



PC Joshi Archives on Contemporary History, JNU  
and  
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

ROSA  
LUXEMBURG  
STIFTUNG  
SOUTH ASIA



# dissensus

## INDIAN TESTIMONIES

### EXHIBITION VENUES

School of Social Sciences III Lobby, JNU, New Delhi, January 9-25, 2015

M F Hussain Art Gallery, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, January 26-31, 2015

TIMINGS 10 am to 5 pm



# dissensus

## INDIAN TESTIMONIES

 Radical Whispers of a  
Silent Valley

 Believing the Woman,  
Struggling against the Law

 The Right to Know,  
The Right to Live

 Flowers from *Boosa*:  
Dalit Literature and the Kannada Imagination

**CURATOR:** Janaki Nair

**COORDINATOR:** Inugurthi Narasaiah

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It is an honour for the PC Joshi Archives on Contemporary History to be associated with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in mounting the exhibition, **dissensus: INDIAN TESTIMONIES**. The show, curated by the former Chairperson of the Archives, Janaki Nair, is in itself a testimony to the interests of the archives in contemporary Indian social movements, and in languages of protest and disagreement which have strengthened Indian democracy. It is also fitting that such an exhibition has been made possible by a foundation which is dedicated to perpetuating the ideas of an important Marxist thinker and activist, Rosa Luxemburg, while honouring the memory of one of India's tallest communist leaders, PC Joshi, whose arduous labours resulted in the collection that forms the bulk of the ACH. There can be no more appropriate location for this launch than Jawaharlal Nehru University whose intellectual and political traditions are a fine blend of democracy and dissent.

Prof. Sucheta Mahajan  
*Chairperson*



We in the RLS-South Asia office are proud and honoured, that PC Joshi Archives on Contemporary History has asked us to start a partnership in 2013. Credit goes to Prof. Janaki Nair with whom we developed the concept of the Rosa Luxemburg Lecture and the exhibition **dissensus: INDIAN TESTIMONIES**. The lecture, the first of its kind, was held in the beginning of October 2014. The auditorium at JNU was packed with young folks to hear Prof. Ricardo Antunes (Sao Paolo) and people had to finally sit in the passage ways as there were no seats left. This inspires us to continue. As his lecture talked about "The New Morphology of Labour" in a similar way, whatever we support or conduct with PC Joshi Archives is directed towards current issues. To engage with history requires more than a kind of insensate 'stamp collecting'. We are convinced that the PC Joshi Archives is providing a platform for an attractive as well as meaningful learning process for today and tomorrow!

Carsten Krinn  
Resident Representative  
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – South Asia



**IN THE SHORT LIFE** of our democratic republic, there have been many moments when the reduction of the people to ‘the population’, and politics to an affair of the government, or of professional politicians and their experts in government, have been challenged. The uncouted, the unauthorized, the invisible, the inaudible have sometimes revealed “a capacity for politics”, rupturing the surface of a suffocating “consensual politics” by the very impropriety of their speech/actions.\*\* Rather than conforming to the rules of argumentative exchange, as defined by Jacques Ranciere\* who coined the term, **dissensus** as genuine political speech is at one and the same time a dispute over the very quality of those who speak. Those who find their tongues make a demand to be recognized as legitimate partners in debate.

**dissensus** questions not only the rule of experts, but brings to the surface questions, perspectives, ways of being that move toward the unthinkable, the unfeasible, politics in short. **dissensus** is therefore, “not the confrontation between interests or opinions.” Rather, “politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen...” by productively challenging what is given and the frame within which it is given.

Democracy, as Jacques Ranciere reminds us, “is not the power of the poor. It is the power of those who have no qualification for exercising power.” The radical aspect of **dissensus**, in his view, is its momentary, short lived, contingent quality, where clear cut resolutions are neither a goal nor a strategy. In the Indian context, where citizenship has remained an unattainable ideal for many, or only a formal possibility, we are faced with a different set of challenges. The instabilities of electoral politics have made public political life into an almost intolerable cacophony, yet one in which productive disagreements have only a precarious presence. Our public sphere is not, and has never been, a homogenous whole. Yet there are increasing signs of attempts to produce a consensual political sphere, rather than preserve a political space which is truly plural, and one in which imaginative alternatives to our present can flourish.

Some of the disturbing trends are part of a global move towards a new and strident intolerance. Others are completely homegrown. Our public life is increasingly suffocating dissent: opponents are made into rivals, dissent is turned into sedition, and electoral democracy simultaneously avows and disavows its heterogeneous constituent elements.

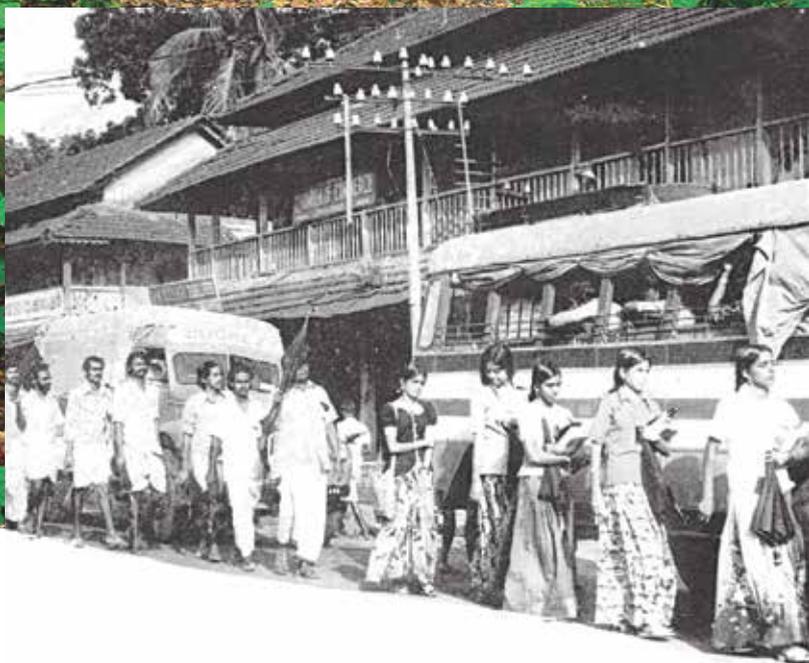
Our obligation here is therefore to focus on the productive power of **dissensus**: those moments in the Indian context which have elevated and altered political discourse, have changed laws to provide justice to disadvantaged and hitherto ignored social groups, and have encouraged creativity in ways that were unanticipated and unplanned. How do we keep the Indian republic safe for, and open to, a renewed “capacity for politics”, indeed democracy itself? Our focus here is on the enduring shifts in ways of thinking, analyzing, writing, indeed *being* that were enabled by the disruptive potential of **dissensus**. It could be the post independence assurance and conviction about “development as progress” that was called into question, as in the campaign against Silent Valley Dam project in the 1970s and 1980s. Or it may be that unsettling challenge to a proud and long established literary culture which unexpectedly powered a new critical aesthetic, as in the *boosa* earthquake in 1970s Karnataka. It could be the flash that revealed the impossibilities of justice for many under the rule of law, as did the case around Mathura’s rape. Or it could do with the moment when the people inserted itself between the government of documents, and documents of governance, to reveal, expose, and thereby to question that which had rendered them speechless, as in the 1990s movement for a Right to Information.

