

Language without Speech

The best way to study cultures is to live one's own; and the right way to live one's culture is to love and respect other cultures. Such is the strong feeling that Mrinalini Sarabhai's autobiography *The Voice of the Heart* induces in the reader. The sphere of her life and movement is the widest that could become available to any individual. It includes statesmen and politicians such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Sir S. Radhakrishnan. V.K. Krishna Menon, Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Kruschev, and Morarji Desai, Gulzarilal Nanda (and many others); artists such as Rukminidevi Arundale, Nandalal Bose, M.S. Subbalakshmi, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore; Intellectuals and literary personalities of the calibre of Homi bhabha, Sir C.V. Raman, Chandrashekhar (physicist), Bertrand Russell, Nadine Gordimer, Erik Erikson and Umashankar Joshi; extraordinary personalities like Agehananda Bharati (Leopold Fischer), J. Krishnamurthy and Yukiyo Mishima; and great ambassadors like Galbraith and Ali Yavar Jung. Her father: the legendary lawyer Subbarama Swaminathan who had the English court in India buckle to truth in the famous 'Kadambur' case; her mother: distinguished social and political activist associated with Gandhiji and the Women's Indian Association; elder

sister: Captain Lakshmi, Commander of Netaji Subhash Bose's Jhansi Regiment; and her daughter: Mallika, like her mother, dancer of international repute. Her husband's (Vikaram's) family is equally illustrious. There is no space for mediocrity in the vast cultural realm of Mrinalini. As the Chapter-titles of *The Voice of the Heart* hint, her account is of people and places ("Father", "Mother", "Shantiniketan", "Study in the USA", "Bangalore" "Ahmedabad and Sarabhais", "Cambridge, England" and so on). Knowing a person is, knowing his/her cultural world, and visiting a place means contacting the best minds there. The chapter titles justify themselves by such persuasion.

'Oneness', 'wholeness'; 'unity', 'integration'—these are the key words in Mrinalini's narrative and the inclusiveness of her self-narration has a visionary, mystic quality about it. "Life is being alive to every moment, every situation", and not mere existence, we read in the Introduction. The plain but profound statement extends to stress the paramount need to educate the individual from the very childhood in "universal oneness"; "to look at a raindrop as well as the vastness of the sky, to integrate the minute with the infinite. One has to look ... at the inner and the outer sky" (Sarabhai 9). How close to Blake!

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower—
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour ("Auguries of Innocence").

It would appear that in dance the mystic and the poetic temperaments coincide: "In dance, the body speaks with the power of the mind behind it" (Sarabhai 11). "All creative work is a mystical experience", she calmly declares. Inspiration in art is "the spring board for the final work", she pronounces, and quickly adds: "Inspiration is itself the result of many years of *study*, of *deep knowledge* and of *hard work*" (Sarabhai 9-10). Her autobiography offers spectacular illustration of this observation.

Mrinalini's 'study' of dance does not end with her discipleship with such great masters as Chokkalingam Pillai, Muthukumaran Thatha, C.R. Acharyulu, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Andalamma, Amubi Singh and Kelu Nair; it extends to her learning of a variety of dance forms in the Far East (Thailand, Japan) and in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (USA). Her 'deep knowledge' is not just bookish, though a sensitive reader will be struck by her erudition that covers philosophers and thinkers like Spinoza, Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi; the literary works of Joseph Conrad, Brecht, F.W. Bain,

Shelley, Donne, Chaucer, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Alexander Dumas, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy among many others. As for 'hard work', what she says of the people of Ahmedabad could apply to people everywhere: "People ... took a long time to understand the tremendous physical work required to be a dancer" (Sarabhai 123). As already noted, the chapter-titles of *The Voice of the Heart* are mostly of people and places: "Paris and Onwards", "At Home and Abroad", "South East Asia", "Brain-children and Children", "Mexico and Japan", "Artists in to Ambassadors" and so on. The hint is that the whole world is the amphitheatre where she performs and learns simultaneously. "All creation is limitless" (Sarabhai 11), she affirms. The aphoristic utterance gets translated at a personal level as, "There is no separateness in dance and my entire being" (Sarabhai 305). In her concept of education", One has to learn to look inwards as well as outwards—at the inner and the outer sky—to be observant of the environment in its beauty and also its ugliness, to become a conscious, caring citizen of the world" (Sarabhai 09).

