

## Inaugural

The Nārīvāda network is the plank from which IGNCA will look at the complex web of cultural interaction among women of different communities, regions, social strata inside and outside India, and exchange source material on the contribution of Indian women to international goodwill and fundamental values of human welfare. It will provide a forum for critical and creative dialogue among various arts, conducted by women, and for consolidating research on women's contribution in bridging natural and social sciences, traditional knowledge and modern sciences. A launching pad for collaborative initiatives between the IGNCA and other national and international institutions, Nārīvāda will build bridges between women in mainland and diasporic India, and between regional diasporas within and outside India.

It seeks to enrich the processes and products of knowledge production by treating women as subjects rather than objects of research and create a new mental atlas of women in India by inviting women to write their own histories; replenish glossaries with feminine terminologies of identity, equity and efficiency; reconcile cognitive and instinctive, material and spiritual, professional and personal categories of feminine experience to evolve culture specific models of feminine and human development. It proposes to articulate, suppressed diverse feminine voices in India, to protect the variety of oral and contextual Indian knowledge systems. It will recognize the custodial role played by Indian women to shore up the co-evolutionary inter dependence of nature and culture, witness and reinforce women's endeavour to liberate themselves from their subaltern function of primary workers in knowledge production and utilization, to assume agency and autonomy. Thus, women become harbingers of catalytic and constitutive role of culture in development, instead of being suborned

in a teleological process of cannibalization and commoditization of nature and culture.

The gender culture civilization network is a strategic posture to deal with the feminization of India as a nation in colonial and post colonial discourse. The Nārīvāda network is concerned with combating the epistemological violence that has impoverished our life and arts, subverted bio cultural safety protocols and created a subject-object dichotomy between the urban-rural, the hills-plains, the global-local, the growth-equity, and state and community economies in India. The network does not propose to raise the flag, beat the drum, shout from roof top or strive for exclusivist stances. It hopes to enhance life and arts, by recognizing, recording, exhibiting and disseminating the unique, distinctive feminine voices that have made Indian civilization what it is, by protecting it from sameness, decadence and sterility.

*K.K. Chakravarty*

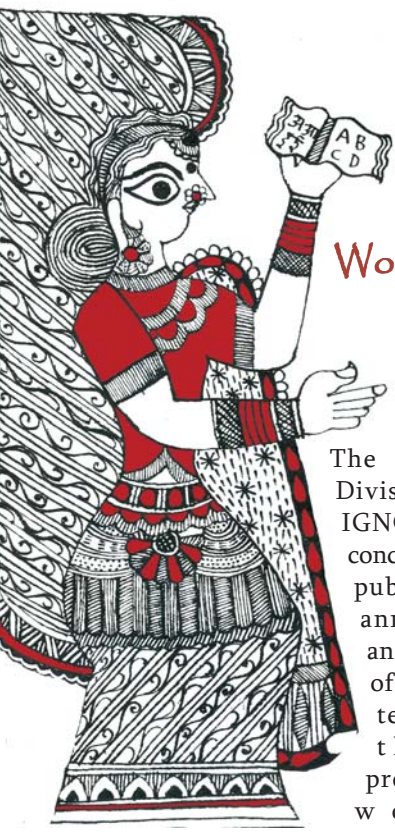
## Introduction

The IGNCA's 'Deed of Declaration' speaks of carrying the past as a living heritage. However, there is a great need to connect the vast resources on women's culture with contemporary discourse in gender studies to protect and guard it from over simplification. In recent years, most explorations in the field of gender and culture in India have been viewed from a Marxist, Socialist, Liberal or Modern perspective in the context of the socio-political reality of our society. These approaches have consigned cultural resources, such as religious scriptures and texts, symbols, powerful feminine icons in oral and written tradition, myths, and legends, knowledge-systems of primal communities and grassroot traditions to the dust heap of history. Our network seeks to evolve models of research on gender pertinent to Indian ethos and reality, and views women's contribution to art and culture as an integral part of our endeavours.

## Our aim:

- To create a space for discourse on women's culture that is either air brushed from history, marginalized or distorted by misperception of history.
- To revise and contextualize women's cultural resources and knowledge systems as an integral element of gender studies.
- To shift the emphasis of gender research from reductionism to a more holistic frame.
- To emphasize and reassess the key role women have played in the creation, preservation and transmission of our cultural heritage.
- To question the current epistemologies in gender studies in order to create space for a new hermeneutics based on the perennial values of Indian culture.
- To alter the frame—to bring about a paradigm shift.
- To provide a new theoretical orientation for the study of Gender and Culture. To redress the imbalance between modernity and tradition so that a dialogue on gender, culture and modernity is pursued on an equal footing.
- To initiate methodological reflections by introducing new ways of exploring women's experience.
- To explore under-theorized areas of women's oral heritage and to celebrate diversity of views.
- To frame our discourse and activism in community solidarities and sister networks.
- To promote wide networks among women scholars, creative thinkers and activists throughout India and the world.
- To promote collaborations with institutions and visibility for Nārīvāda-oriented research.





### Women's Writing in Sanskrit from 3000 BC to 2000 AD

*Not knowing me, Vijjika, dark like the petals of a blue lotus,  
In vain indeed has Dandin said that Sarasvati is all—white”.*

*Vijjika, South Indian poetess*

The Kalakosa Division of the IGNCA is concerned with the publication of annotated texts and translations of fundamental texts. It is, therefore, proposed that women's contributions to Sanskrit literature be added to the existing research and publications.