All of these moments had no final closure, but did produce unthinkable, even unexpected, effects. There is every sign that these moments, full of promise and contradiction, as well as their effects, will be buried/forgotten in the rewriting of the republic’s history. This places an ethical responsibility on an archive such as the P.C. Joshi Archives on Contemporary History, JNU. Such an archives must produce, not a space that merely preserves, to stifle or appropriate these moments of **dissensus**, but a platform for airing the contradictory promises. It must reveal, both politically and aesthetically, the multiplicity and the precariousness of innovation. With this aim, an exhibition.

Janaki Nair

\*Jacques Ranciere “Ten Theses on Politics” *DISSENSUS: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Edited and Translated by Steven Corcoran. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Steven Corcoran’s insightful \*\*Introduction is also appreciatively cited.

# Radical Whispers of a Silent Valley



*Silent march in Payyanur town against the Silent Valley project, 1978. Courtesy: C. Unnikrishnan.*

“ Silent Valley, Ichampalli, Koel Karo, Tehri, Narmada; these are now familiar names. Along with being the names of big dam projects, they have become synonymous with peoples’ struggles. They used to be heralded as temples of our country’s march towards progress. Now, these harbingers of development are seen as tombs of destruction ”

Baba Amte, veteran Gandhian activist.

Over the last couple of decades, the negative environmental impact of big dams has emerged as a significant issue in debates on sustainable economic development the world over. We look back on one of the struggles – the Silent Valley movement – that enabled a critical view to emerge on the necessity of big dams.

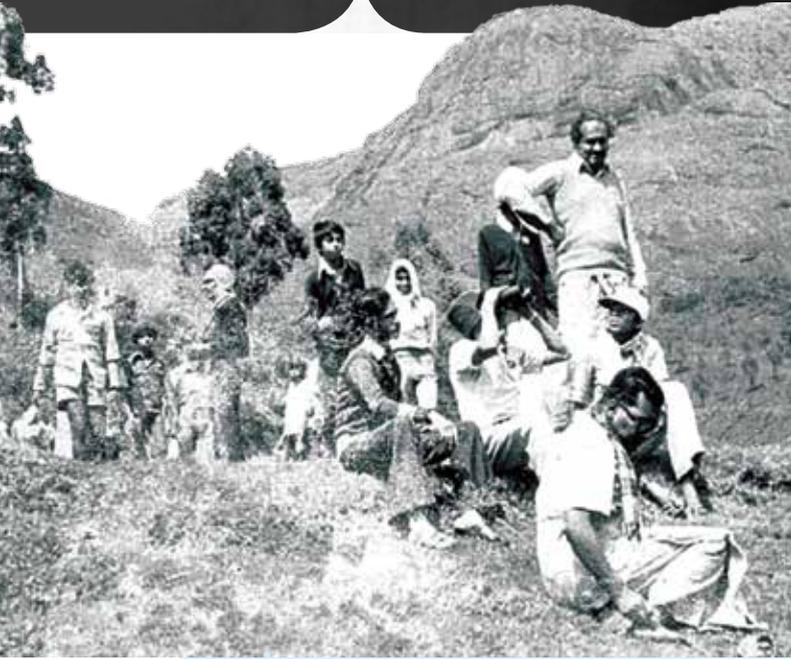
Soon after independence, the Indian state adopted a top-down, state-led development vision focused on economic growth. Big dams had a central role in this scheme. Between 1951 and 1977, India built 797 big dams, and several more were under construction. One such dam was planned at Silent Valley in northern Kerala. Watered by the river Kuntipuzha, the pristine evergreen forests of the valley contain rare plant and animal species. The relative absence of the chirping cicada lends it an eerie silence and gives the

valley its name. In June 1973, the Kerala State Electricity Board announced the building of a 390-foot high, 120-megawatt hydropower dam at Silent Valley. The project was bound to wreak havoc on the valley’s rare and delicate ecosystem.

Even as the vision of big dams dominated, the “environment” was gradually emerging as an issue of social concern, political activism and governmental intervention globally. In 1974, villagers in the Garhwal hills, now in Uttarakhand, had successfully fended off forest lumber contractors by clinging to trees, in what would become famous as the Chipko Movement.

The first questions about the proposed Silent Valley dam were asked when scientists like Steven Green, of the New York Zoological Society, and Romulus Whittaker alerted Indian





◀ *The first Nature Experience Camp organized by the Zoological Club of Payyanur College at Ezhimala, January 1978, Courtesy: C. Unnikrishnan.*

A unique grassroots movement soon took shape. By the end of 1977, the Zoological Club of Payyanur College, under the guidance of Prof. John C. Jacob, had started organizing local students and teachers against the dam.

naturalists like Zafar Futehally, Salim Ali, H.M. Patil, and other scientists and intellectuals of Kerala about the ecological threat. Sathish Chandran Nair, a young scientist, visited the Silent Valley in 1977 and came back with a lot of information about the ecosystem that was on the verge of destruction. Soon, a unique grassroots movement took shape. By the end of 1977, the Zoological Club of Payyanur College, under the guidance of Prof. John C. Jacob, had started organising local students and teachers against the dam. In 1978, the Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) produced a report on the flora and fauna of Silent Valley and made a case for conservation.

The Kerala government, however, was far from convinced and the KFRI report met with official ire. The project's powerful advocates, including the Indian National Congress (INC), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), and significant sections of the scientific community, argued that the development of the Malabar region would be hampered if the project was dropped. Despite this, the early opposition to the project made some gains. After complaints by Salim Ali and Zafar Futehally, the National Council for Environmental Planning and Conservation came up with



a report highlighting the massive ecological damage that would result if the project was carried through.

Over the next few years, the agitation snowballed into a mass movement which not only altered the fate of Silent Valley but forever inserted the question of environment into debates on development. By 1979, transnational organizations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) began to actively oppose the project. With the significant groundswell, the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a CPI-M-affiliated forum of scientists that produced popular science literature, took a position against the project in 1979. Despite initial resistance about indulging in matters that did not concern "science", and in the face of CPI-M opposition, enough KSSP activists were convinced to constitute an Environment Brigade. The KSSP gave the movement an organisation and a mass character. Soon after, writers came together to form the Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti [Committee for the Preservation of Nature]. N.V. Krishna Warrior, Sugathakumari, O.N.V. Kurup, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan, Ayyappa Paniker and K. Velayudhan Nair were prominent faces of the cultural movement against the Silent Valley project.