The most important place where she gets education in universality is Shantiketan. In the company of such eminence as Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Kshitindra Mohan Sen, Gurudial Malik and Abanindranath,

she is ideally placed there to find "new forms from traditional techniques" and it is Gurudev Tagore "who first understood and encouraged this creative urge" (Sarabhai 56).

It is in Mrinalini's very nature to perceive the people and places of the world in a state of inter-connectedness. She informs us that she was named after Sarojini Naidu's sister Mrinalini who frequently visited the dancer Mrinalini's mother (Sarabhai 41). At Shantiniketan she once asks Gurudev who frequently forgot names, how he remembered hers, and receives from him a smile as response. Later she learns that Mrinalini was Gurudev's wife's name. When she starts reading the philosophy of Aurobindo, she discovers that Mrinalini was also the name of Aurobindo's wife!

The inter-connectedness is of course perceived on a far more serious level, and the perception of the world is with reference to the self and the homeland. When she is speeding through a Burmese city, for example, she comments on the landscape: "spaces are open and the foliage is *much like that of Southern India*" (Italics added, Sarabhai 168). Visiting the Sun Temples in Mexico she observes "remarkable similarity between Indian culture and the Mayan and Aztec civilization" (Sarabhai 144).

Mrinalini's is a comprehensive vision which is in tune with the concept of Universal Religion and Universal Man that Rabindranath Tagore advocated. There are two important aspects of her comprehensive vision. First, the ability to be aware of the interrelatedness of people and places. For instance, she describes Bali thus:

All through Bali there was a strange feeling of mysticism, of unseen forces, of continuous rhythms and sounds, *that were reminiscent of Kerala*. Aeons ago, *these two lands may have been one, so close was the affinity*. (Italics added, Sarabhai 66-67)

Expressing her great admiration for Mario who shows her his 'Kebyar' dance, Mrinalini says: "I studied some dances with him and unconsciously wove them in to my own choreographic pieces years later" (Sarabhai 66). Her comprehensive vision affiliates the far to the near; the remote to the domestic:

The first few days in Batavia and Bandung fascinated us with the beauty of the landscape, *so like our own country, yet so different*. The batik lungis worn by the people were very superior to the Indian ones, *but the designs were similar ...* . I was surprised to find in the museum an old framed relic of a cloth *exactly like the blouse I was*

wearing. So many of the old fabrics were Indian in character and weave. (Italics added, Sarabhai 63)

Witnessing the Serimpi dance for the first time, she "could see a resemblance of our own Bharatanatyam, though the movements were extremely slow and their faces were immobile" (Sarabhai 64). Similarity underlying dissimilarity: this appears to be the pattern in her observation of cultures. Watching a fragment of *Ramayana*, in Burma, Mrinalini notes:

Compared to our dancing, everything moved at a very slow tempo, but the basic pattern seemed similar: the bent knees, 'the square position of the hands', the use of mudras, In fact, we discovered small missing links that had puzzled us in our own dance-dramas, which gave us a great thrill. (Sarabhai 170)

At a time "when so much of emphasis is laid on political contacts, people would be surprised to learn that the deepest ties between countries are cultural", she asserts. Seeing an episode from a drama *Inao*, In Bangkok, she comments:

A popular production, its ancient costumes, conventional pieces and broad farce made it a little complicated for the spectator, but we enjoyed it all the same. *Contrary to Indian dancing there was a*

complete lack of facial expression and yet the mood was conveyed. (Italics added, Sarabhai 171)

At Phnom Penh, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, "thrilled" with (her) dancing, praises it as being "so alive and intense"; the Prime Minister of Cambodia asks: "Why don't you come back and help us revive our dancing?" Her reply is that she would go back to "learn it first" (Sarabhai 173). About Cambodian dance her observation runs thus:

Their dance was similar in many ways to what we saw in Bangkok, but here there was even more resemblance to the 'lasya' of Kathakali. India could learn much from the orchestras of all these countries, instead of always turning to the west for inspiration. (Sarabhai 173)