The institutionalization of literature has undermined the authority of women's writing in Sanskrit. Critical assumptions and historical circumstances have been responsible for this neglect. It is well known that women's writing in Sanskrit began as early as 3000 B.C. The Rigveda mentions Brahnavadinis—or women seers known as Rishikas—who were the authors of several notable hymns in the Rigveda. However, few critical editions give credit to their writings. The 522 verses of the Buddhist Therigatha were composed by the disciples of Buddha. In the later period, Gargi and Maitreyi in the Upanisads, and several illustrious women authors in medieval India like Devakumarika, Lakshmi Rajani, Trimul Amba, Ganga Devi and Ramabhadra Amba have written great works in Sanskrit language. From the medieval down to the twentieth century, there are gems of writing in Sanskrit by women. Some of these writings are interspersed in Subhashitas and Sanskrit Kavyas.

The Vidushi Project endeavours to re-evaluate neglected and suppressed voices of women in Sanskrit literature that have either been dismissed, or

misrepresented. A broader aim is to bring out reappraisals, critical editions with translations in English of hitherto known and unknown works. This project takes a critical but purposeful look at the resources to understand the themes, styles, literary reflections on personal agency and insightful observations of women-centred narratives that capture the women's world in pre-modern and modern India.

The other component of the Vidushi Project is to reinvestigate and reinterpret Hindu scriptures and literature in Sanskrit to set aside stereotype myths and prejudices often put forward about women in India. Both research endeavours to aim for a 'self-definition of women'.

### Vidushi Workshop - A Report

An exploratory workshop was organized by Narivada to work out an Action Plan for the Vidushi Project on Women's Writings in Sanskrit From Rigveda (3000 B.C.) to the Modern Period (2000 A.D.) chaired by Prof G.C. Tripathi. Prof Tripathi spoke on several unheard voices of women that need to be recognized. As an example, he quoted the Vidula Upakhayayana, in Mahabharata as a representative voice of wisdom of women. Prof. Deepti Tripathi, Delhi University described the programme as a long-term project of extraordinary importance. She suggested the categorization of Sanskrit texts by women should be based on chronology (*kala-krama*), themes and regions, keeping geographical regions based on old cultural maps.

Dr Amita Sharma Reader, Lal Bahadur Sastri Vidyapeetha, Delhi suggested that we should begin our documentation from present day writing in Sanskrit by women, and then consider the works in the past. It will be easy to do the categorization on the basis of subjects such as literature. We should create a method of logical presentation of new paradigms of record the *Jnana ke Parampara*, Tradition of Knowledge. Prof Shashi Prabha Kumar, JNU emphasised the importance of linguistic analysis of terms in the Nighantu and other encyclopedia. These texts should be researched for words which are linked with the feminine gender. The role women played in inspiring male authors as Bhamati did for Vachspati Mishra, Vidyotama for Kalidasa and Bharati for Mandana Mishra. The creativity of these men was totally in the dark until lit by the flame of women's inspiration and insight. Prof Shashi Tiwari, Delhi University stated that there were thirty Rishikas in the Rigveda whose voices should be documented. Dr Upendra Rao, JNU, said it was tragic that women's writings in Sanskrit was unavailable for the education of women in Universities. The contribution of women "Bhikshuni Sangha" and literature in Pali and Prakrit should be included. Dr Priya Kapoor, Portland University, USA stated that this is a project of recovery of writings and scholarship that is important to maintain the vitality of modern academics. We must recover the monuments of our history to create a gender-centric scholarship.

An all-India workshop will be organized at IGNCA in future.

Chair : Prof G.C. Tripathi  
Convenor: Dr Madhu Khanna

# Documentation on Endangered Wisdom Traditions and Traditional Knowledge Systems

This project aims to document and disseminate women's contribution to the endangered 'Intangible Heritage' in the following areas: (1) Aesthetic Systems: art and crafts; (2) Representations of Collective Memory: Oral narratives, songs and legends; (3) Rituals and Ceremonies in the domestic and public spheres; (4) Traditional Environment Management Systems; (5) Traditional Healing Systems; and (6) Women's protection of food diversity and agrarian knowledge in the first phase, we propose to carry out this research in Madhubani, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Orissa and in the states of Arunachal and Assam in North-east India. Under this programme we are researching the following project.

## Gender and Knowledge Systems in the North-East

This research purports to look at the discourse on knowledge systems based on a case study of a women's community in North-East India. All communities have a vast resource of knowledge based on their world view. These communities lead a way of life closely linked to the environment in ways more than one. The life rhythms of these communities have many strands to it. They cannot be subscribed to a 'linear pattern' as compared to modern day societies. Studies on communities have highlighted the fact that women have been major participants in a mosaic of activities such as the production of arts and crafts, environmental conservation, healing practices, animal and plant breeding, festivals and rituals, child rearing and knowledge of food diversity along with culinary skills. The research will be undertaken in two segments.

The first segment would entail an exercise of analysing and then raising questions on what constitutes a 'knowledge system of women'. The study attempts to move away from the existing western notions of a knowledge system as limited to the three R's. In contrast, it can be observed that the women belonging to traditional communities acquire a plethora of skills that contribute significantly towards the community.

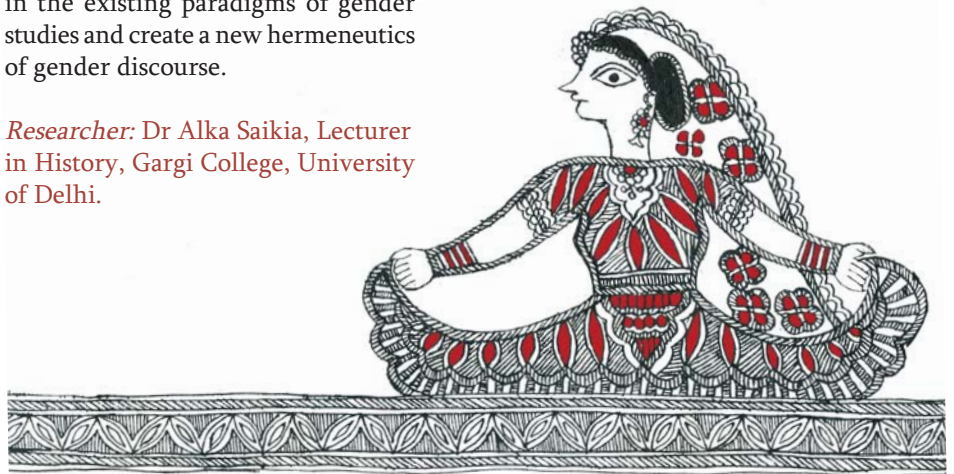
The second segment would draw upon data collected through oral histories of a women's community. These forms of knowledge are an integral part of the socialization process of women in traditional