➤ Prof. John C. Jacob, Courtesy: C. Unnikrishnan

...the agitation snowballed into a mass movement which not only altered the fate of Silent Valley but forever inserted the question of environment into debates on development.



Appendix III

Copy of letter from Dr. Satishchandran Nair\* from the Silent Valley, January 15, 1979.

Dear Prof. Prasad,

I am writing to you from the Silent Valley. We are camping at the dam site. We will be here for about a week and then shift camp to the interior ..... We have been here for the last five days. I am attempting to cover as extensively as possible the whole of Reserve Forest. Going into the interior with the help of a tribal guide. Around the dam site (proposed!) the vegetation is extensively altered. Huge burnt patches and dense regeneration of 1-4 years old make a mosaic. It is difficult to locate the exact location. But mostly they follow the roads and then up the ridges on either side. The amount of destruction already done is staggering. The animals indicate by their speed of flight how harassed they are. There is lot of sleeper extraction work going on even deeper than the dam site. The large crew are camping in the interior. A fire probably started by them had been burning for the last four days. There is evidence of elephant poaching and I saw parts of a skull yesterday. Occasionally gunshots can be heard.

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\*Dr. Nair is a Research Fellow in the Department of Zoology, University of Kerala, Trivandrum and Secretary, Kerala Natural History Society.

*Letter to Prof. M.K. Prasad from Dr. Satishchandran Nair, 1979*

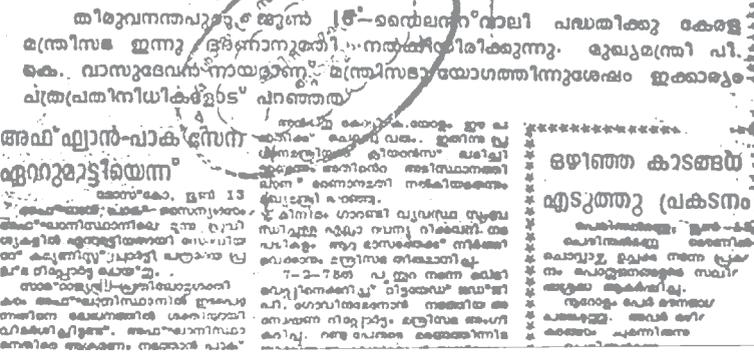




With the involvement of intellectuals from varied disciplinary backgrounds – biology, electrical engineering, economics, nuclear science, and literature – the movement went beyond talking about the ecological impact of the project and began spotlighting the social impact of environmental damage. “Development” came to be questioned when it emerged that the government’s insistence on the project for the sake of electricity generation was unsustainable. The state lacked proper distribution systems even for the existing power supply, and had made inadequate efforts towards alternate modes of power generation. Indeed, only political calculations were apparent in the sanction of such damaging projects.

Though the political opposition to the movement, by the Kerala leaders of the Congress (I) as well as the CPI-M, remained resolute into the 1980s, Indira Gandhi lent a sympathetic ear to the movement during her campaign for the 1979 election. The KSSP, on the other hand, had long been pushing the CPI-M to change their stance on the project. The debate was played out in the media as much as on the streets. The media in India, as always, was sharply polarised.

# സൈലന്റ് വാലിക്ക് ഭരണാജ്ഞാമതി



Among the English dailies, the *Hindu*, and later the *Indian Express*, came out in support of the movement, while among the Malayalam dailies, *Malayala Manorama*, *Kerala Kaumudi* and *Deshabhimani* virulently opposed the movement.

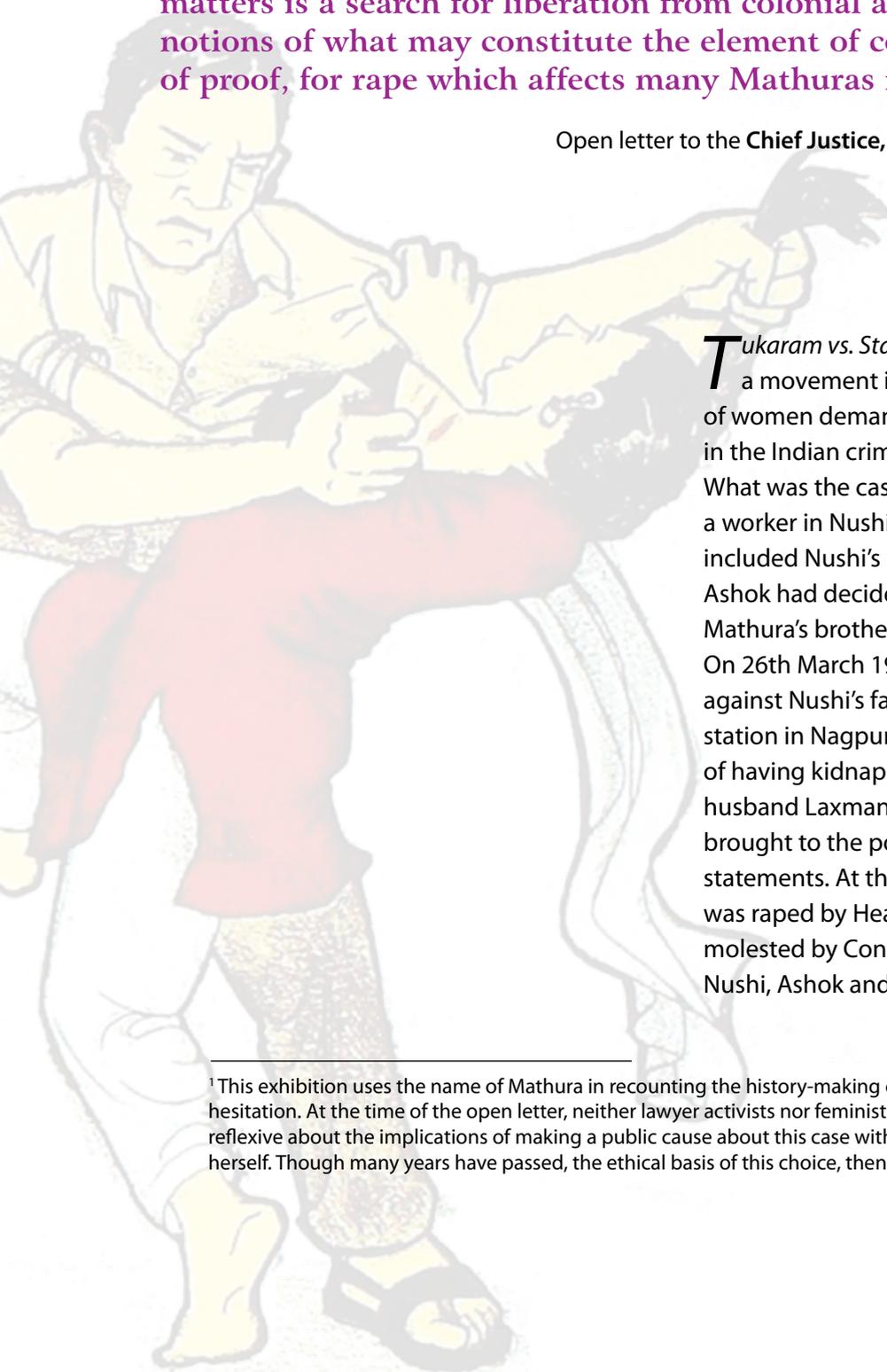
After a series of stay orders by the Kerala High Court and the Governor of Kerala, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi instituted a new committee headed by M.G.K. Menon to examine the issue. In its report of 1984, the Committee concluded that not only would rare ecosystems be destroyed, but also that the perceived benefits of the project were exaggerated. The Committee left the door open for the prime minister to take a final call. In July 1984, the project was cancelled and Silent Valley was declared a National Park.

