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Introduction

Indian history lives in folklore. On the lips of country ballads which immortalise the indomitable spirit of its great women, each vale proudly recalls soul stirring deeds of heroic women. Each ancient palace echoes the honour and bravery of some daring Queen. Indeed, the greatness of Indian culture does not arise from its breathtaking miniatures, intricate hand carvings, fine inlay work, dazzling architecture, magnificent temples and mosques, superb classical music or the vedic texts, but from the dignity and sacrifice of woman who built Indian civilization into the greatest culture of the world. Their sacrificing spirit moulded itself to face each challenge anew, with each a need to glorify the Holy Spirit. From the Holy Spirit, they wielded a reservoir of strength which knew no defeat; whilst facing foes with unhaunted courage that even awoke the enemy's awe. The Manu-Smriti pays glowing homage to women in a beautiful verse.

'Yatra naryastu puhyante ramante tatra devatah

Yatraitastu na puhyante sarvastatraphalah kriyah

'Where women are worshipped, there the Gods delight, but where they are not worshipped, all religious ceremonies become futile".

Whereas houses on which dishonoured women pronounce a curse, perish, as if by magic. "

According to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, man is completed by the equal halves of man and woman, like halves of a shell completing the whole shell ardhavalamiva.

The women fill up the void in men's lives - not only as equal partners but infinitely more superior to them in their inherent and special rights as mothers.

Even when she is not a mother, but an unmarried girl of tender age, she is a Devi, regarded as Kanya—Kumari, the auspicious maiden. When Shri Rama returned from exile he was first received by the Kanya-Kumaris, as they are considered most auspicious, Shubh-Shagun.

If God made man in His own image, then the Mother of God made woman as the reflection of the Holy Spirit. The Mother of the universe bestowed in Her womb the Primordial Truth which could never be vanquished. It is eternal, pure, resilient, all-pervading. It is the Kavach of the Devi, a talisman that shields her innocence, that brings joy to all creation, a love that never diminishes but multiplies like the waves of the ocean. It cannot be said to belong anywhere, yet flows through all her veins. That is what the Primordial Mother envisaged when She filled the woman with the breath of Her Holy Spirit.

A befitting praise to the Devi in the Devi Mahatmya states, "all forms of knowledge are aspects of Thee, and all women in the universe are Thy Form."

Her love is described as Nirvajya, without expectation or vested interest. The love is not conditioned, inhibited, it does not want any respite or return. It is pure, innocent, untainted by selfishness, unblemished by possessiveness. In its flow there cannot be any competition, aggression, any superior or inferior. It is the eternal flow of the river. Her satisfaction lies in the joy of flowing freely and when she cannot flow freely she becomes disturbed. She does not hear the din of feminist cries or male/female status disputes. Her fulfilment lies elsewhere; in giving comfort and warmth to others. Her

archetype is the Goddess Laxmi who is seen standing on a delicate pink lotus, offering protection with one hand, bestowing benedictions with the other and also the role of Gruhalaxmi, the ideal and auspicious wife. This ideal is realised in the life of Her Holiness Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi who is always giving, healing thousands of people and sewing humanity tirelessly. She says, "I never buy for Myself. The whole thing is the joy of giving to others. I always think what I can give to others. Diwali is a good day for Me that I can buy so many presents that I want to give, you and I love it. Nothing is like the joy of giving. After all think about yourself, why am I here? I am here to enjoy everyone. That is the way to open the lotus of your heart."

As it is the nature of the sun to shine, as it is the nature of the river to flow, it is the nature of woman to love. This innate nature cannot be cramped, qualified or limited; it just is. It is not a state of passive love but a dynamic living process that guides, nourishes, counsels, creates and also protects.

In the Vishnu Purana Goddess Laxmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu, is addressed as Sri, for it is through Her alone that Shri Vishnu can be reached. Sri plays an important role as a mediator. She considerably softens Her Lord's anger, appeases Him and awakens in Him a feeling of intimacy, warmth and patience. When Shri Vishnu threatens to punish human folly She pleads, "But if You punish the human instead of saving him, Your virtue of grace will be lost." Elsewhere She resorts to little tricks to distract attention from punishing erring devotees. Indeed, a woman plays a paramount role as a mediator. With her infinite affection she tames man's aggressive nature. She develops sweet ways to teach him patience and forgiveness. She slows down a speedy husband. In the scheme of creation man and woman were born as equals, complementary to each other, as the two wheels of a cart. If the wheels are not alike, then the chariot cannot move. The left wheel will not fit the right side and vice versa. In this way, there are two types of wheels rotating, because they are similar and yet are not similar. In Indian marriage the question of competition or equality is not considered. The marriage contemplates identity of spirit and not the issue of equality. This consciousness follows from the archetype Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha, the male principle of the universe, yang, is the external witness of the play of Prakriti, the female principle of the universe, yin, which spontaneously creates all material reality. The harmonious interdependence and the unity of the male and female principles is narrated in the Siva Purana. Parvati is Siva's shakti necessary for involving Him in creation. It is only in association with her that Siva is able to realise His potential. Parvati as shakti not only complements Siva but also fulfils Him. Siva is described as the sky, Parvati as the earth, Siva is subject, Parvati object. Siva is ocean, Parvati the sea shore. Siva is the sun, Parvati the light. The two are actually one — different aspects of the ultimate reality.

Marriage, then, is a sacrament to realise this ultimate reality where each assumes a defined position which is complementary and not antagonistic or competitive. Thus the primary motive of marriage is not merely individual satisfaction, but the achievement of a higher evolutionary goal. The sage Yajnavalkya explained to Maitreyi the doctrine of soul. "The husband is dear to the wife not for the husband's sake but for the soul and vice versa. Similarly a son, wealth, status, scriptures and the universe are all dear not on their own but for the sake of the soul".

The wife is further spoken of as sahadharmcharini "she who supports and fulfils social and sacred duties". Her life is to fulfil a great ideal and serves as the axis of the social order which it cements together with patience, care and warmth. The ultimate purpose of social discipline is that men and women should unify their individuality with the much wider and deeper level of collective consciousness. One should perform one's duty, svadharma, regardless of success or failure or ideas of 'I' or 'mine'. Thus the social order is placed above individual whim. But this social order also serves as a woman's armour. It shields her honour and places her in great esteem. No ceremony can be complete without her. Her faithful adherence to dharma circumvents the expression of her ego and enables her to realise the higher level of collective consciousness. Her life is dedicated to fulfilling this great ideal. It is both for her own sake and the collective that her life must be attuned to the eternal harmony of Purusha and Prakriti.

Nature has cast women with certain attributes and when she bejewels herself in these ornaments she appears as a Goddess, a Devi, a queen and a true mother. In her caring arms all creation rests. The world is a garden. In rough weather the gardener has to take more pains. In the sleepless nights of his traumas the seedling is born. The nature of a woman's work involves sacrifice. But there is not pressure in that sacrifice when one is acting out of love. It is a pleasure to do something for others who are but the other extension in the cord of love. In the concern for others one does not feel tired. Says Shri Mataji, "Doing work for others is music to Me, so cooling. Everything is music to Me. Do you get tired of music? On the contrary you feel fresh. The whole power of your Mother is love, music".

In a befitting praise Manu, the ancient law giver, says,
'One master excels ten tutors in honour;

A father excels a hundred masters;

But a mother even excels a thousand fathers in glory. "

Manu-Smriti, 2.145

He regards the mother as a Goddess. "Matri=Devo-Bhava."