The second aspect of her comprehensive vision is that it allows any idea/attitude/quality its opposite, so as to enable a dialectic tension between opposites. Hence the strain in her "to find *new forms from traditional techniques*" (Italics added, Sarabhai 56). Shantiniketan was for her "the heart and soul of India's tradition and progress" (Sarabhai 61). "Tradition and progress", "new forms from traditional techniques"—that is the burden of Mrinalini's comprehensive vision: achieving a Unity that allows a dialectic tension between contraries. One

dimension of this unity is the tradition-new strain. The concept of tradition she upholds has nothing narrow or regional about it; it is something that all the world seeks. Hence her observation: "It was the emphasis on tradition in its finest aspects that drew people to Shantiniketan, not only from India but from all over the world" (Sarabhai 53-54). She describes Rabindranath Tagore as "above all a humanist caring profoundly for the universe." Those who went to Shantiniketan, she observes, "sought eternal values in thought, beauty and everyday living" (Sarabhai 54). She speaks of a bridge between past and present. She designs costumes for her 'new creative work', 'collecting old sarees and jewellery'; searches for 'antique fabrics' and cuts them up for costumes, to receive compliments from critics. A critic in London writes: 'Never have we had performers more beautifully dressed, nor colours displayed on stage in such perfect harmony' (Quoted by M. Sarabhai, 133).

Incidentally, Mrinalini's narrative expresses disapproval of people who forget or ignore their traditions. Of Manila which accords a warm welcome to her troupe, Mrinalini remarks: "It was a modern and very 'American' city. Somehow to me the people of Manila seemed to have lost their cultural moorings" (Sarabhai 174). But in Jakarta, she "happily found the ancient

culture still alive" (Sarabhai 175). At Bahia, South America (where the famous 'Samba' dance originated), 'thrilled' with the "sounds of drums, the wild primitive movement of bodies, the vigour of the dance and the costumes", she joins in to feel as though she "*had been born again in some ancient civilization, where the world was still new* and humanity was joyous at discovering the wonder of music and rhythm" (Italics added, Sarabhai 138-39). About Bangkok she says: "While the temples and the bazaars retained the old world charm of an ancient culture, Bangkok was in many ways a modern city What seemed to me a great pity was that the national dress of the people had been discarded almost completely" (Sarabhai 172). Mrinalini's grasp of the world around is always in terms of 'ancient-new' network. Her impression of New York should serve as yet another example: "New York was awe-inspiring, like being in a deep valley with mountains and skyscrapers on either side!" (Sarabhai 68). And she does not fail to mention—casually though—that she enrolled at "one of the *oldest* drama institution in the country" (Italics added, Sarabhai 68), the American Academy of Arts. Her friendly, sympathetic criticism of America issues thus: "Ignorance about other countries is phenomenal in America" (Sarabhai 71).

A brief discussion of another set of contraries—gender-shaded—in dialectic relation would perhaps help in understanding the comprehensive/integrated outlook of Mrinalini Sarabhai. At Shantiniketan, on one of the annual festivals, she dances the role of Krishna, she reports, with a certain pride and satisfaction (Sarabhai 55). She also informs that she had played Krishna on other occasions. Being 'slim and tall', she "often took hero's roles". She goes on to recount an amusing event. Once, dancing the male role of Utio in *Shyama*, she had changed the ending by a realistically falling on the stage with the flash of a sword. Much pleased, Gurudev Tagore had asked, "who the *young boy* was who danced so well!" (Italics added, Sarabhai 59). On another occasion when a dance drama needed four or five boys none of those who appeared for audition was acceptable; so "finally Gurudev wrote a note to Krishna Kripalani: 'let Mrinalini do all the boys' roles!'" (Sarabhai 60) But attention must be called to the fact that she played masculine roles so convincingly when she was brimming with feminine charm. This is brought out impressively by the jocular ruling of Gurudial Mallik: "You must not smile so sweetly at the boys They all come here and I have to listen to their longings". Her 'wistful' response was that she felt like smiling. Laughingly Mallik would reply: "Well

then I suppose I will have to continue to listen to the broken hearts, my child" (Sarabhai 61).