A new struggle is on today, as plans are afoot to build a dam in the buffer zone around Silent Valley. Yet the fact that such plans can be resisted in Kerala, as anywhere else in the country, is a testament to the radical shift in the development discourse marked by environmental movements of the 1970s and 80s, of which the Silent Valley movement is an important landmark.



“Must illiterate, labouring, politically mute Mathuras of India be continually condemned to their pre-constitutional Indian fate? ...nothing short of protection of human rights and constitutionalism is at stake. May be on re-examination Ganpat and Tukaram may stand acquitted for better reasons than now available. But what matters is a search for liberation from colonial and male-dominated notions of what may constitute the element of consent, and burden of proof, for rape which affects many Mathuras in the countryside.”

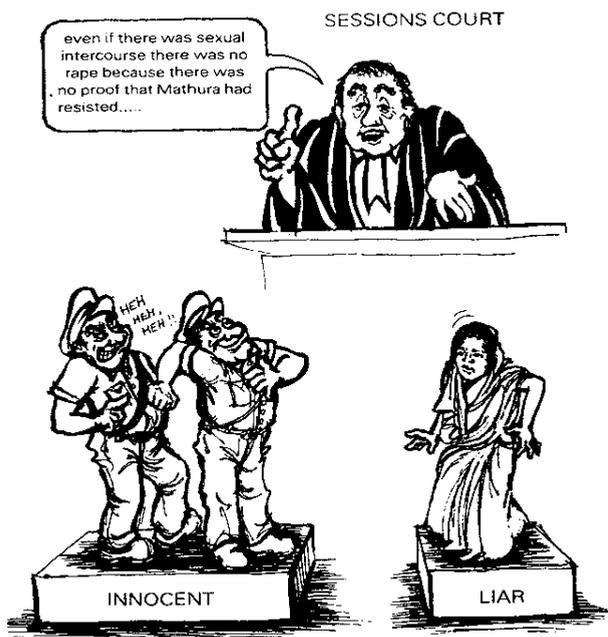
Open letter to the Chief Justice, Supreme Court of India, 1979



**T**ukaram vs. *State of Maharashtra* triggered a movement in which tens of thousands of women demanded substantive changes in the Indian criminal law on sexual assault. What was the case about?<sup>1</sup> Mathura was a worker in Nushi's household, which also included Nushi's brother Ashok. Mathura and Ashok had decided to get married, but Gama, Mathura's brother, objected to this marriage. On 26th March 1972, Gama filed a complaint against Nushi's family at the Desai Ganj police station in Nagpur district, accusing them of having kidnapped Mathura. Nushi, her husband Laxman, Ashok and Mathura were brought to the police station to record their statements. At the police station, Mathura was raped by Head Constable Ganpat and molested by Constable Tukaram, while Nushi, Ashok and Gama waited outside.

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<sup>1</sup> This exhibition uses the name of Mathura in recounting the history-making case with considerable hesitation. At the time of the open letter, neither lawyer activists nor feminist groups were sufficiently reflexive about the implications of making a public cause about this case without the consent of Mathura herself. Though many years have passed, the ethical basis of this choice, then as now, remains debatable.



◀ Illustration from Nandita Haksar and Anju Singh, *Demystification of Law for Women*, 1986.

she might have invented the story of having been confined at the Police Station and raped by accused No. 2." [Accused No.2 was Ganpat]

The Sessions Court in Chandrapur, Nagpur district held in 1972 acquitted both Ganpat and Tukaram saying that Mathura's age could not be satisfactorily determined to be less than sixteen and rape could not be proved. Based on the medical examination (where Mathura was subjected to the "two finger test" to determine her past sexual history) and on the fact that she had a relationship with Ashok, the judge concluded that Mathura was "habituated to sexual intercourse". The Sessions Judge surmised:

...the farthest one can go into believing her and the corroborative circumstances, would be the conclusion that while at the Police Station she had sexual intercourse and that, in all probability, this was with accused No. 2... Finding Nushi angry and knowing that Nunshi [sic] would suspect something fishy, she (Mathura) could not have very well admitted that of her own free will, she had surrendered her body to a Police Constable. The crowd included her lover Ashok, and she had to sound virtuous before him. This is why – this is a possibility –

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1976, the Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court reversed the judgement of the Sessions Court and sentenced Tukaram to rigorous imprisonment for one year and Ganpat to rigorous imprisonment for five years. However, on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1978, the Supreme Court of India acquitted Tukaram and Ganpat.

In response to the acquittal, four legal scholars wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice of India in September 1979. The letter by Upendra Baxi, Raghunath Kelkar, Lotika Sarkar and Vasudha Dhagamwar would go on to create history and change the ways in which sexual assault in India could be thought about. The letter pointed out the crucial distinction between submission and consent in rape cases, where the "evidence" of the former cannot become a proof of the latter.

Your Lordship, does the Indian Supreme Court expect a young girl 14-16 years old, when trapped by two policemen inside the police station, to successfully raise [the]



*Lotika Sarkar*



*Upendra Baxi*

The letter pointed out the crucial distinction between submission and consent in rape cases, where the “evidence” of the former cannot become a proof of the latter.

