the involvement of one of their own in the protest, the rulers let her go without charging her. In 1933 and 1936, she was elected Alderman by the Calcutta Corporation. During World War II, she spoke movingly in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, to which she was elected in 1940, on behalf of women raped and tortured by soldiers.

After the Partition, she stayed on in Chittagong, her husband's home city in East Pakistan, and continued to serve in the Legislature to which she was elected unopposed. She served on the Minority Board until health and vision problems made her return to India for medical treatment, where she died.

## **NIHAR BARUA (1903–2004)**

Nihar Barua was an ethnomusicologist and folklorist of eminence. She was the sister of Pramathesh Barua. She was married off at the age of 11 to a magistrate and by the age of 17 had borne six children. But this did not slow her down. She had an affinity with animals, played with snakes, tamed elephants and hunted tigers after the custom of her family. She became a collector of the songs, beliefs and customs of the people of Goalpara, where her ancestral home of Gauripur was located. She collected more than a thousand songs, documenting each of them with meticulous care and creating an archive of the cultural practices

of the unique and endangered culture of the Goalpara Rajbanshis. She began school in Gauripur in 1935.

She wrote a wide range of essays and articles, some of which have been collected in the anthology *Prantobashir Jhuli: Goalparar lokjiban o gan* (Songs from the Margins: the culture and music of Goalpara) published by Stree in 2000. These essays, originally published in *Desh, Parichay, Baromas, Ekshon* and other well-known Bengali periodicals, are about the folk customs and beliefs of Goalpara, the land between Cooch Behar, Meghalaya, Assam and Bangladesh. She studied the music of Goalpara, delving into the contexts and customs behind it. The songs are at once earthy and touching, sung by the people to Sonarai, the spirit of tigers, or Madankaam, the essence of spring and generation. In the article on marriage songs, she comments on the marriage practices of different communities, and in a section on dances performed by village women to make rain (often in the nude), she paints a picture of female agency and freedom.

## **NIRMALA DESHPANDE (1929–2008)**

Nirmala Deshpande was a peace worker and a Gandhian. She was born to Vimala and Purushottam Yashawant Deshpande of Nagpur. Her father was a noted Marathi writer who won a Sahitya Akademi Award for his book *Anamikachi Chintanika* in 1962. Her mother translated Jiddu Krishnamurty's *Commentaries on Life* into Marathi. Nirmala joined Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement in 1952, undertaking a 40,000-km journey on foot across India to carry the message of gram swaraj or village autonomy to every corner of rural India. She also organized peace marches in Punjab and Kashmir in 1994 when the violence was at its peak in those states. She organized the India-Pakistan meet in 1996. When the Christian missionary Graham Staines was burnt to death by Hindu fundamentalists in 1999, she organized a

protest march in Orissa. The Tibetan cause was also close to her heart. In 2006, she pleaded for clemency for Afzal Guru, accused of a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, which killed thirteen people. Just a few months before her death, she declared herself a 'friend' of Maoists.

She wrote several novels in Hindi, including *Seemanta* and *Chimlig*, some plays, and travelogues. She also wrote a commentary on the Isha Upanishad and a biography of Vinoba Bhave. She was a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha from 1997 to 2007. She was considered for the position of President in 2007, but lost out to Pratibha Patil. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and received the Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award and the Padma Vibhushan in 2006. With her short, bespectacled figure and violently hennaed hair, she was a distinctive character. She was regarded so highly on both sides of the border that inter-faith prayers for her were offered in India and Pakistan at her death. Her ashes were immersed in the Indus at the Sadhu Bela temple in Sindh.

## **NIVEDITA, SISTER (1867–1911)**

Sister Nivedita was a freedom fighter. She was born Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born on 28 October 1867 in Dungannon, Northern Ireland. Like many Ulster families, they were of Scots descent and had been living in Ireland for generations. They were staunch Methodists, a sect of Protestantism that focuses on individual conscience and moral action. Both of Margaret's grandfathers had been involved in Ireland's struggle for Home Rule. She grew up in England, where she initially worked as an educationist interested in the progressive theories of Pestalozzi and Fröbel. She met Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895, and he encouraged her to come to India. She came to Kolkata in 1898 at the age of 30 as his disciple. Living simply in a small house in Bosepara Lane, she threw herself into social work,

opening a school for Hindu girls and helping with plague relief. She was initiated into the Ramakrishna order, followed the teachings of Ramakrishna and Sarada Ma, and even worshipped images of Kali and Shiva. She campaigned in the West for two years to garner support for the order, returning to India in 1902. She started another school, the Ramakrishna Balika Vidyalaya. Sixty women in purdah attended the school on the opening day.

Vivekananda's death the same year led her to leave the order to join India's freedom struggle, though she continued to maintain close relations with it. She toured the country tirelessly, giving lectures and helping with relief and campaign work wherever she was. In politics, she was influenced by the theories of Prince Kropotkin, but her radicalism did not prevent her from being on good terms with politicians of all colours. She was dedicated to Indian art, culture and science, encouraging, among others, Abanindranath Tagore and Jagadish Chandra Bose in their work. She opposed Western attempts to see Indian culture as a pale shadow of Greco-Roman civilisation. Her syncretism was reflected in her appearance; tall and fair with deep blue eyes and brown hair, she wore a simple white gown with a string of rudraksha beads around her neck. The floods and famine in Bengal in 1905–1906 absorbed a great deal of her strength, eventually proving too much for her. Her health declined from then on. In 1911, while visiting flood- and famine-struck villages in East Bengal, she contracted malaria and died in Darjeeling.

## **NOOR JAHAN (1926–2000)**

Noor Jahan was an actor and Hindustani classical singer. She was born Allah Wasai on September 21 to a family of musicians in a small town in the Punjab, the youngest of thirteen children. The family moved to Lahore, where her elder sisters, Aidan Bai and Haidar Baandi, found

work in the theatre. She began her musical education under Kajjanbai. Later, she became adept in the lighter classical forms such as *thumri* and *khayal* under Ustad Ghulam Mohammed. Mukhtar Begum's husband took Noor Jahan on at his Maidan theatre as a child artiste, but this did not make enough to support her. She managed to get a role in *Hind ke Tare* (1930), a silent film, and moved to Bombay, where she made 11 silent films in 1931. She sang for Ustad Ghulam Haidar's *Khazanachi*, and the following year, she switched from Punjabi to Urdu cinema with *Khandaan* (1942), directed by Syed Shaukat Hussain Rizvi and shot at Pancholi Studios in Lahore. She fell in love with Rizvi, and this caused animosity among Noor Jahan's brothers, especially as Rizvi was much younger than her. In Mumbai, Rizvi began shooting for *Naukar* (1943) in Bombay, and he cast Noor Jahan in a small role, giving her the perfect excuse to travel to the city. The film flopped, but the lovers married, though Noor Jahan's family tried unsuccessfully to prosecute Rizvi. *Naukar* was followed by *Nadan* (1943), *Dost* (1944), *Lal Haveli* (1944) and *Badi Maa* (1945). She acted with the young Meena Kumari and the Mangeshkar sisters and sang in the *qawali* style with Zohrabai Ambalewali and Amirbai Karnataki, the first time that women sang a *qawali* in an Indian film.

In 1946, she appeared in *Anmol Ghadi* and hit stardom, following this with *Jugnu* (1947) with music by the young Mohammed Rafi. Her last film in India was *Mirza Sahibaan* (1947). She and her husband returned to Lahore and set up Shahnoor Studios there in 1951. Noor Jahan was ready with her next film, *Chanwey*, in which she directed as well as acted. The film was a hit, and was followed by *Dopatta* (1952), *Gulnar* (1953), *Patey Khan* (1955), and *Intazaar* (1956). Noor Jahan and Rizvi divorced in 1956–57. The breakup was bitter; Rizvi demanded that she sign over Shahnoor Studios to him in return for custody of her children, and she agreed. Amid this turbulence, she won the first President's Award in 1957 for best actress and best singer. Of her three children by Rizvi, her daughter Zile Huma later became a renowned singer.

The next two years saw the release of *Nooran* (1957) and *Choomantar* (1958), both Punjabi films, and *Anarkali* (1958), in which Noor Jahan played the title role. These were followed by *Koel* (1959), *Pardaisan* (1959) and *Baaaji* (1963). *Pardaisan* was produced by her then-husband, M. Naseem. She continued with her singing, and recorded songs for a number of films, including *Jan-e-Bahar* (1958), *Lakhon Me Ek* (1967), *Salgirah and Pak Daman* (1969), as well as cut albums. She continued to sing in the 1970s, although her voice showed signs of fatigue. She visited India in 1982, when she was introduced to Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister, and gave a number of public and private concerts. She returned to Pakistan and sang for *Sholey* (1984) and *Moula Baksh* (1988). In 1996, she finally retired from singing. Four years later, she suffered a fatal heart attack and was buried after a state funeral in Karachi.

## **NOOR-UN-NISA INAYAT KHAN (1914–1944)**

Noor-un-nisa was a resistance fighter during World War II. Her father, Inayat Khan, was a famed Indian musician and a descendant of Tipu Sultan. Her mother was American. She was born in Moscow though the family had to flee the country shortly afterwards in the face of the growing unrest building up towards revolution. After having spent some years in London, they settled in Paris, where her father had lived when young; he had played in Mata Hari's backing band and may have been the source of the famous dancer and charlatan's stories of being born in South India. He died in Paris when Noor was 13. Struggling to support her ailing mother and her young sister and brothers, she studied child psychology and began to write children's books. Her *Twenty Jataka Tales Retold* was published in 1939. With the outbreak of war, she and her sister Khair-un-Nisa trained as nurses, though Hitler's advancing armies forced them once more to flee to

London, where one of her brothers, Vilayat, was a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force.

Noor wished to join the war, but was repeatedly refused because of her non-Christian name, her foreign nationality, and her frankly avowed commitment to fighting for Indian Independence after the war. She knew French, and she finally managed to get the British to take her on as a radio operator behind enemy lines in Paris using the code name 'Madeleine'. Too small to wear a standard-issue parachute, she was flown in on a tiny plane, but the dangerous landing proved fruitless as her contact failed to turn up. Given the option of quitting, she refused and returned, successfully this time. In Paris, she was reckless; sometimes appearing in public with her radio equipment or leaving secret documents where others could sneak in and see them. She lived in a building that housed many German officers, but her charm and wit soon had them all eating out of her hand. Once, a German soldier caught her hanging the radio aerial from a tree, yet she succeeded in convincing him it was a washing line; he helped her set it up. On another occasion, she managed a tricky situation by explaining to a soldier that her radio was a cinema projector, confusing him with technical talk.

By the close of 1943, however, she was in trouble. Two Germans posing as Canadians had infiltrated her circle and captured many of her colleagues. She escaped to Normandy and was told she must not return to Paris under any circumstances. She disobeyed orders and returned, hoping to be able to rebuild her group. She failed, and before she could escape a second time, the Gestapo caught her with her equipment and documents. Knowing that she could hardly escape the death penalty now, Noor asked to be shot at once, but the Germans, hoping to interrogate her, refused. She then asked to be allowed to take a bath and made such a fuss about the soldiers watching her undress, that she was allowed to close the door and then promptly escaped out of the window, only to be captured again. She was imprisoned, the first captured British agent to be held in Germany. After 10 months in jail, she was transferred to the infamous Dachau prison camp. There on 11

September 1944, with the Allied victory just months away, Noor was shot with three other British agents. Her last word was '*Liberté!*' She was posthumously awarded Britain's highest civilian award for bravery, the George Cross, and the French Croix de Guerre with gold star.

## **NUR JAHAN (1577–1645)**

Nur Jahan was a Mughal empress and the power behind the throne of Jahangir. The Princess Mehr-un-nissa was given the title Nur Mahal (Light of the Palace) on her marriage to Jahangir, and this was subsequently changed to Nur Jahan (Light of the World). Jahangir's marriage to her was the turning point in Mughal rule. She began to enjoy greater influence and authority on her promotion to the status of Padshah Begum (the chief Queen) in 1613. In that capacity, she became the head of female society in the capital and the mistress of the imperial household. Dominating and power-loving as well as generous and liberal, she secured an unrivalled ascendancy over Jahangir's mind. Jahangir repeatedly said that he had bestowed the sovereignty on Nur Jahan, and he only 'required a seer of wine and half a seer of kababs' for his own needs. She often appeared before the people to dispense justice and transacted business in the open. Coins were issued in her name, and all royal orders were countersigned by her. Within a few years of her marriage, Nur Jahan organized a faction of her own and took the reins of government into her own hands. This party consisted of her parents and relatives, who were soon raised to high positions. The main pillars of the caucus who ruled the empire for four years were Nur Jahan herself, her father Itimaduddaula, her brother Asaf Khan and Prince Khurram, her son by Jahangir, later to be known as Shah Jahan.

During this period, Nur Jahan tried to raise Khurram to the pinnacle of prestige and glory. He was tipped to be the next king, but

in 1620 Ladli Begum, the queen's daughter from her first marriage to Sher Afghan, was betrothed to the Shahryar, youngest son of Jahangir and a potential rival to Khurram. Nur Jahan had a change of heart and soon began to back Shahryar and reduce Khurram's influence. This drove Khurram to rebel against her and a prolonged civil war followed, which ended with Shah Jahan's accession to the throne. Nur Jahan was pensioned off to live in retirement in Lahore till her death.

Nur Jahan's matchless beauty and unrivalled accomplishments helped her in influencing her husband. She was responsible for the invention of Itr or essence of roses and devised many new fashions and ornaments, most of which remained in vogue till the austerities of Aurangzeb's reign put an end to them. She was highly educated and was fond of poetry and music, and composed many verses in Persian. Believing in the Shia faith, she yet had a very universal outlook.

*Piyashi Roychoudhury*

## **NUTAN (1936–1991)**

Nutan was a film actor. Born on 4 June, she was the eldest child of Shobhna Samarth (q.v.) and the director Kumarsen Samarth. She was thus related to many actors of then and now, including Tanuja, Kajol and Rani Mukherjee. Nutan is one of the biggest legends of the Hindi film industry. Her face was described by the late make-up maestro Sarosh Mody as 'a cameraman's, dream because she has no bad angles.' However, when she was young regarded as 'skinny' and 'ugly'.

Her film career began at the age of nine when she featured as a child artiste in her father's *Nala Damayanti* in 1945. In 1950, when she was only 14, Nutan starred in a film directed by her mother, appropriately titled *Hamari Beti* (Our Daughter). In 1951, she had her first hits, *Hum Log* (1951) and *Nagina* (1951), and was also crowned

the first ever Miss India. She was then sent to Switzerland to spend some time in a Swiss finishing school, Le Chatelaine. On her return she stunned the industry by playing a juvenile delinquent in *Seema*, (1955). It was evident quite early on that her style of acting and emoting was very different from what had hitherto been seen on the Bombay screen. She tried to think of herself as her characters and to use her mobile and expressive face to maximum effect. Characters such as Seema, with their tormented, mercurial temperaments, gave her the maximum scope to showcase this talent. Even though Nutan herself had a beautiful voice, she chose to concentrate on her acting rather than her singing.

In 1959, she married Rajnish Behl, a lieutenant commander in the Indian Navy, and had a son, Mohnish, after which she took a break from films, returning with the award-winning *Bandini* (1963). In the next couple of decades, she played diverse roles in films like *Milan* (1967), *Saraswati Chandra* (1968), *Saudagar* (1973) and *Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki* (1978), and won many awards. She worked with directors as distinct as Bimal Roy, Manmohan Desai, Raj Khosla and Basu Bhattacharya. As she aged, she began to take on more mature roles in the 1980s and also launched her son, Mohnish Behl, in films. In February 1991, she died of cancer. Her last film, *Insaniyat*, was released posthumously. Nutan won six Filmfare Awards and countless others, the most any actress has won to date.

## P

### **PADMAJA NAIDU (1900–1975)**

Padmaja Naidu was the daughter of Sarojini Naidu (q.v) and joined the Indian National Congress at the age of 21. She founded the Hyderabad branch of Congress with her mother. She was active in the Swadeshi movement and the boycott of British goods in the 1930s. She was jailed for taking part in the Quit India movement in 1942. After Independence, in 1956, she became the first Governor of West Bengal. She was also associated with the Indian Red Cross. She donated the Naidu family home, ‘The Golden Threshold’, to the University of Hyderabad plans to establish an arts and media centre. She was also associated with the Bharat Sevak Samaj, the All-India Handicrafts Board and the Nehru Memorial Fund. In 1975, the Zoological Park at Darjeeling was renamed the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park by Indira Gandhi.

### **PADMINI, QUEEN OF CHITTOR (1285–1303)**

Padmini, or Padmavati, was a queen of Chittor. Her name means ‘lotus-woman’, the most desirable type of woman according to Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*, and she was queen to Rana Rawal Ratan Singh of Mewar. She is famed in stories and legends for her beauty. Perhaps this is why she is popularly believed to have been the prize Ala-ud-din Khilji sought in invading Chittor, though no contemporary sources mention this story. The first appearance of this interpretation of events is in Malik Mohammed Jayasi’s 1540 poem *Padmavat*.

This alleges that a disgruntled courtier of Chittor traveled to Delhi and incited Alauddin Khilji to lust after Padmini, such that the Sultan came to Chittor, laid siege to the fort and eventually reduced it, but was balked of his prey by Padmini's act of committing ritual suicide by the Rajput custom of *Jauhar*. Acts of heroism were common when Chittor was under siege, for the fort had no source of fresh water, and given a lengthy siege, it was doomed to fall every time. Hence, the defenders would try through sorties and sudden attacks to secure quick relief.

Whatever the real facts of the case may be, Padmini was, nevertheless, a Rajput queen in the heroic mould, and helped her people last out against the Sultan's army for eight months. The forces of Delhi proved stronger and better organised, and when it became plain that the Rajputs were bound to be defeated, Padmini and her attendants lit a great fire in an underground passage. James Tod, in *The Annals of Rajasthan*, describes how the women were sealed into this subterranean chamber with the 'devouring element' (although how they kept the fire alive underground is not clear). Here, all the noblewomen of the fort immolated themselves in the Rajput custom of *jauhar* to avoid capture.

## PANNA DHAI (C. 1542)

Panna was the nurse of the Rajput prince Udai Singh, posthumous son of Maharana Sanga (1509–1527). She brought him up along with her own son, Chandan. The history of Mewar during this period is turbulent. Maharana Sanga was killed in battle against Babur, and two of his sons occupied the throne in succession. Finally, in 1536, Udai Singh was declared the ruler and his cousin Banbir Singh, was appointed as his regent. However, Banbir Singh was rumoured to be an illegitimate son of Udai Singh's uncle and was suspected of having poisoned one of his elder brothers. Panna Dhai had protected her

charge's life through many upheavals, but she now knew the prince was in mortal danger and had him conveyed out of the palace, hidden in a fruit basket. Banbir Singh entered the prince's apartment with a sword drawn and demanded to see the child. Silently, Panna pointed to the cradle where her own son, Chandan, slept. Banbir killed the child, and Panna arranged the funeral as if the boy had really been the prince. She then slipped out of the fort, and after some difficulty, succeeded in obtaining sanctuary for Udai Singh with the Jain governor of Kumbhalmer, who pretended that the boy was his nephew. Thus, Udai Singh remained incognito for some years, until Panna produced proof of his identity to the nobles of Mewar, and he was reinstated on the throne.

## **PARBATI GIRI (1926–1995)**

Parbati Giri was a freedom fighter and activist for tribal rights. She was the daughter of Dhananjay Giri at Samlaipadar village near Bijepur of the present Bargarh district and undivided Sambalpur in the year 1926. Her uncle Ramchandra Giri was an associate of freedom fighters like Laxminarayan Mishra, Durga Prasad Guru, Bhagirathi Pattanayak and his wife, Jambobati Pattanaik and Fakira Behera. Parbati witnessed their discussion as a young child and was quickly fired with the desire to serve the nation. She studied till class three, then dropped out and began travelling from village to village, campaigning for the Congress. In 1938, when she was 12, senior Congress leaders at a meeting in Samlaipadar requested her father to permit her to work for the Congress. He agreed, and Parbati was allowed to go to the Bari Ashram, in Jajpur, run by Rama Devi (q.v.). The little girl travelled there without any signs of nervousness. She was accompanied by Prabhabati Devi, a child widow of Bargarh. Prabhabati's family tried to stop them but failed. On the way, the two girls halted at Arigaon, the home of Reba Roy, then arrived at Bari Ashram.

During her life in the Ashram, Parbati learned many things, including handicrafts and self-help. In 1940, Parbati began travelling for the Congress to Bargarh, Sambalpur, Padampur, Panimara, Ghens and other places. She trained villagers in spinning and weaving khadi. From 1942 she campaigned for the Quit India Movement and was arrested many times, but at first, as she was a minor, the police had to release her. She was finally arrested when she invaded the SDO's office at Bargarh, sat in his chair and ordered her 'men' to bring the SDO to her, bound with a rope. She was sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment at Sambalpur Jail. At Bargarh Court, she staged an agitation to persuade the lawyers to boycott the court in defiance of the British. Those lawyers who refused to stop work were presented with bangles (an insult to their manhood). After Independence, she completed her schooling at the Prayag Mahila Vidyapitha in Allahabad in 1950. Four years later, she joined Rama Devi (q.v.) in her relief work.

In 1955, she joined an American project to improve the health and hygiene of the people of Sambalpur district. She started an ashram for women and orphans called the Kasturba Gandhi Matruniketan at Nrusinghanath, and another home for the destitute called Dr. Santra Bal Niketan at Birasingh Gar under Jujomura block in Sambalpur district. She worked in jail improvement and leprosy eradication. The Department of Social Welfare of the Government of India awarded her a prize in 1984.

## **PARVEEN BABI (1954–2005)**

Parveen Babi, was an actor. She was born in Junagadh, which had been a Princely State; her father Vali Mohammed Babi had been an official in the Nawab's government. She was a much-awaited child as her parents had been childless for fourteen years. She went to school in Aurangabad and to college at St Xavier's, Ahmedabad. Her stunning

good looks quickly got her noticed, and her first film was *Charitra* in 1973. Several unremarkable films followed until the success of *Deewar* (1975), the film that made Amitabh Bachchan's reputation. She went on to make a long list of films, many co-starring Amitabh, including the hugely successful *Amar Akbar Antony* (1977). She also made *Pati, Patni Aur Woh* (1978), *Kaala Patthar*, *Suhaag* (1979), *Shaan* (1980), *Meri Awaaz Suno* (1981), *Kranti* (1981), and *Namak Halal* (1982).

Both she and Zeenat Aman embodied for Hindi film audiences the new woman: Westernized, stylish, ever ready to smoke a cigarette or wriggle in tight dresses on the dance floor, yet also vulnerable and soft, longing for the hero's attention and the apotheosis of marriage. She was cast alongside Zeenat Aman in *Mahaan* (1983) and again in *Ashanti* (1981), a rather odd remake of *Charlie's Angels*, with Shabana Azmi taking the role of the third angel. Babi also acted in non-mainstream films like Vinod Pandey's *Yeh Nazdeekiyan* (1982). She featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1977. It is rumoured that Mahesh Bhatt's release of *Arth* in 1983, which was based apparently on his relationship with her.

She moved to New York that year and is rumoured to have had a breakdown at John F. Kennedy airport, necessitating physical restraint. She was taken to a public hospital where an Indian doctor recognised her and rescued her. She became a recluse, associating with the philosopher U.G. Krishnamurthi, and returned to India in 2002, much changed and very overweight. It soon became apparent that she was ill both physically and mentally, and she accused many foreign personalities and her former co-star, Amitabh Bachchan, of conspiring to kill her, but her petition in court was dismissed for lack of evidence. She filed an affidavit in the Special Court convened to deal with the 1993 violence in Mumbai, claiming that she had evidence to show, but she did not answer her summons. She may have been a victim of paranoid schizophrenia. She never got married.

She was found dead in her apartment after the secretary of her residential society complained to the police that she had not collected

milk and newspapers from her doorstep for two days. She was found to have gangrene of the foot as a complication of her diabetic condition. The police ruled out any foul play. She was buried next to her mother at Santa Cruz cemetery in Mumbai after an Islamic funeral service. The film *Woh Lamhe* (2006) is based on the story of her life.

## PATACHARA (6TH CENTURY BCE)

Patachara was a bhikkhuni, a Buddhist nun. She was the daughter of a banker of Shravasti. She fell in love with an employee of her father's, eloped with him and came to live with him in his country. After having two children, she wanted to return to her father's house and be reconciled with her parents. Her husband was reluctant to go as the journey was long and hard, but at last he agreed. On the way, she and her children felt very thirsty, and the young man went to fetch water for them. He failed to return, and Patachara found him dead of snakebite. Alone with her children, she proceeded onwards till she came to a mighty river. This she crossed with the younger child, telling her elder one to wait on the bank till she called him. She reached the other side, covered the baby with a leaf and set out to get the other. When she was halfway across, a hawk swooped down and carried off the baby. At this, she screamed and the other child, thinking she was calling him, ran into the stream and perished.

These experiences caused her to lose her reason, and she wandered the forest, mad with grief, for many years. Then one day she chanced to come upon a place where the Buddha was teaching. His followers tried to shoo her away, but Buddha said, 'Forbid her not'. She came into his presence, and he calmed her mind and heard her story. She wished to join the sangha, and he accepted her as a novice. Her study and adherence to the rules were so great that she earned the name *Patachara*, meaning adept (*patu*) at ritual (*achara*). Some of her hymns

are preserved in the *Therigatha*, the collection of hymns by the *theris* or Buddhist nuns.