Mrinalini's self-rendering suggests, among other truths, the awareness that in dance the human body respects gender-divisions the least. When she says, "Kelu Nair dances the Kathakali with graceful strength" (Sarabhai 62) one gets a hint of the gender-unity that contains within it the feminine-masculine dialectic. 'Graceful strength' carries the sort of mystic suggestion that is there in Blake's "fearful symmetry" ("Tyger") or in Yeats's "terrible beauty" ("Easter 1916"). At Shantiniketan Kelu Nair "enchanted" Mrinalini "with the powerful technique of Kathakali". And, being "interested in the vigorous dancing of Manipuri", she learnt from Amubi Singh "the masculine aspects of it with its wonderful leaps and whirling movements" (Sarabhai 55).

An important dimension of the comprehensive vision is in the science-art dialectic. At a personal level, this principle unfolds in her relationship with Vikram Sarabhai:

Science is so similar to Art, both disciplines are a search for unknown galaxies in the universe, both spiritually aware of the indivisible wholeness of the cosmos. A scientist looks for new horizons in knowledge, a dancer for inner horizons of

understanding. A scientist speaks about the spaces beyond our planet and its mysteries. A dancer searches spaces within for meaning. Vikram as a scientist, and I as a dancer, shared a togetherness that was hard to define. (Sarabhai 80)

Before their marriage, Lady Raman (Sir CV's wife) had advised Mrinalini: "Much as I love Vikram, ... scientists don't make good husbands. They are too engrossed in their laboratories" (Sarabhai 104). Mrinalini remembers this statement after marriage when Vikram stays in the laboratory, working on cosmic rays. The Sarabhais too had serious reservations. But nowhere does she speak of Vikram not making a good husband. There are many places where Mrinalini speaks of the participation of each in the other's discipline. "I read a fair amount of physics in order to be aware of the physical universe" (Sarabhai 233), she plainly tells us. At a time when Vikram worked for "twenty out of twenty-four hours at the Cavendish Laboratory, "his thesis on cosmic rays went at a hectic pace", and Mrinalini joins in to read and correct the language of the dissertation. She makes no claims regarding her 'scientific' contribution here: "It was all Greek to me and often at the end of a sentence I would ask, 'Are you sure this is English?'" (Sarabhai 106-07) Correspondingly Vikram shared her work: when Mrinalini

took up a role in a Brecht play at The Cambridge Dramatic Society, "Vikram enjoyed helping backstage with the lighting, in spite of his gruelling schedule!" (Sarabhai 107). The Physical Research Laboratory (PRL, a scientific Research institution), the Ahmedabad Textile Industry's Research Association (ATIRA) find their correspondence in the Darpana Academy of Dance in Ahmedabad.) The aspiration of both Vikram and Mrinalini in Ahmedabad is for an "ancient-new city" (Sarabhai 154). When she is away on tour, Vikram takes care of the two children: "Whenever I was away, Vikram wrote detailed letters about the children, which showed great love for them" (Sarabhai 160). On the other side, the eminent 'scientific' friends of Vikram were close enough to Mrinalini to discuss arts, literature and music. Vikram himself had a passion for music, and arts. As already noted, Vikram-Mrinalini relation is a concretization of science-art dialectic. A picture from her narrative may serve here as an apt illustration: "Vikram often talked of the marvellous universe beyond the Milky Way, and both of us, lying on our cots on the veranda of our bedroom, gazed at the stars differently, yet united in a shared experience of wonder" (Sarabhai 233).

What is here being discussed is not a 'happy' marriage. There certainly was friction between Vikram and

Mrinalini, if one goes by the enigmatic statements of Mrinalini, especially with reference to Vikram's relation with Kamala Kapur, Mrinalini's classmate in Shantiniketan. Kamala had joined ATIRA and a disconcerted Mrinalini writes: "As the years went by, the relationship between Kamala and Vikram became extremely personal and I found the situation difficult, not because I objected to it on moral grounds, but because it encroached upon our family" (Sarabhai 163). "I too had wonderful friends", she says elsewhere, "but mine were mostly 'cerebral' attachments" (Sarabhai 165). She also writes that "it was perhaps when Mallika grew older that she showed her resentment of the relationship [between Vikram and Kamala]" (Sarabhai 165).