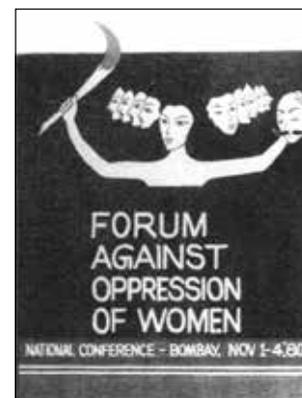
alarm for help? Does it seriously expect the girl, a labourer, to put up such stiff resistance against well-built policemen so as to have substantial marks of physical injury? Does the absence of such marks necessarily imply absence of stiff resistance? ... [Does] the absence of shouts justify an easy inference of consensual intercourse in a police station? ... [There is a clear difference in law, and common sense, between ‘submission’ and ‘consent’. Consent involves submission; but the converse is not necessarily true. Nor is absence of resistance necessarily indicative of consent. It appears ... that there was submission on the part of Mathura. But where was the finding on the crucial element of consent?

They also drew attention to a space such as the police station, which had long been recognised by the Indian judiciary as an unequal space for a woman. The scholars made a plea for reviewing the Mathura case by a larger bench of the Supreme Court.

The open letter inaugurated an outpouring of protests that asked for a comprehensive change in laws that dealt with sexual assault. However, the issues they raised did not merely have to do with the niceties of law, but also dealt with the patriarchal values that permeated the judiciary and the protective apparatuses of the state.

A number of women’s organisations such as the Forum against Rape (later known as Forum against Oppression of Women) were formed as a result of the agitation. Sujata Ghotoskar and other feminists recount:

Hundreds of women participated in two public meetings around the Mathura case and thousands of signatures were collected demanding the reopening of the Mathura case and changes in the rape law. International Women’s Day, March 8, 1980, saw huge demonstrations on this issue, involving women in many parts of India. Regular organisational meetings were attended by fifty to sixty women, and February and March 1980 throbbed with activity. Even women from the CPI [Communist Party of India] and CPM [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] and other women’s and students’ organisations participated in the Forum’s activities. It created a great stir through its plays, songs and exhibitions documenting women’s sexual oppression at work and in the family.



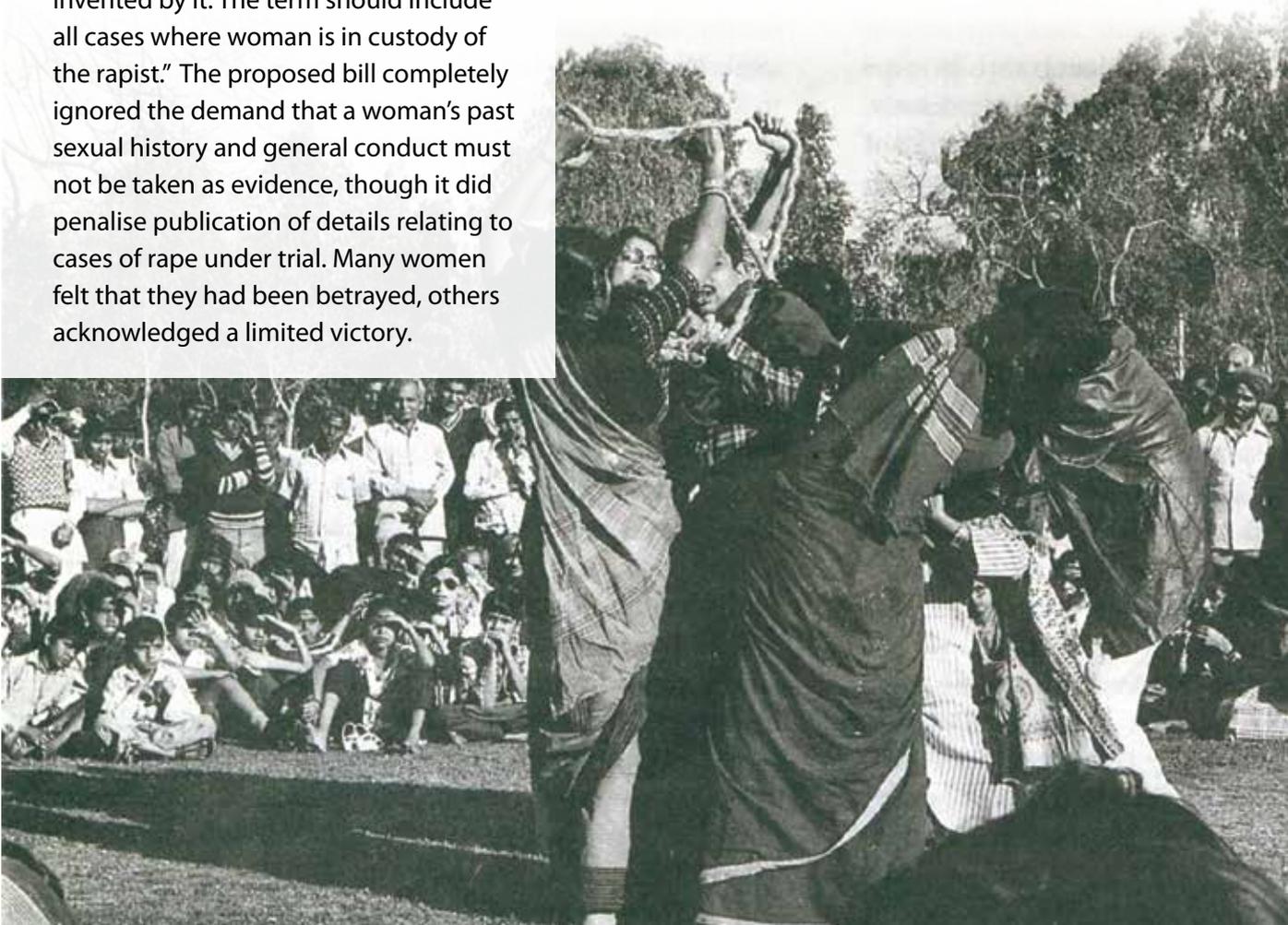
› *Poster of FAOW Conference, 1980*

Though legal change was the goal, these movements realised the importance of opposing patriarchal values and ideologies that had become entrenched even in the Indian judiciary.

Among the main demands of the women's movement was a change in rape laws, namely the definition of "rape", the question of consent, the burden of proof and the arrest and trial procedures. Though the 84<sup>th</sup> Law Commission set up in April 1980 noted these demands, they were not included in the August 1980 bill presented in the Lok Sabha. The demand for a shift in the burden of proof was accepted only in cases of "custodial rape". The feminist journal *Manushi* commented in 1981: "The bill focuses on custodial rape – a strange new category invented by it. The term should include all cases where woman is in custody of the rapist." The proposed bill completely ignored the demand that a woman's past sexual history and general conduct must not be taken as evidence, though it did penalise publication of details relating to cases of rape under trial. Many women felt that they had been betrayed, others acknowledged a limited victory.