Mother worship inspired the freedom struggle. The great mother is the Earth Goddess and as such is worshipped as the "Bharat Mata", the land of the Indian subcontinent. During India's freedom struggle, She had to be liberated from foreign yoke. The great Bengali poet Bankim Chandra stirred the soul of the Indian masses in his inspiring hymn Vande Mataram", "Hail to Thee my Mother". During the Independence movement when the college students were being mercilessly beaten up, the spirit of Indian womanhood was resilient, inspired by the song of the young student Nirmala Devi,

"Maa teri Jai ho, teri hi Vijaya ho", "Glory to the mother, victory to Thee". With this song on their lips and Bharatmata in their hearts, college girls proudly marched into British jails. This relationship is as intimate and deep as the link with eternal source; perhaps it emanates from the collective unconscious from where it permeates the human consciousness. Whenever the sanctity of the Mother is defiled, the spirit rises in arms. The awakening of the Mother force within us is the working of the full consciousness of the Divine Power. This immense power of God makes us strong, surcharged and dynamic. The Artharva Veda assigns the Earth as mother.

The immortal heart of this Earth, covered with
Truth, is the highest firmament.

Let the Earth assign to us brilliancy, strength.
 Let her sprinkle us with splendour,
 Earth is Mother, I am Earth's son.

"A woman is the strongest power of the household. Like this Mother Earth, she takes all the problems upon herself because she is the strongest. Who else can withstand this kind of weight on her"? It is the mother".

According to Shri Mataji, "We women are like the Prithvi tattwa (The tattwa of the Mother Earth). We have so much power that we can absorb many things and yet shower love from within. This power God has given us. For example, is the fan more powerful or the source from where it derives the power? The woman is the ocean of power, and through that only man is able to work, like the potential and the kinetic. Woman is potential and man is kinetic. When the Maratha forces were dismayed and defeated by Aurangzeb a seventeen year old girl, Queen Tarabai, the younger daughter-in-law of Shivaji, defeated him and made his grave in Aurangabad. When a woman fully absorbs her power then she is very powerful and terrific. But if she uselessly dissipates her power by quarrelling, arguing, criticising, exhibiting absurd behaviour and silliness, then all her powers get destroyed. A woman is so powerful that she can, if she wants, work more than a man. But first she has to respect her power by being, humble, modest, dignified, poised, understanding and compassionate. Men may abuse and quarrel but a woman should never do that. Her work is to bring peace, give warmth and save people like a shield. The shield cannot do the work of a sword, but it is greater than a sword because it can break the striking of the sword. The sword will break but not the shield.

"A woman has to settle down in her innate power, shakti Modesty is the greatest axis of that shakti within, absorb it and settle down in it".

Woman represents the continuity of life, an energy which cannot be divided or diverted, she can no more desire to be something other than herself. The Indian woman is what she is, because her social and spiritual culture have permitted her to be that and to remain essentially feminine. With all her limitations of sentimentality and illiteracy she has remained the guardian of a highly evolved spiritual culture, which is of much greater worth than all the efficiency of the sophisticated and advanced ones.

Women in Ancient India

FROM the Rig-Vedic age women were equal partners with men in all spheres. Women studied both the apara and para vidya, the physical and metaphysical knowledge, and became great scholars, seers and teachers. When Yajnavalkya wanted to divide his property between his two wives, Katyayani and Maitreyi, the latter declined to accept saying, "What should I do with all the worldly wealth through which I cannot gain immortality". Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Women of royal households received military training. Mudgalani, wife of Mudgala, drove her husband's chariot in the battle field and vanquished the foe. The Ftamayana places the mother in the highest position. The Kishkindha-Kanda, part of the Ramayana, states that the wife is the Self of the man. In the Ayodhya-Kanda the mother is enjoined to be honoured as much as the father. When Princess Sita desired to accompany Rama to the forest, the spiritual preceptor of the royal house, sage Vasistha, tried to dissuade Her by offering Her the reins of the Kingdom during Her husband's exile, but the dutiful Sita refused, saying Her place was by Her husband's side. The merit and political wisdom of learned women was very much respected.

In the Mahabharata period that followed, women were very well versed not only in philosophy but in all branches of knowledge. They enjoyed equal rights with men in all respects. The wife was spoken of as the best friend of man. Women were respected with special care and attention. They were venerated for auspiciousness, virtue and harbingers of prosperity. .

There were special women ascetics like Sulabha who roamed from place to place in search of truth. Even such a great scholar as Raja Janaka respected Sulabha's knowledge and drew inspiration from her. In the Hari-Vamsha a learned woman, wife of Prabhasa, attained the highest perfection in Yoga and expanded the Brahma Vidya. Another great acharya (teacher) was Arundhati, wife of a great sage, Vasistha, who equalled her husband in knowledge and intellect.

Women of the royal household, though deeply spiritual, were well versed in politics. Statecraft emanated from the quality of Divine benevolence based on the foundation of Dharma, the code of righteous conduct sanctified by the scriptures. The foremost duty of the ruler was to uphold Dharma.

Queen Gandhari, wife of the blind king Dhritrashtra, refused to bless her favourite son Duryodhana for waging an unrighteous battle and boldly proclaimed –
"Yato Dharmastato Jayah - Victory to the righteous

A woman's Dharma was held above her family attachments. Dharma rested on the foundation of a woman's strength of character. Heroic queens Kunti and Draupadi were exemplary characters and paragons of virtue, sacrifice and righteousness. Draupadi's fiery words to Her defeated son were an example of Her fortitude.

A woman may be a poet, philosopher, scholar or a saint but she should not present herself in public making a demonstration of her merit. However learned a woman may be, she should not strive to become fonivard and self willed. If the highest merit lies in fulfilling one's duty (svadharma), then the woman who remains absorbed in her own

work cannot even think of self-assertion or self-advertisement.

Shri Mataji explains that "A woman should stay in the background and a man in the forefront. She should help him in the background for she is the current of his power". She must remain within her maryadas, i.e. the norms and boundaries of social conduct, which lend her dignity, honour and protection. Her greatness lies in the service to others and through being the mother of great children. The height we achieve is primarily due to the upbringing of our parents. The greatest job a woman can do is to build a strong foundation in the child. This task she alone can do. Shri Mataji often says that all work you do is dead work, you cannot create anything living.

You cannot create even a flower. But at least you can nurture innocent lives and cast the mould of great heroes, statesmen and patriots.

Savitri

IN THE month of Jyaishta (May-June), orthodox Hindu wives fast for three days to imbibe the virtues of the ideal wife Savitri.

Being the only child of King Ashwapati, Princess Savitri was brought up amidst indulgent luxury and the seeking for education. She was extremely wise and compassionate and the people loved her dearly. When she came of age her father sent

her on a long journey with permission to choose a worthy husband. The princess was greatly attracted by places of pilgrimage and the hermitages of saints.

Once travelling through the forest her eyes fell on a handsome young man carrying an axe and a bundle of wood. Her soul raced out to the stranger and she knew him to be her chosen husband.

The stranger was none other than Prince Satyavan, son of King Dyumatsena who once ruled the Shalwa country. When King Dyumatsena became blind, his enemies took advantage of him and overthrew him.

The King with his devoted wife and infant son, Satyavan, retired to the forest hermitage Yama. Yama told her to return and perform the last rites of her husband. Savitri refused stating that she must go where her husband goes.

Yama attempted to comfort her with a boon. Savitri thought of her blind father-in-law suffering alone in the forest and requested his sight to be restored. Yama gladly granted his eye sight, yet Savitri continued to follow him. Yama again told her to return but Savitri replied, "How can I be tired when I follow my husband? My destination is where You take him".

Yama was so pleased with her sincerity and devotion that he offered to bestow another boon except the life of Satyavan. Savitri's thoughts again raced to her in-laws, "Who would look after them in their old age?" She prayed for the restoration of the kingdom to her father-in-law. Yama blessed this desire also but Savitri would not leave His trail. He could not shake her off.

Yama was impressed by Savitri's selflessness and compassion for her aged in-laws. As she had not asked anything for herself, He offered to grant a third boon for herself. Savitri thought for a moment and prayed that she be blessed with great sons who would spread the fame of their father. Yama consented and proceeded on His journey. After a while, He glanced back to find Savitri still following him. He stopped and asked her why she was still following him. Very humbly she replied, "O Yama, You have granted me the boon of great sons, but how can I beget these sons when my husband is not alive with me?"