## PATIENCE COOPER (1905–1993)

Patience Cooper was an actor. She began her career as a dancer in Bandmann's Musical Comedy, a revue troupe. She later joined Jamshedji Framji Madan's Corinthian Stage Company. In those days, it was very difficult for respectable Indian women to join films, and most of the early heroines were tawaifs (courtesans) or Anglo-Indian dancers like Patience or Gauhar Jan's (q.v.) mother. Patience had very well-marked features, which made her perfect for the lighting used in films at that time. She played sexy but innocent heroines caught in moral dilemmas, the kind of roles later played by Nargis (q.v.). Her first major film was *Nala Damayanti* (1920), a lavish Madan production directed by the Italian Eugenio De Liguoro, known in Italy for his spectacular 'oriental' films like *Fascino d'Oro* (1919). He also directed *Dhruva Charitra* (1921). *Nala Damayanti* used innovative (for the time) special effects to give a sense of the mythological dimensions of the story. She then appeared in *Vishnu Avatar* (1921) and *Pati Bhakti* (1922) directed by J.J. Madan. She retired in 1944, after performing in over 40 films. She was the first person in Hindi cinema to play a double role, playing two sisters in the film *Patni Pratap*, and a mother and daughter in Kashmiri Sundari. Sulochana (q.v.) was her competitor. She married Ispahani Saheb, a tea-estate owner, when she was 21, but the marriage fell apart, although they remained friends. She then married Gul Hamid Khan, another actor, who died of cancer six years later. After Independence, she emigrated to Pakistan and changed her name to Sabra Begum. She fostered and/or adopted 17 children during her lifetime. Her last film was *Zehari Saap* (1933) about a revolt against an evil Nawab.

## D.K. PATTAMMAL (1919–2009)

Damal Krishnaswamy Pattammal was a Carnatic singer. She was born into a conservative Brahmin Dikshitar family and given the name Patta. The family was deeply religious, and Patta remembered her father's recitals of Sanskrit prayers that were almost like raga recitals themselves. Although Patta showed promise, she was not allowed to become the disciple of a maestro (in those days, all male). Her only access to music was the Thyagaraja festival, organized by the impresario Naina Pillai. She enlisted her brothers to help her, and later, they also became her accompanists. Lacking the basic training given to professional singers, she spent her whole life devising workarounds for the gaps in her knowledge, and it was her own boundless talent that made such a feat possible. She gave her first performance at the age of ten and her first radio performance at the age of thirteen. Her headmistress, impressed, allowed her to take a part in a musical play, and she came to the notice of Ambi Dikshitar, a descendant of Baluswami Dikshitar, brother of Muthuswami Dikshitar. He taught her, then she learned from T.L. Venkatarama Iyer, an authority on Dikshitar *kritis*. She mastered the Raga Thanam Pallavi, traditionally sung by men. Songs by Subramanya Bharati and Papanasam Sivan, rendered by her, became widely popular. She also began to sing for film scores, first for *Thyaga Bhoomi*, then others, including *Naam Iruvar*.

She married R. Iswaran and had two sons, I. Sivakumar and I. Lakshman Kumar. She sang patriotic songs over All India Radio on the eve of Independence. She was a recipient of several awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1961, the Sangeeta Kalanidhi from the Music Academy in 1970, Padma Bhushan in 1971, and Padma Vibhushan in 1998. She became a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1992.

## PERIN BEN CAPTAIN (1888–1958)

Perin Ben Captain was a freedom fighter. She was a granddaughter of Dadabhai Naoroji and was born at Mandvi in Kutch on 12 October 1888. Her father was a doctor and died when she was seven. She was educated in Bombay (now Mumbai), then in Paris at the Sorbonne University where she studied French. In 1925, she married Dhunjisha S. Captain.

In Paris, she became part of Madam Cama's circle of revolutionaries and had a part in the plan to free Savarkar after he was arrested in London. She and Savarkar attended the first Egyptian National Congress at Brussels. Perin Ben also worked with Polish émigré organizations in Paris against Czarist Russia. She returned to India in 1911 and met and was influenced by Gandhiji in 1919. In 1921, she helped set up the *Rashtriya Stree Sabha*, a nationalist women's organization on Gandhian principles. She was a member of several War Councils of the Bombay (now Mumbai) Congress and also its first woman president in 1932 when she was arrested during the Civil Disobedience Movement. That same year, when the *Gandhi Seva Sena* replaced these earlier organizations, she was made Honorary General Secretary and remained so till her death; she held the same office for the *Hindustani Prachar Sabha*. She was one of the early awardees of the Padma Shri in 1954.

## PHOOLAN DEVI (1963–2001)

She was a controversial and iconic figure in modern Indian history, known for her transformation from a victimized child bride and bandit leader to a Member of Parliament. Her life story is one of resilience, vengeance, and complex intersections of caste, gender, and justice in rural India.

She belonged to the *Mallah* (boatmen) caste, a backward caste group. At the age of 11, Phoolan was married to a man three times her age, who physically abused her. She eventually returned to her parental village, facing social stigma and oppression.

After enduring sexual violence and exploitation—reportedly including gang rape by upper-caste Thakur men in the village of Behmai—Phoolan joined a gang of dacoits (bandits) in the Chambal Valley. Her most infamous act came in 1981, when her gang killed 20 Thakur men in Behmai, in what became known as the Behmai Massacre, reportedly as revenge for her earlier assault. This made her a national sensation and a symbol of both fear and defiance.

She surrendered: 1983, negotiated through the Madhya Pradesh Government, spent and 11 years in prison without a formal trial. She was released in 1994, as part of a political arrangement, Phoolan Devi entered politics soon after her release, portraying herself as a champion of the oppressed. She joined the Samajwadi Party under Mulayam Singh Yadav, was elected as a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Mirzapur constituency in 1996 and again in 1999.

In July 2001, she was assassinated outside her residence in New Delhi by Sher Singh Rana, who claimed to avenge the Behmai killings.

## **PHULRENU GUHA (1911–2006)**

Phulrenu Guha was a freedom fighter and revolutionary. She was born on 13 August 1911 in Calcutta and was educated at Calcutta University, London University and the Sorbonne in Paris. She first joined the Jugantar Party at the age of fifteen in 1926. Jugantar belonged to the radical end of the spectrum of political groups working towards Independence. There she met her future husband, Biresh Chandra Guha, who had joined the Jugantar Party even younger, and who had

completed his M.Sc. in organic chemistry in 1925 and began working under Prafulla Chandra Ray. In about 1928, Biresh Chandra left for England, while Phulrenu joined the Sorbonne in Paris. Neither were to return to India till about 1932. Biresh Chandra was working with Sir Jack Drummond and Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins in London and Cambridge and helping to discover vitamins.

On their return to India, the Guhas were caught up in the Non-Cooperation Movement, and Biresh Chandra was jailed, leaving Phulrenu, undaunted, to fight alone. Phulrenu was part of the effort to relieve the distressed during the Bengal Famine in 1941–43, and she also strove to restore communal harmony at Noakhali. From 1943 to 1944 she was Secretary of the Women's Section of the Azad Hind Relief Committee. Like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (q.v.), she understood that the first priority after Partition had to be the rehabilitation and succour of the displaced, especially women and children. Phulrenu and Biresh Chandra Guha were married on 17 July 1945, many years after they had first met. After Independence, Phulrenu threw herself into nation-building. She served various State and Central Government organisations in different capacities. She was Chairperson of the Task Force on Child Welfare Committee of Planning Commission, Government of India, from 1971 to 1972, and of the Committee on Status of Women in India from 1972 to 1975. She was also president of the Indian Council of Child Welfare from 1970 to 1973. In 1977, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan. She was a Member of the Lok Sabha from 1964 to 1970. She served as Minister of State for Social Welfare from March 1967 to February 1969 and Law from February 1969 to June 1970. She was a formidable debater and a person of very sharp intelligence and good sense. She died at the age of 95, in an old age home she had founded herself, and also publicly donated much of her wealth and possessions to Calcutta University to set up the B.C. Guha Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology.

## PRABHAVATI DEVI (5TH CENTURY)

Prabhavati, daughter of Dhruva Devi (q.v.), was one of the most important queens of ancient India, ruling the Deccan for about 13 years. She was an expert diplomat. Her career as a mediator started young; when the Gupta empire came under threat from the Vakatakas in the fourth century, her father, King Chandra Gupta II, deflected the danger by proposing her marriage to the Vakataka Prince Rudrasena II. The proposal was accepted, and the alliance solemnised in Pataliputra in the year 380.

Prabhavati was the chief queen of King Rudrasena II and had tremendous influence over him. It was probably she who led him to give up his ancestral religion, Shaivism, and became a Vaishnava. Rudrasena had hardly ruled for five years when he died, leaving his two minor sons, Divakarasena and Damodarasena, so Prabhavati ruled the kingdom as regent on behalf of the former. Her royal father assured Prabhavati of military assistance and sent able officers to help her in the state administration, and this support ensured that others of the Vakataka family refrained from challenging her—for Vindhyaashakti II of the Vasim branch of the family, being the eldest male, had a more orthodox claim to regency.

It was during Prabhavati's regency that Chandra Gupta conquered Gujarat and Kathiawar, but there is no definite proof that she gave her father any military help. Chandra Gupta, moreover, took a keen interest in the education of his grandsons and appointed the poet Kalidasa was to be their tutor. It is said that Kalidasa corrected the draft of *Sethubandhan*, written by Pravarasena, as the younger prince became known. Prabhavati issued a proclamation during her visit to a temple of the god Ramagiriswamin, who is identified as the deity of Ramtek near Nagpur. In it, she is described as a devotee of Lord Vishnu and is credited with the lineage and the family designation of her father. Kalidas may have accompanied her on this journey and been impressed with the natural beauty of Ramtek, for the place features largely in his famous epic poem *Meghadutam*.

In the thirteenth year of her regency Prabhavati, witnessed a great tragedy, the death of Divakarasena, and she had to continue her regency for another five to six years before her younger son came of age. Her younger son issued an order concerned with her welfare in his nineteenth ruling year, which claims that she lived for more than 100 years, but her death cannot have taken place much before 455, when her brother Kumara Gupta died. Following the family tradition, Prabhavati married her grandson Narendrasena to the Kadamba princess Ajitabhattarika, thus ending the enmity between the Kadambas and the Vakatakas.

Prabhavati was undoubtedly proud of her Gupta lineage and used the cognomen of her father's family even after her marriage. The copper plates of Poona and Rithapur issued by her begin with the genealogy of her father and not of her husband, as was the usual practice.

## **PRAMILA DANDAVATE (1928–2001)**

Pramila Dadavate was a politician and champion of women's rights. She was born in a prosperous middle-class family. In her youth in 1944, she took part in the setting up of the Konkan Rashtra Seva Samiti, but felt Samiti was divorced from current issues. With Kusum Mahale and Kusum Kulkarni, she then became involved with the Rashtra Seva Dal. She studied at the J.J. School of Art but was more interested in attending M.G. Ranade's village camps and became sensitized to women's issues. She married the Janata Dal politician Madhu Dandavate and they took part in the Goa Mukti Andolan of 1955, or the movement to end Portuguese rule in Goa. The couple then became involved with the movement for a united Maharashtra and spent time in and out of jails. Around this time, she got a UNESCO scholarship to go to England. With Mrinal Gore and Ahilya Rangnekar, she took part in the 'latne morchas' or 'rolling pin marches' taken out

by crowds of women carrying rolling pins. In 1971, her husband was elected to the Lok Sabha, and she looked after his Konkan constituency while he was in Delhi. Later, she was elected from Mumbai North Central constituency in the 1970s. She was president of the Mahila Dakshyata Samiti, a prominent organization promoting women's issues. She campaigned against dowry killings and bride burning. She was jailed at Yerawada for the duration of the Emergency of 1975-6. With Jamila Verghese and Ranjana Kumari, she edited *Widows and Destitute Women in India* (1989). When she moved to Delhi, she established the Mahila Dakshyata Samiti in Delhi also. She was a founder member of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, a member of its National Council and the National Executive Committee for several years.

## PRASANNAMOYEE DEVI (1856–1939)

Prasannamoyee Devi was a Bengali poet and writer, and one of the earliest female memoirists. She was also the mother of Priyambada Devi (q.v.). Her father, Durgadas Chaudhury was a Brahmo and a senior government official with a transferable job. Her family was well-connected, and her brothers, Ashutosh Chaudhury and Pramatha Chaudhury were littérateurs and sympathizers of the freedom movement. Prasannamoyee published her first book of poems, *Adh-Adh Bhashini*, at the age of twelve. She was married to a wealthy zamindar and kulin Brahmin of Pabna in what is now Bangladesh: Krishna Kumar Bagchi. However, Prasannamoyee refused to live with him in his rural home. After her daughter was born, she lived mostly with her father and brothers, and their house was frequented by many of the Tagores and other cultural worthies of the time. Prasannamoyee wrote regularly in prestigious journals such as *Matri Mandir* and *Bharatbarsha*. Her novel *Ashok* is set during the War of 1857. She published *Banalata* and *Niharika*, both collections of poems and a memoir titled *Purbakatha*.

## **PRATIMA DEVI (1893–1969)**

Pratima was the daughter of Binayini Devi of the Tagore household and sister of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore and of Sunayani Devi (q.v.). Pratima Devi shared the family talent for art, and she further developed it as Rabindranath's daughter-in-law. The poet took an interest in her education, gave her books to read and encouraged her to make the most of her talents. He would write to her frequently and support her in extending her mind beyond the small confines of the world considered appropriate for married respectable women of the time. After her marriage, he put her in touch with Nandalal Bose at Shantiniketan, and she continued to develop her artistic talents under him. She joined the Vichitra club and studio and helped with the curriculum and management of Shilpa Sadan. She also travelled widely with her husband and father-in-law. She would take a major role in amateur dramatics for which the Jorasanko household was famous, helping with set design and music. She was particularly interested in dance and would help Rabindranath choreograph his dance dramas. She is the author of a little book called *Nritya*, on the dance and its possibilities.

## **PREETILATA WADEDAR (1911–1932)**

Preetilata was born at Chittagong in what is now Bangladesh. Her father was a head clerk at the District Magistrate's office. She imbibed a strong sense of honesty and duty from her parents. In her youth, she kept a diary in English and also wrote in Bengali. As she grew older, she was determined to free her country from British rule. She began secretly to study revolutionary texts and involve herself in resistance activities in Chittagong. She joined Leela Nag's *Deepali Sangha* and Kalyani Das's *Chhatri Sangha*, both with strong revolutionary

leanings. In Chittagong, she came under the influence of Nirmal Sen of the Jugantar Party, who taught her boxing and firearm shooting and introduced her to Surya Sen, known as ‘Masterda’. While still a teenager, her activities brought her under constant police surveillance.

Academically brilliant, she graduated with honours from Calcutta University in English Literature, joining Nandan Kanan School as Headmistress. She had a narrow escape in 1932 when Captain Cameron raided the revolutionary centre at Dhalghat, killing Nirmal and Apurba Sen. Preetilata went into hiding. Three months later, ‘Masterda’ chose her to lead a raiding party on the European club at Pahartoli. The club was bombed, wounding a dozen Englishmen. Her mission accomplished, Preetilata took poison and died near the club premises in June 1932. Several pamphlets written by her were found on her body.

## **PROTIMA BARUA PANDEY (1934–2002)**

Protima Barua Pandey was a folk singer and ethnomusicologist who sang the folk songs of Goalpara. She was the niece of a filmmaker Pramathesh Barua. She was a member of the Gauripur royal family; her father was Prakitesh Chandra Barua (Lalji). She was popularly known as Hastir Kanya after one of her songs. Another song she often sang was ‘Mur Mahut Bandhu Re’. She was born in Calcutta and educated at Gokhale Memorial School, then at the Girls’ High School, Gauripur. She was never formally trained in music, but many members of the family were naturally musical. In 1955, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika visited Gauripur and attended a concert where the young Protima sang the songs of Goalpara to the *dhol*, *junuka*, *ditora*, *darinda*, *dhuluki* and flute. Dr. Hazarika was impressed and predicted that she would take Goalpariya folk music to great heights. She had great respect for her guru, Bhaben Singha Roy, who was the chief mahout or elephant keeper in her father’s stable. She married Gauri Shankar Pandey, principal

of the Gauripur P. B. College. She was awarded the Padmashree and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. A documentary on her by Prabin Hazarika, *Hastir Kanya*, won a national award for best biographical film in 1997.

## PROTIMA GAURI BEDI (1948–1998)

Protima Gauri Bedi was a dancer, socialite and rebel from childhood. Her father, Laxmichand Gupta, was a trader from Haryana who had married a Bengali, Reba, and had to leave his family because of their opposition to the match. She was born in Delhi, but in 1953 the family moved to Goa, then Bombay, where she joined St Xavier's College. She began modelling in the 1960s. When her father saw a picture of her modelling a nightdress in the *Times of India*, he slapped her. She walked out and used her modelling money to rent a room for herself. She was already seeing Kabir Bedi, and she now lived with him, opened Mumbai's first disco, Hideout, and acquired a reputation as a party animal. She decided she wanted a non-formal relationship because she had seen how frustrated her mother and many of her friends were in their marriages. She was also disgusted with the attitude of men who assumed automatic superiority over women, and in protest, she famously streaked on Juhu Beach in 1974. At 26, she wandered into a theatre and saw an Odissi performance and realised at once this was what she wanted to do. Discarding her cigarettes, her torn jeans, streaked hair and hippie paraphernalia, she went to Kelucharan Mahapatra and begged him to teach her. Even when she was learning, the trappings of authority annoyed her; she would not perform *puja* or touch her guru's feet. But the humility of her guru, a man honoured by the nation who would sweep his own gutter, broke down her resistance. When she finally touched his feet, it was out of genuine respect.

She toured the world, settling in Switzerland, but felt that there was something missing from her life. She was not a born dancer and did not have the technical mastery of one brought up in the form. She felt she had to give something else to her best-loved art. Thus was born the idea of Nrityagram. She bought land outside Bangalore and built the place almost with her bare hands. She did not teach; her guru Mahapatra taught Odissi, Kalanidhi Narayan, taught *abhinaya*, and Kumudini Lakhia, Kathak. Then, when Nrityagram was up and running, she quit. She had intended to nurse her son Siddharth who was schizophrenic, but Siddharth, took his own life. Her daughter Pooja became a successful film actor. Pratima died in a landslide when, on pilgrimage in the Himalayas.

## PUPUL JAYAKAR (1915–1997)

Pupul Jayakar was a writer and cultural impresario. She was born Pupul Mehta into a cultured and liberal family. Her mother was a Gujarati Brahmin, and her father was a senior civil servant. She remembered going on field trips with him as a girl. Those nomadic years, travelling through the districts of rural India, gave her the grounding in Indian culture that stood her in good stead in later years.

She went to Annie Besant's school in Varanasi, then lived in Allahabad from the age of fifteen. There, the family became friends with the Nehru-Gandhis, and the young Pupul became deeply attached to Indira. She left to study journalism in England before marrying and settling in Mumbai in 1937, when her first child was born. When she was seven months' pregnant with the second in 1939, she was bitten by a dog with rabies and was given the full course of injections of anti-rabies toxoid. She lost the child, and developed high blood pressure and lost her sight temporarily. The experience devastated her.

Shortly after this, she met the spiritual leader Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was to become her guru. She also became active in politics,

working as an assistant to the Congress activist Mridula Sarabhai. She had an abiding interest in handicrafts, which she believed would be the salvation of rural India. She headed the Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation. She almost participated in the Quit India Movement but came down with appendicitis and had to have surgery. In 1945, she, became pregnant with her third child, but it was born deformed and died shortly after birth.

She dabbled in Socialism and the Co-operative Movement. In Independent India, both the Congress and the Socialist party offered her a ticket, but she declined and left politics to work for the Krishnamurti Foundation. When Jawaharlal Nehru and T.R. Krishnamachari asked her to help sort out the handloom sector and update it for modern times, she extricated herself from evenings of bridge at the Willingdon Club and set out to teach herself about the business of textiles. She was a significant factor in making *khadi* and handicrafts fashionable among the smart set. Later, she founded the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), interested foreign designers such as Pierre Cardin in using Indian fabrics, and put Indian textiles on the world map. She was active with the Krishnamurti Foundation in India until her death.

Her best known books are her two biographies, *J. Krishnamurti: A Biography* (1988) and *Indira Gandhi: An Intimate Biography* (1992). In the latter, Jayakar reveals that her close friend Indira Gandhi had personally expressed to her a premonition of her death in the wake of the Operation Bluestar incident. She also wrote *The Earthen Drum*, a book on folk arts, and *The Earth Goddess*, a survey of myths and legends.

## **PURNIMA BANERJEE (1911–1951)**

Purnima Banerjee was the younger sister of an independence activist and educator Aruna Asif Ali. Her advocacy for broader

educational reforms and the removal of sectarian exclusiveness in educational institutions marked her contributions to the Constituent Assembly.

Purnima Banerjee was the secretary of the Indian National Congress committee in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. She was one among a radical network of women from Uttar Pradesh who stood at the forefront of the freedom movement in the late 1930s and 40's. As secretary of the Indian National Congress committee in Allahabad, she was responsible for engaging and organizing trade unions, kisan meetings and work towards greater rural engagement. She took part in the Salt March and the Quit India Movement and was subsequently imprisoned.

Later, she became a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly and of the Constituent Assembly of India. She was arrested for her participation in the Satyagraha and Quit India Movement. One of the more striking aspects of Purnima Banerjee's speeches in the Constituent Assembly was her steadfast commitment to a socialist ideology.

Purnima Banerji stood up in support of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to pass the Draft Constitution; she was never hesitant to express her apprehensions. According to her, the Constitution only provided the basic means for a just and civil society. However, it is always dependent on people of power to scale our society to new heights of glory.

Banerji felt that the key industries and mineral resources of the country should have been taken over from private enterprises to save the government from foreign aggression. Keeping in mind, India's tryst with salt, salt should have been kept duty-free as a gift to free India. She was the first woman to lead the chorus of Jana Gana Mana after it was officially adopted as our National Anthem on 24th January 1950.

Purnima Banerjee's legacy is one of quiet but powerful defiance, visionary thinking, and unwavering commitment to justice.

## **QURRAT-UL-AIN HAIDER (1927–2007)**

‘Qurrat-ul-Ain An iconoclast, Haider broke through the poetry-dominated Urdu literary world to give Urdu prose its due recognition through her works that earned her accolades.’

She was a writer in Urdu of novels, articles and short stories. She was known for her perspective on women’s lives behind the purdah in traditional Urdu society. She was born in Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh of literary parents. Her father was Sajjad Haider Yilderim, a famous Urdu writer, and her mother, Nazar Zahra, wrote under the names Bint-i-Nazrul Baqar and Nazar Sajjad Hyder. Her parents named her after the Iranian poet Qurrat-ul-Ain Tahira, but she was affectionately known in later years as ‘Ainee Apa’. She began to write at the age of six, and was encouraged by her parents and her mother’s patron Muhammadi Begum. Qurrat-ul-Ain spent her early childhood in Port Blair, was educated at Lucknow’s Isabella Thoburn College. Her first short story, ‘Bi-Chuhiya’ (Little Miss Mouse), was published in the children’s magazine Phool. She moved to Karachi in Pakistan in 1947 and published her first novel, *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane*, in 1949. She then wrote *Safina e Gham e Dil* (1952) and became a member of the Pakistan Writers’ Guild. She published *Aag Ka Dariya* in 1959 (translated by the author as *River of Fire* in 1998). This novel covered significant moments in South Asian history from Buddhist times to the present day. The book was acclaimed, but also raised a certain amount of controversy in Pakistan, which was then under General Ayub Khan. Somewhat disconcerted by the reaction to her book, she left for London shortly afterwards.

In 1961, she left London for Bombay, encouraged by her friend, the film director Abbas Ahmed. In 1964, she became managing editor of the magazine *Imprint*, where she continued till 1968. She then became a member of the editorial staff of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* till 1975. Her other books are *Patjhar ki Awaz* (The Sound of Falling Leaves, 1965), the short novel *Chae ke Bagh* (Tea Garden, 1965), *Raushni ki Raftar* (The Speed of Light, 1982), and the family chronicle *Kar e Jahan Daraz Hai* (The Work of the World Goes On). Her later novels include *Aakhir Shab ke Hamsafar*, *Gardish e Rang e Chaman* and *Chandani Begum*. Her books have been translated into English and other languages. In all, she has 12 novels and novellas and four collections of short stories. Her last work was a biography of *Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan*, written with Malti Gilani and published in 2004.

In addition to journalism, she had a career as an academic, serving as a guest lecturer at the universities of California, Chicago, Wisconsin, and Arizona. She was a visiting professor at the Urdu Department at Aligarh Muslim University, where her father had earlier been a registrar. She was Professor Emeritus, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan Chair, *Jamia Millia Islamia*, New Delhi. She never married.

She won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for *Patjhar ki Awaz* in 1967, the *Soviet Land Nehru Award* in 1969, the *Padma Shri* in 1984, and the *Ghalib Award* in 1985. She won the *Jnanpith Award* in 1989 for her novel *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (Travellers Into the Night) and the *Bahadur Shah Zafar Award* in 2000 from the Urdu Academy. In 2005, she was awarded the *Padma Bhushan*. She died of complications from asthma and is buried in the *Jamia Millia Islamia* cemetery, New Delhi.