The time was ripe for openly questioning assumptions about women, about the propriety of their appearance in public spaces, and about restricting their presence in public spaces to specific times. Though legal change was the goal, these movements realised the importance of opposing patriarchal values and ideologies that had become entrenched even in the Indian judiciary.

*Street play by Stree Mukti Sangharsh, New Delhi, 1981,  
Courtesy : Sheba Chhabhi*



➤ *Activist from Sabla Sangh, Delhi, explains anti-violence poster, 1982, Courtesy : Sheba Chhachhi*



Despite the amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure in 1983, the rate of acquittals in rape cases has remained very high, at least in part because judicial reasoning has often repeated long held ideologies about women, sexuality, and Indian culture. In the well known Sessions Court judgement of 1995 on the rape of Bhanwari Devi, who was assaulted by upper-caste men in Rajasthan while carrying out her work against child marriage, Judge Jagpal Singh wrote: "It isn't possible in Indian culture that a man who has taken a vow to protect his wife, in front of the holy fire, just stands and watches his wife being raped, when only two men almost twice his age are holding him."

Indian feminists described the judgement as "the epitome of gender bias in the judiciary." The disillusionment with such judicial reasoning led to rethinking the links between law as site of rights and law as a site of gender justice. Yet, as the feminist scholar Nivedita Menon has pointed out, "the option of abdicating the law is not a viable one, for the law will not abdicate us."



↖ *Anti Rape Protest Rally, 1980s. Courtesy: Sheba Chhachhi*

➤ *Poster from Laxmi Murthy and Rajashri Dasgupta, Our Pictures, Our Words: A Visual Journey Through The Women's Movement, Zubaan 2011.*



# The Right to Know, The Right to Live



MEGHALAYA RIGHT TO INFORMATION MOVEMENT

My dreams have the right to know,  
Why, for years, they've been shattered,  
It's as if they'll never be fulfilled!  
My hands have the right to know  
Why they've been empty for years,  
They've no job even today!

A popular song of the Right to Information (RTI) movement

The struggle for the right to information in India, fought since the 1990s, is part of a global practice of resistance to official silences. The demand for the public's right to know began in India after the suspension of civil rights and liberties during the Internal Emergency of 1975-77, which followed the brutal repression of the radical left in the 1970s. Information deemed even remotely subversive was suppressed by the state. The post-Emergency period witnessed the rise of a powerful civil society and a new politics of citizen's groups demanding a voice beyond the rituals of voting every five years. From this churning came the Peoples' Union of Civil Liberties, constituted in 1980.

Through the 1980s, radical political possibilities appeared to be dwindling, even as the people's experience of hunger, poverty, deprivation and

**Information deemed even remotely subversive was suppressed by the state. The post-Emergency period witnessed the rise of a powerful civil society and a new politics of citizen's groups demanding a voice beyond the rituals of voting every five years.**



exploitation remained unresolved. Between 1989 and 1991, world communism led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China was also in decline. In India, a section of the radical left had made compromises with the state, while another group lay maimed and massacred.

This was fertile ground for the emergence of democratic, progressive political forces imbued with a new ethic, innovative forms of organisation and an imaginative vocabulary, as embodied in the Right to Information (RTI) movement.

The story begins with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a unique grassroots political organisation independent of any political party. Harsh Mander and Abha Joshi recount:



*Nikhil Dey and Aruna Roy*

It began ... [in 1987], when the three founding activists of MKSS chose a humble hut in a small and impoverished village Devdungri in the arid state of Rajasthan, as their base to share the life and struggles of the rural poor. The oldest member of the group was Aruna Roy, who had resigned from the elite Indian Administrative Service over a decade earlier. She had worked in a pioneer developmental NGO, the Social Work and Research Centre, Tilonia, and gained important grassroots experience and contact with ordinary rural people, but now sought work which went beyond the delivery of services to greater empowerment of the poor. She was accompanied by Shankar Singh, a resident of a village not far from Devdungri, whose talent was in rural communication with a rare sense of humor and irony. He drifted through seventeen jobs – working mostly with his hands or his wits in a range of small factories and establishments – before he reached Tilonia, to help establish its rural communication unit. With him were his wife Anshi and three small children. The third activist of the group was Nikhil Dey, a young man who abandoned his studies in the USA in search of meaningful rural social activism. Together they had come to the village Devdungri, with only a general idea of their goal of work, to build an organisation for the rural poor.



The organisation was formally registered on May Day, 1990. Its cadre was drawn from marginal peasants and landless workers. MKSS soon gained local recognition for its uncompromising but non-violent resistance to different forms of injustice, including the struggle for minimum wages for landless farm workers. Their integrity drew praise from the locals, though lack of information severely hampered the movement.

After some skirmishes with the Rajasthan government in 1996, the MKSS staged a *dharna* at a small town called Beawar, demanding the right to information about local development expenditure. The state government responded on the very first day of the *dharna*, allowing citizens the right to inspect such documents for a fee, but not to obtain copies. This was rejected by MKSS since no action could be initiated by anyone detecting wrongdoing without a legally certified copy.

The *dharna* spread to the state capital Jaipur, supported by over seventy grassroots organisations and activists, and the mainstream press. On 14 May 1996, the Rajasthan government set up a committee to give practical shape to the assurances made by

the Chief Minister to the Legislative Assembly. Should the state provide photo-copies of documents relating to local development works, for instance?

A series of Right to Information Acts were passed in Tamil Nadu (1997), Goa (1997), Rajasthan (2000), Delhi (2001), Maharashtra (2002), Madhya Pradesh (2003), Jammu and Kashmir (2004) and Haryana (2005). A Freedom of Information Bill drafted in 2000 was considered inadequate by the MKSS and other pro-RTI organisations because it exempted too many and contained no grievance redressal mechanism.



With the growing popularity of the slogan “maximum governance, minimum government” which privileges citizens’ participation in governance the RTI serves as a reminder that such participation could threaten existing power structures.



After five years of debates, discussions and agitations, the national Right to Information Act came into being on 12 October 2005. Under the act, any citizen may request information from a public authority, which in turn is required to reply within thirty days. However, a number of bodies and agencies, including intelligence, military and police authorities, are exempt from the act.

Over the years, there have been numerous RTI success stories even as activists and whistle-blowers in general have faced threats, intimidation and harassment. Some have even been murdered. Yet, the RTI application soon became a tool of empowerment for individuals as well as local communities. The movement had a significant impact at the structural level. What constituted a “public body” to be exempted from inclusion under RTI? The security and sovereignty of the nation have been cited as reasons to withhold information. The identification of “threats” that require exemptions from the RTI helps us identify the alignments of dominant powers in the country.