Yama was highly impressed with her intelligence and wisdom and He restored Satyavan's life.

Vidura (Mahabharata Period)

FOR the person who is large-hearted the whole universe is her family. In a large heart

there is a place for everyone. There are instances of many such large hearted Queens in India who always held the interest of their subjects above themselves and their family. Women are brought up with an attitude to regard the welfare of others as their own welfare, especially that of the collective. She cannot think otherwise for this gives her the greatest satisfaction.

The life of Queen Mother Vidura is a glimpse of this common virtue that endears a woman in a multitude of social and familial relationships that nurture and ground the society. When her vanquished son, King Sanjaya, was seeking refuge in his royal apartments, the Queen Mother Vidura admonished him and urged, "Take courage and fight. Be fearless, else men will call you a coward, friends will scoff you and the enemy will devastate the territory. It is better to die than to hide like a shameless coward. Better to shine like a meteor even for a moment than to smoke forever. If you neglect your duties as a warrior then it is better to die".

The King tried hard to evade his mother's command by appealing to her tender heart, saying, "What will your life and all the pleasures of the palace be if I am no more? It is better to escape from the battle and live in peace".

'Vatsalya', the tender feeling of a mother for her child, overwhelmed her, but with supreme strength she held back her tears and answered, "As birds seek refuge in a tree that bears fruits, similarly the life of a man is blessed when he sustains his dependents. Be true to your name O Sanjaya, the conqueror, take up arms and slay your foe. No doubt in your childhood it was prophesied that a calamity would befall you but it was also said that following the path of righteousness you would overcome it and achieve fame. You are like a ship who will carry us across the "o'cean. Though hard to cross in the beginning, with all my blessings and prayer you will succeed".

Not caring for his duties as a warrior, the King pleaded, "You are a heartless mother and do not care for your son's life. You only desire the kingdom for your pleasure".

The frontiers of the nation were in peril and the only hope was her son. The Queen knew well that the first principle of her deity Mahalaxmi was sacrifice of one's own children at the altar of truth. In her heart she prayed to the family goddess Mahalaxmi and then forcefully stated, "A true mother safeguards the interest of her son in her heart. By shirking your duty you will not only gain dishonour but would not even enjoy peace or happiness in this world or the next". She told him of her hidden treasure which would finance the army and how proud she would be of his valour and prowess.

The depth of her soul penetrated the King's heart and gave him courage. Renewed with his mother's spirit the King fought like a hero and of course with the blessings of such a mother, how could he lose?

Though a mother's love is described as 'Nirvajya' (without expectation) still she has to build the character of the children, nurture their growth as responsible citizen, make them aware of their weakness and from weakness build them up in strength. She has to prod them on with all her skills and playfulness. The art of bringing around the children only a mother knows.

She can overlook many things but at the appropriate moment she corrects them in her own way, so sweetly, that the child does not feel the correction. Through her love she absorbs the defects of the child and cleanses him. If the mother all the time wants to grab the child and the child wants to grab her then it would be suicidal for both. Apart from being a mother she is a true friend, comforter, counsellor, and guide. Her actions are directed to the best interest of the child and not her own self interest.

A mother and a grandmother, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi describes, "Within a mother the power of love is so great that she uses this power to put things right. Her ways are so loving that the children do not mind. Only a mother knows how to scold. If a father scolds, perhaps the children may mind. A mother's love is selfless. She wants nothing for herself. She only wants that her children get alright. May they acquire all my virtues and powers. If a mother thinks like this then the children will definitely get alright".

Where mothers take pride in the collective responsibility which their children also learn to shoulder, there is little room for spoiled children. All their attention is for the benevolence of the spirit. Truth has to be told and the child has to be corrected. According to Shri Mataji the source which transforms the individual into the spirit is the Kundalini which she calls as the individual Mother. "This Individual Mother Kundalini is loving and knows each and everything about an individual from his past lives. She is just waiting for the chance to be awakened and to give the real second birth. She is a Divine Mother. She cannot give troubles or problems to her child. On the contrary, in her ascent she heals all the problems and establishes thoughtless awareness. A thought rises and falls, the Kundalini makes the thought smaller and in between is the present. One stops thinking and in that space inner growth takes place".

The manifestation of the Kundalini is the guiding factor for the upbringing of the children. It is important to know what is conducive to the ascent of the Kundalini. For this the mother herself has to assume her position of a Realised Soul, herself having had the Kundalini awakening, and she must observe the protocol and maryadas, the tenets of Dharma and she must lead a virtuous life.

Only when she imbibes these virtues can she become an example for the child to follow. The child does not learn mentally but through observation and example. The child reflects the level of his parents. Therefore for the evolution of civilisation the mother is the axis.

Shabari

BEYOND THE Vindhya mountains in the Dandaka forest there dwelt the great Sage Matanga. Disciples from all over the country flocked to his hermitage to serve him and learn from him. Some distance away from the hermitage was the small hut of an ignorant tribal woman Shabari. Shabari yearned to serve the great Sage, but she dared not approach him due to her low caste. She would satisfy her devotion by silently cleaning his path and sprinkling water on it. Unseen by anybody she would leave a bundle of firewood at the Ashram.

The Sage had observed these caring services for some time and asked his disciple to find out who had rendered them. One night when the disciple concealed himself, he discovered Shabari cleaning the path. Pleased with her devotion, the Sage initiated her. Shabari's devotion grew day by day.

After several years the Sage began to prepare for Mahasamadhi. Bidding farewell to all his disciples, he told Shabari not to grieve, for Shri Rama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, would come to give her Moksha. Thereafter Shabari became a Rama Bhakta and passed her days in the worship of Lord Rama. So fervent was her bhakti that she could think of nothing else but his coming. One day when she heard Rama was coming, she went mad with excitement. She could not bear to wait for His darshan. How would she receive Him? How was she to seat Him? She quickly ran and gathered all the wild berries. She was so concerned lest even one of them be sour that she tasted all of them and only selected the sweet ones for her Rama.

While she was returning, her garments accidentally brushed past a Sage, who took offence at this. After reprimanding her severely the angry sage went to bathe in the river but surprisingly found the river curiously contaminated with dirt. He enquired of Lord Rama the cause of the river's sudden pollution. Lord Rama answered that it was because the Sage had humiliated His devotee Shabari. When the Sage begged forgiveness of Shabari, the river became pure.

Shabari was drenched with joy at the sight of Lord Rama. She fell at His feet and offered Him the berries she had tasted. Lord Rama ate them with great relish and found them sweeter than ambrosia.

Pleased with Shabari's simplicity, sincerity and devotion, Lord Rama offered her a boon but Shabari only prayed that her devotion to Lord Rama may remain steadfast and everlasting. Lord Rama blessed Shabari. With her hands folded, worshipping the feet of Lord Rama, Shabari's soul departed into infinity. Lord Rama, Himself lit her pyre and poured sacred water liberating her soul.

Shabari's life was an example of a beautiful surrender. The Lord always resides in the hearts of a sincere devotee. In the sincerity of devotion one feels absolutely secure and fulfilled.

Sukanya

YEARS of hard penance and deep meditation had reduced the body of sage Chayavana to a skeleton. Even his body was buried in an ant hill. One day Princess Sukanya, who was merry making in the forest, spied two gem like objects shining through that ant hill. Aroused by curiosity she poked a sharp thorn into the shining object and inadvertently pierced the eyes of the sage Chyavana, turning him blind. The Sage exploded and threatened to cast a terrible curse on the Princess unless she married him and shared his hermitage. Ashamed of herself Princess Sukanya took permission of her parents and began serving her husband, lovingly, practising all the ascetic penances. She would dress herself with the bark of trees and sen/e the Sage with utmost devotion, without even thinking that he was blind, old and almost a skeleton. She would cook the most delicious dishes for him, tend to the cows and attend warmly to all visitors.