communities. This study would raise issues about the existing 'feminist epistemology' and contrast women's contribution in a traditional community to those in urban areas. It also endeavours to bring about a shift in the existing paradigms of gender studies and create a new hermeneutics of gender discourse.

*Researcher: Dr Alka Saikia, Lecturer in History, Gargi College, University of Delhi.*



*Audio CD, 'Gram Banglar Nadir Moner Kotha', Bengali folk songs by Women.*



## A study on Women Characters in Assamese Ramayana and its impact in the daily life of common women

This study examines the unique role of the Ramayana in Assam. The three dimensions the proposed study will cover are: (1) Text, (2) Text and Context and (3) Text and Practice. The two basic texts will be (i) Madhav Kandhali's *Sat Kanda Ramayana* and (ii) Sankaradeva's *Ramayana*. The other text to be consulted are the Ramayana's by Durgavara Kayastha (15th century). Ananta Kandali (16th century). Madhav Dev (16th century) Raghunath Mahanta (18th century). The selection of the other texts is to demonstrate the contrast of context (space and time) that influence the portrayal of characters in popular 'folklore' like the Ramayana. The following three categories of women are selected for a

comparative study in Assamese Ramayanas for Text, and Text and Context dimensions: (i) Sita and Kaikeyi; to study the portrayal of two bold women in a patriarchal social system. (ii) Tara and Mandodari; the uniqueness of two queens of defeated kings. (iii) Common women of Ayodhya and Lanka. To study how the character of common women is integral to create/substantiate the overall characters of Rama and Ravana respectively in the text(s). The second aim of this study is to investigate the responses of women of the Ramayanas.

*Researcher: Manjit Baruah, Women's Studies & Development Centre, University of Delhi.*

## Integrated Studies on Women's Culture in Mithala, Bihar

Madhubani in Bihar, eastern India has emerged as one of the foremost areas where rural women have been found to possess remarkable skills in painting and crafts that is passed down from generation to generation. Women in the villages have been painting their walls and floor for centuries but they have gained prominence and recognition as artists only during the last thirty years. Since the discovery of the art of Madhubani, there are many studies on the creativity of women limited by content and clarity to the community life. An integrated documentation of

women's culture, which threads together the tradition of *vrata*, *katha*, *puja*, *gita* and *bhitti-chitra* sets the context for an integral understanding of women's creativity.

A workshop 'Kala aur Katha', organized by IGNCA, brought together fifty women artists living in Delhi on the occasion of the Madhu-Shravani Parva, (15 July-7 August 2006), the festival dedicated to snake deities during the monsoon season. An integrated documentation on the fifteen narratives, songs and rituals associated with the festival were

recorded at the workshop.

A publication entitled *Liberation Through Art*, edited by Dr Madhu Khanna with contributions by Prof G.C. Tripathi, IGNCA, Ms Manisha Jha, Madhu Art Centre and Dr Priya Kapoor, Portland State University and the women who participated in the workshop.

## Kala aur Katha

### Reconfiguring an Indigenous Paradigm of Empowerment in Women's Art in Mithila

A Symposium on 'Reconfiguring an Indigenous Paradigm of Empowerment in Women's Art in Mithila', is being organized in January 2007.

This symposium is outcome of the collective efforts of Narivada Network, IGNCA, and the Ethnic Arts Foundation. Documenting several women's voices in the workshop on Kala aur Katha brought to light that the integral creativity of women is also a great resource for redefining their own paradigms of femininity.

There are numerous domains in which women have maintained substantial degrees of autonomy, agency, and community, and from which men have been excluded, or to which they have had only limited (or recent) access. Most obviously this has long been true in areas of ritual and the arts – especially painting (e.g., Mithila painting), song, and dance – but also in organizing, shaping, and



*Women at the workshop*

controlling the social life of families and communities. In recent years, women have also been increasingly prominent in national, regional, and environmental politics, and professional and intellectual life, generally. Furthermore, greater access to education, urbanization, and urban employment have led to strong feminist movements. In each of these domains women are defining (or re-defining) their own moral, social, and aesthetic values, and would seem to be constructing or re-constructing their understandings of themselves,

the larger society, and male/female relationships.

The question then is to what extent do these exemplars of women's creativity and agency in Mithila represent: (a) hidden forms of women's empowerment; (b) a more balanced or differentiated view of previously unrecognized or under-appreciated domains of gender relations; (c) significantly new or changing understandings of gender relations in India; or (d) Would fresh attention to the domains art and ritual

call for a substantial re-thinking of gender relations, or at least moves in that direction?

In order to address these questions concretely it would seem useful to examine the gender values in specific domains of (often closely bound) art and ritual – both historically and today. Who are, and who have been, the artists – the singers, dancers, painters, storytellers, and musicians? Where do their ideas and performances come from? How are they trained, or how else do they develop their expressive skills? What gendered relationships, knowledge's, meanings, and values do they convey – to themselves and to others? To what extent are the arts - as frequently

## Women Patrons

Studies on the contribution of women to the making of heritage sites and cultural landscape of India

This project is envisaged as an enquiry into looking at women subjects as active historical agents. It purports to recognize and acknowledge the role women have played in the creation and evolution of material culture. While women's sacrificial role towards family and society has been acknowledged their contribution to building monuments of piety such as temples, forts, dargahs; and the landscapes of piety such as gardens, groves, avenues, lakes, wells, ghats, rest houses, places, etc. has been neglected.