The objective of the present discussion is not to prompt curiosity about their marital life. It is to draw attention to the fact that the inclusiveness of Mrinalini is not a simple one without conflict. The 'wholeness' is more about the metaphysical base of relation between people, than a strictly of a domestic base. This is why perhaps she says of Vikram: "He wanted me to make her [Kamala] feel a part of our family, which somehow *I was perhaps not generous enough to do*" (Italics added, Sarabhai 164). Her autobiography includes letters (from Vikram) which caution a reader against sitting in

judgement over issues of the heart. In one letter, Vikram says: "If we cannot prevent *hatred in our love* as at present, let us take out of it that which sours it. I need so much your tenderness—as you need my shoulder to rest your head on I love you dearly—not only as the mother, but as a woman. And I shall never stop feeling this way for anyone else's sake" (Italics added, Sarabhai 165). In the same letter Vikram writes:

How does one unlive what one has lived through? This applies to all relationships. You, Kartik, Malli, Kamla. It is impossible to consciously trample on anyone—but this is what I am doing all the time, with those who I love When the world outside and all our relationships get tangled up like this, what else can one do but to withdraw into oneself—not stop loving but pay the price. (Sarabhai 164)

By producing this letter, Mrinalini illumines the relation with a sophistication that elevates it to a certain sanctity, which one could be blind to if one regarded it on only a domestic and physical plane. A conventional reading of the relationship could distract this discussion from wholeness to information of the sort one finds in *Vikram Sarabhai: A Life*.

... of the Sarabhais' reputation for eccentricity and permissiveness. Vikram's aunt Ansuya had a close relationship with her colleague, labour leader Shankarlal Banker, while Vikram's brother Gautam and his partner Kamalini Khatau were known to hold unconventional views on marriage. Within the Sarabhai fold ... [there] was an incredible amount of broad-mindedness. But there was also an element of indifference in the openness. (Shah, 111)

Shah's rendering is not without objectivity when discussing this relationship, but it misses the wholeness and the dialectics of contraries when using *Voice of the Heart* as a source book for the biographical purposes. The expression, "hatred in our love" in Vikram's letter (quoted earlier) is a strange one, but must suggest the dialectics of contraries that the present analysis is addressing itself to. The wholeness of the human outlook of Mrinalini is seen in a statement like "I did my best to combine the mother, dancer and wife role" (Sarabhai 159), or in an utterance referring to Mallika's birth: "Children to me are the greatest fulfillment of married life" (Sarabhai 157)—which is echoed elsewhere in the book.

No doubt, it is an "insatiable curiosity for life" (Sarabhai 71) that makes Mrinalini so inclusive in her attitude. It is against this background of inclusiveness and interrelatedness that her love for the American, Ward, is to be viewed. She confesses: "I was young and carefree and the intoxication of love made me feel vibrant and alive" (Sarabhai 71). An executive in his father's business, Ward takes her to ballroom dance. He assumes her ignorance of ballroom dancing and goes about teaching her ball dance only to be surprised, because Mrinalini effortlessly follows all the steps he knows! "Dancing of any kind was my life" (Sarabhai 70). On her part, she tells him of Gandhi, non-violence, Vedas and the Bhagavadgita.

The frustration of this relation is not at all a failure of individuals; it owes to the sad chasm between cultures. When Ward takes Mrinalini to his parents, she, "for the first time ... learnt what racism was". Ward's father is appalled to find his son 'dating' an Indian girl and shows his disapproval. Mrinalini is admirably clear about her own destiny and her roots, as well as his: "I wanted to live in India and to dance. I could never be away from my roots, *nor could I ever think of taking him from his*" (Italics added, Sarabhai 74). How well she imbibes the spirit of Shantiniketan, the global

India is revealed in the quotation she produces from Tagore's *Gora*: "Today I am really Indian. In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Musalman and Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food" (Sarabhai 75).

It is the failure to respect the otherness of cultures that is to be seen behind the non-continuance of her dance career with the celebrated dancer Ramgopal. For Mrinalini, dance was the very embodiment of this inclusiveness; it was 'bhakti', 'worship', whereas Ramgopal needed public applause (Sarabhai 81). One episode she narrates clearly reveals their divergent temperaments. This happens during World War II. She would go daily to Ramgopal's home for practice. Among the regular visitors to the place were many soldiers, mostly Tommies. To Mrinalini's distaste, some of the Tommies were using as ashtrays, the images of Deepalakshmi (along with images of Nataraja and Gauri) which received elaborate puja everyday before the dance sessions. They would sit with their "booted feet perched on them" (Sarabhai 82).