## R

### **RAJYASHRI (590–647)**

Rajyashri was the sister of Harsha Vardhan and was instrumental in getting her brother to convert to Buddhism. They were the children of Prabhakar Vardhan, a king of Sthanvisvara or modern Thanesar in Haryana. Prabhakar Vardhan was a follower of the sun cult. Rajya Vardhan was the eldest brother and succeeded to the throne in 606; he appears to have been a Hinayana Buddhist. His younger brother was initially Shaivite. Rajyashri was married to the Maukhari king, Grahavarman of Kanauj. Kanauj and Magadha were strong centers of Buddhism, and here Rajyashri was exposed to Buddhist teachings and became a Mahayana Buddhist.

Some months after Rajya Vardhan's succession, Grahavarman was defeated in battle and killed by Deva Gupta of Malwa, and Rajyasri was thrown into prison. Rajya Vardhan marched against Deva Gupta and defeated him. He rescued his sister, but was attacked and killed by Sasanka, King of Gauda in Bengal, who committed an act of treachery. Thus, Harsha succeeded his brother to the throne of Thanesar at the age of sixteen. He allied with Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa and marched against Sasanka. Sasanka was defeated but escaped, and Harsha was able to rescue Rajyashri and bring her home to Thanesar. Under Rajyashri's influence, Harsha inclined towards Mahayana Buddhism, although he remained a syncretist all his life. His play *Nagananda* is based on the Jataka tale of Jimutavahana also introduces Shaivite motifs into the story. He was a renowned playwright as well as a successful ruler.

Harsha continued his father and brother's expansion of the kingdom. He conquered Kanauj and transferred his capital there. At

the height of his power, his kingdom spanned the Punjab, Gujarat, Bengal, Orissa and the entire Indo-Gangetic plain, extending North of the Narmada River. There, his rule ended as he could not overcome the powerful Chalukyas of Karnataka.

Rajyashri is said to have been instrumental in persuading Harsha to simplify the style of his court and to become a renouncer in later life. Harsha became a great patron of Buddhism, making many endowments to the university at Nalanda and organizing great Buddhist debates, one of which was won by the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who has left an account of Harsha's rule. Rajyashri herself is said to have become a bhikkhuni or Buddhist nun.

## **RAMA DEVI (1899–1985)**

Rama Devi was a freedom fighter. She was born into a wealthy zamindar family. Her mother was Basanta Kumari Devi and her father Gopal Ballav Das of Cuttack district. On 11 November 1914, she married Gopabandhu Choudhury, the son of Sri Gokulananda Choudhury. Her mother-in-law was very strict, but could not confine Rama Devi to the house for long. In 1921, her husband left his government job to work for the Congress full-time, and Rama Devi went with him. Her husband's brother Nabakrushna Choudhury and his wife Malati Choudhury (q.v.) also joined the Congress, and the four of them threw themselves into the Non-Cooperation Movement. They also took an active part in the Salt Satyagraha, the movement to promote swadeshi and khadi and the Bhoodan and Gramdan Movements. In 1930, Rama Devi spearheaded the famous Satyagraha at Inchudi in Balasore district, where thousands of men and women took part. Malati was arrested and sent to Bhagalpur Jail, and some months later, the police came for Rama Devi. The two women were released after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Rama Devi continued to agitate and was arrested

again in 1932 and kept in the Hazaribagh Jail. After her release, she began in 1934 to work for Dalit rights through the Asprushyata Nibarani Samiti, later renamed Harijan Seva Sangha. In 1938, she worked hard to raise money for the Congress meeting in Orissa. After Kasturba's death, she was appointed to work for the Kasturba Gandhi Trust in Orissa. She started an ashram at Bari, which was run on Gandhian lines. But in 1942, when the Quit India Movement began, the entire Choudhury family was once again arrested.

After Independence, she helped set up the Utkal Khadi Mandal and also established a Teachers' Training Centre and Balwadi (crèche) at Ramchandrapur. In 1950, she set up a Tribal Welfare Centre at Dumburugeda. During the 1951 famine, she and Malati worked in famine relief in Koraput. Thereafter, whenever a natural calamity struck, she was always there to organize relief and give comfort to the victims. In 1952, she undertook a padayatra all over Orissa to motivate people to donate surplus land to the Bhoodan Movement. She worked to aid soldiers affected by the Indo-Chinese War of 1962. During the Emergency, she protested by bringing out her own newspaper with Hare Krushna Mahatab and Nilamani Routray. The publisher, Gram Sevak Press, was banned by the government. She established a children's cancer hospital at Cuttack.

She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Utkal University and the Jamuna Lal Bajaj Award.

## **RAMABAI PANDITAI (1858–1922)**

Ramabai was an educationist and scholar. She was the daughter of Anant Padmanabha Dongre of Maharashtra, a great Vedantic scholar. His own people persecuted him because he educated his wife, Laxmibai. To escape, the family set out on a long pilgrimage, during which Laxmibai taught her daughter Sanskrit grammar and literature

By the age of fifteen, Ramabai could recite twenty thousand verses from the Hindu scriptures. She came to Kolkata aged twenty with her only surviving brother, Shrinivas Shastri, in 1878. Here she was greatly influenced by the teachings of Keshab Chandra Sen, as she had lost her faith in her native religion. In 1880, Shrinivas died. Ramabai married Bepin Behari Das, a lawyer, but he died young, leaving her with a daughter in 1882. She was drawn towards Christianity at this time after going through a copy of St Luke's Gospel left to her by her late husband.

Meanwhile, with the help of Maratha reformers like Ranade and Bhandarkar, she founded the Arya Mahila Samaj first in Pune, then in other parts of Maharashtra. In 1883, she gave evidence before the Hunter Commission regarding the provision of medical care to Indian women, and her testimony received wide publicity. That year, she went to England to study the language, writing her book *Stree Dharma Neeti* to pay for the expenses of travel, and was attracted to the attitude of the Christian faith towards 'fallen' women. Later that year, she was baptised in Wantage Parish Church. She joined the Cheltenham Women's College where she learned English, natural science and mathematics. In 1886, she went to the US to learn Fröbel's Kindergarten system of teaching young children, and in her leisure hours, prepared a series of Kindergarten readers in Marathi. Her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* won the admiration of Americans, and in 1887, they set up the Ramabai Association at Boston, 'with an object of giving education to high caste child widows in India'. In 1889, Pandita Ramabai founded teaching young children, and in her leisure hours, prepared a series, of Kindergarten readers in Marathi. Her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* won the admiration of Americans, and in 1887, they set up the Ramabai Association at Boston, 'with an object of giving education to high caste child widows in India'. In 1889, Pandita Ramabai founded the Sharda Sadan in Mumbai, and later in Puné, a shelter home for widows. Girls and women wishing to attend school were also admitted.

A severe famine broke out in 1896 in central India, and Ramabai gathered six hundred famine-stricken girls and women and kept them under her own care. In 1897, she founded the Mukti Sadan at Kedgaon to give shelter to destitute women during the famine of 1900. Ramabai also founded a rescue home with a hospital attached, Kripa Sadan, for women escaping the sex trade. She gave them vocational training and encouraged them to be self-sufficient. Ramabai did not tie herself to any particular church but announced her institutions were Christian Institutes and Christian instruction could be given to those who desired it. She carried out her work in the teeth of vehement opposition from Nationalist groups. In 1897, she protested the mismanagement and ill treatment of women in plague camps and even rebuked the Governor of Bombay. In 1898, she attended the Fifth National Meeting of the Congress. In her book *United States-chi Lokasthiti Va Pravas Vritta* she suggested that Hindi should be the Indian national language. She, also wrote *Ramabai's Bible* (translated from the original Hebrew), *Ibri Vyakarana* (a Hebrew grammar in Hindi), and edited *Mukti Prayer Bell* (a journal).

## RAMABAI RANADE (1862–1924)

Ramabai Ranade was a social worker. Married to Mahadev Govind Ranade, the lawyer and reformer, when she was but 11, Ramabai yet managed to transcend her beginnings with the willing help of her husband. Ranade had wanted to marry a widow but was forced by his family to accept Ramabai, and initially their relationship was fraught with bewilderment on her part and disappointment on his because of the arrangement. But Ranade then began to teach his young wife to read and write, and she responded ably to these new demands, showing herself an apt and able pupil.

Ramabai made her entry into public life in the 1870s, but it was after Justice Ranade's death in 1901 that she wholly identified herself with the cause of women in India. She willingly became a Visitor of the Central Prison and the Lunatic Asylum at Yeravada. She regularly visited the prison, prayed with women prisoners and tried to regenerate their souls. She visited the Lunatic Asylum and attended a meeting of its managing committee. She went to see the boys in the Reformatory School, spoke to them and distributed sweets to them on festive occasions.

She was soon knowledgeable enough to manage his affairs, and after his death in 1901, she edited and published his speeches and writings. In 1881, she participated in meetings of the Prarthana Samaj. She was active in the campaign for women's franchise in India and drew attention to the plight of Indian labourers in the Fiji Islands. In 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1920, she presided over the sessions of the Bharat Mahila Parishad.

She was president of the Bombay Seva Sadan from 1908 till her death, and of the Poona Seva Sadan from 1909. She established clubs where housewives could learn sewing and first aid, as well as Marathi and English. Her work for the Seva Sadans included the establishment of a hostel and arranging for nurses' training at the David Sassoon Hospital from 1911. In 1912, she served on the Central Famine Relief Committee. She wrote her autobiography in Marathi, *Amchya Ayushyatil Kanhi Athawani*, which gives a frank picture of her life in a traditional household with a progressive husband, and the sometimes-delicate feats she had to perform, balancing the demands of both. Her most outstanding contributions were agitating, compulsory and free primary education for girls, and organizing the women's suffrage movement in the Bombay Presidency in 1921–22.

Ramabai Ranade's birth centenary was celebrated on 25 January 1962, and a stamp was released on the occasion.

## RAMI (C. 1440)

Rami was a Vaishnava poet and a figure of Bengali legend as the low-caste lover and muse of the Vaishnav poet Chandidas. Chandidas himself is the subject of some controversy, as there seems to have been more than one poet of that name. In the legend, Chandidas is said to have seen Rami washing clothes in a pond and became so overwhelmed that he braved the ostracism of the village, quit his job as a priest, to wander with her and sing songs of love in the Vaishnav tradition. Several attempts have been made to historicise this legend, including the finding of an anthology ascribed to Rami, but so far, no conclusive evidence has been found to prove she really existed. The love lyrics ascribed to the washerwoman-poet are frank, courageous and uninhibited. A few lines from one of them:

What can I say, friend?  
 I don't have enough words!  
 Even as I weep when I tell you this story,  
 My accursed face breaks into laughter!  
 Can you imagine the cheek of the sinister men?  
 They have stopped worshipping the Devi  
 And have started tarnishing my reputation.

## RANI RUPMATI (C. 1570)

Rani Rupmati was the queen of Mandavgarh or Mandu, and she was also a famed musician. She came to Mandu from Nimad, whose chief river, the Narmada, she worshipped as her tutelary deity. At Mandu, she met Baz Bahadur of Malwa, also an accomplished musician, and their shared love of the arts drew them together. Between

them, they made Mandu a centre of culture and music. Rupmati was as beautiful as she was intelligent, but she had little inclination to involve herself in the workings of the kingdom, preferring to give her time to poetry, music and dance.

She invented many new forms, of which the most famous is the *khayal*. Though she was well known for the Bhupkalyan Khayal, her favourite was the Baz Khan Khayal. Rupmati's performances were totally her own creations; she would write the songs, set them to music and interpret them herself through dance. She was well-versed in Hindi and Rajasthani as well as the local dialects of Malwa and Nimad; she wrote in all these languages. Though her songs were not collected in her lifetime, many are preserved in Ahmad-ul-Lemari's collections. Mandu's reputation as a centre of musical excellence did not survive its sacking by the armies of Akbar under Adam Khan in 1570; Rupmati committed suicide to avoid falling into the hands of the army.

## **LADY RANU MUKHERJEE (1907–2000)**

Born Priti Adhikary in Varanasi, Lady Ranu Mukherjee was to become the muse of Rabindranath Tagore in his last years. Tagore first met her as a child in her parents' house when she rushed out to greet him in innocent nudity. He met her again when she was fifteen and had grown into a striking young girl on the verge of womanhood. She was a mercurial child; she could show great maturity as she acted a role beyond her years in Thakurbari amateur dramatics, but she also had a whimsical playfulness that the aging poet found very refreshing. She nicknamed him 'Bhanuda' after the character in his Bhanu Singher Padabali. Sunil Gangopadhyay wrote a novel, *Ranu o Bhanu*, in which he hinted that Tagore and Lady Ranu had become lovers. That there was a great attraction between them was undeniable; Tagore trusted Ranu to handle many important literary matters for him, even after

her marriage to Biren Mukherjee. She, too, was powerfully attracted, but there is no evidence of anything actually happening between them.

In later life, Lady Ranu became an active patron of the arts, helping with the running of the Academy of Fine Arts from 1947. She spent thirteen years at Shantiniketan, where she learnt drawing from Nandalal Bose.

## RASHEED JAHAN (1905–1952)

Rasheed Jahan was an Urdu writer and a member of the Progressive Writers' Group. Her work, with its earthy realism and uncompromising vision, inspired Ismat Chughtai (q.v.). Trained as a doctor, Rasheed saw many instances in the course of her practice of man's cruelty to woman. She was born and brought up in Aligarh, and her father, Sheikh Abdullah edited a women's magazine in Urdu, *Khatun*. The family was highly educated and often debated women's concerns. Rasheed's three sisters were all professionals, two working in education and the third an actress.

Rasheed studied in Lucknow, then went to Lady Hardinge Medical College. There she ran literacy classes and free clinics for women. In 1931, she made her name in Urdu literature with a play and a story in the anthology *Angare*. The other writers in this collection were all progressive, but public opinion concentrated on Rasheed's contribution. The play, titled *Parde ke Pichhe* (Behind the Curtain) and dealing with abortion and other health issues, angered traditional Muslim society. *Fatwas* were issued against her, and she was warned not to go out on her rounds, usually in the poorest and most dangerous parts of town, without a bodyguard. This suggestion she brushed aside, maintaining that as a doctor it was her duty to be available for private consultation to those who relied on her. She was well known for never refusing a call from a patient who needed her. She also edited the magazine

*Chingari*, kept open house for her progressive friends, acted in and directed many plays and worked for the Communist Party, taking over the duties of comrades underground and helping their families during World War II. She died in Moscow of uterine cancer. Today, she is largely remembered for her short fiction.

## **RANI RASHMONI (1793–1861)**

Rashmoni, the founder of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, was born in 1793 in Kona, a small village near Kolkata. By birth, she belonged to a *shudra* or ‘untouchable’ caste. Her father was Harekrishna Das, a labourer. When she was 11, Rajachandra Das, a very rich man, was struck by her beauty and married her. In 1817, Rajachandra inherited the large family fortune from his father, but he died at 48, leaving Rashmoni and her three married daughters. Rashmoni, though a very religious person, was nevertheless aware of the material interests of her family. With consummate skill and the help of her son-in-law Mohandas Biswas, she managed the assets and prosperity of the house and also contributed generously to charity. There are many stories of her fearlessness; when drunken soldiers broke into her house to loot it, she posted herself with a sword in hand at the door of the temple in her home, while other members of the family sought safety in a neighbour’s house.

The turning point in Rashmoni’s life came in 1847, when guided by a vision of the goddess Kali, she started the construction of the temple at Dakshineswar, four miles north of Kolkata. In 1855, an auspicious day was fixed for the installation of the deity at the temple. Since she was a *shudra*, Rani Rashmoni could not prevail upon any orthodox Brahmin to officiate as the priest. She consulted many renowned scholars, and one of them, Ramkumar Chattopadhyay, guided her out of the dilemma. She made a gift of the temple to her guru, a Brahmin,

and provided funds for its maintenance by purchasing a big estate in Dinapur and endowing the temple with its income. Ramkumar Chattopadhyaya was appointed the priest of the temple, and after him his brother Gadadhar took over. Gadadhar was so thoroughly immersed, in the contemplation of Kali that many people thought him mentally deranged. Rani Rashmoni was advised not to appoint him, yet with her intuition and insight, she was convinced that his strange ways only showed the intensity of his religious fervour.

Once during the time of worship, Sri Ramakrishna sensed that her mind was engrossed in commercial matters and slapped her on the back. Outraged, the astonished people demanded that she dismiss and punish him. She silenced them by saying that the Divine Mother had illumined her heart through Sri Ramakrishna. She donated generously to the then Imperial Library (now the National Library of India) and Hindu College (now Presidency College). By blocking the shipping trade on a section of the Ganga River, she compelled the British to abolish the tax imposed on fishing in the river, which threatened the livelihood of poor fishermen. When Puja processions were stopped by the British on the charge that they disturbed the peace, she defied the orders, forcing the government to withdraw them. A memorial shrine to her stands in the precincts of the Dakshineswar Temple.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **RANJABATI SARKAR (1963–1999)**

Ranjabati Sarkar was the daughter of Manjushree Chaki Sarkar (q.v.). She was born in Nigeria, and as a baby, she was carried on her mother's back to her first dance school. In New York, she began her training in earnest, and in 1979, when her parents returned to Kolkata, she was already well-versed in classical Indian dance. She pursued her interest in dance while doing a B.A. and M.A. in English Literature at

Jadavpur University, standing First Class First at both levels; she won four gold medals and a UGC fellowship. At JU, she met Samantak Das, to whom she was married for some years; they separated in the early 1990s and divorced some years later.

Ranjabati was part of the Dancers' Guild, the dance troupe founded by her mother. The Guild's work was consciously feminist and revolutionary, drawing on a wide variety of folk arts, myths, legends and contexts to generate a unique form, Navanritya. Ranjabati was a compelling performer. She performed at the Kalanubhavamanjari festival in Madras and the New Directions Festival, New Delhi, in 1993, the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay, in 1994 and 1996, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Chorography Festival, Calcutta in 1994, Festival Creadores in 1991 and Festival Danza por la Vida in 1992, both in Caracas, the Vivarta Festival, London in 1992, on board the Queen Elizabeth II in 1994 and 1995, as part of the Magdalena Project, Cardiff in 1995, at the Festival Vailarin Creador, Caracas in 1995, at the Women in World Music Festival, New York, in 1995, the Maison des Cultures du Monde, Paris 1996, where she performed a piece called *Wounded Earth*, the Center Culturel Francais, Dakar 1997, the Commonwealth Festival, Edinburgh 1998. She also won the Dance Umbrella Award. She committed suicide after her mother's death in 1999.

## RASHSUNDARI DEVI (1810–1899)

Rashsundari Devi's account of her life, called *Amar Jiban* and written when she was 73, is one of the earliest memoirs by a woman extant. A simple housewife in a Vaishnav family, Rashsundari hid a page out of her son's book and a sheet of paper, and taught herself to read and write after the household slept, scratching letters on the soot-covered walls of the kitchen. She had to look after 12 children

and a large household, yet her account is lucid, polished and movingly honest. Her daily work was so tough and the hours so long that she could hardly tell night from day, yet the desire to learn was strong in her, and she had powers of introspection strong enough to map her own ambivalence to the idea of a woman—herself—learning this forbidden knowledge. In those days, women who learned were universally thought to be destined for widowhood; Rashsundari describes how the older women would scold and rage if they saw a piece of paper in a woman's hand, 'but somehow', she says, 'I could not accept this.'

## RAZIA SULTANA (1205–1240)

Razia was the ruler of Delhi. She was born in 1205, the daughter of Iltutmish, the third Sultan of the Slave Dynasty, and thus belonged to the Turkish Seljuk ancestry. She was the only woman ever to occupy the throne of Delhi, for a period of three years and six months. Minhajuddin, a historian whom she appointed to head the *Madrasa-i-Nasiriya* which became a centre of learning in her reign, described her as 'a great sovereign, sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects, and of warlike talent and endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for Kings.' Iltutmish gave an excellent education to his daughter and nominated her formally as his successor, as none of her brothers had the strength of character to rule the turbulent Delhi court. She was well-versed in the Koran and had a fair knowledge of several other sciences, writing Persian verses under the pen name 'Shirin'. Nevertheless, the Turkish nobles and governors who held the real power attempted to advance the claims of one of her brothers, only to be foiled by his extreme weakness of character. Perhaps thinking that Razia could be bullied into submission, they let her ascend the throne. Her tolerance of Hinduism would later

bring her criticism from Muslim historians. She established schools, academies, centers for research, and public libraries that included the works of ancient philosophers along with the Quran and the Traditions of Muhammad. Hindu works in the sciences, philosophy, astronomy, and literature were reportedly studied in schools and colleges. She refused to be addressed as Sultana because it meant 'wife or mistress of a sultan'. She would answer only to the title 'Sultan'.

The main source of Razia's strength was her army and her populist attitude. She gave proof of her courage when she single-handedly routed the rebels who rose against her. She cast aside the veil in the second year of her reign, dressed in red robes, and gave audience to the people every Friday near the Jama Masjid. Soon, she curbed the power of her rebels. The administrative Council of Forty held strong orthodox opinions, which meant that in their minds, to be ruled by a woman was extremely humiliating. Razia tried to prove them wrong by excelling in every manner as a ruler and governor. She miscalculated in showing favour to an Abyssinian slave, Yaqut, perhaps in an attempt to break the Turkish stranglehold, and this provoked the governors of Lahore to rebel against her. She fought bravely but in the end was captured by the Turks, and her brother, Bahram Shah, was given the throne. Razia, though imprisoned in the fort of Tabarhindah, did not give in. She played upon the aggrieved sensibilities of her captor, Altuniya, who felt he had not been adequately rewarded for his part in the rebellion, and offered to marry him in return for assistance against the Turks. Balban, Iltutmish's son-in-law, routed their joint forces in battle. Raziya and her husband fled from the field but were robbed and murdered by some Hindu landlords in 1240. Her body was recovered from the plunderers and lies buried in a part of old Delhi known as Bulbuli Khana in an unpretentious mausoleum. Unfortunately, her successors appear to have considered her an embarrassment, for Firoz Shah Tughlaq omitted her name from the list of sultans that was prepared during his reign.

*Reena Jain*

## RENUKA RAY (1904–1997)

Renuka Ray was a freedom fighter. She was the daughter of Satish Chandra Mukherjee, an ICS officer, and Charulata Mukherjee, a social worker and member of the All-India Women's Conference. As a young girl, Renuka lived for a while in London and went to Kensington High School, then did her BA from the London School of Economics. She had teachers like Harold Laski, William Beveridge, Clement Atlee, Eileen Power and others. She met Gandhi at the age of 16, and this had a profound effect on her. She married Satyendranath Roy. In 1934, as legal secretary of the AIWC, she submitted a document titled 'Legal Disabilities of Women in India: A Plea for a Commission of Enquiry'. This articulated the AIWC's disappointment with the treatment of the Sharda Bill and their commitment to legal review of the situation of women before the law in India. Renuka argued for a uniform personal law code, saying that the position of Indian women was one of the most iniquitous in the world.

In the same year, she visited seven coalmines where women worked in the Jharia coal belt. The scenes she saw there were so horrifying that she and her colleagues drew up a report urging that women not be allowed to continue in this hazardous occupation, and that the AIWC immediately take on the responsibility of finding them an alternative employment, a task which they recognised would not be easy. From 1943 to 1946, she was a member of the Central Legislative Assembly, then of the Constituent Assembly and the Provisional Parliament. In 1952–57, she served on the West Bengal Legislative Assembly as Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. In 1957 and again in 1962, she was a Member for Malda of the Lok Sabha. She was also President of the AIWC in 1952, served on the Planning Commission and on the Governing Body of Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan. She served as a Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. She established the All-Bengal Women's Union and the Women's Coordinating Council. Her memoir is titled *My Reminiscences* (1982).

## ROHINI BHATE (1924–2008)

Rohini Bhaté was a Bharatnatyam and Kathak dancer. She was born in Patna and went to school in Pune. She graduated from Fergusson College in 1946 and founded the Nrityabharati Kathak Dance Academy at Pune in 1947. While in college, she was exposed to Bharatnatyam under Guru Parvati Kumar. She also received training in Hindustani music under Keshavrao Bhole and Vasanttrao Deshpande, so that she often composed the music for her productions as well. She then went on to do a doctorate in Kathak. She studied this dance form under Pandit Lacchu Maharaj and Pandit Mohan Rao Kalyanpurkar. Her deep knowledge of both styles gave her dance a unique and rich quality. A scholar as well as a performer, she wrote her autobiography in Marathi, *Majhi Nrityasadhana*, and translated it, *I, Isadora*, the autobiography of Isadora Duncan, as *Mi Isadora*. She also translated and edited the Sanskrit manual *Abhinaya Darpana* as *Kathak Darpan Deepika*. She advised Khairagarh University and Lalit Kala Kendra, University of Pune, on the teaching of Kathak and other dance forms.

She received the Kalidas Samman and, the Maharashtra Rajya Puraskar in 1977, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1979, and the Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar in 1990. She became a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2006 and received the Akademi Ratna Award in 2007. She trained hundreds of dancers at her centre, but in later years was afflicted with Parkinson's disease and died because of complications from it.

## ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN (1880–1932)

Rokeya was an educationist and social reformer. She was born and grew up in Poiraband, now in Bangladesh, in an oppressively

orthodox household. Girls in this household were not allowed to learn anything more than the most rudimentary skills. Bengali was shunned as the language of ‘the others’, that is, the Hindus, or of lower-class Muslim Bengalis. Upper-class *sharif* families preserved the illusion of their foreignness by reading and writing only Urdu, Persian and Arabic. When it was discovered that Rokeya’s elder sister Karimunnessa had not only taught herself to read Bengali but also enjoyed reading Bengali books, she was dispatched under guard to her grandparents and quickly married off. The younger Rokeya, however, found allies in her educated brothers. Her brother Ibrahim, who had studied in Calcutta, shielded her and helped her learn English and Bengali late at night in utmost secrecy when everyone was asleep.

At 18, Rokeya was married to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a widower and District Magistrate in Bihar. He was a friend of Ibrahim’s, who had arranged the match in the hope that Sakhawat would give Rokeya space to grow. Sakhawat believed firmly in the need for women’s education, taught his young wife English and encouraged her to write. Three years later, she was writing and publishing articles on issues of concern to women. Once when Sakhawat was away, she wrote her story *Sultana’s Dream*, in English. On returning and reading the story, Sakhawat commented with perceptive good humour that he had been justly punished for his neglect of her and the story was ‘a cruel revenge on men’. When Sakhawat died in 1909, Rokeya used an endowment set aside by him for women’s education to start a school for girls in Bhagalpur. This was eventually shut down due to property disputes with her son-in-law, and she was forced to return to Calcutta. She wrote a bitter diatribe against the patriarchal method of distributing property. She began again from scratch, establishing the Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls on 16 March 1911, with eight students and little capital. By dint of gruelling hard work, she was able to set the school on its feet, going from door to door to persuade Muslim families to send their daughters to it. She promised strict *purdah* for the girls there and reinforced it by wearing the *burqa* herself. Like

many Muslim women, she distinguished between *purdah*, a Muslim woman's voluntary modesty, and *abarodh*, the patriarchal perversion of *purdah*. In 1916, she became a founder member of the *Anjuman-i-khawatin-e-Islam* (Muslim Women's Association) and in 1926 she presided over the Bengal Women's Education Conference in Calcutta. In 1932, she presided at a session of the AIWC at Aligarh.

It is ironic that, though she was such a good Bengali stylist herself, she had to fight long and hard to get the Muslim community to accept the idea of teaching Bengali to girls. The medium of instruction at her school was Urdu, and 14 years later, there was still no Bengali section. There is no evidence that she read Wollstonecraft, but the last work she attempted was a manuscript titled '*Narir Adhikar*' (The Rights of Women). In one essay, *Abarodhbashini* (literally, Living Under Siege) she writes of the insidiousness of *purdah*. Rokeya herself lived in strict *purdah* from the age of five, and she speaks of it as a silent killer, like carbon monoxide gas. She would always say that she was dedicated first and foremost to the removal of the '*purdah* of ignorance'.

## RUDRAMBA (1259–1289)

Rudramba was a queen of the Kakatiyas who ruled parts of what is now Andhra Pradesh. She succeeded to the throne of her father, Ganapati Deva and ruled well for three decades, which saw her land reach great heights in both trade and the arts. Ganapati Deva had no male heir, and, determined to keep the sovereignty in his own family, proclaimed Rudramba, his elder daughter, heir to his throne. He bestowed on her the name of Rudradeva Maharaja and took special interest in her education. He gave her practical training in administration, involving her in the business of his government in the last years of his reign. Rudramba and her sister Ganapamba were both endowed with great intelligence and exceptional ability. Ganapamba

was married to the prince of neighbouring Kota, and after his death, she ruled the Kota kingdom unopposed for over 40 years. When the king died in 1262, Rudramba ascended the throne, though all did not accept her as a sovereign. The feudatory nobles of southern Andhra, who had only been lately subjected, thought this an ideal opportunity to rebel and regain their independence. At the same time, Mahadeva, the Yadava King of Devagiri, took advantage of internal troubles and invaded the Kakatiya dominion from the west. Rudramba, who had the faith and loyalty of all her ministers and officers, not only suppressed the rebellion but also defeated and repelled the Yadava monarch.

Rudramba built tanks dug canals and wells to provide water for irrigation to the farmers. She granted concessions to merchants and traders to promote trade and cottage industries. An inscription from Malkapuram dated 1261 throws light on the queen's charities. It relates to the gift made by her, in accordance with the expressed wishes of her father, of the village of Mandaram to the Raja Guru (royal preceptor) Vishweshwara Shambhu, head of the Pashupata sect. The queen made other grants too: at Mandaram she built a temple, around which grew a township inhabited by Brahmins from different regions, artisans, musicians, dancers, ordinary villagers, soldiers and servants, among whom all the lands mentioned in the gifts were distributed. A hospital and a college were established in the town, and in the public kitchens, people of all sects and castes were fed. Rudramba was herself a staunch Shaiva but was tolerant towards other faiths. Marco Polo, the famous Venetian traveller, may have passed through the Andhra kingdom during Rudramba's time, or through the realm of her sister. He bears witness to the flourishing conditions of foreign trade and domestic industries, especially the diamond industry for which the land was famous.

Rudramba married a Kshatriya prince, Virabhadra of the Chalukya dynasty. She had two daughters, Mummamma and Ruyamma. The former was married to another Chalukya prince, and they had a son,

Prataparudra, whom Rudramba adopted and made her heir. In 1289, she died fighting the rebel chief Ambadeva.

## **RUKHMABAI (1864–1955)**

Rukhmabai was a child bride who refused to live with her husband. Later, she became a doctor. Her case, turning on the question of the rights and wrongs of child marriage, became a cause célèbre in Bombay (now Mumbai) in the 1880s, with Rukhmabai's rights being pleaded by no less a personality than Pandita Ramabai.

Rukhmabai's mother had herself suffered because of the custom of child marriage: she had married at age fourteen, had Rukhmabai a year later and was a widow at seventeen. However, seven years later, she remarried, this time to a doctor and professor of botany at Grant Medical College in Mumbai, Sakram Arjun. Rukhmabai's mother gave in to social pressure and married off Rukhmabai at the age of eleven to Dadaji Bhikaji, then aged nineteen. Rukhmabai did not live with her husband but stayed in her parents' house and studied in school until her husband demanded in 1884 that she come and live with him. She refused, was tried by a court, and sentenced to prison for denying her husband's conjugal rights. Pandita Ramabai exploded with rage, not just at the obtuseness and connivance of the colonial rulers who had passed such a judgement, but also at those sections of society, led by B.G. Tilak, who nodded approvingly at the step. Rukhmabai defended herself by appealing to English law, which could not compel her to live with her husband and consummate the marriage *against her wishes*. She also alleged that her husband was motivated by financial gain in trying to force her to live with him. The issues of child marriage and the lack of education for girls and women hit the headlines in London and heated discourses on the question of whether English law should override Hindu law filled the pages of the *Times* for many months.

Rukhmabai was only saved when Queen Victoria intervened and issued a proclamation dissolving her marriage and commuting the sentence.

Dr Edith Pechey-Phipson (q.v.) at the Cama Women's Hospital, raised a fund to help pay for Rukhmabai's medical education in London. Rukhmabai qualified from the London School of Medicine for Women in 1894 and returned to India to head a hospital in Pune. Rukhmabai became the Chief Medical Officer of Hospitals in Surat and Rajkot, continuing to write against the harmful effects on women of *purdah* and life in the *zenana*. She never married again, as although her husband had finally accepted financial compensation not to continue with his claims, her legal situation in Hindu law, as neither married nor unmarried, was never clear. She died in 1955, aged ninety-one.

## **RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE (1904–1986)**

Rukmini Devi Arundale was a dancer and dance theorist. She gave Bharatanatyam its present form. Before her, this dance style was considered the province of *devadasis*, literally servants of god; women who had been dedicated to temples in their childhood and who practised a form of sacred prostitution. As the twentieth century progressed, there was a gathering middle-class 'reform' movement to abolish the devadasi tradition and 'clean up' the temples. Revealingly, this campaign was known as the 'anti-nautch' (i.e., *nach* = dance) movement, and like many similar movements, it tended to stigmatise the dance along with the less savoury aspects of the *devadasi* tradition. In 1947, the Madras Prevention of Dedication of Devadasis Act made the institution illegal. Afraid that the dance form would be abolished along with the devadasis, Rukmini set out to rid it of its associations with prostitution and give it a new respectability, though others closer to the old tradition, like T. Balasaraswati (q.v.), regarded this as sacrilege.

Rukmini Devi was born into an orthodox Brahmin family on 29 February 1904. Her father, Nilakantha Sastri was a scholar who shocked his community by joining the Theosophical Society. Annie Besant (q.v.) was one of Rukmini's mentors, and Rukmini married the Englishman George Sydney Arundale, a teacher at the Central Hindu College, Varanasi, who succeeded Besant as president of the Society. Rukmini learnt to dance when she was nearly 30 and proceeded to rescue the dance from the fringes of society and make it something that respectable people would be willing to teach their daughters. She and her husband toured the world, acting as ambassadors for their version of the art form. In addition, George promoted the cause of national education with roots in Indian culture. In 1935, with the help of E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini persuaded Chokkalingam Pillai, son-in-law of the famous guru Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, to teach her. Other students of the guru also taught at her institute.

With the birth of a new elite class of amateur performers, Rukmini Devi set up her own centre for the development of the form. This was Kalakshetra, established at Adyar, the Theosophical Society's headquarters. She looked for musicians outside the traditional pool of families that supplied these skills and began to experiment with choreography. The roster of musicians who served Kalakshetra includes Tiger Varadachari, Papanasam Sivan, Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal, and M.D. Ramanathan, to mention only a few. In the general management of the centre and of her extensive foreign tours, theosophists like Peter Hoffman helped her. She reworked traditional gestures and costumes and changed the lyrics of songs to conform to definitions of what was acceptable. She replaced the bagpipe and clarinet with the veena and flute and began the tradition of dancing on stage before an image of Nataraja, the dancing avatar of Shiva. Her radical changes, made hardly fifty years ago, are now regarded as part of tradition. Beginning with a dance season each winter to coincide with the Theosophical Society's annual conference, the work of Kalakshetra under Rukmini Devi's guidance soon began to diversify.

She extended the form from an exposition of classical movements to a discipline through which dance dramas could be presented, and she borrowed elements from Kathakali and related forms to create a more vigorous mode for characters like Hanuman and Ram. Soon Kalakshetra was a residential campus offering a full five-year course in the classical Indian performing arts. After the first two decades, Rukmini Devi retired from dance and dedicated herself wholly to managing the centre. Her vision to build a theatre modelled on the Kerala Koothambalam had been fulfilled.

## SADA KAUR (1762–1832)

Sada Kaur was regent with two others of a large part of Punjab. She was the daughter of Dasaundha Singh Gill and was married to Gurbaksh Singh, son of Jai Singh, leader of the Kanhaiya clan. Punjab was then fragmented into small territories called *misl*s, ruled by feudal lords. Among the more prominent were the Kanhaiyas of Batala under her father-in-law and the Sukerchakias under Maha Singh at Gujranwala. In a conflict, Maha Singh killed Sada Kaur's husband in 1785. She then contrived to get her daughter, Mehtab Kaur, betrothed to the five-year-old Ranjit Singh, Maha Singh's son. Ranjit Singh became the ruler in 1792 on the death of his father, but a regency ruled for him. The wedding was celebrated in 1796, and Sada Kaur arrived in Gujranwala with her daughter. She maneuvered to become one of the members of the three-member regency for the prince. The other two members were Ranjit Singh's mother, Mai Raj Kaur (popularly known as Mai Malvain), and Diwan Lakhpat Rai, his minister. Mai Malvain died mysteriously, and Lakhpat Rai was killed in an expedition against the Chatthas. Sada Kaur was left as the sole regent, and she had by now also become head of the Kanhaiyas. She helped Ranjit Singh in his campaigns, overcoming Lahore and campaigning against Amritsar, Chiniot, Kasur and Kangra. She gave him strategic help against the invading Afghans under Shah Zaman on two occasions. Ranjit Singh's victories established him as the Maharaja of Punjab.

However, Ranjit Singh's marriage to Mahtab Kaur was not happy; her first child died, and he took a second wife whose sons became his heirs. Later, Mahtab had two sons, Sher Singh and Tara Singh, but they were not in line to succeed to the throne. This soured relations

between him and Sada Kaur. She boycotted the marriage of his heir, and also tried twice to fake an heir to the throne by passing off children as the issue of her daughter, but Ranjit Singh was not impressed. On Sher Singh's majority, Ranjit Singh insisted that Sada Kaur hand over the administration of her estates to him. She refused and threatened to cede the town of Vadhni to the British. Ranjit Singh persuaded her to visit Lahore, where she was put under house arrest. Once she managed to escape in a covered litter, but was captured and brought back. The wealth of the Kanhaiyas was confiscated, though Batala was given as a jagir to Sher Singh. Sada Kaur died in confinement in 1832.

## BEGUM SAMROO (1753–1836)

Begum Samroo was the ruler of Sardhana. She was born Zeb-un-nissa to a noble of Kutana in Meerut named Lutf Ali Khan. She lost her father when she was six, and her mother moved to Delhi, where she grew up to be a remarkable beauty. Like many independent, beautiful and spirited women without protectors at the time, she was forced to become a *tawaiif*. She attracted the eye of General Walter Reinhardt, and in 1765, she was sold into his harem.

Reinhardt was an adventurer who had been nicknamed 'Samroo' from his 'sombre' face. He had obtained the *jagir* of Sardhana from the Mughal emperor, from which he derived an annual income of six lakhs of rupees. Begum Samroo was an exceedingly clever woman and soon took control of the estate, so that when 'Sombre Sahib' died in 1778, she was able to prevail upon Shah Alam to recognize her as his successor with control of his revenues and forces. In 1781, she and her stepson Zafar-Yab converted to Christianity, and she took the name Joanna. George Thomas, another adventurer, joined her service. She is said to have saved Shah Alam from an assassination attempt by the Rohilla, Ghulam Qadir. Her weakness for men, however, was her

undoing. In 1790, a Frenchman, J. Levassoult, joined her army and quickly rose in her favour. This fomented jealousy amongst her other followers, and Thomas, among others, left her service. Resentment grew until she was forced to flee with Levassoult, but they were overtaken. The Frenchman killed himself to avoid falling into their hands, but the Begum was captured and kept tied to a gun carriage for seven days. An old officer then had her released, and it took her little time to regain her *jagir* and her old status. She transferred her allegiance to the British in return for their non-interference and occupied the last years of her life building grand churches in Sardhana and Meerut.

## SAMYOGITA (12TH CENTURY)

Samyogita, also written Samyukta, was the daughter of Jayachandra, ruler of Kanauj. She eloped with and married Prithviraj Chauhan, her father's enemy. Jaychandra arranged for his daughter's *swayamvara* ceremony, a rite where the suitors to the bride assemble and the bride indicates her choice by garlanding one of them. Forewarned that Prithviraj might try to disrupt the proceedings—and to humiliate his enemy—Jaychandra had a statue made of Prithviraj stationed at the door like a doorkeeper. Samyogita tossed her garland around the neck of this statue. At this signal, Prithviraj, who was hiding nearby, swept her up on his horse and carried her away. Such, at any rate, is the story in ballad and legend. Her story appears in the famous *Prithviraj Raso* ballad by Chand Bardai.

When Prithviraj faced Muizzuddin Muhammad of Ghor on the field of Tarain for the second time, which was to prove fatal, Samyogita exhorted him to bravery, saying, 'To die is the destiny, not only of man, but of the gods; all desire to throw off the old garment, but to die well is to live forever.' Prithviraj fought bravely but was defeated and died

on the battlefield. Samyogita immolated herself on his funeral pyre. Many folk songs of Rajasthan celebrate their story.

## **SANGHAMITRA (282–203 BCE)**

Sanghamitra was a Buddhist nun and preceptor. She was born in 282 BCE of Devi and Ashoka Maurya, then Viceroy of the Mauryan Empire at Vidisha, and later Emperor of India. She and her younger brother, Mahendra were both deeply impressed by their father's Buddhist leanings and dedicated their lives to the cause of Buddhism.

In 268 BCE, Sanghamitra was married to Agni-Brahma and had a son by him called Sumana. Agni-Brahma was ordained in 266 BCE, and two years later, when her father Ashoka asked her if she was prepared to take the vow also, Sanghamitra said yes, and was renamed Ayapali. She renounced the world and entered the sangha as a member.

In 252 BCE, Ashoka sent a mission to the court of Devenampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka, led by Sanghamitra's son Suman and her brother Mahendra. The mission was very successful, and many Sri Lankans became Buddhists. It was then that Ashoka sent Sanghamitra to Sri Lanka at the express desire of Tissa. She went there with a cutting of the Bodhi tree and instructed the women in Buddhism. Together with her brother, she was engaged throughout her life in evangelical work and converted many women, including members of the royal household, to Buddhism. She established a nunnery and took charge of the training of nuns. It is said that when she died, the king of Sri Lanka paid her tribute by performing her last rites himself.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## SARADA MA (1853–1920)

Sarada Ma was a spiritual leader, prominent in the cult of her husband Ramakrishna Paramahansa. She was born on the 22nd December 1853 at Jayrambati in the district of Bankura in West Bengal, the daughter of Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay and Shyamasundari. Though she had no formal education, her perseverance and zeal enabled her to read the Hindu epics in later life, even though she never learned to write her own name. She was married in 1859 at the age of six, to Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, who later became known as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, after which she went back to her parental home, where she stayed till she was 14. Gadadhar, who had taken the vows of a Hindu monk, practised celibacy. In 1867, when he met her again, her mind was touched by his spiritual love. In 1872, she visited Dakshineswar, and during her stay, her husband asked her whether she had come there to drag him down to the worldly plane. She answered with dignity and assurance, 'Why should I pull you down? I am here to serve you that you may go ahead on your chosen path.' She stuck to her pledge till the very end of Sri Ramakrishna's life. He recognised and appreciated this great sacrifice, admitting to one of his devotees that 'had she been of a different nature, I don't know how far I would have drifted'. Sarada was capable on occasion even of reproving him. She was in the habit of bringing his lunch to him every afternoon; one day, a prostitute begged her to allow her to take the food to him instead. The woman took the food, but Ramkrishna did not touch it; he called Sarada and tried to make her promise to give him food only with her own hands. She promised, but said, 'If anyone calls me "Mother" and asks for this privilege, I shall not be able to refuse, whoever they may be. Besides, you should remember that you are not just my Lord, but everyone's Lord.'

In 1886, Sri Ramakrishna passed away after a long illness. While in mourning, Sarada Devi had a vision of her husband, who forbade her

to dress and behave like a widow. Orthodox as she was, she obeyed her husband's wish, and till the end of her own life, she never discarded her red-bordered sari and golden bangles, signs of the wedded state in a Bengali woman. In a celebrated incident, she allowed a Muslim, Amjad, who had also been a highway robber, to eat in her house, and when the other widows who lived with her expressed horror at such a transgression, she took up the leftovers and tidied his place with her own hands. After Ramkrishna's death, she lived at Kamarpukur for a year but moved to the city at the insistence of her devotees. Even during the inauspicious mourning period after a death, she did not prohibit a disciple from taking initiation, saying, 'there is no connection between the spirit and body. The talk of defilement due to a death is meaningless. She preached the teachings of Ramakrishna along with her own practical philosophy. In 1898, she met Sister Nivedita (q.v.) for the first time and opened the Nivedita school. In 1901, she started the practice of Durga Puja at Belur Math.

*Rita Dalmiya*

## **SARAJU BALA DEVI (1912–1994)**

Saraju Bala Devi was an actor. She belonged mainly to the stage where her presence was so overwhelming that she soon came to be known as '*Natya Samraggi*' or Empress of the Stage in Kolkata's theatre circles. Yet it was in silent films that she made her mark as an actress, moving on to sound with *Rishir Prem* in 1931. But she soon realised that her real talents lay with the stage where she performed for many years in the company of the best in the field. She also learnt music from Kazi Nazrul Islam, K.C. Dey and Bhishmadev Chatterjee. She received the Sangeet Natak Academy Award just before her death.

## SARALA DEVI CHAUDHURANI (1872–1945)

Sarala Devi was an educationist and feminist. She was the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi (q.v.). Growing up in the Tagore household, she not only had the benefit of the cultural and political milieu of that environment, but also a cultured and accomplished mother to teach and guide her. She was taught initially at home, and then went to Bethune school and college, where she met the poet Kamini Ray (q.v.) and Lady Abala Bose (q.v.). A talented singer and musician, she was involved with the Congress from her college days and published a book of patriotic lyrics titled *Shotogan* (A Hundred Songs). In 1905, she married Rambhaji Datta Chaudhuri, a Punjabi Brahmin of Lahore. He edited the nationalistic Urdu paper *Hindustan* and was thus often under the scrutiny of the Raj. They had one son, Dipak.

Sarala Devi worked for women's upliftment in the area around Lahore and proposed a scheme for the education of women in *purdah*. She also believed in the necessity of physical culture, and therefore instituted the Birastami Utsav, a sports and athletics festival. In 1904, she opened a swadeshi shop called Lakkhir Bhandar. For her efforts in promoting *swadeshi* trade, the Indian National Congress gave her a gold medal. In 1910, she convened the first meeting of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, the first major Indian women's organisation set up by a woman, and she did this because she felt that the men working for women's emancipation lived 'under the shade of Manu'. The Mahamandal identified *purdah* as the biggest stumbling block to women and accordingly resolved to train teachers to go into the zenana and teach basic skills. In 1930, she opened a school, the Bharat Stree Shiksha Sadan, in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

Her later years were taken up with spirituality and meditation. Dr. Alka Saraogi has explored her relationship with Mahatma Gandhi through a Hindi Novel.

## SARAT KUMARI CHAUDHURANI (1861–1920)

Sarat Kumari was a writer in Bengali. She was born and grew up in Lahore, where her father, Shashibhushan Basu worked. Her short stories were very popular in her own time. Rabindranath Tagore especially liked her work. She was married aged of ten to the poet Akashary Kumar Chaudhury, who was intimate with Tagore. She was primarily a journalist, and only one of her works was published as a book, entitled *Shubha Bibaha* ('Auspicious Marriage'; the conventional term used to announce a wedding). Her best-known story is '*Adorer Na Anadorer?*' (Loved or Unloved? 1891) a subtly written yet powerful portrayal of the way women unthinkingly imbibe and project male prejudice. Her work is focused and stream-like; a technique admirably suited to the short story, but not to the long work, which probably explains her chosen literary form. She also wrote essays on women's issues, such as '*Ekal o Ekaler Meye*'. Many of these were published in Swarnakumari Devi's (q.v.) journal *Bharati*.

## SAROJ PATHAK (1929–1989)

Saroj Pathak was a writer in Marathi, predominantly of short stories. Born in 1929 to a conservative Bhatia family, she married Ramanlal Pathak, a Brahmin, writer and communist, against her parents' wishes. She had trouble completing her education, partly because of a morbid fear of examinations, but she eventually took her master's degree in Gujarati. She worked for All India Radio and for the Soviet Embassy.

Both she and her husband seem to have suffered from manic-depressive syndrome; Ramanlal once had so debilitating an episode that he was unable to leave the house for some years; Saroj supported

him and her daughter during that time. For the last 19 years of her life, she lived alone, working as a teacher, seeing her husband on weekends. Tragically, she died on the day she was due to retire; it may have been that she took her own life in a fit of severe depression at the thought of quitting. The action of her stories takes place as much or more in the characters' heads as it does in the 'real' world of the story. For one who wrote most often of women caught in awkward or loveless marriages, Saroj's own marriage seems to have been unusually successful, with both partners sharing childcare and house chores, and trusting and confiding in each other to a rare degree. Her writing style is oblique and vertiginous, creating a sort of metaphysical dialogue both inside and outside the character's mind.

## **SAROJINI NAIDU (1879–1949)**

Sarojini was a poet and freedom fighter. She was born on 13 February 1879, at Hyderabad. Her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, was a brilliant scientist, a linguist and a scholar. He established Nizam's College in 1878, a pioneering women's educational institute. Sarojini began to write at the age of eleven. She passed her Matriculation at the age of twelve and went to King's College, London, and later to Girton College, Cambridge. She married, against the wishes of her supposedly liberal family, Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu in 1898 under the Brahmo Marriage Act, as he was a Non-Brahmin. They had four children and lived in their famous home, The Golden Threshold, in Hyderabad. Her daughter was Padmaja Naidu (q.v.).

After her experience in the suffragist campaign in England, she was drawn to the Congress and the Non-Cooperation Movement. In 1908, she addressed a conference on widow remarriage in Madras. Along with Annie Besant, she lectured all over India on the welfare of

youth, dignity of labour, women's emancipation and nationalism. The main mission of her life was Hindu-Muslim unity and a secular India. From 1917 to 1919 was the most dynamic phase of her career as a public figure. She campaigned regarding the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, the Khilafat issue, the Rowlatt or 'Black Bills', the Sabarmati Pact and the Satyagraha Pledge. She was Gandhi's most faithful lieutenant when he launched the Civil Disobedience Movement on 6 April 1919, continuing the work after he was imprisoned, although she could also good-naturedly criticise what she considered to be his more impractical ideas. She returned the Kaiser-i-Hind medal, which the British Raj had awarded her for her outstanding work during the plague epidemic. In 1924, she travelled to South Africa to care for the interests of fellow Indians there, and became President of the Congress the following year, 1925. Her anti-British activities sent her to prison in 1930–32 for being re-elected as Congress President after it had been declared an illegal institution, and again in 1942–43. She accompanied Gandhi to the inconclusive Second Round Table Conference held in 1931 in London. She was a great peacemaker. She organised the 'National Week' in 1940, virtually running the whole Congress campaign at this stage.