Delhi has a unique ancestry. Delhi is often looked at as a microcosm of several communities and cultures and a home of all the major world religions. Over a period of history seven cities have flourished, vanished and reincarnated (Sayed Shafi). The city has a history of inherent creativity in art, crafts, and literature. Unfortunately, an important segment

gendered expressive forms and skills - tightly linked to the core rituals, traditions, and cosmologies that underlie and integrate Indian society and culture?

The symposium will address two major themes: a) understanding of women's art in the context of the above questions raised, b) the challenges and threats to women's art in Mithila in the process of adaptation to the values and aesthetics of globalization.

In collaboration with IGNC and Ethnic Arts Foundation, USA and Madhubani Art Centre, New Delhi



of its past history has gone unnoticed by previous historians. What is striking is the absence of recognition of the role women have played as patrons, initiators, even builders, of this great city. We have launched a research project to identify all those areas where women have contributed to the making of the city. Delhi's rich heritage and its multi-dimensional legacy of diverse cultures should be exploited to carve out a niche for those forgotten and neglected contributions/voices of women who have contributed to the rich fabric of Delhi's architecture, public arenas, gardens, crafts, literature, music the visual and performing arts.

## Bibliographies on Women's Culture

The culture of India has played a very significant role in moulding Indian woman's history. However, a close examination of the resource material shows that there is no comprehensive bibliography on the multiple dimensions that have shaped a women's cultural-specific identity. Our endeavour in this direction is to:

**Reprint** the only existing Annotated Bibliography of Sources in English 1975-92. Nancy Euer Falk. 1994. *The First Bibliography on Women, Religion and Culture*. Western Michigan University. An Indian edition of the book will greatly facilitate further research into this field.

**Prepare bibliographies from printed material** on Women's Culture in India from existing bibliographies, books, journals and other resources. A small beginning has been made in this direction. Since April 2005 to the present we have been able to identify 3,464 entries from eight sources.

**We propose to collaborate with Centre for Women's Development Studies New Delhi** and Kala Nidhi, IGNC to compile an 'Annotated Bibliography on Women's Culture in India'. The long-term aim is to create a digital database on Women's Culture in India.

**A bibliography of Films and Videos on Women's Culture** is also under way. We propose to collaborate with Seagull, Kolkata, for working out a comprehensive bibliography on films related to women's culture.

## Recovery of Oral Histories of Women

### a) Ethnicity and Livelihood Studies

In post-independence era, there has been a drive to create a new source of non-agricultural income for women. This initiative has encouraged a number of women to produce traditional paintings, embroidery and artifacts for commercial sale. While the commercial success of the artisans has been well acknowledged, the questions related to the resourcefulness of women, their inherent genetic potential, their cultural context underlying the creativity of rural women and their private histories has not received the attention it deserves.

These studies record personal histories of a selective number of women tribal artists from Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The study charts out patterns of growth, creativity and the manner in which deep-rooted cultural expressions in painting, can play an important role in livelihood activities, thereby empowering and enhancing all aspects of their life.

Under this programme we have documented a number of conversations with Bhuri Bai of Pitol, Bhuri Bai of Zher and Gangu Bai, three tribal women artists from Madhya Pradesh. The conversations are published as a book.



### b) Recovery of Lost Voices— Personal Histories of Women from Marginal Groups

This project aims to recover the lost voices of women through the recounting of their personal oral histories. Following is an excerpt from *The Tribal Daughter* by Zothanpuri Harshel from Mizoram (work in progress)

*While I weave on my little loom near windows or in verandahs, often I saw little planes humming in the clear blue sky. I would imagine trapping these planes in my loom and travel far away into the world I knew existed beyond my home and the huge surrounding blue mountains, majestic, even though appearing to be flung together carelessly. All my life, I visualized these solid, rugged mountains covered with the secrets of deep jungles transcending life and philosophy. Often, I have told myself these mountains are my ancestors guiding my life, many a times removing fears from the experience of life. The precision and purity of nature partaking in one's childhood has the most incredible impact in forming one's character that always hesitates to deviate from straightforwardness. Fear after all is the main culprit for crashing of dreams and goals, the ugly ingredient for failure and hinders personal growth.*

We propose to identify many more women who can substantiate their personal histories.

### c) Documentation on Women and the Making of the Indian Nation

The Contemporary history of women's problems, roles and status presents a picture of complexity. Despite the explosion of research and publications, there are several crucial areas of research, which are neglected. One area of profound significance is the relationship between women's empowerment and the process of socio-political formation that resulted in the birth of the Indian Nation. We will explore the alternative oral history or 'Her-stories of Nationalism' of women who were participants, onlookers, or receivers of stories of the freedom movement from the older generation of women. There are innumerable women whose silent voices need to be heard.

Some contemporary thinkers believe that collective feminism in India was born in the first wave feminism in the 1970s. This is untrue. The oral popular history of women patriots may prove otherwise. The project records the retelling of the experiences, motivations and the reception of Gandhi's non-violent revolt from the women's perspective. A DVD-Rom entitled 'Recollection of a Satyagrahi' and a book *A Passion for Freedom: The Study of Kisanin Jaggi Dev,* by Deepti Priya Mehrotra have been published.



## d) Women Revolutionaries from West Bengal

The history of Indian Independence movement is a saga of heroic deed of men and women. By the early twentieth century, the awakening of the Indian women was complete and women had begun to participate in large numbers in various movements. Bengal was one of the major Presidencies where women's voice was expressly heard. This study intends to delve into the experience of Bengal from 1905-1947, in this context.