One day the divine physicians, the Ashwin twins, happened to pass by in the forest. They were enchanted by her beauty and both desired to marry her. Princess Sukanya was outraged by such insult to her fidelity and devotion to her husband. Impressed by her chastity and devotion, the Ashwins promised to restore her husband's eyes on the condition that thereafter she would have to choose one among the three of them, the sage or one of the twins, as her husband.

The Ashwins restored the sight of the sage but also transformed him into their own replica so Sukanya could not distinguish one from the other. Sukanya was most confused and did not know whom to choose.

Eventually the love of her husband and her chastity led her to identify the sage through his vibrations and she garlanded him. The Ashwins blessed the happy couple and departed.

MAHARASHTRA has always been the land of Saints and Sages. Its history and culture is so closely interwoven with spirituality that it is difficult to separate it. It is a saga of human ascent and the endeavour of the men of God to establish the rule of Dharma. Even the country songs and bhajans narrate the spiritual history of the land. A popular abhanga (devotional song), sung often in the Pune district, records the meeting of Muktabai with Saint Namadev in the Shrine of Vitthala at Pandharpur.

A great devotee of Lord Vitthala, Saint Namadev prided himself in being dearer to the Lord since he always stayed at the Vittala shrine. Muktabai wanted to shake off this illusion and refused to salute him, saying that by merely staying in a temple one does not get Self—Realisation. A discussion followed and it was finally agreed to put the matter to the renowned Saint Gora Kumbhar, the potter.

During the evening Kirtan (singing of devotional songs) Gora Kumbhar tested Namadev with a strip of wood. As he drew the strip towards Namdev he got angry. So Gora remarked that Namadev was still a raw pot and needed the guidance of a Guru. Gora recommended him to Visoba Khechar, a disciple of Saint Gyaneshwar.

It is said that when he went there he got his Self-Realisation. He had a miraculous revelation that no place was devoid of the Lord's presence in the universe. Namadev was overwhelmed with divine love and his ego completely melted.

He realised that nobody becomes superior by the mere privilege of staying in the Lord's shrine. When he returned, Muktabai was pleased with the beautiful vibrations emitting from his Spirit and she humbly touched his feet.

She was a great comfort to her brother Saint Gyaneshwar. From the tender age of six when their parents were compelled by the society to commit suicide to secure the respect of the children, she was like a mother to him, soothing, counselling and encouraging him.

When upset by the people's egos, Gyaneshwar would withdraw himself into the hut, where she would compose inspiring abhangas consoling him, that a saint should not be disturbed by the petty follies of the world.

*"The one pure in mind forgives everything.
The world is a simple piece of cloth
woven with one thread of the Lord,
so come out, O Gyaneshwar".*

She was struck by lightning and died at the age of eighteen.

Dhatri Panna

THE SPIRIT of sacrifice of Indian women is beyond record. Each tale of sacrifice is more breathtaking than the other. So many lives have been sacrificed at the altar of Bharat Mata, Mother India, that even the soil of Bharat is worthy of worship. Nobility in women does not depend upon race, but upon ideals. It is the outcome of their dharmic way of life.

After the death of Maharana Sanga of Mewar, his two sons succeeded him. Their evil cousin Banbir Singh murdered the first son and attempted to murder the second son Udai Singh, but his nurse Panna got wind of the plot through a barber and foiled it by quickly sending Udai Singh away, hidden in a fruit basket. She placed her own son in the cradle in place of Udai Singh. Mistaking Panna's son for Udai Singh, Banbir murdered him.

Her breast choking with grief, Panna held back her tears and escaped with the faithful barber. They took refuge with Asa Sah, the governor of Kumbhalmer. To avoid suspicion Panna left the palace and Asa Sah declared Udai Singh to be his own nephew. After a few years his true identity was revealed to the nobles of Mewar and they placed him on his rightful throne, banishing the usurper Banbir Singh.

Queen Chinnammaji (A.D. 1661)

IT WAS not unusual for Indian Queens to administer the kingdom during their husband's reign. Queen Chinnammaji was a woman of such extraordinary administrative skill and genius that her husband entrusted the reins of the Government to her hands. When he passed away in A.D. 1677, she ruled wisely and justly for another twenty-five years.

In the face of impending danger she sheltered Shivaji's son, Rajaram, who was being pursued by the army of Aurangzeb. She repulsed the Moghul army and totally routed it. Aurangzeb was so impressed by her valour that he honoured her with gifts. In another onslaught she defeated the Mysore army and succeeded in restoring lasting peace in her kingdom.

Kannada literary works pay glowing tributes to her benevolent queen. She was a great patron of the arts and of learning and she founded many schools and universities. She gave liberally to charities and universities. She undertook public works, building tanks, roads, hospitals and irrigation systems. Under her direction the system of administration reached such perfection that it could well serve as a model for modern times, with She

herself as an ideal model for an administrator.

Ahalyabai

THE MARATHAS were known for their honour and valour. The name of Malhararao Holkar shines in the Maratha annals for his courage and bravery. When he was only eight years of age a cobra spread its hood to protect his slumber. This auspicious event foretold of great events to come. But Malhararao was not so lucky with his vagabondson who became a constant source of concern. Once when Malhararao was returning to Pune from his tour of North India, he reached Chaundi village in Beed District of Aurangabad. As it was getting late he decided to step at the Siva temple. Aarti was in progress with conches and temple bells. Soon a small but attractive young girl of hardly eight years arrived with a plate of flower offerings and a lamp. She offered worship with such deep devotion and humility that everyone stood spell bound as if some golden letters of Indian history were being written into that spell. She left such a deep impact on Malhararao's mind that he instantly decided to take her as his daughter-in-law.

When young Ahalya stepped over the Holkar threshold, glory and prosperity increased. She became the soul of the Holkar clan. While performing her daily routine she would always meditate and pray and thus receive tremendous inner strength and guidance to face the mounting challenges of life. An envious clan woman wanted to draw comparison to Ahalya's beauty. It was reported that, "Ahalya is neither fair nor beautiful, she looks simple but such divine serenity shines in her face that it brings peace to the soul". Ahalya was well groomed by Malhararao in the art of statecraft, and often accompanied him to war. She loved her countrymen like her own children. She would personally attend the sick and extend a generous hand to the needy. Taxes were mild and trade flourished,

When she was only twenty, her husband was fatally wounded by a cannon ball during the siege of Fort Kumbaheri. She wanted to follow him to his funeral pyre and to perform sati, but Malhararao persuaded her to desist as she was his only hope. She showed rare administrative ability and the Peshwa, the ruler, gave her complete charge of the State. At the time benevolence towards subjects was the exception to the rule, but the name of Ahalyabai evoked love amongst the people for her just rule and benevolence. She was a very kind and humane person, well known for justice but if required she could rule with an iron hand. When the Chandravat Rajputs revolted against her, she personally led her forces and crushed the revolt.

Ahalyabai was unfortunate in her family life. Her only son died of lunacy. The Peshava uncle, Raghoba, thought of taking advantage of a woman and schemed to invade her territory. Though in grief Ahalyabai quickly put together a regiment of women and sent a warning to Raghoba, "I am a woman but also consider what would happen if our positions were reversed". Raghoba felt ashamed and made an excuse that he was merely preparing for a condolence visit.

Ahalyadevi was deeply religious and was a great seeker. In the evening of her life she had to face the grief of witnessing her daughter's death. She never recovered from the shock and she took to a life of austerities. She built a new capital at Maheshwar, on the banks of the holy river Narmada. She encouraged textiles there and soon the Maheshwar saris became famous. She died in 1795. She is remembered as an exemplary Queen who came only to serve and to give to others. She put all her heart into the welfare of her people, building wells, roads, rest houses, schools and temples.