The movement popularised a new form of protest: the *jan-sunwai* or public hearing in which affected people are mobilised through small meetings. Indeed, the *jan sunwai* itself unites people against an identifiable

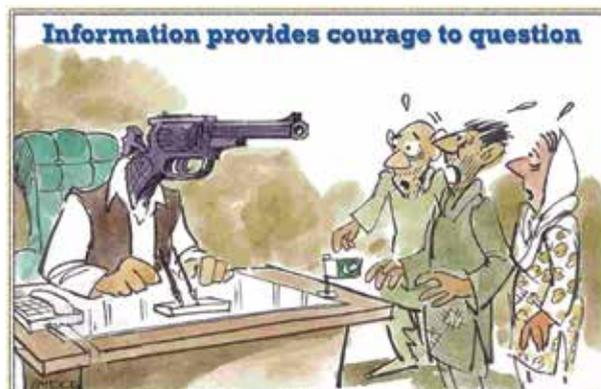
opponent. By identifying politico-bureaucratic power as a crucial source of oppression, the RTI movement also identified an emerging ruling class, which is largely upper caste, upper class and male. The movement identified political parties as oppressive power structures that are hand-in-glove with the bureaucracy.

Later, during the anti-corruption movement of 2012, this section came to be identified as the “political class”.

With the growing popularity of the slogan “maximum governance, minimum government” which privileges citizens’ participation in governance the RTI serves as a reminder that such participation could threaten existing power structures.

The RTI movement has enthused an entire generation of young people. Many of them today sing along with RTI activists:

My life has the right to know  
What worth is life without rights?  
It is equal to death.

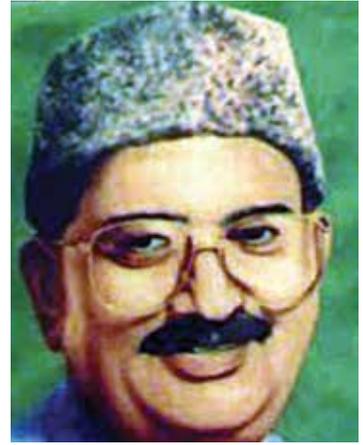




Karnataka witnessed a powerful Dalit cultural and social movement in the 1970s, which thrust itself up amidst other complex social and political changes. Devaraj Urs presided as Chief Minister (1972-1980) over an eventful decade. Beginning with the student unrest of the early 1970s and ending with the landmark Public Sector strike of 1980-81, the period was marked by massive social and political realignments. Land reforms were introduced, new political alliances with backward classes were forged, an environmental movement took shape, and peasants and farmers once again raised their demands. The Congress government, under Urs, its first non-Lingayat, non-Vokkaliga leader, self-consciously cultivated OBC, SC and Muslim communities in a bid to contain dominant-caste power.

These social transformations provided fertile ground for cultural innovation and iconoclasm. B. Basavalingappa, one of the defiant young ministers in the Urs cabinet, made a statement about Kannada literature at a seminar on "New Waves", organized by

◀ Panchama, *the voice of the Dalit movement* (inset);  
*Student protest during boosa agitation, 1973*



◻ B. Basavalingappa

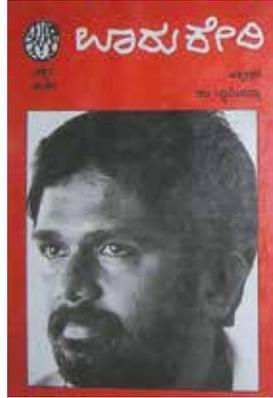
the Dr. Ambedkar School of Thought in Mysore. Basavalingappa said, "We should have Kannada pride, speak Kannada, strive to make it grow; but we get ideas, independent thinking and patriotic feeling by reading English." Upper castes dominated Kannada language and literature, which contained a lot of *boosa* (chaff).

Basavalingappa's statement, made on 19 November 1973, provoked a massive controversy. He sought the help of Dalit students, requesting a young Siddalingaiah, who went on to become a prominent writer, and his friends to mobilise support in his favour. Despite the customary clarifications that he had referred only to some Kannada works, Basavalingappa was eventually compelled to resign from the cabinet. However, his remarks had set off an earthquake, which led to great introspection and self doubt in the literary establishment.

At the height of the movement around Basavalingappa's comments, many writers who stood by his critique were humiliated and forced to withdraw their support. Chandrashekhra Patil recalled the moment



^ Devanoora Mahadeva



◀ Ooru Keri, *autobiography of Siddalingaiah*

and forced to withdraw their support. Chandrashekhar Patil recalled the moment when a large group of angry students in Central College, Bangalore, forced the writer P. Lankesh to sign a letter declaring himself against the *boosa* remark. Yet the ultimate victory was Basavalingappa's, for the controversy set the stage for a Dalit literary revolution. Many important Dalit writers and intellectuals continue to credit him with having created the space for a new literary efflorescence.

The *boosa* agitation served as a clarion call to several young Dalit students and writers, who formed the Dalita Lekhaka Kalavidhara Balaga, or Daleka, in 1974. In the same year, B. Krishnappa, P. Lankesh, Poornachandra Tejaswi, Devanoora Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, H. Govindaiah – not all of whom were Dalits – set up the journal *Panchama*. The journal provided a platform for several Dalit writers to launch their literary careers and became the vehicle for social transformations that the new Dalit movement brought about in Karnataka.

There had been a long tradition of progressive writing in Kannada which dealt squarely with

dominant social issues of the time, including caste oppression. The new Dalit writers argued that this body of work was inadequate in representing caste realities, with upper-caste literati writing as if they spoke for all Kannadigas. Non-Dalit writers were critiqued for their representations of Dalit life, which were at odds with the humiliations, oppressions and poignancies experienced by Dalits. As many writers testify, the Dalit movement drew from different progressive strands of Indian politics: Ambedkarite, Marxist, as well as Lohiaite.

By 1975, young Dalit activists formed the Dalita Sangharsha Samiti (DSS), imagined as a literary as well as social movement to empower the Dalits. It consciously stayed away from electoral politics in its early years. "We started DSS to defend life and property", said Siddalingaiah. The sharpened polarisation of society due to Urs's political experiments was revealed during the *boosa* agitation, and many young rebels faced threats to life and whatever property they had.