We take 1905 as the starting point—the year when 'undivided' Bengal was 'divided' and set the ball rolling for increased political agitation. The Partition, in fact, became the focus of political agitation and revolutionary upsurge. During this period, women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the INC began to get involved in national politics through the press and the platform. While there was no mass awakening among women at this time, there was some sort of a movement spreading among them. Slowly, as the political process became more mature, women's involvement in politics became more pronounced. Women in Bengal became a part of the national clamour that demanded the right of the individual and of the Indian nation.

Bengal has gone through various phases of freedom struggle and this study focuses on those women who were actively involved with the movement in the various phases. They were women like Dukaribala, Nakaribala, or even in the later stage of the struggle, Matangini Hazra of Midnapur who had joined the movement with single-minded devotion of opposing the Raj without perhaps any definite ideology. Many began to participate in revolutionary activities and many imbued by leftist ideology began to follow their own course of action in their struggle against the colonial power. Women were also encouraged to adopt the revolutionary creed by Subhas



Chandra Bose, and many young girls and aged women came into the fold of the revolutionary party.

In 1905, women supported the anti-partition movement, staying in the background initially, but they slowly came out in large numbers. They had to face lathi blows and bullets and even arrests. They sacrificed their careers, sheltered life and the security of their homes. Many among them were subjected to inhuman torture, often psychological if not physical, for sympathizing with or sheltering the revolutionaries. They were often punished the same way as the men—dragged, their processions lathi charged and life sentence passed on some. In spite of such treatment, women went along their chosen path. Thus, a nascent beginning in 1905 had by the 1940s become an all-pervasive phenomenon. While we know about the heroic deeds of women like Samiti and Suniti, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Wadedar, we know very little of the contributions of many more who had sacrificed their lives for the country. This study aims to document the contribution of all these women. The first time an attempt is made to delve into the contributions of women in Bengal from 1905-1947. One major source would be biographical books by women who were active in the movements, newspapers, archival records (national and state), particularly police records. This project is in

collaboration with University of Calcutta.

*Researcher: Professor Konkona Sen Gupta, University of Calcutta.*

### Video documentation on Women and the freedom movement

We have completed 45 video clips of interviews. The following have been brought out in a DVD Rom:

-  **Recollections of a Satyagrahi**, an interview with Rama Ruia, a freedom fighter and head of the Mahila Ashram, Wardha.
- Kasturba, the first Satyagrahi**, retold by Rama Ruia, Wardha.
- Gandhi's Birthday Lesson**, retold by Rama Ruia, Wardha.
- Untouchability**, retold by Rama Ruia, Wardha.
- Khadi as Symbol of Truth**, retold by Rama Ruia, Wardha.
- Stri Shakti: An interview with Devi Ben**, at Brahma Vidya Mandir, Paunar Ashram of Vinoba Bhawe, Wardha.
- Memories of the Freedom Movement**, by Prabeena Ben, Geetai Mandir, Paunar - Wardha.
- Gandhi - A Symbol of Humanity**, by Prabeen Ben, Wardha.

## Collaboration with Women Studies Research Centre, University of Calcutta.

### a) Lost Voices: Women of Eastern Classical Music Tradition

The project is an attempt to document the four women musicians: Mogubai, Harimati Devi, Sidhheswari Devi and Reba Muhuri. The last two are living legends, but not quite remembered. Mogubai and Harimati Devi are part of musical history now. However, we still have some audio documents of their music with All India Radio and elsewhere that can be revived. The other two musicians are living legends and hence, it is possible to have easy access to their audiovisual documents.

The focus of our study will be to revive the documents relating to their music, an ethno-musicological analysis of their music, where we find the difference with male musicians, their life, their struggle, and their recognition as musicians, etc. The thrust is to understand the reason why these feminine musical voices have been lost, what has been the struggle for existence of their music in the society and in history from the point of view of gender analysis as well as ethno-musicological analysis.

This is a long-term project, as it requires persistence and patience in finding and retrieving the lost documents. All of these documents are available in Eastern India. We will have publications, documentary films, audio presentations and two workshops as an outcome of this project. Documentary films will capture the living legends, while the publications of their biographies form an integral part of disseminating the story of why their voices were lost.

*Project Team:* Prof Ishita Mukhopadhyay, Director, Women Studies Research Centre, University of Calcutta; Somaji Dasgupta, Guest Lecturer, University of Calcutta and Bappa Sen, Expert on Film Studies.

### b) Women Patua Painters: Transitions from Tradition to Modernity

The patuas of West Bengal are communities who have been in possession of extraordinary traditional skills developed through many generations. They are mostly poor landless labourers for whom their craft is a major means of subsistence. This craft consists of narrative scroll painting, executed with bold and colourful brush strokes on paper fastened with glue on strips of cloth. The patuas take pride also in the possession of the time-honoured art of preparing their own dyes from natural and vegetable sources. In earlier times, the scrolls depicting mythical narratives, moral tales and sensational topical events used to be carried from village to village by the itinerant patuas and demonstrated to the accompaniment of songs with lilting tunes. The women of the community take an active and important role in preparing the colours, painting the pictures, and even in carrying the scrolls from one place to another to earn their subsistence by demonstrating them.

Rapid urbanization and aggressive incursion of audiovisual media, even in the countryside, is jeopardizing the popularity of all traditional art forms. Against this backdrop, the women patuas along with their men are struggling to preserve their means of livelihood as well as the dignity of their craft in a world where the demands of an urban metropolitan market can alone ensure their survival as artists. Though their popularity in the countryside has declined, we find that in the last few decades a small niche market has been created abroad for the scroll-paintings, which were earlier made only for demonstrations in the locality. In spite of this, it is evident that these artists must also make innovative incursions into the

market within India, in order to pursue their craft as a means of livelihood.