A Scottish poetess wrote of her in glowing terms :

*"For thirty years-her reign of peace, the land in blessings did increase;
And she was blessed by every tongue, by stern and gentle, old and young."
And where her works of love remain, on Mountains pass, on hill or plain,
There stops the traveller a while, and eyes it with mournful smile,
With muttering lips, that seem to say,
"This was the works of Ahalya Bai"
"Kind was her heart, and bright her fame,
And Ahalya was her honoured name."*

Rani Chennamma

"My last wish is to be born again in this land, to fight against the British and drive them away from this sacredland."

RANI CHENNAMMA has been described as the morning star of India's freedom struggle. Although Queen of the small state of Kittur, on the Pune-Bangalore highway, she was the first ruler to defy and overcome the mighty British Empire. She loved her land and people and no sacrifice was sufficient in their service.

Her dramatic first encounter with her husband Raja Mallasarja Desai has been described in numerous folk songs. A man-eating tiger had created havoc near the woods where the Raja was camping. The Raja was a skilled shot and he set out to kill the tiger. When the tiger was spotted, the Raja shot the ferocious animal with a single arrow. When he reached the spot of the slain tiger, he was confronted by a fully armed maiden who claimed the tiger as her sport. Two arrows had pierced the tiger and the maiden claimed that it was her arrow that had killed the tiger. Mallasarji was struck both by the courage and beauty of the youthful maiden and married her. The maiden was no other than Rani Chennamma.

Before his demise the Raja adopted a son and had declared him his heir. The British took the opportunity for annexing the state on the pretext that the adoption was invalid because their consent had not been taken.

After the death of her husband, Rani Chennamma took over the administration. The little state prospered under her benevolent rule. The Queen was sagacious and proficient in military strategy. But the British had set designs on Kittur and were looking for a suitable opportunity to annex it.

In an impassioned speech the Rani declared, "Kittur is ours. We are masters of our own land. Who are the British to dictate terms for our adoption matters? These British came to our land to trade, but took advantage of our internal feuds and grabbed our land. They shamelessly demand Nazarana. They may have vanquished other rulers by cunning and deceit but they do not know that the people of Kittur love freedom more than life. This sacred land has been sanctified by the blood of thousands of martyrs who fought for freedom. We may be a small state with a small army compared to them but the love of this sacred soil and its blessings flow in our veins. Each one of us is equal to ten of their soldiers. We will fight to the last man".

This inspiring speech of the Rani roused the valour of the people. The swords of the soldiers flashed out and with one voice they thundered the battle cry "Long live Kittur. Long live Bani Chennamma". The attack by the Kittur army was so sudden that the British had no time to recover. They were completely routed and fled. That night there was great jubilation in Kittur. The ramparts of the fort were illuminated and the sound of bugles heralded the triumph. It was indeed a glorious day in the history of India's freedom struggle. The morning star shone brilliantly above the Kittur fort.

The Kittur soldiers had captured a few British women and children. The Queen received the women and children with great kindness. She fondled the children and told them not to be afraid. They were treated as her special guests with customary hospitality. She even sent a special messenger to the British camp informing them that the women and children were safe and could be taken home at the earliest opportunity.

Whatever be the circumstances, women and children are always respected and sheltered. This is a maryada (code) strictly adhered to in Indian culture. The magnanimity and graciousness of the Rani won even the enemy's admiration.

But the Rani was aware of the short lived peace. She tried to negotiate with the British with great dignity, firmness and equanimity, displaying remarkable qualities of statesmanship, but the British were determined to annex Kittur. In a fierce battle that followed, they overpowered the fort and the Bani was imprisoned where she died five years later. The fire of the love of freedom was not extinguished by the defeat. Through indomitable spirit and valour blazed the glory of the freedom movement.

Rani Durgavati

EACH Rajput clan takes pride in the heroic deeds of their ancestors. The memory of gallant ancestors inspires them to great heights. The people of Gondwana in the northern part of Madhya Pradesh recall with pride their accomplished Queen Durgavati.

A woman of tremendous determination and wisdom, she ruled as a regent for her minor son. She was an able administrator. Under her reign, trade, agriculture and commerce flourished. She was a good shot and it was her custom that if a tiger made an appearance she would not drink water until she had shot him.

Around AD.1564, the twenty-two year old Emperor Akbar claimed suzerainty over her state. The indignant Queen sent him a befitting reply. "To aggress is your choice, mine is to remain free. The swords of my ancestors were honoured with the blood of aggressors. The valiant die but once, they are not afraid of death. We are ready to face you with the strength of our trust in God. We offer you friendship on equal terms but anything less we spurn".

The reply enraged Akbar but also aroused his curiosity about the calibre of this brave Queen. He sent two of his most able Generals Asaf Khan and Khan Abdul Majid to bring the Queen to his court alive.

After offering prayers inside the capital fortress of Churugarh, the Queen put on her armour and mounting an elephant, she herself led the troops. She inspired them saying, "It is better to die with glory fighting for the motherland than to live in shame".

She inflicted two successive defeats upon the Moghul army, and would have crushed them completely during the night, had her men supported her. In the next round her son was severely wounded and most of the followers deserted the field. But with three hundred loyal troops she gave a fierce fight till she was seriously injured by two arrows.

Her aide wanted to carry her to safety but she declined, saying, "Though overcome in battle I am not overcome in honour". Unsheathing her sharp dagger she stabbed herself.

Her tomb still stands between the hills of Gondwana, and her spirit is heard beckoning the warriors of Gondwana to fight on for the honour of the Motherland.

Queen Mother Mayanalla

THE SPLENDID monuments of Gujarat speak volumes of their builder Queen Mayanalla. When her husband, King Karna I died in 1094, she took over the reins of

administration and brought up her minor son to be a great King. She was a benevolent Queen and worked tirelessly for the welfare of the people. She is renowned for building two famous lakes.

Queen Mayanalla was a just Queen, a true Rajalaxmi. While devoted to her people she never exerted the pressure of her royal authority on anyone. Popular Gujarati legends pay a glowing tribute to her sense of justice and fair play. The legend goes that when the Queen was building the lake Malav, a house of a courtesan obstructed its symmetry. The Queen offered a large sum of money to the courtesan for acquiring the house but the latter refused saying, "I shall be famous with your lake". With her authority the Queen could have easily ousted her but instead the lake was built circumventing her house. Since then there is a popular Gujarati saying, "If you want to see justice just look at Lake Malav".

Nur Jahan Begum

IN THE solitary tombs of India's vast countryside lie the remains of many great women, Queens and Princesses. An unpretentious, and neglected tomb near Lahore bears a humble inscription.

*"On the grave of us poor people
No roses bloom, no nightingales sing
No friendly lamp dispels the gloom,
The lark and the moth may
Thus he saved the agony of love".*

This was the last will and testament of the Empress Nur Jahan.

At the moment of death she was completely surrendered to God.
She said ,

*'Allah knows all. I was born in a desert and
now my bones will become the sand of the desert".*

She must have reached heaven by sheer humility and surrender. For eleven years she administered the greatest Empire in the world. Her husband, Emperor Jahangir, completely relied on her administrative ability and statesmanship. He even had gold coins struck in her name and "Gold had acquired a hundred—fold beauty with the name of Nur Jahan on it".

Nur Jahan was indeed a remarkable Queen. She was very versatile and accomplished, a great patron of art and learning. She developed a variety of cuisine, jewellery, dress, and even invented the rose essence. Her bath used to be soaked in rose petals overnight for the beauty of her skin.

She was a skilled rider and a renowned shot. On one occasion she shot four tigers. The story goes how a stray arrow from her bow killed a washer man. When the washer man's wife complained to the Emperor he ordered the washer woman to shoot the arrow at himself, being the husband of the criminal, and avenge her husband's death. The washer woman was too overwhelmed and immediately forgave the Queen. A special bell of justice was installed outside the royal court for the poorest citizens to call for justice.

Before taking her last breath she requested her physician to tell the women of the the secret of her success -

"I never said no to my husband; obedience with a smile was the secret of my success. I ruled over the greatest empire by allowing myself to be ruled by one man " .

Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi

THE RUINS of the ancient palaces of India tell tales of unbelievable honour, beauty and sacrifice. Each stone of the Jhansi fort is a monument to glory. Indian historians paid rich tribute to their Queen saying that even the soil of Jhansi is sanctified by the heroic sacrifice of the martyrs; let us pay homage to it.

When the Maratha Chief of Jhansi died without leaving an heir, his widow Bani Lakshmi Bai was not permitted by the British Governor-General to adopt a successor. The State of Jhansi was annexed to the British administration and a paltry pension of Rs. 5000 a month was settled on the Rani.

The year 1857 saw the courageous mutiny by the Indians against the British. Maratha blood boiled in the veins of the Rani. who was eager to shake off the British yoke. She joined the uprising and proclaimed her authority throughout her state. She would herself lead the troops dressed in military uniform. She bravely defended the fort of Jhansi against the ranks The Rani realised the magnitude of the task ahead of her. Without an organised army the British could not be overthrown. She therefore joined forces with the powerful commander Tatia Tope and vigorously started recruiting soldiers from all over the country.

The Rani worked relentlessly, selecting the men, supervising them and organising the ranks. She displayed a great understanding of men and she had a unique military genius. She had tremendous fortitude and would say, "No sacrifice was enough at the altar of freedom"- She was the heroine of the soldiers.

In a bold and surprise attack her combined forces captured the impregnable Gwalior Fort with its vast store of arms and ammunition. The Maharaja of Gwalior fled for his life and- most of the soldiers crossed over to the Bani's force.

The British were naturally stunned by this bold onslaught. They were afraid of such a daring Rani. They immediately gathered their best cavalry that had fought at Balaclava in the Crimean War and charged against the Rani's troops. The British were equipped with far superior batteries against which the Jhansi arms were obsolete and no match. Despite that the Jhansi forces fought to the last man. Seated on her horse the Rani fought valiantly until a bullet hit her and she fell to the ground.

The British commander, General Rose, was so struck by her superhuman force that saluted her fallen body saying, "*We may have won the battle but the glory goes to Jhansi ki Hani*".

Jijabai (A.D. 1594-1674)

INDIA is a vast subcontinent with diverse features and a variety of climates but historically and spiritually the country was always considered as one nation. From

antiquity, perhaps from the all pervading collective consciousness, the realisation of a common Mother dawned. As the population grew, the family unit broadened to clans and then to tribes; but the consciousness of the common Mother of the Universe continued to remain the binding force. The love of the Primordial Mother manifested in the worship of the Mother Goddess.

The bounties of the fertile land were attributed to the blessings of the Earth Goddess Bharat Mata. The land was named Bharatavarsha after King Bharata who ruled, "from south of the snow-clad Himalayas and north of the Indian ocean with seven main ranges of mountains spanning it".

Despite prosperity the people led pious lives, with their attention towards inner spiritual growth and deep inquiry into the nature of life and existence. Attuned with their inner spirit they grew in wisdom and matured in philosophy, long before even the earliest Greek thinker, Pythagoras.

Around 1000 A.D. evil eyes began to turn towards the great wealth of Bharatavarsha. Mahmud of Ghazni raided India seventeen times. By the thirteenth century the Turks ruled most of northern India. In the sixteenth century the Moghuls wrestled the power from the Afghans and established a grand Empire which lasted until the advent of the British. All these aggressions were aimed at exploiting India's wealth, but they failed to penetrate its spiritual fabric.

The Muslim rule was completely alien to the Bharati ethos. The rulers were mostly bigots who tried to convert the inhabitants by force or bribery. Petty jealousies and internal dissensions prevented the local Hindu rulers from offering a unified resistance. But the spirit of Indian women never yielded. With each blow she emerged more determined to throw off the foreign yoke. A woman may not be able to fight physically but she can prepare great sons of Valour and Dharma to do the job. Thus Jijabai prayed fervently to Goddess Shivani for a son who would free the land of foreign tyranny.

Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji, was the most outstanding Queen of Maharashtra. In a conflict between her husband and father, she was torn apart by the loyalty to her father or her husband. Well versed in the duties of a married woman, the determined wife had the fortitude to stand by her husband.

Things came to a difficult head when her husband Shahji remained a staunch supporter of Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar whereas her father changed sides to Nizam's enemies of the Moghal empire. Jijabai never looked back. When her husband was fleeing from the Moghal army, in her pregnant state she could not keep pace with her husband and was soon overtaken by the Moghal forces led by her father. She refused her father's invitation to return with him and instead stayed back at the fort of Shivaneri, where her son was born. Her prayers were granted, and in honour of the guardian goddess of the Shivaneri fort, 'Shivani', she named her son Shivaji.

Jijabai brought up her son on the foundation of Dharma, inspiring him with the stories

of great Indian heroes from which he imbibed fearlessness, courage and valour. She devoted all her energies in developing his character with the virtues of honesty, righteousness, benevolence, justice, tolerance and fair play. He learned his administrative skill from the Pune Jagir. She inspired his vision of a free Maharashtra and his desire to shake off the foreign yoke.

When Shivaji declared his wish to become an ascetic, she sent him back to his kingly duties. Indeed she was the force that led him on from one victory to another. Under her guidance every act was done in obedience to Dharma and in the awe of God.

She had taught him to regard women in high esteem. When she received a desperate message that the honour of women was in peril she invited Shivaji to a game of chess. She checkmated her son, and as a prize demanded the Kondana Fort, then in enemy hands, where the problem lay. The mother's will was his command and he immediately sent his able general Tanaji on the eve of the latter's daughter's wedding.

There was no way to scale the invincible fort. Tanaji had trained large lizards to scale the walls. A rope was tied around them and with their support a man could climb to the top. The Marathas fought fiercely and won but Tanaji was fatally wounded.

Though the Maratha flag was hoisted, the soldiers mourned the death of this great son of Maharashtra. Shivaji's heart was heavy with the loss of Tanaji, he informed his mother, "The fort is won but the Lion has gone."

Jijabai was ahead of her time. She was a great social reformer. During the Moghul invasions many Hindus were persecuted and forced to `embrace Islam. And once a Hindu was converted, he was never accepted back into the Hindu fold, whatever patriotism he might display. Jijabai wanted to break the myth and reconverted Bajaji Nimbalkar to Hinduism. To show that their status was no less, she married her own granddaughter to him.

When Shivaji left for the Moghul court the reigns of administration was held by Jijabai.

She was a benevolent Queen and worked with astounding energy day and night, for the welfare of her people. She was easily approachable; if anyone had a grievance, they could always go to her for redress. To her astute wisdom and strong character we owe the foundation of the Maharashtra Empire.

She lived to see the coronation of her son as Chatrapati Shivaji.

Tara Bai (A.D. 1675-1761)

WHEN ALL the Maratha forces were vanquished and demoralised, the seventeen year old Queen Tara Bai jumped into the forefront and thwarted the Muslim invasion. During the seven years following the death of her husband Ftajaram, the younger son of Shivaji, she bravely led the Maratha forces, moving from fort to fort and displaying a rare military genius. To this day the people of Kolhapur take great pride in their tigress Queen, who by dint of her courage did not allow the mighty Emperor Aurangzeb to impose Moghal rule in the Deccan.

Tara Bai was both able and ambitious. She wanted a throne for her own son and founded the Collateral Ruling House of Kolhapur.

Rani Padmini

BEFORE departing for war it was customary for the warriors to seek the blessings of the elders. The wife would put vermilion mark on the forehead of the husband and propitiate auspicious blessings for his success. The weapons were also worshipped, the sword was charged with prayers for success. The husband was entreated to save the honour of the clan. "Do not think of your family but of saving your honour. Remember to die well is to live forever".

There was also a silent message that should the husband flee the battlefield he would never see her again. To save their honour, woman folk would burn themselves in the ceremony of Jauhar rather than compromise their modesty at the hands of the enemy.