Her relationship with Vikram, on the other hand is firmly founded on comprehensiveness that is not a simple resolution of contraries. To reproduce the concluding part of the passage quoted earlier—"Vikram as a scientist

and I as a dancer shared a togetherness that was hard to define" (Sarabhai 80).

It is by now evident that the comprehensive vision of Mrinalini Sarabhai holds contraries—masculine-feminine, ancient-new, science-art, old and young, tradition-progress, past-present—in magnificent equilibrium. It is no surprise therefore, to see the language of the mystic temperament ruled by paradox: "Work [dance] is like catapult one pulls back in order to spring forward", she observes in the Introduction. The play of contraries is most fascinatingly revealed in the body-spirit dialectics. "In dance, the body speaks with the power of the mind behind it" she asserts. Consciousness permeates all her being when she dances:

Once on stage, I forget everything. When I dance, there is no feeling of 'my' or 'self'! It is as though a whole dimension of spiritual energy takes over my being. I am no longer aware of the living world. In those moments I feel as if some strange power within me is released: creating a oneness with the 'Supreme', a wholeness and unity with the cosmos, like an enlightenment of myself!
(Sarabhai 129)

When she remarks sadly that she 'cannot seem to meditate' though she 'sits' in prayer, her spiritual Guru's

reassuring words are: "You are fortunate, you dance your meditation, ... we can only sit" (Sarabhai 129). "It is the radiance of my spirit that makes for the movements of my limbs" (Sarabhai 317), she claims. But it cannot be assumed that the translation of idea into gesture and movement is smooth or steady. A few episodes from her autobiography should bring out this point.

(i) At the height of the freedom movement (1942) in Ahmedabad a tear gas shell explodes right before her face and she is in danger of losing her eye. With the eyelids of one eye stitched, and resisting the medical expert who determines to remove the eye, Mrinalini spends a whole year in agony, terrified by complete darkness. "Not allowed to cry any more", she is in a dazed condition. The deep anguish is not over the prospect of physical losses, but over the bleakness of the chances of a dance-life. That she becomes fit to dance again after a year is evidence to the will of the spirit to shape the body for its expression. "It seemed as though I had travelled inwards into the deep recesses of my soul, almost as if I was reborn", she says (Sarabhai 99), and adds philosophically: "Life becomes invaluable only after such harrowing

experiences. It is a process of growing up inwardly" (Sarabhai 100).

(ii) In Bogota, (S. America), she starts vomiting blood in the middle of a show. A troupe member, Chathunni, is also in the same condition. They 'somehow' manage to finish the show. The doctor who is called explains that their ailment owed to the heights and to their stressful schedule, and advises hospitalization. But Mrinalini goes ahead with the shows after some medication.

(iii) In Sweden Mrinalini falls ill and is in "excruciating pain". Immediate hospitalization is the medical advice, but she is unable to go to the hospital because of the performances. She can "barely stand", and after each item, she collapses, crying in agony. Her students dress and undress her each time readying her for the next item, and one of them sits up all night, "ironing" Mrinalini's body to relieve pain.

(iv) During a performance in London glass beads from her Kathakali costume fall off as she dances, and Mrinalini receives cuts from the splinters on her foot. She completes her performance, without realizing that her foot is injured.

(v) There is a 'devastating' cold in Moscow, Mrinalini recounts that on "While doing mudras on stage", her fingers "would freeze in that position, as did [her] smile, so that [she] would have to turn [her] back on the audience and loosen [her] fingers and manipulate [her] mouth" (Sarabhai 217).