Many patuas have had to give up their traditional trade because they have no local market. Some of the women supplement scroll painting by making clay dolls and mat weaving. Others, both men and women, are trying to retain their skills by transferring them to other media and painting saris and bags for sale. Sometimes, they are recruited by government departments to campaign with their paintings and songs on issues like literacy, immunization, family planning and environmental awareness. Sometimes, they paint scrolls on national and global events like the Gujarat earthquake, the sinking of the Titanic or the 9/11 disaster in the USA. The project includes a survey image of women painters and audio-visual documentation of the life and work of women patuas in their own context by Prof Ratnabali Chatterjee.

*Project Team:* Prof Ratnabali Chatterjee and her team at the University of Calcutta.

### c) Stitching Dreams, Creating Livelihood—A Study on Kantha Embroidery by Women

In the context of globalization and cross-cultural influences in arts and crafts, the revival of traditional arts such as the tradition of Kantha making by the women in Bengal, assumes new importance both as a rejuvenation of lost tradition of woman's art and as the marker of a new ethnic fashion statement in an expanding national international market. I propose to expand on my research based essay, 'The History of the Kantha Art' that provides detailed documentation with statistics of the promotion of Kantha making among the woman of Bengal over the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It delves into the history of the modes of Kantha making and the wide variety of designs; it looks into the role of private and state patronage in promoting the cause of the Kantha makers and traces the spreading awareness among the middle class through collection, preservation and display of Kanthas. The study also maps the transformation in the social background and condition of the women engaged in Kantha making, denotes the changes in the themes of Kantha design and tracks the new values that this art embodies.

This study focuses on new issues as motifs (with illustrations), gender, functionality, marketability, Kantha as carriers of national identity and particularly as representations of a Bengali woman's new lifestyle. The project involves travelling to different parts of Bengal, taking interviews of fashion designers, village women who are Kantha makers, boutique owners, collectors, art teachers at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan, members of Crafts Council, and members of local women's and social service societies. It will also involve photographic documentation of Kanthas displayed in museums and those worked out by the village women and those in designer boutiques. The project will survey published works (books, journals, newspapers) and unpublished documents (diaries, letters). Using these sources, the project will trace how tradition and modernity is negotiated in the practical working of and in the drawing out of the imperatives behind the contemporary revival of Kantha art in Bengal.

*Researcher: Rituparna Basu, Senior Lecturer, Dept of History, Bijoy Krishna Girls College, Calcutta.*

### d) Three Undiscovered Women Painters from West Bengal

This study will record the story of three unknown painters Protima Thakur, Chitraniha Chowdhury and Kamala Roychowdhury who struggled hard to create a space for themselves. Protima Devi, the daughter-in-law and close associate of Rabindranath Tagore, was accomplished not only in dance and literature but also in painting. While she painted single pieces, she also decorated stage for the performance of Tagore's dance and other dramas. As a niece of the maestro Abanindranath Tagore and Sunayani Devi, she was acquainted with this branch of art from a young age, which she got a chance to develop further while working in close association with the poet.

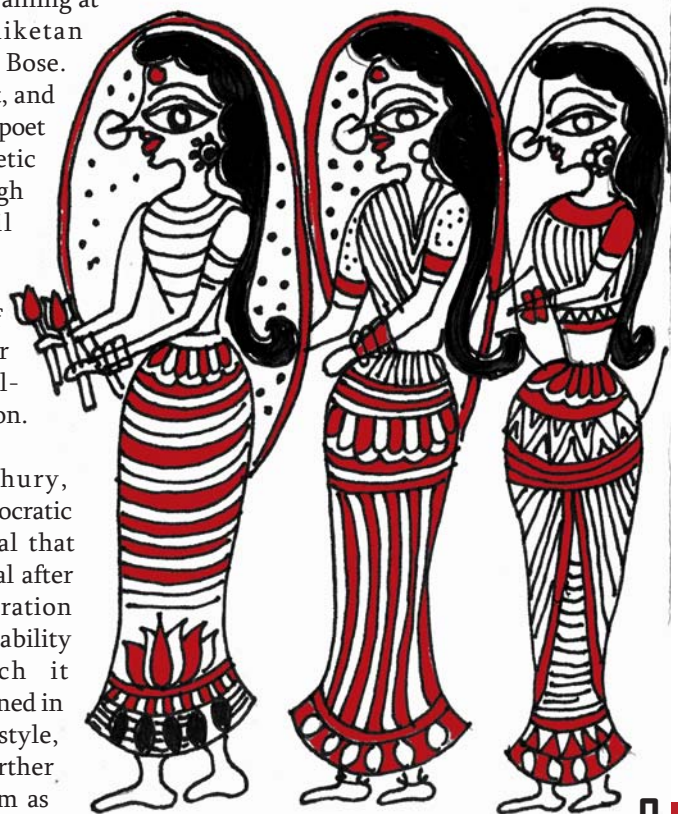
Chitraniha, skilled at various ritual arts like alpana, was chosen as a bride for this expertise. In her new family she was not only encouraged by her in-laws but was also given the opportunity to receive training at Kalabhavan—Shantiniketan (1928) under Nandalal Bose. She too had met the poet, and both Kalabhavan and the poet helped shape her aesthetic taste and capacity. Though she mastered pencil drawing, landscape painting, portrait painting, and the use of water colours, her portraits and pencil-drawings deserve mention.

Kamala Roychowdhury, belonged to a landed aristocratic family of eastern Bengal that had come to West Bengal after the partition. The migration adversely affected the stability of the family, which it recovered gradually. Trained in the Western academic style, she went to Paris for further training and won acclaim as

an artist. The art critic of *Desh* on 17 Agrahayan 1367 (1954) had felt that among the artists who had exhibited their works at Artistry House, Kamala was exceptional. There were three male artists in the group who went on to gain much fame later, but Kamala's remained known to only a few. On 18 December, the same critic especially admired her 'Sunflower' shown at the Academy Annual Show.