In 1945, she served as a member of the Constituent Assembly from Bihar. After Independence, she brought grace to the office of the UP-State Governor. She presided over the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. She died while in office, at Lucknow, at the age of 70. Her first volume of poetry, *The Golden Threshold*, was published in 1905. It was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917), *The Sceptre and the Flute* (1928) and *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961). In 1914, she was elected a fellow member of the Royal Society of Literature and a member of the Constituent Assembly.

*Reena Jain*

## **SATYAWATI DEVI (1906–1945)**

Satyawati Devi was a unionist and social worker. She was born in the village of Talwan in Punjab. Her mother, Ved Kumariji was a social reformer and activist, and her father was a lawyer. The family had links with the Arya Samaj. When she was 16, her mother arranged an inter-caste marriage for her with Bal Bhadra Vidyalankar. It was a simple ceremony; the bride wore *khadi*. She was deeply influenced by Marxism and renounced religion, considering its degraded forms to be the greatest curse of Indian society. She wished to see India become a workers' and peasants' Utopia and worked tirelessly to combat the evils springing from religion. She organised a strike at the Birla Mills in Delhi, where her husband held a lucrative job. She also worked in the slums to better their conditions. During her last detention in Lahore Jail, she was taken seriously ill and released to the Delhi TB Hospital. Gandhi, who had nicknamed her 'Toofani Behn', tried to make her recite 'Ram' on her deathbed, but she refused, dying as she had lived.

## **SAVITRIBAI PHULE (1831–1897)**

Savitribai Phule was the wife of the social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, and an activist in her own right. She was married to Jyotirao was born in 1840 at the age of nine. Her husband wished to educate her, a project which met with fierce resistance from his own family. Nothing daunted, they moved out of the ancestral home so that she could go to school unhindered. She and a Muslim, Fatima Sheikh, finished school together in 1847. Savitribai, having completed her studies, she and her husband started a school for girls in Pune in 1848, with nine girls from different castes as the first batch of students. Every day as Savitribai walked to the school to teach, groups of orthodox men would follow her, jeer at her and pelt her with garbage and stones.

She was severely discouraged, but her husband urged her to go on. He gave her two saris, telling her to wear the cheap one for society to dump its garbage on her on the road, and to change into the better one in school. Finally, one day, Savitribai's patience evaporated, and she slapped one of her tormentors. From the following day, she was left unmolested.

She and her husband continued to open schools. She also campaigned against the ill-treatment of widows and urged the barbers who shaved widows' heads to go on 'strike'. Wells were segregated by caste, so they threw open their water reservoir to the untouchables in the neighbourhood. Once Jyotirao stopped a pregnant woman from committing suicide, promising her to give her child his name after it was born. Savitribai and Jyotirao later on adopted this child, who grew up to become a doctor. They also set up a shelter for pregnant women to be delivered where no questions would be asked about the antecedents of the child. This was called the 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha' or 'place of prevention of child murder'. The couple continued to face intense prejudice and hostility from society for their reforms. Savitribai carried on her husband's work after his death. In 1897, she threw herself into relief work during the Bombay plague, but caught the disease and died.

Savitribai was also a Marathi poet. She published two collections, *Kavya Phule* in 1934 and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1982. In 1996, the Maharashtra Government started an award in her name for women who work for social causes. On her death anniversary, a postage stamp was released by the Department of Posts and Telegraphs to commemorate her. A Feature film called *Phule* is made on her life.

## **SEETA DEVI (RENEE SMITH) (1912–1983)**

Seeta Devi was an actor. Born Renee Smith to an Anglo-Indian family, she became a star when Himanshu Rai chose her to play

the female lead opposite him in *Prem Sanyas* (1925), known by its English title *Light of Asia*, loosely based on Edwin Arnold's poem of the same name about the life of the Buddha. Himanshu Rai gave her the name Seeta Devi. She was a star at Madan Theatres' Elphinstone Theatre, making her debut with Dhiren Ganguly. She acted in Priyanath Ganguly's 1920s Madan films. She then appeared in *Shiraz* (1928) where she played the 'other woman'; this was based on the story of the Taj Mahal. She acted in *Prapancha Pash* (1929), known in English as *A Throw of Dice* and based on the *Mahabharata*, as the heroine. All three films were made in collaboration with the German film director Franz Osten and the Bavarian company Emelka, but this collaboration ended with the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. It has been suggested that both Renee Smith and her sister Percy Smith appeared in the film *Seeta Devi* in the title role. Three of her other films, *Krishnakanter Will* (1926), *Durgesh Nandini* (1927), and *Kapal Kundala* (1929) were based on the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. She also appeared in *Loves of a Moghul Prince* (1928), titled *Anarkali* in Urdu and *Rajmahal Ni Ramani* in Punjabi. Her last film was *Kal Parinaya* (1930). Himanshu Rai's death in 1940 was a blow to her career.

## SHAKUNTALA PARANJPYE (1906–2000)

Shakuntala Paranjpye was an actor, writer and social worker. She was the daughter of the educationist and diplomat Sir R.P. Paranjpye, the first Indian to qualify as a Senior Wrangler in mathematics from Cambridge and India's High Commissioner to Australia from 1944 to 1947. Shakuntala initially followed in her father's footsteps, taking her tripos (degree in mathematics) from Cambridge in 1929. The following year, she took a diploma in education from London University. In the 1930s, she divided her time between her film career in Mumbai and her work in Geneva with the International Labour Organisation. She

travelled the villages of Maharashtra, spreading the message of birth control in 1933.

Her first film was *Sairandhri* in 1933, and her most noted role was in V. Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane* in 1937. She was married briefly to the Russian painter Youra Sleptzoff and had a daughter, Sai, by him in 1938, but the marriage did not last. Sai Paranjpye later went on to become a noted film director in Mumbai. She continued to act till 1955. As her acting career tapered off in the 1940s, she turned her attention to writing and politics. She published a memoir, *Three Years in Australia*, in 1951, and a book titled *Sense and Nonsense* with Orient Longman in 1970. In her later years, she wrote in Marathi. She was a member of the Maharashtra Legislative Council between 1958 and 1964, and was a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha from 1964 to 1970. In 1991, the Government of India awarded her the Padma Bhushan in recognition of her pioneering work.

## SHAMSUNNAHAR MAHMUD (1908–1964)

Shamsunnahar was a teacher who had to struggle all her life to be educated and independent. She was born in the village of Guthuma into a comparatively liberal family; her father could count among his relations Fazlul Karim, one of the first Muslim graduates of Bengal, and her mother's side also had reformers and educationists. Nevertheless, she grew up in strict purdah. At first, she attended Dr. Khastagir's Girls' School in Chittagong and mingled with the Hindu Bengali girls there who were to grow up to be revolutionaries; she remembered this in her memoir *Ami Jokhon Chhatri Chhilam* (When I Was a Student) as an exciting time of discovery. Then, at the age of nine, when she was in Class 6, she was taken out of school to observe purdah.

Her studies continued at home, with a thick curtain separating her from a male Hindu tutor. Somewhat to everyone's surprise, she passed

her matriculation examination with brilliant marks. The following year, she married Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, who encouraged her to fight for her education. Then came the next phase of the struggle, about which the poet Nazrul Islam wrote to her in comradeship and commiseration, 'I do not know what is to become of you ... I suspect that whoever your guardian may be, the light of the twentieth century cannot touch him. Perhaps that is why you have to plead and weep to procure permission to go to college.' She did eventually get permission, but not before she had been married off. She also began publishing poetry; her first poem, 'Angur' appeared in a juvenile magazine. To the young city girls of the 1920s, she was an amusing figure in her all-enveloping burqa, but she turned the ridicule once again to astonishment when she came twentieth in the whole University in the Intermediate Arts examination of Calcutta University. While a student, she edited the women's sections of the magazines *Naoroz* and *Atmashakti*. She wrote *Punyamayi* (1925), while Nazrul dedicated his book *Sindhu Hindol* (1927) to 'Bahar and Nahar', i.e., Shamsunnahar and her brother.

She graduated with distinction in 1928 and was felicitated by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (q.v.) on the occasion. When in 1939, Lady Brabourne College was set up, Shamsunnahar accepted a teaching post there. In 1942, at the height of World War II, she appeared for her master's degree as a private candidate. She has written of her association with Nazrul Islam in *Nazrulke Jemon Dekhechhi* (Nazrul as I Saw Him). She was the secretary of the Nikhil Banga Muslim Mahila Samiti (all Bengal Muslim Women's Society) and established the Centre for Rehabilitation of Disabled Children in 1961. She was elected to the National Assembly in 1962. From 1933 with her brother Habibullah Bahar, she edited *Bulbul* in Kolkata. She wrote in Bengali *Phulbagicha* (1935), *Begum Mahal* (1937), a life of Roqeya in 1937, a number of travelogues and *Shishur Shiksha* (Lessons for Children, 1939).

## SHANTA APTE (1916–1964)

Shanta Apte was an actor in Marathi cinema. Born in Dudhni, Maharashtra, Shanta Apte grew up in Pandharpur and learned singing from a young age. She began her career in Marathi cinema with *Shyamsunder* in 1932, and for a time she was the highest, paid female screen star in Marathi-language cinema. She also broke into Hindi cinema a few years later, making *Amrit Manthan* in 1934, and made her name with V. Shantaram's *Dunia Na Mane* in 1937, a paradigm-breaking film about a young girl, Nirmala, played by Shanta. Nirmala, an orphan, is given in marriage to a rich old man, played by Keshavrao Date, who has lost his first wife. She rebels and refuses to sleep with him. She gets him to see the wrong he has done to her, and in the end he feels remorse and commits suicide. In his suicide note, he advises her to remarry, as the life of a widow is worse than a bad marriage. In the film, Shanta sang a version of H.W. Longfellow's 'A Psalm of Life'.

In the same year, she acted in *Kunku*, and films came her way frequently through the 1940s. Her last film was *Ram Bhakta Vibhishan* in 1958. She sang her own songs, as most stars of the time did. Her autobiography in Marathi is called *Jau Mi Cinemat*.

## SHANTA GANDHI (1917–2002)

Shanta Kalidas Gandhi was a stage actor, writer and dancer. She was born in Amreli, a tribal part of Gujarat, where her father was an engineer. Her younger sister Dina Pathak also became an actor. Shanta was forced into a child marriage, but managed to obtain permission to graduate in science. At school in Pune, she was close to Indira Gandhi. On graduating, she became involved with left-wing politics, causing her conservative father to send her to England to study medicine. In

London, she visited India House, where she met Krishna Menon and other young revolutionaries. She threw herself into the intellectual life of the Indian expatriates there, discussing Indian and world politics and dreaming of changing the world. Here, she became an avowed atheist and a smoker and even joined a dance troupe to raise funds for the Spanish Civil War. Scandalised, her father forced her to return and abandon all thoughts of a medical career, but Victor Kiernan, a noted Communist scholar she had met in London, followed her to India and married her in 1938 at the Bombay railway station before they boarded a train for Lahore. There, he took up a post teaching history at Aitchison College. This was mostly frequented by the Indian aristocracy, who must have been rather puzzled by his leftist study groups. Shanta joined the circle of activists, artists and writers there, including Amrita Shergill and others. She joined the Communist Party and danced and performed for many political causes, putting up street events to reach the people: Shanta translated the *Naty Shastra* into English from Sanskrit, while Victor, who knew Persian and Urdu, became Faiz Ahmed Faiz's friend and first translator.

In spite of their shared interests, their futures lay in different countries and eight years later, in 1946, the marriage was dissolved. Victor returned to England and joined Cambridge University as a historian, while she stayed on, joining Uday Shankar's Almora School of Dance. She also joined the Little Ballet Troupe, the dance wing of the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). After some time, she began to have doubts about the Communist Party and its authoritarian way of functioning. She left the city and moved to Gujarat, setting up a school for tribal children near her hometown, Amreli. Here she began to explore ways of teaching children through music, theatre, dance and storytelling. Every full moon night, she and her pupils would organise performances to which villagers flocked from all around. She left Amreli after some years to do research at the B.M. Institute of Child Psychology in Ahmedabad. In the late 1950s, she became Professor of Ancient Indian Drama at the National School of Drama, and also

helped set up the Asian Theatre Institute. She pioneered the use of folk theatre forms such as Bhavai at NSD and wrote several plays drawing on folk theatre, including *Amar Singh Rathore* and *Jasma Odan*. She also developed her work on street theatre, producing *Mukhda Dekho Darpan Mein* (See Your Face in the Mirror) for this genre. She had a good relationship with her students, socializing with them after hours. She then became Director of Bal Bhavan and the National Children's Museum. In 1990, she began the Avehi Abacus project to research alternative curricula for schoolchildren. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 1984 and the Sangeet Natak Academy Award in 2001.

## SHANTALA DEVI (12TH CENTURY)

Shantala was the chief queen of the famous Hoysala King Vishnuvardhana of Dwarasamudra. Among the famous temples she initiated are those at Halebid. Halebid has its origin from the word 'halebeedu', meaning old capital. These temples took 103 years to complete and are unique for their exquisite stone carving.

Shantala was a devout Jain. Brought up in a liberal and enlightened atmosphere, she has been eloquently described by poets and others as 'a brihaspati [Jupiter] in discrimination, a Vachaspati [ruler of speech, a title won by examination] in ready wit...expert in singing, instrumental music and dancing...'. In 1117, she assumed the Crown as Pattamahadevi. The palace had a congenial atmosphere for arts and literature. In 1123, she presented Savati-Gandhavarani Basti and other endowments to her guru Prabhachandra. In Belur, she set up an image in the Kappe-Chennagiraya temple and statues of herself and her husband. This testifies to their broad outlook in religious matters. She also earned the titles of 'crest jewel of perfect faith' and 'a rampart of the Jain faith'. It is said that to the king she was 'the goddess of victory in battle' and 'goddess of wealth and fame in peace'. As Vishnuvardhana

had no son; he adopted a boy as his heir. In 1131, the young prince died, and the grieving Shantala committed suicide by jumping off a cliff at Shivaganga. Vishnuvardhana was deeply grieved by her death, and though he remarried later on, none could fill the vacuum.

## SHARADINI DAHANUKAR (1945–2002)

Sharadini Arun Dahanukar was a clinical pharmacologist and Ayurvedic researcher. She was born in Mumbai and excelled in school. She joined Seth G.S. Medical College and graduated in medicine in 1969. She decided to specialize in clinical pharmacology and did an MD in it in the US where she had accompanied her husband as he was a scholar there. In the US she met the children of Vaidya Veni Madhav Shastri Joshi, who told her about their father's research into Ayurveda. She became intrigued by the idea of investigating the medical properties of Indian plants and therefore took traditional Ayurvedic training for five years from Vaidya Joshi. She then did a Ph.D. on the properties of these plants and their applications in modern medicine, researching, among other things, the effects of *Menispermum glabrum* on haematopoiesis. In 1989, she set up the Ayurveda Research Centre at King Edward Memorial Hospital, then in 2001, the Advanced Centre for Ayurvedic Research, Training and Services (ACARTS) at BYL Nair Ch. Hospital. She was also, Head of the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Dean at Topiwala National Medical College and BYL Nair Ch. Hospital. As a research guide, she always insisted on impeccable documentation of findings. Besides her many research publications, she wrote a number of popular books on Ayurveda, including *Ayurveda Unravelled*, *Ayurveda Revisited*, and *Heal by Herbs* (1995). She was also a prolific writer in Marathi. Seth G.S. Medical College has instituted awards in her memory for the best teacher and researcher. She received the Dr. Vasant Pai Award for her contributions

to medical knowledge and was felicitated by the National Academy of Indian Medicine at Benares Hindu University. She also received the Mahila Gourav Puraskar and the Vanita Samaj Gourav Puraskar.

## SHARDA BEN MEHTA (1882–1970)

Sharda Mehta was a Gandhian social worker. She was born in 1882 in Gujarat into a high caste family and married to Dr Sumant Mehta in 1898. Her husband was very supportive of her education, and she graduated along with her sister in 1901, the two thus becoming Gujarat's first woman graduates. She was very influenced by Gandhiji. In 1917, she organised the people against the *girmitia* system of forced labour. She worked for Gandhiji's national weekly *Navjivan* in 1919. She realised that women must be economically self-reliant to be empowered. Angering the orthodox of her caste, she sheltered and brought up a Hindu child-widow. In 1930, she established a *khadi mandir* and ran her husband's ashram near Ahmedabad, and in 1934 started a pioneering co-operative store called 'Apna Ghar Ki Dukan'. In 1934, she established the Jyoti Sangh to undertake welfare activities for women. She held many important posts and wrote a number of books in Gujarati, including a life of Florence Nightingale, and translated many works.

## SHASHWATI (VEDIC PERIOD)

Shashwati was a hymn-writer. She is credited with the authorship of a hymn in the Rig Veda (1.179.6). This celebrates the revival of the phallic power of her husband, Asanga Playogi. Shashwati was also called Nari, meaning woman, implying that she was the type or

pattern of the perfect woman. The frank and uninhibited nature of the hymn and its being given a prominent place in the sacred text implies that women's sexuality was celebrated in ancient times.

## **SHEILA DHAR (1929–2001)**

Sheila Dhar was a musician and writer. She is best known for her amusing and poignant memoir, *Here's Someone I'd Like You to Meet* (1995), and her work on the links between culinary and musical arts, *The Cooking of Music*. She had the rare gift of painting character with words, and in the towering personalities of Hindustani classical music, she found subjects worthy of her pen. An M.A. in English from Boston University, she was married to an economist and bureaucrat P. N. Dhar. This gave her an opportunity to observe the baroque world of politics and the services as well as the social circles of music. She served on the board of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and was advisor for music to the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. Her other books include *A Children's History of India* (1961); *This India* (1973); and *Raga 'n' Josh: Stories from a Musical Life* (2005).

Sheila Dhar's main talent, and the source of her charm, was her huge interest in people. It is this interest, vast, warm and forgiving, that humanises for us in her prose the formidable and rather unapproachable *ustads* and *bais* of the musical world. Her books remain popular even now and continue to introduce young people to the intricacies of the musical world.

## SHILA MAHADEVI (8TH CENTURY)

Shila Mahadevi was a Rashtrakuta ruler and the wife of King Dhruva. She ruled jointly with her husband over a territory that stretched from beyond the Vindhyas in the north to the kingdom of the Pallavas in the south. King Dhruva was able to extend his territory by annexing the Pallav kingdom and defeating the Ganga king to the south of them. Shila Mahadevi seems to have been co-ruler de facto, not just in name. She was the daughter of a mighty king, Vittarasa, who had been identified with Vishnuvardhana IV of the Eastern Chalukya dynasty. An epigraph in existence from her reign shows that she could give out very large gifts to sages and scholars on her own authority. In the document, she is referred to as ‘Parameshwari’ and ‘Paramabhatarika’, both high titles. Rajashekhara (see Avantisundari) mentions a Shila-bhatarika who is the peer of Bana in writing in the Panchali style. The appellation, ‘bhatarika’ possibly indicates royal status, and the reference may be to this queen, or to Shila of Kanauj, who was queen to Bhojaraja.

## SHOBHNA SAMARTH (1916–2000)

Shobhna Samarth was a film actor. She was born Saroj Shilotri. Her father, P.S. Shilotri was a prominent banker, and her mother, Rattan Bai was an actress. Her father died when she was still quite young, and her uncle took over the headship of the family. He was vehemently opposed to acting, and his disapproval forced Saroj to act in secret, although his daughter, Nalini Jaywant, later went into films. Her uncle was worried that he wouldn’t be able to get her married off if she was seen on stage, so her mother brought a proposal from a distant relative, Kumarsen Samarth, who had just returned from

studying cinematography in Germany. Saroj at first refused to have anything to do with him, but when she met him, she was smitten by his good looks and charming manner and agreed. Kumarsen gave her her screen name of Shobhna Samarth.

Shobhna began with the Marathi film *Vilasi Ishwar* in 1934, and produced her first Hindi film in 1935, titled *Nigahen Nafrat*. She knew no Urdu, and she memorized her Urdu dialogue phonetically, much to the amusement of the crew. The following year, her daughter Nutan (q.v.) was born. She made an average of two films a year for the next few years, playing Sita in *Ram Rajya* (1943). Her last film was *Vastuhara* in 1991. Two of her daughters, Nutan Behl and Tanuja Samarth, also became actresses, and Shobhna produced their debut films, although subsequently she became estranged from Nutan over money matters, only becoming reconciled a few years before Nutan's death from cancer in 1991. After that, Shobhna made no more films and retired to her cottage in Lonavla. Her third daughter, Chatura, is an artist. Shobhna and Kumarsen had some differences, and some years later their marriage ended amicably, and Shobhna continued her tempestuous relationship with the actor Moti Lal. In 2000, she died from cancer.

## SIDDHESHWARI DEVI (1908–1977)

Siddheshwari Devi was a Hindustani classical singer from Varanasi. She popularised the Varanasi modes of singing *thumri*, *thappa*, *dadra*, *purvi*, *holi*, *chaiti*, *kajri* and other forms of song. She came from a long line of *kotiwalis* or courtesans and was famed for her range and variety of expression, especially in *khayal*. She recalled in middle age that some hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago, her ancestor Rati Bai had come to Varanasi and established herself as a singer and courtesan. After her death, Rati Bai's mantle fell on

her niece Maina Bai, whose daughter Chanda Bai was Siddheshwari Devi's mother. She lost her mother when she was a baby, and her father Shyamji when she was 11 years old. Her aunt Rajeshwari brought her up, but one day after a quarrel, threw her out of the house for nothing more than the clothes on her back. She lived in a hovel with a rent of Rs 2 a month and threw herself on the mercy of the singer Vidyadhari, from whom she borrowed her *pakhwaj*. Slowly, she attracted a growing following and reputation. She continued to live in a red-light area of Varanasi. Siddheshwari had great powers of improvisation and could elaborate intricately on a single *bol*. Ustad Siyaji, Razab Ali Khan of Dewas and Inayat Khan of Lahore, taught her, as well as Shri Bade Ram Das of Varanasi, who taught her after she had already become a well-known classical vocalist. She sang in several films for the Usha Cinetone Company. In her last years, she moved to Delhi and got a post teaching *thumri* at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra. The Sangeet Natak Academy gave her a fellowship. In 1966, she received the Padma Shri, and in 1976, from Vishwa Bharati University, a D.Litt.

## SMITA PATIL (1955–1986)

Smita Patil was an actor and a mainstay of alternative Hindi cinema until her tragically early death. While in college, she began working on student films in Pune and as a TV newscaster. From the beginning, she had strong views about how she wished to portray women on screen. Her first major film was Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* (1975) followed by his 1977 film *Bhumika*, based on the life of Hamsa Wadkar (q.v.). Many offers came to her after that; she refused any that she felt were exploitative or stereotyped. In the early 1980s, she became more open to the idea of accepting mainstream roles. She campaigned for women's issues and set up a women's refuge in Bombay. With her two commercial films, *Ardh Satya* and *Umbartha*, she acquired a

name. People began to follow her career and were introduced to ideas of alternative cinema. She won fame for *Mandi* in 1983, and *Raowan*, 1984. She also played in popular films like *Bheegin Palkein*, *Shakti* and others. A powerful portrayal of the 'other woman' in *Arth* also gave her excellent scope to display her skills. One of her last appearances before her death was in Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*. Her style as an actress was unique; understated yet earthy, she was one of the few Bollywood actresses who was comfortable as well as convincing when playing lower-class and lower-caste women as well as conventional roles.

## SRIVIDYA (1953–2006)

Srividya was an actor in Tamil and Malayalam films. She specialized in playing the roles of mothers, but ironically died of breast cancer. She was born in 1953 in Chennai. Her father was a film comedian but suffered facial paralysis the year she was born and had to retire. Her mother, the famous Carnatic classical singer M.L. Vasanthakumari (q.v.), had to work long hours to support the family, sometimes not even finding time to breastfeed her children. Hoping to alleviate their financial difficulties, Srividya went into films very young. She was a trained classical singer and danced in *Kumarasambhavam*, a Malayalam film by P. Subramanyan, and got her first lead role in *Chattambikkavala*. She sang for film scores and also at musical festivals. She began to be famous with *Chenda*, directed by A. Vincent, and also to get roles in Tamil cinema, such as the film *Sollathan Ninakkiren*. In 1975 in *Apoorva Raagangal* by K. Balachander, she played the wife of Rajnikanth, while having an affair with Kamal Haasan. Fact followed fiction, and she nearly married Kamal Haasan, but it did not work out. Later, she married George Thomas, an assistant director in her Malayalam film *Teekkanal* in 1978 and became a Christian against her family's wishes.

Her wish to retire was thwarted as George did not make much money, and she soon found that he was exploiting her. After a long legal battle, which went up to the Supreme Court, the marriage ended in divorce. She left Chennai and moved to Trivandrum. She now embarked upon the later phase of her career where she became renowned for character acting, usually as a suffering mother. Mani Ratnam's *Thalapathi* (1991) ironically shows her playing the mother of Rajnikanth. She also played roles in a number of successful TV serials. In 1990, she lost her mother, who had been a huge source of support for her. Depression followed, and in 2003, she was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. Three years of treatment followed to no avail, and she finally succumbed. Her last film was *London* (2005).