Few men can achieve greatness without the tender nourishment of the wife. Woman possesses the power of perpetually creating in man the qualities she desires, and this is for her an infinitely greater power than any other conferred upon her.

Allaudin Khilji, the Muslim ruler, had heard of the great beauty of Rani Padmini, the wife of Rana Rattan Singh of Mewar. Adhering to the Maryada that a woman would not allow any man to see her, she kept herself in Purdah (veiled). He cunningly sent her gifts declaring himself to be her brother, and desired to meet her in person. However she only allowed him to see her reflection in a mirror. After this he was so enamoured by her exquisite beauty that he wanted to possess her. So he threatened to besiege her palace, in the famous citadel of Chittor, unless the Queen be handed to him.

The people of the kingdom could not bear the insult to the chastity of their Queen because her chastity represented the chastity of all the women. They devised a clever plan of sending 100 palanquins stating that these were the entourage of the Queen. In each was seated a fully armed warrior and the palanquin bearers themselves were hand-picked warriors. The sultan's troops were merry making and getting drunk on the occasion of the Queen's surrender. As the palanquins entered the enemy camp, Queen Padmini's soldiers launched a surprise attack and inflicted heavy casualties. But the sheer numerical strength of the enemy finally overpowered them.

When the Queen did not see the smoke signal of victory she knew that all was lost. She then assembled the women in the fort and addressed them saying. "Lest our honour is defiled by these barbaric men let those among you who desire to perform Jauhar enter into the fire".

Thus offering prayer to the Goddess Jagadamba, they peacefully gave up their souls in the fire to vindicate their honour.

Cornelia Karuna Salve

A WOMAN'S chastity is the axis of the social order. It is the foundation, the Shri Ganesha, upon which the social structure rests, and it is jealously guarded. A man is protected and strengthened by his wife's chastity, but he is made vulnerable and weakened by her deceit. The husband's welfare rests on the strong and chaste foundation of the 'Gruha Laxmi' principle in the wife. An insult to a woman is taken as an injury to the collective womanhood; nay, it defiles the very sanctity of the social order. The whole society rises in arms against the slightest advance or even such a suggestion. Even staring at a woman is sufficient cause for an uprising.

Such a highly evolved society cannot bear freudian thought which it considers barbaric. A woman can only be looked upon as a daughter, sister, wife or mother. A maiden would always be addressed affectionately as a young sister, 'didf, without the slightest suggestion of unholy intent. An unknown woman is addressed with respect and regard as 'mother', 'ma'.

With these sanskaras (auspicious conditionings) and impressions deeply rooted in the Indian psyche, the mother is always secure in any situation, at any hour. As such she becomes an umbrella of security: She responds to the sentiment with genuine affection and concern. She would reach out to anybody's distressed child and give it a warm hug. There would always be a sweet or a little something for every child. She would gladly offer her humble fare to any stranger before satisfying her own hunger, be it even a fellow traveller. The greatest joy for a mother is to feed children and her greatest disappointment is when they do not partake of her cooking. Cooking is by no means an ordeal but an expression of her love which she herself enjoys very much. Her role as a mother assumes greater importance as begetter of children.

A pregnant woman is held in highest respect and is considered most auspicious. This realisation of auspiciousness has exerted a tremendous influence in the evolution of the collective moral consciousness which has given the family unit and the society self-respect, happiness, security and peace.

The spirit which emanates from the Primordial Source manifests on earth as love. This has been experienced for thousands of years in the daily lives of most Indian women. They bring up their children in harmony with the Divine spirit, through the time-honoured code of Dharma and well established tenants of social conduct. The Indian mother forms the bedrock of the social order and its spiritual ascent. Behind every great man is the blessing of his mother.

It is customary to name young girls after some great mother. It was therefore most auspicious to name a daughter Cornelia, after the famous mother of the Gracchi family in ancient Rome, who declared her twin sons to be her jewels in response to the noble women of the place showing of their gems. The Jadhavas of Ahmednagar (Maharashtra) further evoked the virtue of compassion in their daughter's name and she became Cornelia Karuna. Born on 20th December 1892 at Nandgoan village of Maharashtra, she upheld the legacy of her name.

Cornelia was a very active, dynamic and serene child. In her teens she showed such extraordinary brilliance in mathematics that it presented a new dilemma for the parents. In an era when women were confined to the household portals, the thought of exposing a young woman to an open college was unheard of. But Cornelia was determined and became the first woman to graduate in Mathematics Honours from Fergusson College under the tutelage of the great mathematician Rangler Paranjpe.

Cornelia devised new methods of reducing steps in Algebra which won her wide recognition. Even the Shankaracharya of Puri had to bow down before her interpretation of Indian mathematics.

Cornelia was very versatile and well versed in Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi and English. She even studied law. But for all her brilliance she was a simple, generous and very humble person. She had lofty ideas and also lived by them. She would spin the thread of her woven saris, which were always restricted to six. Whenever a new sari came another one would invariably be given away.

As the principal of St. Ursula's High School, Nagpur, she found her monthly salary of 125 Rupees exorbitant and surrendered a balance of 100 Rupees. When the school management committee refused to accept it, she gave it away to charity. She was a self disciplinarian, extremely honest, and was highly respected for straightforwardness. She was full of wisdom and understanding. Her father was well to do and used to bring home chaman grapes, but she would not touch them remembering the millions starving under the British tyranny.

In the year 1920 she married a brilliant barrister, Shri P.K. Salve. It was an ideal marriage for both were extremely selfless, compassionate and highly spiritually evolved. Their patriotic zeal found vent in the meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1928. There was no looking back, no sacrifice was enough. Every Saturday Cornelia would go to clean the colonies of untouchables, whom Mahatma Gandhi called Harijans -

meaning the people of Lord Krishna.

Cornelia was elected president of Congress in Central Provinces. In the freedom struggle she and her husband went to jail several times. The year 1942 was particularly trying; during the Quit India Movement her husband was imprisoned for nearly two years, leaving no income behind for the eleven children.

Cornelia was an extremely self-respecting person, and refused to accept any help from friends. She started a Gram Udyog (village self-help shop) to support her family. This did not dampen her freedom struggle.

In 1934 all freedom fighters were to take a pledge of freedom in public, courting arrest by doing so. A secret message was spread that there would be a very big meeting in Chitnis Park to take a pledge to fight for the freedom to the last drop of blood. Leaving the family in the care of her teenage daughter, Nirmala, she stood on the public platform and took the pledge. She was arrested but later released through the intervention of a family friend because she had little children to look after.

Between the jail and her work Cornelia was devoted to her children, who were brought up with a lot of love but also with strict discipline. A visitor was never sent away without a meal. Both the parents would sit together with the children in the evening and sing hymns and bhajans to evoke their spiritual realisation. Education was a priority, culture and sport activities were encouraged, but frivolous talk and superficiality were taboo. She was a social and collective being.

When her children wanted a badminton court in the house she agreed on the condition that the court would be open to the public also. In this atmosphere charged with swadeshi and patriotism, the children grew up in highest tradition of service before self, sacrifice, and collectivity. Though Christians, the children were given a broad religious education, so that they could understand the similarities of all the great religions must be treated as part and parcel of one universal religion.

She would send the children out to protest against liquor vendors. In 1942 the principal of her daughter Nirmala's college reported her underground activities in the freedom struggle and how she had led a procession boldly facing the British soldiers. Tears of admiration filled Cornelia's eyes and she said, "I am a very proud mother to have such a brave girl".

She had complete trust in her daughter, knowing that one day she was destined to transform the world. When she was pregnant with her, she had a great desire to see a lion in the open. A neighbouring Raja invited the family for the hunt, when suddenly a majestic lion walked before them, like a divine being. Cornelia stopped her husband from taking a shot at him, understanding the significance of the lion related to the divine child Nirmala within her womb. She lived to witness her daughter give spiritual realisation to thousands of seekers of truth all over the world and for her universal recognition as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, the Adi Shakti.