These episodes (and similar others), going by the tone of narration, are not intended to show off her heroism; they serve to illustrate the body's total allegiance to the spirit; to enact the body-spirit dialectics. One is reminded of similar crises that Gangubai Hangal recounts in her autobiography, *The Song of My Life*. Once, on stage, Gangubai's Guruji's voice could not reach the higher octave. After a time the audience stared leaving the hall when in a supreme act of will. He got back his voice to compel the audience to return to their seats. Gangubai mentions also that she had to sing for All India Radio when she had been operated for tonsillitis. Her voice then sounded almost male. But then she restored the voice to its original state. By an act of will, the voice was made to obey the spirit. It is not that the assertion of the spirit over the body is made on special occasions. It is seen in the everyday life of the dancer. When on tour—especially to Western countries—Mrinilani, along with her troupe, has

to do frequently without food, for the impresarios and organisers often forget that those dancers and artists are vegetarians; and she makes those dance trips in spite of her "dread of flying".

The Voice of the Heart is centrally about the affirmation of the spirit through the body. We are struck by the profundity of the epigrammatic words:

Where I do spring from

I do not know.

Who gave me wisdom, who charted my course,

Unfolding day by day, patterns of coherence

Unknown each hour,

The days became the design.

Slowly I recognised what I was

And at five years of age

So my mother told me, I said,

'I am a dancer'

Not 'will be'

Not 'was'

But 'I am'.

The awareness that it is through the instrumentality of the body that the spirit supremely asserts itself is unfolded throughout the autobiographical work. In dance

"the moving body realizing freedom within the framework of technique yet beyond it, is perhaps the greatest expression of movement" (Sarabhai 129).

But it is not individual/personal freedom that she speaks of. Her inclusiveness addresses the self to the society/life around. While pronouncing that her every expression "has been a search, an unfolding, an inner vision", Mrinalini rules that dance has a "social role to play" and that it can speak powerfully through traditional techniques; ... "Dance is an inward journey, a deep, personal equation which unfolds before the audience". "Hence, audience participation is of prime importance and ... cannot be taken for granted". Since dance "is the self, speaking", "It is the epitome of Bhakti" (Sarabhai 113).

"The epitome of Bhakti"! Her family was not "particularly religious" she informs, but she had "a forceful awareness of Krishna's presence From that day of realizing his presence to this, he has been my main source of strength" (Sarabhai 36). [In plain words, and in an uninhibited manner, she states that she would go into a trance.] On one occasion when she was training with Vidwan Ellappa in (Bangalore),

Ellappa was singing 'Krishna ni begane baro',
... I went in to a state of trance, or so I was told

later. He often related this incident to his students adding that he had never seen anyone express the padam so well. 'I could feel Krishna's presence,' he said Years later the great veena maestro Balasubramaniam, played the same song at the end of his concert when I was in the audience, as a special tribute to me, a gift I acknowledged with tears. (Sarabhai 105)

It is a comprehensive life in that it seeks self-realization through acknowledging the validity of both, celebrates the body and the spirit, each in terms of the other.

The mystic temperament in Mrinalini, regards the mysteries of creation and life with remarkable sensitivity. However, while being mindful of the 'mysterious', it does not give in to any dogma or superstition. The references to the 'supernatural' in *The Voice of the Heart* are to be regarded in this light.

The coming of the Muslim-Hindu saint Shirdi Sai Baba in the life of Mrinalini is one notable instance of the supernatural. This happens after Vikram's death, when Mrinalini is in great agony. She feels 'comforted' in the presence of a Baba in a Sai Baba Temple in Ahmedabad. Directed by this Baba, she visits Shirdi, touches the neem "tree under which he had sat, gathers embers from

the fire he had lit" and prays to his statue. "One part of me felt that all this was play acting. Yet I dismissed the rational mind and tried to merge into the faith and trust that I saw around me—a great and wonderful simplicity of utter Bhakti, the surrender to the cosmic force" (Sarabhai 252). The really baffling and inexplicable experience is the one she has at the time of Mallika's grave sickness. With her finances dried up after Vikram's death, Mrinalini feels devastated to learn from doctors that an operation is an imperative for the brain-tumour Mallika had developed. The doctors in the UK—where Mrinalini takes her daughter—reiterate this with greater gravity and emphasis. Hearing of a healer—"a coalminer who spoke with the accent of his class" (Sarabhai 268)—she takes Mallika to him without the knowledge of doctors. The 'intriguing' healing session is described thus:

The miner first shut his eyes and almost immediately went to a trance. The woman, who was a medium, then guided him to Mallika who lay as on a hospital bed. He ran his fingers over the psychic body. That itself was so amazing because his fingers moved over the body very close, not even a centimetre away, yet never actually touching the physical form. When Mallika was being examined,

there was a strange fragrance of Muslim agarbatti in the air. When the miner spoke in his trance-state his language was polished and accentless. (Sarabhai 268)

Later this man tells her that there was a "Muslim doctor with a team of specialists who had come to diagnose". After a few sittings, he performs a small operation on her back

... he went through all the motions of an operation, like asking for the instruments one by one from the woman assistant and his hands were those of a surgeon. (Sarabhai 269)

After stitching up the wound on the psychic body, he declares there is nothing to worry. No payment is taken by him. When Mallika is taken to the medical experts for the final tests and scanning, the doctors are as dazed as Mrinalini, for there is no tumour seen. 'Nothing needs to be done!' It's a 'case of one in a million', according to the experts. Mrinalini and Mallika fly home. Mrinalini with no further elaboration says: "I went straight to Shirdi" (Sarabhai 269).

The style and tone of Mrinalini's writing must be considered with care, here. She is not sensationalizing an event; nor is she promoting crude miracles. It is just that she is willing to reckon with the inscrutable

elements in life. The Mysterious or the Supernatural peeps in again in the self-narration at the time of Mallika's children's birth.

It is her comprehensive outlook that makes her regard the mysterious/non-rational forces in life with an openness. And it is dance that brings with it that openness and unity. Dance is the very meaning of life for her. Her answer to those who have questions about Mrinalini who dances beyond her age, achievement and fame, is as follows:

I am only when I dance. I am only that 'I AM' when I dance. I am only Eternity when I dance. Silence is my response, movement my answer.

What am I but an abstract form in time, born into a land of deepest symbolism, containing within my work the past, the present and the future of a conscious force beyond time, beyond space, the echoes of which may be heard and seen in later vision.

Again and again in the silence I hear the words, 'Who knows in truth? Who knows whence comes this creation. Only that God who sees [....] He only knows or perhaps He knows not!' (Sarabhai 304-05)

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Mamoni Raisom Goswami (Nov 1942–Nov 2011)

Mamoni Raisom Goswami or Indira Goswami is the first Assamese woman writer to receive Jnanapith Award in 2000 and also the first Indian to win Principal Prince Claus Laureate from Netherlands in 2008. A great combination of academic and aesthetic merits, Indira Goswami is well known as an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar, activist and writer.

Born in an aristocratic Brahmin family, as a daughter to Umakanta Goswami, himself a great scholar, Indira suffered from depression since her childhood. Sometimes severity of depression led her to attempts of suicide. Later with a magic spell of 18 months interval (between 1965 and 67)—during which she married her soul-mate Madhavan—the depression disappeared, only to reappear more aggressively with her husband's accidental death in 1967. However, Indira found a way out in writing and in humanistic concern for the fellow beings. She acted as mediator between the Bodo activists and the Assam Government. *Pages Stained With Blood, Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker, The Man from Chinnamasta* and *Nilakanthi Braja* are some of her well-known works.

After Madhavan's death Indira pursued research on the Comparative Study of Ramayana literature in Vrindaban, and later published that scholarly work as

Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra. In 1967 she joined the University of Delhi, to later become the Head of the Assamese Department. After her superannuation she lived in Guwahati.

During her literary career many accolades and awards came in Indira Goswami's way. As the focus in her writing has been on women and the cultural and political construct of the Assamese society, many of her works have been serialized and performed on stage as well. The Sahitya Akademi Award that she received in 1982 was followed by a series of awards: Literary-cultural ones like, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988, Bharat Nirman Award in 1989, Sauhardya Award in 1992, Katha National Award in 1993, Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award in 1996; Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Gold Plate from Asiatic society in 2008; and akademik D.Litt. Degrees from Ravindra Bharati University, West Bengal in 2002; Rajiv Gandhi Univ., Arunachal Pradesh in 2007, Indira Gandhi National Open University in 2008. In 2002 she politely declined the Padmashree Award saying that she had already received the highest Jnanapith Award. *An Unfinished Autobiography* (originally *Adha Likha Dastaveg* in Assamese) was written when she was just 27.