## M.S. SUBBALAKSHMI (1916–2004)

Madurai Shanmukhavadiyu (M.S.) Subbulakshmi was a classical Carnatic singer. She was born in Madurai on 16 September 1916, close to the famous Meenakshi temple of that city. Her family could occasionally hear musicians rehearsing there. Her father, Shanmukhavadiyu was a well-known *veena* player, and his mother Akkammal had been a player of the violin. Her mother, Subramania Iyer was a lawyer as well as a musician, and in later life, Subbalakshmi, known at home as Kanchamma, remembered listening as a child to her mother rehearsing. She studied only till class five, taking up music full-time after leaving school.

She began to learn the Carnatic style with Guru Madurai Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyengar, but her lessons were cut short by the death of her guru. She had perfect pitch and could sing without any accompaniment. She was famed as a child prodigy, giving her first recording session at the age of ten for HMV, where she astounded the recording technicians with the range of her voice. In 1933, she debuted

at the Madras Music Academy. She learnt Hindustani classical music under Pundit Narayan Rao Vyas. She gave her first public performance at the Mahamaham festival at Kumbakonam, followed by a concert at the Madras Music Academy. As a young woman, she visited Kolkata in the 1930s, and learned *khayals* and *thumris* from Dwijendralal Roy. She also learned from Siddheshwari Devi (q.v.) and Dilipkumar Roy, who taught her *bhajans*. She became so expert that Mahatma Gandhi would request particular *bhajans* from her. She also met her future husband, the freedom fighter and Congress politician Thiagaraja Sadasivam, and married him in 1940. He produced many of the films she acted in from 1938 to 1945, including *Meera*. She could sing in Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati, etc.

She was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1954 for her services to Carnatic music. In 1968, she became the first woman to receive the title of Sangeet Kalanidhi. In 1974, she was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award, and the following year, Padma Vibhushan. She travelled the world as India's cultural ambassador, sang at the Edinburgh festival and at the United Nations in 1966 and 1970, the Royal Albert Hall in 1982, and the Festival of India in Moscow, 1987. In 1988, she was awarded the Kalidasa Samman, and in 1998, she became the first musician to be awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour. However, the previous year her husband had died and she no longer performed in public. She donated most of her money from her prizes to charity.

## **SUBBAMMA DUVVURI (1880–1964)**

Subbamma Duvvuri was a freedom fighter. She was born into a lower-middle, class Brahmin family of the Vaidiki sect. She had no education when young and was married as per custom at the age of 10 or 12 to a very poor man, Duvvuri Venkayya. His death a decade later left her destitute. She was childless and gifted with considerable

beauty and without a friend in the world. Luckily, she was related to Tirupati Venkata Sastri, a popular poet of the area, who instructed her in classical literature. Then nationalism called her, and she became a follower of Gandhiji. She took an active part in the Salt Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement till 1947. She toured Andhra extensively, condemning the British and building up sympathy for the cause among common people. During this time, she worked with Ponaka Kanakamma and Unnava Lakshmi Bayamma (q.v.). She was the first woman leader in Andhra to be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for political activities. She attended every session of the Congress, and started a women's wing of the Andhra Congress in 1921. She campaigned to separate Andhra from Madras. In 1924, she started a school for women, the Sanatana Stree Vidyalaya, at Rajamundry, where places were reserved for widows.

## **SUBHADRA KUMARI CHAUHAN (1904–1948)**

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan was a poet and freedom fighter. She was born in 1904 in the village of Nihalpur, near Allahabad, into a middle-class Rajput family, and was brought up in an orthodox atmosphere where untouchability was the code of conduct and *pardah* a strictly enforced custom. Her father, Thakur Ram Nath Singh, was a strict disciplinarian, but her elder brother Raj Bahadur Singh challenged the family traditions and managed to get Subhadra Kumari educated at Crossthwaite Girls' School in Allahabad. There, she was a senior contemporary and friend of Mahadevi Verma, whom she encouraged in the pursuit of literature. She was married to Thakur Lakshman Singh Chauhan of Khandwa at the age of 15, and soon after secured a scholarship at the middle school level. Her husband settled in Jabalpur, where he joined the Non-Co-Operation Movement. Subhadra became

a student at the Theosophical School at Varanasi, but left her studies and went to Jabalpur to assist her husband in the freedom struggle.

In 1923, when she was barely 19 years old, she took out a procession with the Congress tricolour flag in defiance of government orders. The flag had previously been pulled down and trampled upon by the police. Indignation had spread all over the country. Subhadra and her husband decided to lead a group of *satyagrahis* from Jabalpur, and this was the beginning of her fiery political career. In the 1930s, she presided over the women's section of the State Congress Committee and in the early 1940s, she joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, and courted arrest, leaving behind her small children and taking a baby in her arms with her to jail. Later, in 1936 and 1946, she was elected to the Bihar Legislative Assembly unopposed. She has described her arrests in her characteristic unassuming and humorous way, saying that on her way to jail she would be honoured with so many garlands that she would make a pillow of them in her prison cell, where they would remind her of the flowers that had decked her marriage bed. The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, non-co-operation and non-communalism were the main planks of her political doctrine.

Her first poem was published in 1913 when she was a child of nine. Very early in life, she gained recognition and became established as a poet when she found a place in *Kavita Kaumudi*, a collection of the writings of eminent poets. She took part in many *kavi sammelans* or literary soirées while still very young. Burning patriotism, a deep-seated humanism, an intense intolerance of social barriers, especially those imposed on women, and a very genuine compassion for Dalits were the chief driving forces of her creative works. Her patriotic poems, influenced by writers like Premchand, Makhanlal Chaturvedi and others, are a vivid portrayal of the rising tide of nationalism that was sweeping through the whole country, and the stirring quality of her work galvanised the masses into action. Indeed, the refrain from her soul-stirring ballad '*Jhansi Ki Rani*' is still to be heard even in remote

parts of the country: '*Khoob lari mardani wo to Jhansi wali Rani thi...*' Her most famous collection of poems, *Mukul* (1930) and a collection of short stories, *Bikhre Moti* (1932), were awarded the Seksaria Prize in 1930 by the All-India Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. She has penned many poems for children, published mainly in journals and collected under the title *Sabha ke Khel* in 1933. She wrote *Unmadini* in 1934. Her writings have left an indelible impression on Hindi literature. She died from injuries sustained in a car accident at the age of 44. Sudha Chauhan, her daughter, has written her biography.

## SUCHETA KRIPALANI (1908–1974)

Sucheta Kripalani was a freedom fighter. She was to become the first woman Chief Minister of independent India, serving in Uttar Pradesh, and was a member of both the provisional Parliament and of the Lok Sabha. She was born at Ambala, the daughter of Dr. S.N. Majumdar, a medical officer. He was a liberal Brahmo leader and kept an open house for freedom fighters. From him and from Bengali literature, especially the novels of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, she derived her staunch nationalist and independent spirit. She graduated from St Stephen's College, Delhi and taught at Sri Gangaram High School, Lahore, and later as a professor at Benaras Hindu University in 1929. She met her husband, Acharya J.B. Kripalani there and married him in 1936. Her marriage cemented her love for the country, for her husband shared her activism and worked tirelessly for India. Even though she joined politics, she was primarily an academician.

She was deeply influenced by the Russian Revolution and later, from 1936 onwards, by Gandhian philosophy. From 1939, she worked under Dr. Rajendra Prasad in flood and earthquake relief, and in the same year, she established and became the secretary of a women's

section of the Congress. She mobilised women during the Quit India Movement and was imprisoned in 1940 and 1944. From 1941–42, she was involved with the All India Congress Committee at various levels. In 1945, she became the coordinator of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. She worked with Jai Prakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and Aruna Asaf Ali. The chaos and pain of Partition made a deep impression on her, as did Gandhiji's distress at his inability to prevent the suffering of divided India. Sucheta toured with him, trying to prevent bloodshed; she did not flinch from visiting the most remote trouble spots and was said to carry at all times a phial of arsenic with which to take her life should the need arise. However, it did not, and she survived the turmoil of Partition.

From 1948 to 1951, she was a member of the Congress Working Committee and from 1958 to 1960, its president. She was a member of the Constituent Assembly of 1950. In 1949, she was a member of the Indian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, and in 1954 of the delegation to Turkey. She led the Indian delegation to the United Nations conference on Asian Women in 1956. She became the first woman Chief Minister of India on 2 October 1963 and had to work very hard to organise and build an effective administrative system in her state of Uttar Pradesh. She held the post till March 1967.

She had a happy marriage and gave credit to her husband for bringing her into politics, as she said her primary interests were music and social work. She was able to fulfil her wish later by involving herself with the Lok Kalyan Samiti and several other organizations. She died in 1974, having retired from politics, disappointed with the direction of political progress in the country and disillusioned with party politics, though as committed as ever to the larger ideals of freedom and democracy.

## SUCHITRA SEN (1931–2014)

Suchitra Sen was a legendary Indian actress best known for her work in Bengali cinema, and to a lesser extent in Hindi films. Renowned for her luminous screen presence, intense emotional depth, and dignified elegance, she was the first Indian actress to win an international award for acting. With her frequent co-star Uttam Kumar, she formed Bengali cinema's most iconic romantic pair.

She was born on 6 April 1931, *Roma Dasgupta*, in Pabna, Bengal Presidency, British India (now in Bangladesh). Daughter of a schoolteacher; later married industrialist Dibanath Sen in 1947, becoming the daughter-in-law of prominent Bengali entrepreneur Adinath Sen. After marriage, she adopted the screen name Suchitra Sen and entered the film industry in the early 1950s.

Suchitra Sen made her debut in the Bengali film “Shesh Kothaay” (1952), though it was never released. Her first released film was “Saat Number Kayedi” (1953).

She rose to stardom with “Sharey Chuattor” (1953), opposite Uttam Kumar, which marked the beginning of the most beloved romantic pairing in Bengali film history. Together, they acted in over 30 films, shaping the golden age of Bengali cinema.

Landmark Films (Bengali), *Saptapadi* (1961), *Harano Sur* (1957), *Deep Jwele Jai* (1959), *Uttar Falguni* (1963), *Saat Pake Bandha* (1963). Notable Hindi Films, *Devdas* (19550), *Mamta* (1966), *Aandhi* (1975).

Suchitra Sen retired from films in 1978 after the release of *Pronoy Pasha*. She famously refused all public appearances, turning down offers, awards, and interviews—including the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2005, maintaining a reclusive life dedicated to spiritual pursuits and Ramakrishna Mission teachings.

Her deliberate withdrawal from public life only deepened her aura and mystique, and she remained a revered icon in Bengali cultural

memory. She received multiple awards, to mention a few, 1963 Best Actress, Moscow International Film Festival – *Saat Pake Bandha*. 1972 Padma Shri, 2012 Banga Bibhushan Award.

17 January 2014, Kolkata, at age 82, due to cardiac arrest. Suchitra Sen was not just an actress but a phenomenon—embodying a blend of beauty, grace, independence, and emotional restraint. Her pairing with Uttam Kumar is etched into Bengali cultural consciousness. Often described as a “Greta Garbo of India”, her legacy continues to inspire generations of actors and filmmakers.

## SUDHATAI JOSHI (20TH CENTURY)

Sudha Joshi, called ‘Sudhatai’ or ‘Aunt Sudha’, was a freedom fighter, and is mainly remembered for her part in the liberation struggle of Goa in 1955. She was born on 14 January in the village of Priyol in Goa, to a middle-class Chitpavan Brahmin family. She had no formal education, though her father gave her some instruction till she was married at the age of 13 to Mahadev Shastri Joshi, a widower. In her husband’s house, she had to look after two stepdaughters and her mother-in-law, but still found the time to read on her own in the epics and the works of Maharashtrian saints and poets. Slowly, her outlook widened, and she began to shed orthodoxy for reformism.

Mahadev Shastri Joshi’s magnum opus was the *Bharatiya Sanskriti Kosh* (Encyclopaedia of Indian Culture). He was also a member of the banned Goan National Congress and followed the progress of the freedom struggle with interest. He wished to be in the front rank of the *satyagraha* of 1955, but Sudhatai persuaded him to remain behind and work on the book. She herself took his place on the barricades. She was to address a meeting at Mapusa in Goa, and the authorities had prior word of this. They watched the borders carefully, hoping to intercept her, but she slipped through the cordon and managed to address the

meeting. Scarcely had she begun, however, when the police broke up the meeting and she was arrested, tried and jailed for 12 years. There, she campaigned to have the demonstrators treated as political prisoners. Pressure was brought to bear on the Portuguese Government by the Indian Government and other bodies, and Sudhatai was released in 1959. From then on she concentrated more on helping her husband with his researches and on publishing his books.

## **SULE SANKAVVA (12TH CENTURY)**

Sule Sankavva was a poet in Kannada, and only one of her poems has come down to us. This poem makes it clear that she was a Bhakti poet, besides also being a prostitute. She is the only instance of a practitioner of this profession (and she does not seem to have been a high-class courtesan) following the Bhakti path. Her poem is called 'In my harlot's trade' and details where the god Shiva comes to her, but she refuses him as she has already taken another man's money. Shiva wears the aspect of a 'polluted' wanderer, and if she cohabits with him, she will be tortured and punished by society. The irony of the poem comes from the contrast between Shiva's godhead and the conventional reaction of disgust and repudiation of his unconventional appearance and ritual impurity, a reaction that threatens her also, if she goes with him.

## **SULEKHA SANYAL (1928–1962)**

Sulekha Sanyal was a writer and activist who witnessed one of the most turbulent times in Bengali history, recording it all as it tore apart and rearranged women's lives. She was a revolutionary and

a communist. The many revolutionaries who hid in her hometown of Korkandi, now in Bangladesh, inspired her to join the political movements then afoot in Bengal. An early influence on her was the Brahma philosopher Ramtanu Lahiri. She was married, briefly and unsuccessfully, from 1948 to 1956. Her chief work is *Nabankur* (The Seedling), 1956, which gives a moving picture of a young girl growing up and confronting the realities of patriarchy in which she lives.

Sulekha also has about 30 short stories to her credit, which started with '*Pankotilok*' published in 1946. Among all her stories, '*Shindure Megh*' (Clouds Tinged with Red) became well-known among Kolkata's literati since a film was made based on it. Stories like '*Jibonayon*', '*Antorai*', '*Folgu*', '*Jonmastomi*', '*Chhoto Mashi*', '*Khelna*', '*Kit*', '*Songhat*', '*Biborton*', '*Chheleta*', '*Ekti Mamuli Golpo*', '*Ulukhar*', '*Kishori*', '*Poroshpor*', '*Khola Chhithi*', and '*Shock Therapy*' are some of her more memorable short stories. Her book *Dewal Phool* (Wallflowers) was published after her death. She died prematurely of leukaemia.

## **'SULOCHANA' (RUBY MYERS) (1907–1983)**

Sulochana was an actor. She was born Ruby Myers, of Jewish ancestry, although it is unclear whether she descended from an Ashkenazi or a Bene Israeli family, or both. Chubby and brown-eyed, she grew up in Pune and was working as a telephone operator when she was approached by Mohan Bhavnani of Kohinoor Films. Initially, she declined because of the social stigma of acting, but Bhavnani persisted and eventually she agreed. She went on to become the highest-paid star in the country, earning a salary of five thousand rupees a month (more than the Governor of Bombay) and driving around the city in a 1935 Chevrolet. She acted in *Typist Girl* (1926), *Balidaan* (1927) and

*Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), a tour de force in which she played eight characters: a gardener, a policeman, a Hyderabadi gentleman, a street urchin, a banana seller and a European blonde. In 1929, three films featured her and were directed by R.S. Chaudhari were hits: *Madhuri*, *Anarkali* and *Indira B.A.* The coming of sound was initially a problem as her Hindi was bad. She took a year off to study the language and improve her diction, then came back in 1932 with the talkie version of *Madhuri*. She remade many of her hits in talkie versions. She switched from Kohinoor Studio to Imperial Studios, where she was paired with Dinshaw Billimoria from 1933 to 1939. In the mid-1930s, she opened Rubi Pics, her own film production house. In 1973, she received the Dada Saheb Phalke Award for lifetime achievement. Ismail Merchant paid homage to her in *Mahatma and the Bad Boy* (1974).

## SUMATI BHIDE (1931–1999)

Sumati Bhide was a cancer specialist and the academic director of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Swami Prakashanand Ayurvedic Research Centre (SPARC). She was the first President and later the Secretary of the Indian Women Scientists' Association. At the Indian Cancer Research Institute (CRI), she pioneered research on pre-cancerous changes induced by tobacco use in human subjects and on the preventive effects of dietary and natural products against cancer. She published extensively and was cited around the world on this subject.

Her work on the cancer-preventive effects of turmeric was nationally and internationally recognised, and she was invited to be the Asia regional editor for the journal *Ethnomedicine*. Her son Amar became an eminent economist and her daughter, Gauri, a clinical oncologist in the US.

## **SUMATI MORARJEE (1909–1998)**

Sumati Morarjee was a businesswoman. She was called the first lady of Indian shipping. She was born in 1909, the only daughter of the textile magnate Mathuradas Goculdas of Mumbai. At 13, she was married to Shanti Kumar, the only son of the pioneering merchant Prince Narottam Morarjee. Shanti Kumar Morarjee nominated Sumati to the managing agency of the firm. After his death in 1929, the work of the company took up her attention.

She was first involved in the running of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company in 1923, aged 20. Between 1942 and 1946, she took part in the freedom struggle, becoming close to Gandhi. She was president of the Indian National Shipowners' Association in 1957, 1964 and 1970. In 1970, she was elected vice president of the World Shipping Federation, headquartered in London. From 1979 to 1987, she was chairperson of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company, until it became mired in debt of about 1.4 billion rupees and was taken over by the Shipping Credit and Investment Corporation of India. She was later appointed as the Chairperson and Managing Director Emeritus of the company till 1992. She made numerous efforts to prevent the selling of the company's ships, which she used to call her daughters, but with little success. At Scindia House in Mumbai, she built up a unique reference library on shipping, and in 1973, she set up the Narottam Morarjee Institute of Shipping. She was also vice president of the Nathdwara Temple Board. She was managing trustee of the Central Relief Fund and a life member of the Worldwide Fund for Nature. She was instrumental in bringing Sindhis to India after Partition. She was awarded Padma Vibhushan in 1971.

## SUNAYANI DEVI (1875–1962)

Sunayani Chattopadhyaya was a painter. Popularly known as Sunayani Devi, she was born into the famous Tagore family at Jorasanko. She married Rajani Mohan Chattopadhyay, a lawyer. As she was a girl, she did not receive the formal training in art given to her brothers Gaganendranath, Samarendranath and Abanindranath. The urge to paint was, nevertheless, a driving force in her. She watched her brothers at work and picked up hints on technique from them, teaching herself painting at a very early age. She painted as a hobby right through the early years of her marriage and her children's babyhood, though she did not begin to paint seriously till she was in her thirties. The Indian Society for Oriental Art arranged to have her paintings shown in Europe more than once. Her work was also acquired by institutions of the time, such as the Sri Chitralayam Museum of Trivandrum, the Jagmohan Palace of Mysore, the Rabindra Bharati Society, and so on. She also established an art teaching institution called Kala Bharati.

Her main medium was watercolour on paper, and her subjects ranged from mythology to the domestic space, which circumscribed a woman's life. It is clear that in shaping her visual language, she drew on traditional sources as well as folk art. Her paintings were suffused with a lyrical sensibility. Whether it was Krishna playing the flute or a woman performing some household chore, Sunayani Devi brought to the figure a loving sense of intimacy and the innocent delight of naivety.

## SUNITY DEVI (1864–1932)

Sunity Devi was the mother of Jitendra Narayan of Koch Bihar, mother-in-law of Indira Raje (q.v.) and grandmother of Gayatri Devi (q.v.). She was the daughter of Keshab Chunder Sen, the illustrious

Brahmo leader and social reformer of Bengal. She married Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur. The ruling family of Koch Bihar had a tradition of strong women; Nripendra Narayan had succeeded to the throne in 1863 when he was a ten-month-old baby and the principality had been ruled by three women regents: Kamteswari Devi, Brindeswari Devi and Nistarini Devi. Suniti Devi was married to him in 1878, after which he left immediately for England to higher studies, leaving her in charge. She was a highly educated woman and established schools and other institutions for the people of her princely state and all around Bengal. She was awarded the Imperial Order of the Crown of India at Edward VII's coronation in 1901. Her autobiography was published under the title *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* in London in 1920, the first autobiography to be written in English by an Indian woman.

## **SURAIYA (1929–2004)**

Suraiya was an actor and singer. She was born Suraiya Jamal Sheikh in Gujranwala, Punjab, now in Pakistan, in 1929, an only child, and was not a conventional Indian beauty except for her expressive eyes. In spite of her lack of training in music, she went on to become a successful singer-actor on film. She spent her childhood in Bombay and debuted as a child artist in *Usne Kya Socha* (1937). Her uncle Zahoor was a popular screen villain, and in 1941, during a school holiday, she accompanied him to Mohan Studios to see the shooting of *Taj Mahal* by Nanubhai Vakil. Vakil noticed the twelve-year-old girl and chose her to play the young Mumtaz Mahal. She found a mentor in the music maestro Naushad, who had heard her sing on All India Radio. Naushad cast her to sing for the young actor Mehtaab in *Sharda* (1942). She was so small that she had to stand on a stool to sing the song 'Panchhi ja' for the film. Her ability to sing gave her an edge over other heroines of the time. She then went on to act in *Hamari Baat* (1943).

At first, she played supporting roles in films such as K. Asif's *Phool* (1944), Mehboob's *Anmol Ghadi* (1946) and *Dard* (1947), and was recommended for the lead role in *Tadbir* (1945) by K. L. Saigal. She co-starred with Saigal in *Omar Khayyam* (1946) and *Parwana* (1947). After 1947, many celebrated cine stars such as Noor Jehan and Khursheed migrated to Pakistan, leaving the field open to Suraiya, and her career bloomed over the next few years. After the hits *Pyar Ki Jeet* (1948), *Badi Bahen* and *Dillagi* (1949), she became the highest paid female star of her time, but her success was short-lived and the 1950s saw her popularity waning. There was a brief revival with *Waris* and *Mirza Ghalib* in 1954, followed by a prolonged gap. Her last feature was *Rustom Sohrab* (1963).

Suraiya was romantically involved with actor Dev Anand, whom she met when she was just nineteen, and the two of them made six films together between 1948 and 1951: *Vidya*, 1948, *Jeet*, 1949, *Shayar*, 1949, *Afsar*, 1950, *Nili*, 1950, and *Do Sitare*, 1951. Their relationship was said to date from an incident during the shooting of a song for *Vidya*, when a boat capsized and Dev Anand saved Suraiya from drowning. However, her grandmother, who chaperoned her very strictly, disapproved of the relationship and is said to have thrown Dev Anand's gift of a diamond ring into the sea and burned all his letters before her eyes. Dev Anand married Kalpana Kartik in 1951, but rumours continued to swirl around the pair. Suraiya never married.

## **SUSHEELA GOPALAN (1929–2001)**

Susheela was a politician. She was born to the famous Ezhava family, Cheerappan Chira in Muhamma, known for their kalari or school of martial arts. She was educated at Alappuzha and Trivandrum. She joined the Communist Party and married A. K. Gopalan, a party leader whom she met during his years hiding. He served five successive

terms in Parliament for the CPI(M) from 1947 till his death in 1977. She won the Assembly elections from Mararikulam constituency in the district of Alappuzha in 1965 and served subsequently as Minister for Industries in the Kerala Government. She was the President of the Kerala Coir Workers Centre since its inception in 1971 till her death. She was the founder President of the All-India Democratic Women's Association. In 1996, she was dumped as chief ministerial candidate by the CPI(M) and the nomination went instead to E.K. Nayanar. She became Minister for Industries and Social Welfare in Nayanar's cabinet. She was a member of the CPI(M) State Secretariat till her death. She held several positions in the LDF.

## **SUSHILA NAYYAR (1914–2001)**

Sushila Nayyar was a doctor and a freedom fighter. She was the younger sister of Pyarelal Nayyar, Mahatma Gandhi's secretary. She was also the Gandhis' personal physician and close associate. She was active in the Gandhian cause even while studying medicine at Lady Hardinge College. Soon after her graduation, she came to stay at Sevagram with her brother, and in 1939 she began to attend to Gandhi, who had high blood pressure and other ailments. In that year, cholera broke out in the area, and with Gandhi's advice, she tackled the outbreak almost singlehandedly. Her courage and fortitude impressed Gandhi and brought her into the inner circle of his associates. Their correspondence is one of the main sources for our knowledge of Gandhi's personal life.

In 1942, she got her MD and returned to Sevagram, where she was swept up in the Civil Disobedience Movement and imprisoned with the Mahatma and his group in the Aga Khan's Palace. She witnessed several attempts on his life in the 1940s and deposed before the Kapoor Commission after the attempt on Gandhi's life by Nathuram Godse

in Panchgani in 1944. Her small, improvised clinic in Sevagram had grown to the point where it disturbed the other inmates of the ashram, and she shifted it in 1945 to a nearby guesthouse donated by the Birlas. This became the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Hospital. After Gandhi's assassination in 1948, she spent some time at Johns Hopkins University, getting degrees in public health, then she returned in 1950 and set up a tuberculosis centre in Faridabad, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's (q.v.) Model Town near Delhi. She also became head of the Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation.