Cornelia was deeply bereaved in 1957 by the death of her husband. However she continued her activities and was offered an M.P. ticket by the Governor of Madhya Pradesh, which she promptly declined because she did not want it just as a compensation for the service rendered by her late husband. The offer was repeated at the next election, which she again turned down, stating that she did not want it merely to warm the seats in the Parliament. She spent most of the time counselling people and helping them. In the evening of her life she was deeply gratified to find prosperity return to her country. Now the grapes were growing in abundance in Maharashtra and she could eat them. In 1970 she peacefully passed away at the ripe old age of 78.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu

Bengal has always been the land of great poets, writers, dramatists, intellectuals, artists, musicians, patriots and freedom fighters. Rabindranath Tagore wrote many songs in its glory describing it as 'Sonar Bangla' - golden Bengal. Its people are traditionally devoted to the worship of the Goddess have inherited a vibrant culture that has preserved the sensitivity to the vibrations of the Spirit. Whenever the sanctity of the Spirit has been defiled the Bengali people called out the battle cry and fought undaunted by against all adversity. They were the catalysts to India's freedom struggle. Heroes and heroines in thousands came forward fearlessly and laid down their lives smilingly for the cause of the nation's freedom, wishing that they could do more. Even the pages of History are inadequate to contain the record of their wondrous deeds. Not even immortality bows before their towering shadow. In these chapters that narrate the deeds of a few such women one may catch a glimpse of the sacrifices of Indian womanhood. The Bengali poet did not exaggerate when he said, "Let us kiss this sacred earth, its soil is nurtured by the blood of martyrs".

One such daughter of Bengal was Sarojini Naidu, affectionately known as the 'Night-ingale of Bengal'. A poetess turned freedom fighter, she so believed that "Until and unless we raise the fallen women in this country and make their voice heard, India's salvation will only remain a distant dream". Herself a Cambridge graduate, she championed the cause of women emancipation and succeeded in getting the resolution passed for women's franchise.

When Mahatma Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience movement she was the first to take the lead. During the communal riots she became the peacemaker, affirming, "Without unity how can we attain freedom"? When Mahatma Gandhi was arrested in 1922, in his parting message he told her "I trust the unity of India in your hands". She propagated the non co-operation movement and was the first woman to be elected as the president of the Indian National Congress in 1925.

Addressing the congress she said, "I am fully aware that you have bestowed upon me the richest gift in your possession but rather in generous tribute to Indian womanhood and as token of your loyal recognition of its legitimate place in the secular and spiritual councils of the nations". "Mine, as becomes a woman, is the most modest domestic programme merely to restore India her true position as the supreme mistress in her own home, the sole guardian of her own vast resources and the sole dispenser of her own hospitality. As a loyal daughter of Bharat Mata, therefore, it will be my lovely, though difficult task, through the coming year, to set my house in order, to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old joint family life of diverse communities and creeds and to find an adequate place, purpose and recognition alike for the lowest and highest of her children and foster children, the guests and strangers within her gate". When the British imposed martial law she openly condemned it and returned the Kaiser-i-Hind medal to the government in protest.

Despite ill-health she reached South Africa to fight the Anti-Historic Bill of 1924, which intended to exterminate the Indian community in South Africa. She urged the Indians, "You must with one united voice give an answer to the Government and say that although in natural history rivers don't flow backwards, we shall make the river of your decision flow backwards". She delivered over two hundred lectures in America explaining, "It is futile to aspire for freedom of the world without a free India". When she returned home she charged the Indian youth with, "Give me liberty or death".

In 1930 she led a salt march upon Dharasena. At the prayer meeting she exhorted the volunteers, "Gandhi's body is in jail but his soul is with you. India's prestige is in your hands, you must not use any violence under any circumstance. You will be taken but you must not resist." The police rained blows on their heads with steel shafts and Sarojini was jailed again. Finally in 1947 her dream of independence was realised and she had the privilege of being the first Governor of U.P. until she passed away in March 1949, her mission completely fulfilled.

Mrs. Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya (1903)

Kamla Devi was a child widow who broke the caste bonds and remarried the brother of

Mr. Naidu. This courageous lady was the first woman to contest for elections for the legislative assembly of Madras in 1920.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 Kamla Devi openly prepared salt and sold it, even in the High Court premises. When she was taken to the court for trial she invited the magistrate to buy salt and started selling it in the court room. She even asked the magistrate to resign and join the Civil Disobedience Movement. For this she was jailed for six months.

After her release she made a whirlwind tour of the country, training volunteers for the service of the country. She was arrested for her political work a number of times. She was kept along with the criminals in a single barrack. There were no proper bathrooms. In addition she had to sweep the barracks and verandahs twice a day, clean the vessels and wash the latrines. But this did not deter her spirit.

After independence she rendered yeoman's service in reviving handicrafts and the traditional cottage industries of the country. The woman of war became the artisan's messiah. She foresaw the great role of village industry as a solution to India's employment and economic problems and worked arduously for the artisans' cause.

She received the Padma Bhushan and Magsaysay Award.

The Mother
by Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi

IT IS the Mother who created the universe. The Father was just a witness to the whole

show. It is she who works out the whole thing. It is She who makes it beautiful, so that He sees the show and becomes the Spectator, because She loves Her creation. The Father wants it to be such that He should be able to love it. He's a perfectionist. He wants everything to be perfect. But a mother accepts the child as it is because it is her own creation. If there is a defect in the child she accepts that defect as her own and she works for it. She works very hard. So sacrifice because you enjoy it, you enjoy doing that you enjoy working for your children and if it was not so, this world would never have existed.

The mother has to bear things when the child is to be born. Actually it's a test of her love at that time, but still she goes on with it because she wants a child. But when this motherhood is spoiled in its image, when the mothers are no more mothers, when they are not respectable, then they are not respected. When children don't respect their mothers, it is because they have no respect for anything else whatsoever. The first and last thing is the respect for the mother. If one does not respect the mother or motherhood that means he has no respect for himself either. So how does he exist? He exists through his mother. So the mother is a very, very important institution for the whole creation, for your creation and for the creation of your children and all the progeny that has to come.

What does the mother provide us with? What part of our being is she? She is everything. But your personal mother, who you know very clearly is your mother, has given you this birth and this body. She gives you the nourishment when you are in the foetal state. And later on, when you grow up, she gives you all the physical nourishment that is needed for your growth. She enjoys it or otherwise she feels overburdened. She wants to give it and everyone appreciates that. It's a collective enjoyment. It's going on and it can be seen in all the paintings of the world, all over the world in every language, in every country, every religion. The mother with her child has been the main theme of paintings and expressions of the most joyous moment for painters. Poets also have written such a lot on that. Every kind of manifestation of joy in all the human endeavour has been on this theme.

But the mother who is your own mother, whom you know as your own mother, who gives you physical birth, is the mother who gives you much more than you know of. Because her blood has a vibration and when she gives you her blood, she gives you her vibrations. She gives you her sustenance, she gives you her desire and also she gives you a push in your evolution, if she is an evolved person. Now in the relationship of mother and child, the mother gives a lot. She makes your complete left side. She creates all the left side in you because she has desired you so she creates that. On the right side she gives you all the beauty of delicate things and also the hunches that you get in your business. All the flexible moments of your life when you think, from what unknown have I got this? That's your mother's blessing on you. You choose your own mother too, when you are born. So no use condemning your mother because she's like this, she's a horrid woman, she's this and that. Now you have children, so better have it. She is a very big part of you, but she also has to be something great to be a mother.

It's a most responsible position, that of the mother. To be a mother is a greater responsibility than that of a King, because a King can only go up to material level or up to physical level. At the most a philosopher can go up to rational level and the emotional level may be fulfilled by the wife. All these things may be done by other people, but the spiritual level you can only achieve from your mother.