Either a patriarchal social structure did not encourage them to pursue their careers with full vigour or did not duly remember them after a period of time; as a result, art lovers and researchers got a limited or no scope to see and study their works and in the process, their names passed into oblivion.

*Researcher: Professor Chilka Ghose, University of Calcutta.*



## Collaboration with Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT, Women's University, Mumbai Research Project:

The proposed study 'Self-Healing the Self' critically examines narratives of healing from women who are/have been members of organized groups such as Brahma Kumaris, Art of Living, Meher Baba Ashram, Ahmednagar district. These groups have been selected because the researcher has personal experience of these groups. Paradoxical healing is, however, not limited to them, and India especially is home to a wide spectrum of such energy medicine efforts. In order to widen the scope of the study, comparable groups will be identified from Christian and Muslim faiths. The Brahma Kumaris, or Daughters of Brahma are headquartered in Mt Abu in Rajasthan. The group advances the practice of Rajyoga meditation, in

which the practitioner seeks to perceive herself as a transcendent point of light radiating energy. Together with daily and weekly congregational work, and attention to diet and some moral observances, individuals are encouraged to feel as members of a spiritual family. The group runs several public facilities, including hospitals in M. Abu and in Mumbai, where Rajyoga meditation is used as an adjunct to mainstream medical care.

It is evident from the field investigations to Department of Parapsychology, Bombay Hospital, the traditional healing centers run by the Bapu Trust, The Art of Living Programme, Intentional Healing Foundation, EMF Balancing

Technique, Meher Baba Ashram and other esoteric techniques, practiced by a host of individuals prove that there is increasing mainstream interest in alternate modalities. They had long ceased to be 'alternate' and had become 'complementary'. It is only a matter of time before they become 'mainstream' or as the current usage goes "integral". The speculation is – would they then cease to be paradoxical?

*Researcher: Prabha Chander, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai.*



## Rethinking Epistemologies:

In collaboration with Centre for Psychoethnological Research Cuernavaca, Mexico.

This project questions current epistemologies and research methods in the cultural study of gender. It explores ways in which indigenous epistemologies inform and validates multi-faceted ways by which women have traditionally constructed knowledge-systems in South, South-East Asia, and civilizational cultures in the pacific and Mesoamerica to define and express their identities.

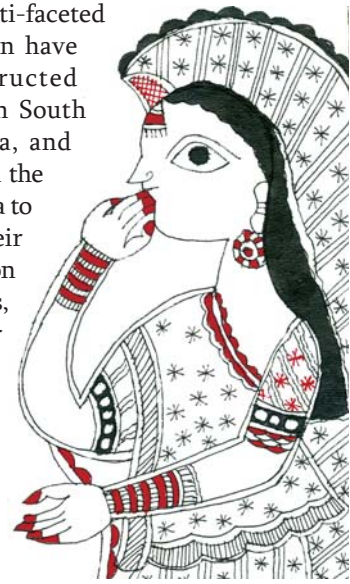
An area of cognitive dissonance is the way social feminist theory informs women's inherent capacities of knowledge making and preserving traditional knowledge systems. Methodological reflections and creation of a new hermeneutics is a very important part of our endeavours in our Narivada forum. It has been rightly argued by many sensitive feminist writers that epistemologies and theories of knowledge that dominate our discourse are based on distorted notions of objectivity.

Women scholars (Poonacha. 2004) have skilfully outlined the problems associated with quantitative theorizing based on the methods of natural science. They have emphasized on the immediacy of women's conscious experience. New Feminist methods have emerged out of conscious raising sessions. In these sessions, the oral histories of women define their own construction of gender.

Sylvia Marcos (2005) has presented a 'Hermeneutics' of orality which would respect this immediacy of experience and its oral renderings. Their knowledges are based on a combination of direct empirical sources, practice and experience. Other readings (Alcoff) have defined this epistemic characteristic as 'knowing how' through the experiential as opposed to 'knowing that', which deals with abstractions.

We consider that research on feminine-centred indigenous epistemologies would naturally emerge from human experience and lived realities of women rather than value-laden abstractions of male bias that have dominated our understanding of women's culture.

We propose to bring out a joint publication titled "Indigenous Epistemologies". The book explores ways in which indigenous epistemologies informs and validates multi-faceted ways by which women have traditionally constructed knowledge-systems in South Asia, South East Asia, and civilizational cultures in the pacific and Mesoamerica to define and express their identities. In collaboration with Dr Sylvia Marcos, Director, Centre for Psychoethnological Research Cuernavaca, Mexico.



## Women of Faith: Priestesses, Religious Leaders and Truth Seekers: *Audio Visual Documentation*

Throughout India's history, women, individually or collectively have been involved in a variety of sacred expressions. Some as priestesses, religious leaders and truth seekers are playing a very distinguished and empowering role in their respective communities. The central framework on which the anthropological research on such women is based, speaks of tensions and oppositions, denigrates their empowering role and looks upon their power – centered status as 'a logical impossibility' (Dumont, Heesterman). However, data from oral tradition reverses this view and validates how many women of faith perceive their own sense of empowerment. We are carrying out a documentation in several areas namely: the tradition of women priestesses of Lepcha tribe; monastic life of Buddhist Nuns-in-exile from Tibet; the first women's gurukula in Maharashtra that began the training of Mahila Purohits by empowering women with the right to chant the

Vedas; conversations with Vaishnavis of Vrindaban; Baul women and images of the feminine in Baul kirtans sung by men and women Bauls at the Jayadeva Kenduli Mela, West Bengal.

A Photographic Exhibition on the theme 'Women of Faith: Priestesses, Religious Leaders and Truth Seekers, along with a publication of a catalogue is being researched.