After Independence, she was elected to the Delhi State Assembly and was appointed Union Minister for Public Health from 1952–1955. The following year, she was Speaker in the Delhi Vidhan Sabha. She served in the Lok Sabha as a member from 1957 to 1971 and Health Minister from 1962–1967. She served another term from 1977 to 1979 during the Emergency. After 1979, she retired from politics and devoted herself to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, which she had set up in 1969. She is the author of *Kasturba, Wife of Gandhi* (1948), *Kasturba Gandhi: A Personal Reminiscence* (1960), *Family Planning* (1963) and *The Role of Women in Prohibition* (1977).

## SUSHMA SWARAJ (1952–2019)

Sushma Swaraj was one of India's most respected and beloved political leaders, remembered for her eloquence, empathy, and statesmanship. Born in 1952 in Ambala, Haryana, she pursued a degree in law from Panjab University, Chandigarh, where she was actively involved in student politics through the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP). She later married lawyer Swaraj Kaushal, adopting his surname in public life.

At the young age of 25, she entered the Haryana Legislative Assembly and became the youngest Cabinet Minister in India at the

time in 1977. In 1998, she broke another glass ceiling by becoming the first woman Chief Minister of Delhi, albeit for a brief tenure.

Over the course of her distinguished political journey, Sushma Swaraj held numerous key portfolios under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, including Minister for Information & Broadcasting, Health & Family Welfare, and Parliamentary Affairs 1998–2004. A consummate parliamentarian, she served seven terms in both Houses of Parliament and was the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha from 2009 to 2014.

Her appointment as Minister of External Affairs in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked a transformative moment in Indian diplomacy. As India's second woman to hold this office (after Indira Gandhi), she redefined citizen-centric foreign policy through the innovative use of social media. Often described as “the people's foreign minister,” she became globally renowned for her prompt and compassionate response to Indians in distress abroad. The Wall Street Journal lauded her as “India's best-loved politician.” Her oft-quoted line, “*I do not sleep, and I do not let Indian envoys sleep,*” reflected her commitment to serving every Indian citizen, regardless of location.

One of her most notable political contests was the 1999 Lok Sabha election from Bellary, Karnataka, where she challenged the Congress leader Sonia Gandhi. Though she lost narrowly, her campaign elevated her national stature.

In 2016, she underwent a kidney transplant and subsequently stepped back from active electoral politics, choosing not to contest the 2019 general elections due to health concerns. Tragically, she passed away on 6 August 2019 in New Delhi following a cardiac arrest, aged 67. Her final tweet expressed her lifelong desire fulfilled: “*I was waiting to see this day in my lifetime*”—a reference to the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir.

She was accorded full state honours at her cremation at Lodhi Road Crematorium, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President

Ram Nath Kovind, and other dignitaries paying tribute. Her daughter, Bansuri Swaraj, continues the family's political legacy, having been elected to the 18th Lok Sabha in 2024.

In recognition of her parliamentary excellence, Sushma Swaraj was awarded the Outstanding Parliamentarian Award in 2007. Posthumously, she received the Padma Vibhushan in 2020, India's second-highest civilian honour. As a lasting tribute, the Pravasi Bharatiya Kendra and the Foreign Service Institute in New Delhi were renamed the Sushma Swaraj Bhawan and the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service, respectively.

## SWARNAKUMARI DEVI (1855–1932)

Swarnakumari Devi was a writer in Bengali. She was the tenth child of Devendranath Tagore and the sister of Rabindranath Tagore. Educated at home under the guidance of her father, brothers, a European lady teacher and a few well-chosen scholars, she was exposed to both Indian and Western literature. In 1867, she married Janakinath Ghosal, a District Magistrate and a leader of the Indian National Congress. She remained with her father while her husband went to England and began her writing career at thirteen.

She wrote novels, essays, songs, poems, plays and ballads. Her first novel in Bengali, *Dipnirvan* ('The Dying of the Light'), was acknowledged as a masterpiece, but her best work is probably the novel *Kahake?* of 1898, which she translated herself as *The Unfinished Song*. She was the first woman author of Bengal to be the recipient of the Jagattarini Gold Medal from Calcutta University. She set up Sakhi Samiti, an organization to promote the free exchange of thought among women and helped women and orphans. She was president of the Ladies' Theosophical Society from 1882 to 1886, and of the Bidhaba Shilpa Ashram, which worked for the welfare of widows. In 1888, at

the inauguration of the Bethune School for Girls, the Sakhi Samiti organized an exhibition, where Rabindranath first staged his drama *Mayar Khela*, written at her suggestion. Swarnakumari attended the sixth session of the Indian National Congress as a delegate and was keenly interested in national industries.

In 1929, she was elected general president of the Bengali Literary Conference in Kolkata. She was the editor for more than 30 years of the Bengali monthly *Bharati*, which did much to popularise and interpret science to Bengali women who did not normally have access to scientific texts. Her literary style mixed homely colloquial words with chaste Bengali and Sanskrit, creating a unique idiom. Her literary works include *Chinnamukul*, *Huglir Imambari*, *Birodha*, *Snehalata*, an operatic dance drama, *Basanta Utsav*, *Debakautuk Nivedita*, poems like *Gatha* and *Kavita o Gan*.

## BEGUM TAIYEBBA (1873–1921)

Begum Taiyebba was a reformer and educationist. She is credited with being the first Muslim woman graduate. She was born in 1873 in Hyderabad and went to school with the eminent poet Sarojini Naidu. While the latter was able to work on an all-India level, Taiyebba was basically restricted to Hyderabad. But she did a lot of work in her own style, which is remembered even today. In 1901, she established the Lady Hyderi Club and later, with Rokeya (q.v.) and others, in 1916 the *Anjuman-i-khawatin-e-Islam*. She worked for the education of girls, especially those of the Muslim community. She wrote *Anwari Begum*, a novel, and a book on Indian folk songs. She undertook relief work during the floods in 1908. Till her death, she was involved in women's education, which she felt was of paramount importance.

## TARA ALI BAIG (1916–1989)

Tara Ali Baig was a writer and philanthropist. She was born in Mussoorie on 8 August and went to school in Darjeeling, Switzerland and Dhaka. She married the diplomat Mirza Rashid Ali Baig and was Anjolie Ela Menon's aunt. In 1937, she was appointed to the first Planning Committee as the convener of a group to examine the social and economic disabilities of women. Shortly after Independence, her husband was posted abroad, and during their tour she established the Women's International Club in Indonesia and later a similar club in Iran. When her husband became Chief of Protocol in Delhi, she built

up the Indian Council for Child Welfare, of which she later became President, and she also helped Indira Gandhi (q.v.) to Indianise the style of entertainment for state banquets at Rashtrapati Bhavan. In 1977, she was elected president of the International Union for Child Welfare in Geneva, the first Asian and the first woman to hold the post. She was a member of the Tibetan Homes Foundation and was president of the SOS Children's Villages of India for 22 years (1967 to 1989). From 1968 onwards, she was vice president of the SOS Kinderdorf International, Austria. She was the architect of the Child Welfare Policies in the Five Year Plans and a member of the National Children's Board from 1975. Her books include a biography of Sarojini Naidu, *The Moon in Rahu*, *Women of India*, *India's Woman Power* and many children's books such as *Indrani*, *The Enchanted Jungle*, and *The Forbidden Sea*. Her talks on All India Radio and her historical and cultural programmes on television were very popular.

She received an honorary degree from the Tehran School of Social Work in 1965, a gold medal and special award from the International Union for Child Welfare in 1984, the National Award for Child Welfare in 1984, and an honorary degree of Doctor of Law from Alberta University, Canada in 1988.

## TARABAI (1675–1761)

Tarabai was a Maratha regent queen. She was the daughter of Hambirao Mohite, descended from the Chalukya kings, who was Shivaji's commander-in-chief. She was married to Shivaji's second son, Rajaram. In 1700, the Maratha capital of Satara was threatened by the Mughals, and the nobles were forced to flee to Central India. Rajaram died around this time, leaving Tarabai the guardian and regent for their minor son Sambhaji II. They made a stand at Tonk Thoda, but were forced to fall back once more to Bednore. The Prince of Bednore,

Jaimall, asked to marry Tarabai, and she responded that he would have her hand if he drove the Muslims out of Thoda. Jaimall was, however, killed by Hambirao Mohite for presuming to aspire to marry his daughter. By 1705, the Maratha army under Tarabai's command had crossed the Narmada and entered Malwa, which was in Mughal possession. There, they defeated several Mughal garrisons. Many well-known commanders, including Udaji Pawar and Hybatrao Nimbalkar, excelled in this offensive. This aggressive Maratha strategy reduced the Mughals, and during the retreat, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb died at Aurangabad. Later, in order to sow discord in the Maratha nation, the Mughals released her nephew Shahu from captivity and restored him to the throne, thus sidelining Tarabai. She established a rival court at Kolhapur in 1713. She was known as Bhadrakali.

## TARABAI SHINDE (1850–1910)

Tarabai Shinde was an activist. She was an associate of social activists Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule (q.v.) and was a member of their *Satyashodak Samaj* (Truth Finding Community). She was stung into activism by the Vijayalakshmi case. In 1881 in Surat, Vijayalakshmi, a young Brahmin widow, was convicted of killing her illegitimate child. On appeal, her death sentence was changed to transportation for life. This so angered Tarabai that she wrote *Stree Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Men and Women, 1882) in Marathi, an early text engaging with the double standards separating the conduct of men and women. This hard-hitting polemic minced no words about the extent of men's hypocrisy and willingness to blame the victims of their vices, women, and condemned the treatment of widows in bleak terms. But it came much before its time, and society largely ignored its message.

## MOTHER TERESA (1910–1997)

Mother Teresa was a Christian saint and missionary. She was born Agnes Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Northern Macedonia, on 26 August 1910. In 1928, at the age of 18, she left Skopje to join the Loreto Postulancy in Dublin. She came to Kolkata in 1929 and taught at St Mary's Bengali Medium School, Loreto Entally, which catered for the orphans, the poor and the homeless. She soon learned to speak Bengali and Hindi fluently. She entered the noviciate in 1931, took her final vows in 1937 at Loreto Convent, Darjeeling, then returned to St Mary's and from 1944 served as its principal. In 1946, she began to feel she had to serve the people who required her care, the poor. She received what she described as 'a call within a call' while on a train journey to Darjeeling.

In August 1948, she left the Loreto Order with the permission of Pope Pius XII, and took as her habit her now famous, blue-bordered white sari. She first went to Patna to do a short course in nursing and dispensary work, then joined the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor. In December 1948, the first slum school came up in Moti Jhil, run from two rented rooms. She also became an Indian citizen that year. In 1950, Pope Pius XII gave his approval for the establishment of the Order of the Missionaries of Charity. After two years, Nirmal Hriday, the Home for the Dying, came up. Later, Prem Dhan was established. In 1963, the Missionary Brothers of Charity was established, and is growing.

Despite poor health, she continued to drive herself hard till the end. She died on 5 September 1997. Her funeral attracted eminent personalities like Cardinal Sadano, representing the Pope, Hilary Clinton, Sonia Gandhi and others. Her tomb at the Mother House has become a place of pilgrimage. But there has also been criticism of her work on the grounds that her ideas were archaic and encouraged superstition and obscurantism. It is reported that she was exorcised, but this is standard practice for saints. There was also controversy over

claims that a picture of her had healed a woman suffering from cancer. Proof of miracles is necessary for canonization.

The Missionaries of Charity works in 125 countries and has 602 homes and 3,914 Sisters, serving millions of needy people. Mother Teresa received a number of awards and distinctions, including the Padma Shri (1962), the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1962), the Decree of Praise by Pope Paul VI (1965), the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize (1971), the Nobel Peace Prize (1979), the Bharat Ratna (1980), the Meritorious Citizen of Skopje Certificate and several other awards and honours. After her death, she was beatified by Pope John Paul II and given the title Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

## **TORU DUTT (1856–1877)**

Toru Dutt was a writer and poet. She was born on 4 March 1856, the youngest child of Govind Chunder Dutt and Chhetramani, of the famous Dutt family of Rambagan, Kolkata, noted for its culture and high moral tone, as well as its western outlook and genuine reverence for Christ. Her early education was entirely in English. Her knowledge of European arts and social customs was amazing, even to her father's cultured English friends. When she was 14, she went to England and spent four years there and in France. French became her favourite language and France the country of her choice. While at Cambridge, she started translating French poems into English, some of which find a place in her book, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876). She wrote letters to Mary Martin of Cambridge. In 1873, the Dutt family returned to Kolkata. The remaining four years of Toru's life were given to a zealous study of English and French literature, to which was added Sanskrit. *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* was well received both in India and England. Later, Toru translated sixty new poems for the

book and the posthumous third edition, published by Kegan Paul & Co., was acclaimed.

Her two novels and all her other poems, collected under the title *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, were published by her father after her untimely death at the age of 21 from tuberculosis. They show the nature and quality of her wonderful poetic genius, which tragically remained more a promise than a concrete achievement. Harihar Das wrote her biography, *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*. She wrote:

I knew in such a world as this  
 No one can gain his heart's desire,  
 Or pass the year in perfect bliss.  
 Like gold, we must be tried by fire.

*Reena Jain*

## **TRIBHUVANA MAHADEVI (C. 846 CE)**

(She ascended the throne of Toshali (Utkala) between 843–845 A.D. and reigned until 850 A.D.)

There are at least three queens named Tribhuvana Mahadevi in Orissan history, but the most famous was the first of them, Tribhuvana, the Bhauma-Kara queen. She also took the titles Gosvamini and Sindagauri. She was the daughter of Rajamalla I of the Western Ganga dynasty of Mysore and was married to Santikaradeva I of the Bhauma-Kara dynasty. According to contemporary Arab and Persian geographers, the royal power of Bhaum belonged to a woman who had an army of 300,000 soldiers. The Arab geographer Ibn Khurdadhbih speaks of this famous woman ruler of Orissa in his geography in 846. She does not appear to have been a regent and ruled in her own right, issuing proclamations and copper plate inscriptions under her own name.

According to contemporary records and copper plates of Orissa, during her rule, the country advanced in three branches of administration; foes were extirpated, glory spread abroad and there was harmony among the people. One such plate, which compares her with the goddesses Katyayani and Sri, records her handover of power to her grandson Lonabhuhara, and describes her powers and achievements, stating, 'I kept my officials in check so that they did not oppress the people. I helped those in distress by maintaining charitable houses and by making offers to the poor and the needy. I provided resources against the disasters of famine, war and pestilence. I promoted education, the arts and architecture. I preserved the caste system. I made the trade flourish of large elephants, pepper, aloes, rattan, cotton, and the white conch that is blown like a trumpet.'

She foiled invasions by the Palas of Bengal and the Rastrakutas and was a great patron of art and architecture. Her period of rule overlaps with the early flourishing of the Kalinga school of architecture in Orissa. Later, Bhaumakara queens also made their mark, such as Prithvi Mahadevi, wife of Maharaja Lalitaharadeva, Gauri Mahadevi, Vakula Mahadevi and Dandi Mahadevi, who ascended the throne in 926. Some of these queens were regents, but all issued coins and were active in the administration.

## U

### **UMAYAMMA (FL.1677–1684)**

(Birth unknown; death in 1698 - 17th century)

Aswathi Thirunal Umayamma was a queen of the Attingal house, connected with the royal family of Travancore. She was the Regent of Venad from 1677 to 1684 on behalf of her nephew Rajah Ravi Varma, who ruled from 1684 till 1718. Her husband, Aditya Verma was not able to control the priests, and they became very powerful. A group called ‘ettara yogam’ based in the Sri Padmanabha temple is said to have assassinated the king, fired the palace, and drowned Umayamma’s five sons. She defeated a rival claimant to the throne, Nedumangattu Kerala Varma, at Tiruvattar and killed him, and subdued the remaining nobles and the powerful priests. She also adopted the famous Kottayam Kerala Varma into the royal family. Shortly afterwards, however, Kerala Varma died, possibly assassinated. Umayamma installed her son, Ravi Verma on the throne. She also adopted two princesses and two princes from a neighbouring dynasty. In 1684, she is said to have aided the English in setting up a trading post in Travancore. Van Rheed, the Dutch governor of Ceylon, has left an account of her rule.

### **UMRAO JAN (FL.1840–1905)**

Umrao Jan was a tawaif or courtesan-singer in Lucknow. She was immortalised in the novel *Umrao Jan Ada*, written in the 1890s and considered by some to be the first Urdu novel. Mirza Haadi Ruswa, the author, may have romanticised her life somewhat, but the salient

facts are reflected in his book. In the twentieth century, the book was filmed with Rekha in the starring role. It was translated into English by Khushwant Singh and M. A. Huseini. It is not known but is likely that Mirza Haadi Ruswa knew the story of Khanum Jan (q.v.), but the greater clarity, idiosyncrasy, and individuality of Umrao Jan's presentation make it almost certain that she was a real woman, her name changed to protect her privacy.

The story states that in the year 1840, a young girl named 'Amiran' was kidnapped from her family by their neighbour, 'Dilawar Khan' and sold to 'Khanum Jaan', a kothiwalli. Amiran, renamed Umrao Jaan, learned to read, write, dance, sing, and charm wealthy men. In time, she caught the eye of 'Nawab Sultan' and the two fell in love. But the Nawab had to marry to please his family, and her heart was broken. She then met a dashing bandit chieftain, Faiz Ali, and fled with him, hoping to marry him and leave the world of the courtesan far behind. But her lover was killed by local police, and she was left with no choice but to return to her old life. The British attacked the city of Lucknow, and once again she had to flee. On the way, her small party of refugees stopped in a village, and the local people asked her to sing and dance. Umrao, looking about her, realized that this was her native village, Faizabad, from which she had been kidnapped. However, she can no longer return.

The War of 1857 destroyed many of the royal houses of India, patrons of the tawaifs. As independent tax-paying wealthy women, the kothis of the tawaifs were important centres of support for classical *ustads*, poets, sages, *pirs* and other intellectuals as well as places of conspiracy against the British. The British were all too aware of this and after 1857, the tawaifs' property was expropriated, their rights and freedoms were curtailed, they were stigmatised as prostitutes and subjected to demeaning health regulations (Kipling is scathing about *tawaifs* in his fiction).

## URMILA DEVI (1883–1956)

Urmila Devi was a freedom fighter. She was the sister of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. She was born at Telirbagh near Dhaka in an upper-middle-class Hindu Vaidya family. Her early education was at Loreto Convent in Calcutta (now Kolkata). She was married in her teens to Ananta Narayan Sen, but continued her studies after marriage. In the 1920s, her brother's house was a centre of political activity, and she too was drawn into the struggle. She became a widow in 1920, and to distract herself from the bereavement, she threw herself into the Non-Co-operation Movement.

She defied the ban on selling *khadi* and was arrested in 1921, along with her sister-in-law, Basanti Devi (q.v.), the same year. She nevertheless set up the Nari Karma Mandir in order to popularise spinning and weaving among women. Initially, Hemprabha Mazumdar, one of the five founders of Chittaranjan's Swaraj Party, assisted her in running the *Mandir*, and when ill health forced Urmila Devi to withdraw, Hemprabha took over. Urmila Devi wrote numerous articles on the efforts of women to further the cause of *khaddar* and *swadeshi*. In 1921, she described in *Banglar Katha*, a Bengali weekly, how young Bengali girls were travelling the country, dressed in *khadi* saris, spreading the message of *swaraj*.

## USHA DEVI MITRA (1897–1966)

Usha Devi Mitra was a writer, first in Bengali and later in Hindi. She was born in Jabalpur in 1897 to a well-to-do family. Her grandmother, Binodini Devi had earned fame as a Bengali writer. Usha began writing in Bengali, but after marriage, she moved to Nagpur and began to write in Hindi. She was a contemporary of Premchand. During

her lifetime, she published seven story collections and five novels. Her stories are sensitive, historical and emotional. The powerful style of her storytelling created a new wave, and she was awarded the Seksaria Puraskar for ‘Sandhya Purabi’. In her period, publishing was yet to develop, and women writers did not get equal opportunities with men. She was disappointed by society’s unwillingness to acknowledge her genius and exclaimed, ‘My writings should be burned on my pyre’. But today, the Hindi literary world can never forget her contribution. She was also an active social worker. Having lost her husband at a young age, she understood the problems women faced. To fight various issues, she established the Nari Mandal Samiti.

## USHA GANGULY (1945–2020)

The formidable doyenne of Kolkata’s theatrical landscape, and indeed, Indian theatre, Usha Ganguli bid farewell at the age of 75, leaving behind a legacy spanning five decades of impassioned engagement with the performing arts. Renowned for pioneering an alternative Hindi theatre movement in Bengal, she was an artist of vision and conviction. Friends fondly recall her saying, “*Theatre is my only life and passion, and Rangkarmee is my family.*”

Born in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, into a family from Nerva village in Uttar Pradesh, Ganguli was trained in Bharatanatyam before moving to Kolkata. She pursued her education at Shri Shikshayatan College and later obtained a master’s degree in Hindi literature. Her theatrical journey began in 1970 with *Mitti Ki Gadi*, an adaptation of *Shudrak’s Mrichchakatikam*, where she played Vasantsena. An acclaimed theatre director, actor, and activist, Ganguli made her mark in Hindi theatre during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1976, she founded Rangkarmee, a theatre group recognized for its remarkable productions.

Ganguli transitioned into directing in the 1980s, bringing a resurgence of Hindi theatre in Kolkata with her dynamic style, disciplined ensemble work, and innovative productions. Notable among them were *Mahabhoj* (1984), adapted from Mannu Bhandari's novel; *Lokkatha* (1987) by Ratnakar Matkari; *Holi* (1989) by Mahesh Elkunchwar and *Rudali* (1992), her dramatized version of Mahashweta Devi's story. Other distinguished works include *Himmat Mai*, an adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Swadesh Deepak's \*Court Martial*. She also penned *\*Kashinama\** (2003).

Beyond theatre, Ganguli contributed to cinema, working on the script of *Raincoat* (2004), Rituparno Ghosh's adaptation of O. Henry's *\*The Gift of the Magi*. In 2005, *Rangkarmee* became the only Indian theatre group to perform at the Theatre der Welt Festival in Stuttgart, Germany.

Ganguli's distinctive style—marked by lyrical sight-and-sound dramas with a deep social conscience, choreographed movement, and musical fluidity—owes much to her classical Bharatanatyam training. For her contributions, she was honored with the first Dayawati Modi Stree Shakti Samman in 1998, followed by Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Direction and the Girish Samman by the West Bengal Government in 2016.

Her indomitable spirit and artistic vision helped shape the vibrant tradition of Hindi theatre in the City of Joy. Ensuring that her legacy endures in every performance that carries forward her passion.

## M.L. VASANTHAKUMARI (1928–1990)

Madras Lalitangi Vasanthakumari was a Carnatic singer for film songs in many Indian languages. Along with D. K. Pattammal (q.v.) and M.S. Subbulakshmi (q.v.), she was the third member of the ‘female trinity’ of Carnatic music. Her parents, Kuthanur Ayya Swamy Iyer and Lalithangi, were noted musicians. She went to school in Chennai and was about to start studying medicine when the great Carnatic maestro G.N. Balasubramaniam heard her sing and persuaded her to become his disciple. Balasubramaniam was a self-taught artiste, and he passed on his innovations to Vasanthakumari. He sang ragas, faster tempo than was then thought the norm and encouraged her to experiment with melody and rhythm. In 1940, at the age of twelve, she debuted at a concert in Shimla where her mother Lalithangi sang, and two years later, Vasanthakumari sang solo at Bangalore. The first 78rpm disc she released caused a sensation. She became particularly known for shifting effortlessly between ragas during a composition. Like her mother, she also sang the songs of Purandardasa, and like her older contemporary D.K. Pattammal, she too sang Ragam Thanam Pallavi. After Independence, Vasanthakumari started to make her name as a playback singer, achieving fame with *Manamagal* (1951).

Vasanthakumari married a film comedian called Krishnamurthy, but he later suffered facial paralysis and was unable to work. Vasanthakumari threw herself into a punishing concert schedule to make ends meet. Of her children, her daughter K. Srividya also learned her mother’s arts and debuted as a singer at the age of ten. Vasanthakumari took on many disciples and trained them in Carnatic singing. She also taught music at the Rishi Valley School. In 1976, she received an

honorary degree from Mysore University and the third-highest civilian honour from the Indian Government, the Padma Bhushan. In 1977, she received the Sangita Kalanidhi Award, the highest recognition in Carnatic music.

## VIBHAVARI SHIRURKAR (1905–2001)

Malati Bedekar was a writer in Marathi under the name ‘Vibhavari Shirurkar’. She was born Balutai Anant Khare and took the name Malati Bedekar, after she became the second wife of the Marathi writer Visharam Bedekar in the 1940s. Malati was the daughter of a writer, Anant Khare, about whom she writes in her autobiographical novel *Kharemaster*. Anant Khare was a forward-looking thinker who sent his daughter to an institution for widows to be educated. He pushed his daughters to make something of themselves.