Participants in the first Dalit writers' convention in 1976 sharply distinguished Dalit literature from existing forms of literary production. By this time, a generation of Dalit writers, with Devanoora Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah in the forefront, had established

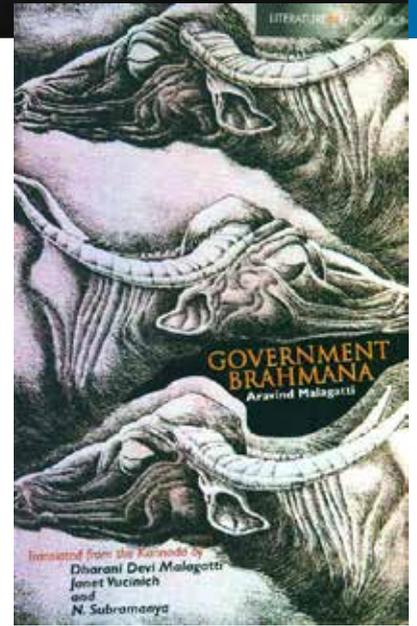
Despite the later setbacks and compromises, the *boosa* moment and the Dalit literary flowering seeded a process of critically creative thinking that persists among Kannada writers and scholars.

themselves in Kannada literature. Channana Walikar, Indudhara Honnapura, K.B. Siddaiah, Kotiganahalli Ramaiah, L. Hanumanthaiah, Mahadeva Shankanapura, Mogalli Ganesh, B.T. Jahnavi, Du Saraswathi and many others emerged as prominent names in the Kannada literary universe. This was no isolated literary movement. Many social struggles led by the DSS in small villages continued parallel to it.

Though Basavalingappa initially found little support in the Kannada literary establishment, U.R. Ananthamurthy and K.V. Puttappa (popularly known as Kuvempu) soon accepted his taunt in part. Gradually, as the Dalit literary movement consolidated itself, it became clear that it would have a far-reaching impact on society. It ceased to be merely about Dalits. As D.R. Nagaraj has said, Dalit literature is at one and the same time the literature of the poor. Not surprisingly, the Bandaya Sahitya Chaluvali (Rebel Literary Movement), started in 1979, allied those who were thinking about the age of poverty. It positioned itself in opposition to the establishment literature represented by the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, which was described as anti-people and anti-Dalit. These new alliances enabled collaborations in the field of theatre too.

› *Performance of the theatre group, Samudaya, circa 1980.*

› *Autobiography of Aravind Malagatti*



The DSS in its old avatar no longer exists today. It has split repeatedly on ideological as well as strategic issues, beginning with its controversial participation in electoral politics and support to the Bahujan Samaj Party in the early 1990s. Still, the Dalit efflorescence and political movement continues to reshape politics in irreversible ways, despite the rise of Hindu right-wing forces. It has produced fresh possibilities and new frameworks for integration within the literary world as much as with the wider political sphere. Despite the later setbacks and compromises, the *boosa* moment and the Dalit literary flowering seeded a process of critically creative thinking that persists among Kannada writers and scholars.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The exhibition would not have been possible without the active interest and cooperation of many scholars and activists. In Delhi, G. Arunima, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Indu Chandrashekhar and Gargi Chakravartty were part of a richly productive brainstorming session on the possible themes for the exhibition. G. Arunima and Divya Kannan helped establish the initial contacts with the Silent Valley activists in Kerala while H. Shivaprakash facilitated the research work on Kannada literature. Pratiksha Baxi helped with crucial material and images. We are grateful to Nikhil Dey for holding two meetings with us to brief us on the history of the Right to Information Act (RTI), while Praavita Kashyap supplied the materials related to the RTI movement. Amar Kanwar radically reoriented our thoughts about the utilization of the exhibition space in the course of one brief meeting. Akansha Rastogi provided valuable design inputs. Shikha Sen spared her valuable time to participate in many of our meetings, subtitle the play *Ooru Keri*, and edit the interview with Upendra Baxi. We also thank Jeena Sarah Jacob, Sreedevi D.C.J. Kuncheria patiently (though quickly) proof read all the drafts. Radha Kumar, Uma Chakravarthi, Sheba Chhachhi, Urvashi Butalia, Shukla Sawant and Gautham Subramanyam (filmmaker) are gratefully acknowledged for their contributions. Ritu Topa has as always obliged with her wonderful designs.

In Kerala, Nandan Kumar put us in touch with several activists and scholars associated with the Silent Valley movement. We recall with gratitude the help extended to us by K.P. Kannan, Shobhana Kannan, V.K. Damodaran, Sathish Chandran Nair and Srikumar Chattopadhyay in Thiruvananthapuram, C. Unnikrishnan in Kannur and T.B. Padmanabhan in Payyanur, C.K. Thomas, Aadarsh Chunkath, and M.P. Parameshwaran in Thrissur and Mammen Chundammanil in Peechi. In Karnataka, C.K. Gundanna, Janardhan, Aravind Malagatti, Devanoora Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah

Lakshminarayan Nagavara told us their stories and extended all possible help for the exhibition. Bindushree provided essential translation assistance to Akash. Mary E. John and Muzaffar Assadi helped us arrange the accommodation in Bangalore and Karnataka. We also thank K. Narayanaswamy for assisting us in Mysore, and Susie Tharu for putting us in touch with him. Vinay Kambipura provided last minute transcription assistance. Vivek Muthuramalingam provided relevant photographs.

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Madhavi Jha and Poorva Rajaram joined in at the penultimate moment, providing much needed assistance as willing members of the exhibition team. John Xaviers has conceived and reconceived design ideas, worked within tight budgets, and found an excellent ally in Apoorva Yadav. Akash Bhattacharya showed exemplary interest and willingness from the outset, and cheerfully reworked texts, suggested ideas, and contributed throughout in shaping up this exhibition.

Much has been learned and unlearned in the process, and no words of thanks can adequately acknowledge the endeavours of the entire exhibition team.

JN

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Contact: Chairperson, PC Joshi Archives on Contemporary History ■ chair\_ach@mail.jnu.ac.in

## VIDEO

- **Only An Axe Away**, directed by P. Baburaj and C. Saratchandran 2005  
*40 min*
- **The Right to Know, the Right to Live**, directed by Anurag Sinha and Jharna Jhaveri 2001  
*40 min*
- **Upendra Baxi in conversation with Janaki Nair** 2014  
*1 hour*
- **Ooru Keri (The Last Neighbourhood)**, directed by M. Ganesh 2010  
*1 hour*



## AUDIO

- **Poetry recitation by Sugathakumari (Malayalam poet)**  
*4 min*
- **Songs of the Right to Information Movement**  
*8 min*
- **Siddalingaiah (Kannada poet and activist) in conversation with Janaki Nair** 2014  
(Kannada excerpt, translated into English)  
*41 min*
- **Songs of Janardhan (Kannada singer)**  
*25 min*





THESIS 8:

The principal function of politics is the configuration  
of its proper space.  
It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations.  
The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus,  
as the presence of two worlds in one.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE | *TEN THESES ON POLITICS*