### **A Dialogue with Women Priestesses of Lepchas**

#### **A Film by Bappa Ray**

Three women priestesses from the dwindling Lepcha tribe speak about their empowering rituals.

### **Narir Bhava: The Symbolic Feminine in Baul Lyrics of Bengal**

A video documenting the images of the feminine in the Baul kirtans sung by men and women Bauls at the Jayadeva Kenduli Mela, West Bengal.

### **Brahmavadinis: The First Women's Gurukul in India**

A record of the first women's gurukula in Maharashtra that began the training of Mahila Purohits by empowering women with the right to chant the Vedas.

### **The Journey of Bhikkunis**








A film on Buddhist Nuns in exile and their aspiration for the perfection of Buddhahood.

### **Seeking Moksha: The Vaishnavis of Vrindaban**

Women from Vaishnava faith speak of their experiences on their path to liberation. A Photographic Exhibition on the theme 'Women of Faith: Priestesses, Religious Leaders and Truth Seekers', along with a publication of a catalogue is being researched.

## Constructions of Femininity in India: Recovery of Oral Histories of Women

The construction of femininity in India has not been surveyed critically. We propose to undertake a series of thematic research studies on the complexity and diversity of multiple dimensions of the feminine. These will be surveyed through an interdisciplinary method covering multiple perspectives such as studies on the symbolic feminine to the feminine embodiment, notions of community sharing, the perspective on complementarity between sexes and the notions of Indian masculinities. Under this the following themes will be explored:

-  The Symbolic Feminine
-  Female Embodiment and the Body Matrix
-  The Relationship between Ideal Images and the Real Women
-  Understanding Women's Communities
-  Women's Experience and Cultural Expressions
-  Understanding Indian Masculinities with special reference to the Complementarity of the Sexes
-  Exploring Research on Indian categories of Femininity (types, classification, roles and ideals)



# Publications

## Books

1. *A Passion for Freedom: The Story of Kisanin Jaggi Devi*, Deepti Priya Mehrotra.
2. *Painting Identities: Conversations with three women Tribal Artists from Madhya Pradesh*, Indira Mukherjee.
3. *The First Bibliography on Women, Religion and Culture*, Nancy Euer Falk.
4. *Liberation Through Art: A Reinterpretation of Madhushravani Festival by Women Artists in Mithila*

## Nārvāda papers on the following themes:



1. *Text and Context*  
Manu on Women: The Meaning of Svatantrya and its Implications for Women's Freedom, Sanjay Kumar (Lecturer, McGill University).  
Decoding Manu's Eulogy and Censure of Women, Shruti S. Pradhan (Baroda University).
2. *Gender and Visual Representation*  
Representation of Gender in Folk Paintings of Bengal, Prof Ratnabali Chatterjee (University of Calcutta).
3. *Rethinking Epistemologies*  
Orality and Hermeneutics, Prof Sylvia Marcos (Centre for Psycho ethnological Research, Cuernavaca, Mexico).  
Writing Women's Lives: Some Methodological Questions for Feminist Historiography, Prof Veena Poonacha (SNDT Women's University, Mumbai).

4. *Indian Femininities*  
Paradigms of Female Embodiment in the Hindu Tradition, Dr Madhu Khanna (IGNCA).

## Forthcoming Publications

1. *Shaktika on the Ascent: Reframing Gender in the Context of Culture of India*, Madhu Khanna, ed. (In collaboration with OUP, New Delhi).
2. *Karva Chauth: A Ritual of Suhaag— Tradition and Social Change*, Mala Bhandari et al. (In collaboration with University of Florida).
3. *The Tribal Daughter*, Zothan Pari Harshel (Mizoram).
4. *Self-Healing the Self*, Prabha Chander (SNDT Women's University, Mumbai).
5. *The First Oral Histories by Women*, Kalyani Dutt (Translation from Bengali into English).

## List of DVD Roms

1. **A Dialogue with Women Priestesses of Lepchas**,  
Director : Bappa Ray  
Duration : 34 minutes.  
The film recaptures the ritual-roles, invocations to mountains and lakes, and healing rituals performed by three tribal women priestesses, of Lepchas who are looked upon as empowered souls on earth to guide and protect the life of the Lepcha community through the yearly rituals.
2. **The Journey of Bhikkunis**,  
Director : Bappa Ray  
Duration : 45 minutes  
The film records the experiences of a Buddhist monastic life in Dharamshala of Buddhist nuns-in-exile from Tibet, and the aspiration for perfection of Buddhahood.
3. **Brahmavadanis : The First Women's Gurukul in India**,  
Duration:  
The film records the oral history of the first women's gurukula established by Upasani Baba in the last century in Sakori, Maharashtra. The history of the ashram is retold by Pandit Vasant Rao Gadgil. Defying orthodox practices, the gurukula offers training and residence to women who are initiated into Vedic learning and are therefore, worthy of being looked upon as contemporary brahmavadanis.
4. **Recollection of a Satyagrahi**,  
Director: Kalpana Subramaniam,  
Duration : 30 Minutes  
The film records the retelling of the experiences, motivations and Gandhi's strategy of non-violent revolt from women's perspective. (For details see page 7)
5. **The Mirasans of Punjab, Born to Sing**  
Director :Shika Jhingan  
Duration : 49 minutes  
The film traces the unique Mirasan tradition of the Punjab dating back to pre-partition when Muslim women participated in life cycle celebrations - birth, marriage and death.
6. **Dakshina Kannada –Land of the: Mother Goddess**,  
Director : S.S. Rajesh  
Duration : Epi. I to IV: 1 hr.54 minutes  
The film explores the rich tradition of Mother Goddess worship in Karnataka.
7. **Seeking Moksha : The Vaishnavis of Vrindaban** – Women from Vaishnava faith speak of their experiences on their path to liberation. (Forthcoming)



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