Malatibai’s first book, *Kalyanchi Nishwas* (The Sighs of Buds) published in 1933, raised a storm of controversy. It was a collection of short stories about young women. Some of them worked and wanted independence from their fathers’ families, some were getting married and rebelled against the dowry. In the suffocating social atmosphere of 1930s India, the stories were shockingly outspoken about sex, money, exploitation and patriarchy. The stories were so hard-hitting that there were several threats to the life of ‘Vibhavari Shirurkar’ (although no one yet knew her real identity). She followed this up with *Hindolyawar* (The Swing) that year, i.e. 1933 and *Virlele Swapna* (The Faded Dream) in 1935. After a pause during which she did a Ph.D. in Sanskrit, in 1946, she revealed her true name and published *Bali* (The Victim) in 1950. Also, *Kharemaster*, and the semi-autobiographical *Shabari* about a woman stuck in a marriage in 1956. She won the Maharashtra State Award in 1964.

## VIDYA GAURI NILKANTH (1876–1958)

Vidya Gauri Nilkanth was a social reformer, educationist and writer. She was one of the first two women graduates in Gujarat. Her daughter Vinodinee Naalkanth (q.v.), also became a writer. Vidya Gauri was born on 1 June 1876 in Ahmedabad. She was the daughter of Gopilal Dhruva, a petty judicial officer, and Balaben. Her father was posted to various small towns in Gujarat while the family stayed in Ahmedabad so that the two girls, Vidya Gauri and Sharda, could go to school. Vidya Gauri studied till class VII at a school in Ahmedabad, then, finding nowhere else to continue their education, she and her sister joined the Anglo-Vernacular classes at the Mahalakshmi Teachers Training College. While still in school, Vidya Gauri was married to Raman Bhai, nine years older than her. Together they wrote articles and books and jointly edited a magazine, *Jnansudha*. She took the Matriculation examination and then, three years later, was admitted to Gujarat College. Vidya Gauri stood first in Logic in the Intermediate Arts Examination of Bombay University, then it took eight years to complete a B.A. in moral philosophy and logic. She came first in the entire University in 1901 and was awarded a fellowship in Gujarat College. She and her sister, Sharda Mehta, thus became the first two Gujarati women graduates.

Vidya Gauri became a member of the Ladies Club, Ahmedabad, which had Hindu, Parsi, Muslim and Christian members. This brought her into the public arena. When the Indian National Congress Annual Session was held in Ahmedabad, she and her sister sang ‘Vande Mataram’ from the dais. She started tailoring classes for poor Muslim women with support from the National Indian Association. She also organized adult education classes and various activities for the War Relief Fund during World War I, for which she was made an MBE (Member of the British Empire) and awarded the Star of India. She returned this award when Gandhiji was arrested during the Salt Satyagraha. She started the Ahmedabad Branch of the All-India

Women's Conference. She was an active member and President of this Branch for many years and presided over the Lucknow session of the AIWC. She was associated with numerous educational institutions, such as the Maganbhai Karamchand Girls' High School, the Diwalibai Girls' School, Ranchhodhal Chhotalal Girls' High School and the Vanita Vishrams, which provided secondary education to women who were widows or dropouts from school because of marriage.

In Ahmedabad, she founded the Lalshanker Umia Shanker Mahila Pathshala, which was later affiliated to SNDT (Karve) University. She taught English, Psychology and Philosophy at this college. She was Honorary Secretary and then President of the Mahipatram Rupram Anath Ashram, an orphanage named after her father-in-law. She was also a member of Victoria Jubilee Hospital, Ranchhodhal Chhotalal Dispensary and various other charitable and philanthropic organizations. She presided over the 15th session of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. She was a prolific writer and contributed to women's magazines such as *Gunsundari*, *Streebodh*, *Sharda*, etc. With her sister, she translated R.C. Dutt's *The Lake of Palms*.

## VINODINEE NEELKANTH (1907–1987)

Vinodinee Neelkanth (she changed the spelling of her last name) was the daughter of Vidya Gauri Nilkanth (q.v.) and a writer and freedom fighter. Her parents were well known in Ahmedabad society, and she grew up in an atmosphere of learning and social activism. At the aged of eighteen, she participated in the satyagraha of Dharasana. In 1929, at the age of 21, she travelled to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, to get an MA in Liberal Arts. She returned to India in 1931.

In Bombay, she became principal of the Municipal Girls' School in 1930 and taught there till 1934. She led a procession of activists holding Congress flags in 1932 as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In 1934, she toured Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan and China. She already knew Manubhai Parikh from her college days; they had taken part together in the Dharasana satyagraha. Now, in 1934, she married him even though he already had a wife and two children. In British India, divorce was not legal for Hindus, so the couple converted to Sikhism. This caused some scandal, but she did not let it hinder her writing, which continued unabated. She began writing her column 'Ghargharni Jyot' in 1949 in the *Gujarat Samachar*, which she continued for many years. In her column, she addressed the women of Gujarat, exhorting them to stand up for themselves and change the society they lived in.

Her first collection of essays was *Rasadvar*, 1928. She began translating from English to Marathi after returning to India, publishing in 1934 *Human Nature and the Social Order* by Charles Horton Cooley. She did a Gujarati History for the Gujarat Vernacular Society in 1942, but critical success came in 1946 with her novel *Kadaleevan*. She also published two collections of stories for children.

## VIDYOTTAMA (4<sup>TH</sup>-5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

Vidyottama was one of the most erudite and talented women of her time. Although much of what is known about her is hearsay. In the twenty-first century, a fresh inquiry is being made into her role and the works of the poet Kalidasa are being looked at from a gender perspective. Vidyottama's story raises timeless questions: Who gets remembered in history? How have brilliant women been marginalized or misrepresented?

Vidyottama was the daughter of the king Shardanand of Varanasi, who appointed Acharya Vararuchi as her tutor in scholarship and academics, while Ganadas was given the task of developing her talents in the arts, particularly dance and music. By the time she was twelve, she had mastered all that her gurus had to teach her, and there was no

field, whether in scholarship or in the gentle arts, which she did not excel in. Her phenomenal accomplishments attracted kings and princes from all over the country who vied for her hand in marriage. However, King declared that only he who could prove himself more learned than Vidyottama, could be eligible to marry her, a condition that none could fulfill. As a part of a conspiracy, she “debated” through gesture with Kalidasa, who answered subtly using sign language which impressed both Vidyottama and the court. She married him only to eventually realize his lack of formal learning.

Stree Shakti has for the last two decades commissioned research to explore an alternative lens on the authorship traditionally attributed to Mahākavi Kālidāsa. With great respect for our classical traditions, the researcher gently raises the possibility that a woman’s voice, subtle yet pervasive might be discerned throughout the celebrated works.

The emotional depth, psychological insight, and the dignified portrayal of women across Kālidāsa’s oeuvre may point toward a distinctly feminine authorship, possibly that of Viduṣi Vidyottamā, the renowned scholar-princess of Kāśī. Characters such as Śakuntalā, Ūrvaśī, Mālavikā, Dhāriṇī, Aushīnari, Indumatī, Pārvatī, Sītā, Kauśikī, Rati, and the Yakṣiṇī are presented not merely as figures of poetic imagination, but as women of intellect, emotion, and agency. Their inner strength, silent endurance, and graceful resistance speak volumes, often through nuanced expression rather than overt declaration.

The themes of love and longing, separation and reunion, motherhood and widowhood, dignity and resilience, and the quest for poetic justice—so deeply embedded in these works—may indeed resonate with the lived experiences and sensitivities of a refined female intellect. An annual award, Viduṣi Vidyottamā, Stree Shakti Samman has been instituted to honour those scholars who are researching the role of Vidusi Vidyottama, whose contribution, if indeed present, remains a silent but shining light in the history of Sanskrit literature.

## **VIJAYA LAKSHMI PANDIT (1900–1990)**

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was a freedom fighter and politician. She was born on 18 August 1900, the daughter of Motilal Nehru, a nationalist leader, and the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of Independent India. Following her family tradition, she became an active worker in the nationalist movement and was imprisoned three times by the British. She entered municipal government in Allahabad before joining the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces and becoming the Minister for Local Self Government and Public Health (1937–39) thus was the first woman to hold a cabinet portfolio at any level. She played an instrumental role in the All-India Women's Conference, being the President from 1940 to 1942. In 1921, she married Ranjit Singh Pandit, a fellow Congress worker, who died in 1944. In 1945, in San Francisco, during the founding of the United Nations, she provided through her speeches a clear picture to the world of British Rule in India. She spoke on India's behalf on her own initiative, travelling abroad on the pretext of visiting her daughters. Her bold policy won her laurels and later a position in the United Nations.

After Independence, Vijaya Lakshmi embarked on a distinguished diplomatic career, leading the Indian delegation to the United Nations (1946–48 and 1952–53), and serving as India's Ambassador to the USSR in 1947–49 and to the US in 1949–52. In 1953, she became the first woman to be elected President of the United Nations General Assembly. From 1954 to 1961, she was the Indian High Commissioner in London and to Spain from 1958 to 1961. She served as the Governor of Maharashtra from 1962 to 1964. From 1964 to 1968, she was a Member of Parliament for Phulpur, formerly represented by her brother. Later, her relationship with the Nehru family was strained, and during Indira Gandhi's period as Prime Minister, it soured irrevocably.

In 1977, she left the Congress Party to join the Congress for Democracy, which later merged with the Janata Party. The following

year, she was appointed Indian representative to the UN Human Rights' Commission. In 1979, she published *The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir*. She spent the last few years of her life at Dehradun. She has been honoured with 15 honorary degrees from universities all over the world. She received the Dorothy Schlozer Gold Medal for her services to humanity and the Padma Vibhushan. She had three daughters; one of them, Nayantara Saigal, is an eminent writer.

*Reena Jain*

## **VIJAYARAJE SCINDIA (1919–2001)**

Vijaya Raje Scindia (pronounced 'Sindia') was born Lekha Divyeshwari and became known as Vijaya Raje after her marriage to the last Maharaja to rule Gwalior. Until 1970, she was known as the Rajmata (queen mother) of Gwalior, and she continued to be called this privately till her death. She was the eldest child of Thakur Mahendra Singh by his first wife, Chuda Deveshwari, who died while giving birth to her. Her father was a deputy collector posted at Sagar in what is now Madhya Pradesh, where she was born. Her mother was a member of a branch of the aristocratic Rana family of Nepal that had been exiled to India. After Lekha's mother died, her maternal family brought her up, although they were not very well off, and she had little contact with her father, who remarried. In childhood, her grandmother, Rani Dhan Kumari, an orthodox and pious woman, was her strongest formative influence. Her upbringing was more middle-class than aristocratic. She was tutored at home and did well enough to go to Vasanta College, Benares, and the Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow. This necessitated her staying in hostels, which gave her greater independence. This was in the late 1930s when the Independence movement was at its height, and Vijaya Raje was impressed by Gandhism. However, before she

could involve herself any further in activism, in 1941, her uncles' efforts to find a match for her proved successful. The family of Jiyaji Rao Scindia were interested. There was, however, some doubt on the part of a few of the Scandia's, largely because she was not a Marathi, and after the wedding, Lekha, now renamed Vijaya Raje, had to work very hard to be accepted by them.

After Independence, she entered politics in 1957, running as a Congress party candidate in Madhya Pradesh. She was elected to the Lok Sabha again in 1962 from the Guna constituency, then in 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998. In between she was elected to the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly (1967–71) and the Rajya Sabha (1978–89). In fact, she won all the elections she ever contested. In 1967, she resigned from the Congress and joined the Jana Sangh, feeling closer to its ideology. The couple had a daughter, named Padmavati Raje, who married Kirit Deb Barman, the last ruling maharaja of Tripura, but tragically died aged twenty. The second daughter was Usha Raje, who married Rana Pashupati Shamsher Singh, a cousin from Nepal. Their daughter is Devyani Rana.

The third child was Madhavrao Scindia, who joined Indira Gandhi's Congress party shortly after the lifting of the Emergency in 1977. This was regarded by the Rajmata as treason, for she herself had spent the Emergency in Tihar Jail. The Rajmata remained with the Jan Sangh, shifting to the BJP in the 1980s. The two youngest daughters, Vasundhara Raje, Chief Minister of Rajasthan and Yashodhara Raje, followed their mother into rightist politics. Vijaya Raje supported the BJP's campaign to get a Ram temple built in Ayodhya. She was Pro-Chancellor of Sagar University and wrote two books: an autobiography with Manohar Malgonkar called *The Last Maharani of Gwalior*, and *Lok Path se Raj Path*, in Hindi. Her grandson and Madhavrao's son Jyotiraditya Scindia, is also an astute politician.

## VIOLET ALVA (1908–1969)

Violet Alva was a politician and the first woman to hold the deputy chair of the Rajya Sabha or the Upper Chamber in India. She was the first woman advocate in India to have argued a case before the full High Court Bench in 1944. She was also the first woman to be elected to the standing committee of the All-India Newspaper Editors Conference in 1952. She was born Violet Hari to a Protestant family on 24 April 1908 and was educated at St Xavier's College and the Government Law College in Mumbai. At the latter, she met Joachim Alva, a Catholic. They married and she started participating in social work, journalism and the freedom struggle. In 1942, during the Quit India Movement, Violet went to jail with her infant child. In 1944, she began a women's magazine, *The Begum*, later renamed *Indian Women*. From 1945 to 1953, she was the secretary of the Agripara Rehawasi Sevamandal in Mumbai. In 1946–47, she was the deputy chairperson of the Bombay Municipal Corporation. In 1947, she served as an Honorary Magistrate in Mumbai. From 1948 to 1954, she was the President of the Juvenile Court there.

Violet was actively involved with numerous social organisations like the Young Women's Christian Association, the Business and Professional Women's Association, and the International Forum of Women Lawyers. She was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1952. She was Union Deputy Minister for Home Affairs from 1957 to 1962, when Jawaharlal Nehru was the Prime Minister. She served as deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha from 1962 to 1966 and again from 1966 to 1969. She resigned from the Rajya Sabha on 17 November 1969 and died of a heart attack on 20 November. A portrait of Joachim and Violet Alva was unveiled in Parliament in 2007. Her daughter Margaret Alva is an important Congress leader.

## VISHAKHA (6<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BCE)

Vishakha was the daughter of a merchant of Saket, renowned for her beauty and accomplishments. She was married to an unworthy man, the son of the merchant Migara, in the city of Sravasti. Migara's family were Jains, while Vishakha was a worshipper of the Buddha. Over time, she won her in-laws over to believing in the Buddha. In fact, so great was her father-in-law's respect for her wisdom and character that he called her 'Migaramata' or 'mother of Migara'. Vishakha made many costly gifts to the sangha, endowing monasteries and paying for their upkeep and furnishing. She was a very important lay disciple in the early years of Buddhism.

## VISHNUPRIYA (16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

Vishnupriya was the second wife of the Vaishnava saint Chaitanya, the name of Vishwamvara Mishra after he attained enlightenment. Chaitanya was a wandering Vaishnava saint, the appeal of whose songs and visions led to the revival of Vaishnavism in Bengal. His first wife, Lakshmi, died of snakebite, and though by then he was well along the path to renunciation, he felt compelled to marry again in order to provide his aged and sorrowing mother with a companion. Vishnupriya was the daughter of a highly placed and respectable court pandit, and she must have found it hard to adjust to the dreary life of poverty she had to lead with Sachi, Chaitanya's mother. She was very orthodox, not liking to show herself to anyone not within the family circle. Before Chaitanya's devotees, she would only appear behind a curtain, which revealed just her feet. She considered herself a woman of ill fortune and spent her time acquiring virtue by reciting the names of God. To do this, she would count out her rosary with grains of rice, and when she had finished, she would boil the little heap of rice for her meal.

## VISHWAVARA (VEDIC PERIOD)

In the Vedic hymns written by women, we sometimes find unrestrained expressions of the intimate joys and sorrows of the homely life led by the poets. This not only shows the high position occupied by them, in that such 'common' subjects could be celebrated in verse, but also gives a glimpse into the inner heart of the women of the times. A hymn of six verses is ascribed to Vishwavara of the Atri family. Vishwavara is apparently a married woman; she approaches the blazing sacrificial fire at dawn with her face towards the East, offers oblations to the gods and prays for love and happiness in wedded life. As she sings in the hymn:

The fully kindled Fire, bright against the firmament,  
Facing the dawn, shines far and wide.  
Vishwavara proceeds towards the East with obeisance,  
Praising the gods, with oblation and ladle full of butter...

From this devotional hymn, we may gather that women in Vishwavara's time were allowed to make independent offerings to the gods, a right they no longer enjoyed in later times.

## Z

### ZOHRABAI AGREWALI (1868–1913)

Zohrabai was a Hindustani classical singer. Like Gauhar Jan (q.v.), she came from a courtesan background and was the last of the great tawaifs. Her style of singing was particularly flamboyant and masculine. She belonged to the Agra gharana, hence her surname of Agrewali, and was trained by Ustad Sher Khan, nephew of Ghagge Khuda Baksh, who imported Khayal from Gwalior. She also learnt from Ustad Kallan Khan and Mehboob Khan (*Daras Piya*). She sang both khayal and thumri with some delightful ghazals, which she learned from Ahmad Khan of Dhaka. She is said to have influenced Ustad Faiyaz Khan, and to have been greatly esteemed by Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan of the Patiala gharana. Gangubai Hangal (q.v.) is said to have modeled her singing style on Zohrabai. Only short pieces by her survive in a number of 78 rpm recordings dating from the first two decades of the twentieth century, including *matki more re goras* in raga Jaunpuri or *dekhen ko man lalchay* in raga Sohni from 1909. These recordings are very rare.

### ZUBEIDA (1911–1990)

Zubeida Begum Dhanrajgir was an actor. She was born in Surat, the daughter of Fatma Begum (q.v.) and the Nawab of the Princely State of Sachin. Her sisters were Shahzadi and Sultana. All three girls appeared on screen, but Zubeida became the most famous and had the longest career. She was stunningly beautiful and was only twelve

when she first appeared in *Kohinoor*. Through the 1920s, she made infrequent appearances on screen along with Sultana, who was more famous at that time. They starred together with their mother in *Veer Abhimanyu* in 1922 and *Kalyan Khajina* in 1924. In 1925, Zubeida had nine releases, amongst them *Kala Chor*, *Devdasi* and *Desh Ka Dushman*. In 1926, she acted in her mother's debut film as director, *Bulbul-e-Paristan*. The following year, she appeared in *Laila Majnu*, *Nanand Bhojai* and Naval Gandhi's *Sacrifice*, based on Rabindranath Tagore's short story 'Balidaan', starred Zubeida, Sulochana (q.v.), Master Vithal and Jal Khambatta. The Indian Cinematograph Committee recommended that it be sent abroad for screening. On 14 March 1931, Ardeshir Irani of Imperial Movietone released *Alam Ara* starring Zubeida and Master Vithal, the first full-length Indian talkie film at the Majestic Theatre. Zubeida took easily to sound and starred in a string of mythologicals. She also appeared in Ezra Mir's *Zarina*. In 1934, she set up Mahalakshmi Movietone with Nanubhai Vakil and had further hits with *Gul-e-Sonobar* and *Rasik-e-Laila*. In 1949, she appeared in her last film, *Nirdosh Ablā*. She then married Maharaj Narsingir Dhanrajgir Gyan Bahadur of the Princely State of Hyderabad, converting to Hinduism, and spent her last years at the Dhanraj Mahal Palace in Bombay amongst her children and grandchildren. Her son Humayun Dhanrajgir is a famous industrialist.

## ZULEIKHA BIBI (12TH–13TH CENTURY)

Zuleikha was the mother of the 13th-century Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. Nizamuddin Auliya was known to be very fond of her, and his early conceptions of humility before God and the brotherhood of men are said to have been the influence of his mother on him. A mystical tale about her that survives till date goes something like this: On the first night of every month, Auliya used to go visit his mother, the

knowledge of which does not go down well with the eccentric and capricious Sultan Mubarak Shah, successor to Alauddin Khilji. To prevent him, the Sultan issued a decree ordering the saint to present himself at court on the first night of every month, failing which he would have beheaded him. Having heard the decree, full of foreboding, Auliya went to see his mother for what he felt would be his last visit. However, the next day, the Sultan was found dead.

## ZOHRA SEHGAL (1912–2014)

Zohra was an Indian actress, dancer, and choreographer. She appeared in several British films, television shows, and Bollywood productions in a career that spanned over eight decades.

Born Sahibzadi Zohra Begum Mumtaz-ullah Khan, she belonged to a respected and wealthy Muslim family in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. Graduating from the British-run elite Queen Mary College, Lahore, later, she got admission at a ballet school in Dresden, Germany. In 1935, she joined Uday Shankar's troupe, it was here that she met her future husband, Kameshwar Sehgal, a scientist, painter and dancer from Indore. The duo later migrated to Lahore, where they set up their own dance academy, the Zohresh Dance Institute. Following the communal tension preceding the Partition of India, they moved to Bombay, with their one-year-old daughter, Kiran. Sehgal joined the Prithvi Theatre (where her sister, Uzra Butt also worked).

Also in 1945, Sehgal joined the theatre group, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). After her husband's death in 1959, Sehgal moved to Delhi and was appointed as the director of the newly founded Natya Academy. She worked in the same position for about three years. Later in 1962, Sehgal was awarded a drama scholarship, which required her to move to London, United Kingdom. Following that, Sehgal made her television debut with a BBC adaptation of a Kipling story, *The*

*Rescue of Pluffles*, in 1964. Sehgal got her first international break in films in 1982, with Merchant Ivory's *The Courtesans of Bombay*. She died on 10 July 2014, aged 102, after suffering cardiac arrest.

Sehgal's most notable films include *Neecha Nagar*, *Afsar* (1946), *Bhaji on the Beach* (1992), *The Mystic Masseur* (2001), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Dil Se* (1998), *Saaya* (2003), *Veer-Zaara* (2004), *Saawariya* and *Cheeni Kum* (2007); and the TV serials *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), *Tandoori Nights* (1985–87) and *Amma and Family* (1996).[1] At the age of 90, she played the central character in the 2002 film *Chalo Ishq Ladaaye*. Considered the doyenne of Indian theatre, she first performed in Lahore for Ajoka Theatre's *Aik thi Nani* in 1993; she and her sister Uzra Butt appeared on stage together after four decades.

Zohra was awarded the Padma Shri in 1998, Kalidas Samman in 2001, and in 2004, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (India's National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama) presented her with its highest award, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship for lifetime achievement. She received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian honour, in 2010. *Laadli* Media Awards in New Delhi, she was named *Laadli of the Century*.

Kiran Sehgal, wrote her mother's biography titled *Zohra Sehgal: Fatty*, which was released in 2012.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr Vidya Niwas Mishra** was an Indologist , a Hindi-Sanskrit littérateur, and a prominent thinker . He was a visiting professor at the California and Washington universities, and director of the Kulapati Munshi Hindi Vidyapeeth, Agra. He was also vice-chancellor of the Kashi Vidyapeeth and the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. For many years, he was the editor-in-chief of the leading Hindi daily Navbharat Times. He was a nominated Rajya Sabha member , He was honoured with Padma Bhushan.

**Dr (Mrs) Pankaj Mittal**, Secretary General of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) is the second women Secretary General of the Association in its 97 years of existence. Prior to joining AIU,Dr Mittal earlier served as the first regular Vice Chancellor of Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur, the first rural women university of North India She is a Fulbright Scholar. and has visited a number of countries like USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Mexico, China, South Korea, Spain, Germany, South Africa, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mauritius and Philippines to name a few, for academic purposes for presenting papers in international conferences and for academic exchanges on behalf of UGC.

**Dr Geraldine Forbes**, Professor Geraldine Forbes is the Distinguished Teaching Professor Emerita, State University of New York, Oswego. As a pioneering persona in the fields of women's studies and women's history in India, Professor Forbes charts new avenues in exploring the lives and works of women in India and imparts historical visibility to women's issues from the perspectives of women. For the

last fifty years, her path-breaking contributions as a dedicated researcher of women's history have inspired generations of scholars in the field of women's studies in India. Her seminal books, such as *Women in Colonial India* and *Women in Modern India*, and numerous research papers have been an enriching oeuvre for women's studies researchers.

## REKHA MODY: A PROFILE

Rekha Mody: [www.rekhamody.com](http://www.rekhamody.com)

Born: 1955, Modinagar, U.P., India. Education: B.A. (First Class). Honors: Vidyasagar (Hon. D.Litt.), Vikramshila Hindi Vidyapeeth.

Rekha Mody, a social worker and activist, is committed to Women Empowerment, working actively in SAARC & ASEAN Countries. A networking expert, she believes that collective thought and action can move mountains. Apart from her social work, she is a connoisseur of art, a writer and a social entrepreneur with the experience of starting a FM Radio station in 1994 in Kolkata. She is the founder of **Divya Chaya Trust** established in 1984, **Habiart Foundation** 1987, **Stree Shakti - The Parallel Force** 1998. [www.divyachayatrust.org](http://www.divyachayatrust.org), [www.streeshakti.com](http://www.streeshakti.com), [www.habiartfoundation.org](http://www.habiartfoundation.org)

Stree Shakti – The Parallel Force organized the first women’s International conference in India: AGEING WOMEN — CRITICAL CHALLENGES & CONCERNS ON 26th–27th AUGUST, 2013 which was supported by UNDP, HelpAge India. The **She Leads** program introduced in 2021, aims to train women in the political field. A Mega Women Leaders Conclave was organised on 7–9 April 2025 in Srinagar She Leads (2021-2023) supported by Chevening Scholarship.

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## REVIEWS

‘I must say it is an impressive collection of writings about various women of undivided India and their contributions in different ways through life and progress in your country.’ –

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‘It is a biographical dictionary, a useful reference book to keep on your working table.’ –

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