

Homages and souvenirs collected between Oct. 2019 and Jan. 2020 after Nirmala's demise

Nirmala was a great lady, simple, direct, present.

I met her in Pune and asked her about Vanasthali, about herself, about her path. And after only five minutes, she asked : « what about you ? What do you do ? What are your plans ? » And we talked about the mothers and babies I was working with at « La Grande Borne ».

During this stay in India, assisting a presentation of diplomas, I was struck by the testimonies of these new teachers, saying how Vanasthali and Nirmala had made them self confident, not only for teaching, but also as mothers. In their husbands families, they were rather neglected, bringing up their children as best they could, often under criticism. But with their training and its questioning about their personality and capacity, they said they started being aware of their children's education.

I could see them taking the microphone and assert themselves with the same expression as the mothers when they had acquired some self consideration in our Grigny reception centre for parents and children.

I felt very close to Nirmala in our similar works of giving confidence : being in the field, with people, linking people together, finding who is able to do what, looking for funds, inventing ways. I am very touched at hearing of her demise.

I was hiking in the Pyrenees when I got to know it and I was walking alone between a fast group ahead and a slow one behind. I sat near a brook to say good bye to her, to remember her quietly.

And again after five minutes, it was as if she had been here, with the bubbling of the brook, she asked me : « what about you ? What do you do ? how are your projects ? »

And I explained, I dreamt with her and we shared humour and our common and practical concern for others which are an integral part of our relationship.

She was a great lady, with a clear and deep look and meeting her gave me confidence and comforted me in the choice of my path .

Thank you, Nirmala.

Carole

I'm sad to hear of Nirmala's death. With Entr'Inde, I had the opportunity of meeting this great lady several times ; she was a major figure in the fight against illiteracy in Indian villages and for the empowerment of women in her organisation.

I'll remember mainly her strength of conviction and her sense of humor, particularly in French.

She appreciated my friend Bruno Chevalier who contributed to the purchase of the Somatne centre.

Jean-Michel

I am so very sad!!!! She would always have a smile in her eyes when we met, even near her last days... I know I will miss her a lot. She made a lot of difference in many peoples lives! A life to learn from...

Rashmi

This demise affects us greatly, her commitment allowed us as westerners to discover a real India, far from the usual clichés and this changed our lives. For India, Nirmala's engagement was important for the development, she could encourage vocations, entail numerous women into progress in giving them a social importance, giving children access to education, studies and much more. We shall miss her.

Joëlle

A noble soul, strong and committed, an model for many of us.

Ilonka

Nirmala marked our lives, we admire her action in the NGO she created for the benefit of the rural children.

Tristan

India being mainly rural, you had understood that development was linked with education and you created Vanasthali. You had understood that a child's awakening begins early, long before the age of primary school and you decided to create pre-primary classes like those you had discovered in France. I had the opportunity to visit some of these « balwadi » with you in the villages. To create a class, finding a small place in convincing a family to lend it or using part of a village temple was enough . Each beginning required to invent. And You had to train local women to make them able to train others on the spot.

There were so many friends to meet,...
and also being a witness of your work...

In Pune, we could visit the students hostels, meet women active in animation and responsible. We could visit village schools and see how teachers educate and show how to create beauty with very small means.

Marie-Françoise

I came to know Nirmala through Marie-Noël who told me about her when we were both working in Algeria. I'm sad for her being no longer with us. She was a great lady, very simple and completely dedicated to her work. Entr'Inde was created after a stay in India and I'm a member. What Nirmala accomplished is remarkable for the rural women : she gave them an opportunity to somehow emancipate themselves from the submission and limiting traditions.

Nirmala was a sort of a feminist in her own way, practical and efficient. She gave me a positive vision of the country , with many people in associations working to improve it. She permitted me to discover a culture that was new for me.

So long, Nirmala

Simone

A great lady of whom I will keep a magnificent souvenir for ever. The Indian children in villages are lucky finding her, thus their future will become different .

Thank you, Nirmala.

See you later.

Françoise

Nirmala was a very simple person. She did not consider herself as exceptional, but she could raise mountains, as if it were quite natural. She was fearless, ignored obstacles. She was simple also in her way of being with others, naturally and without fuss. direct and straight forward, she pushed everybody to contribute and commit oneself as she did. Entr'Inde was our response to it after a stay in India, meeting Vanasthali.

Violette

In Pune we had many meetings at Vanasthali, Vidyarthi Sahayak Samiti and Francis Mitra Mandal. to pay homage to Nirmala.. She was associated with these organisations for many years. On 2nd August we had a reorientation course for our Supervisors and Assistants Supervisors. We held a special homage meeting for these ladies. We all are very sad ; but we all are determined that we will carry forward her work with the same dedication.

VRDC

When I first met Nirmala, I was a student in Paris and I was one of her guides in the city. She had had a short training in French in Besançon before and though I was able to communicate in English, she insisted in using French and I admired her for that.

We met again in Pune, and I came to know her better and discovered her work. Later, after a long period, I decided that my husband and children should know such a great friend, so important to me, whom I had so much told them about.

She took me and my family around the villages, meeting the balwadi children and teachers there ; for

us, learning about them, discovering their difficulties, their commitment, their enthusiasm was amazing . As I thanked Nirmala for these interesting visits, she explained me that it was also important for the children and their teachers, because our visit proved the importance of what they do, since we were coming from abroad to see them ; this is how Nirmala took advantage of any occasion for the benefit of all. Back home, one of my sons declared « for once, we are not studying a foreign country » when India was in his geography program ! ... then, he decided to create a website on Vanasthali and we are still in charge of it after more than 20 years !

All this, along with my first experience with the Friends of France (1968, the second « plongée »), induced me with some colleagues to organise a school exchange with Fergusson College and the lycée of Bretigny where I was teaching. The program in Pune included of course activities with Nirmala and Vanasthali , as an unique occasion for our students to discover a different aspect of India, people working to improve the life in villages.

Several times, Nirmala challenged us (me, my family and Entr'Inde, the association created to facilitate our collaboration), asking us to organise a program for a group of farmers, then for a group of architects, with special visits adapted to their particular interests; and she sent us 4 of her supervisors for 7 weeks, and again 2 others for 4 weeks, and this was a fantastic experience for us as well as a hard job we did not know we were capable of.

These Indian teachers became part of the staff in two nursery schools in Saint Michel, the French teachers, students and parents still remember it after 13 and 11 years. As for the architects and farmers, we are still in contact and they occasionally collaborate with Vanasthali or Friends of France.

Nirmala inspired us . She was a great friend, a part of our family. We travelled together to Rome to see my daughter, to Chambéry, Cologne, Besançon, Saint Martin la Plaine and other places to meet some of her numerous French friends, she invited some other friends of hers at our place when she was tired of travelling and it was an immense pleasure to come to know them all.

Nirmala I used to phone for a recipe, for news or details to put on the website, or just for the pleasure of hearing your voice,

Nirmala, who asked me if you would still have your room in my place when I moved,

Nirmala, always full of new ideas and plans, always ready to transform any occasion into a positive project,

Nirmala, my first visit as soon as I arrived in Pune after travelling a long night,

Nirmala always attentive to others,

you changed my vision of life for ever.

I'm very proud of having been your friend,

I miss you.

Marie-Noël

Nirmala, « la vieille dame indigne »

It was for sure a great shock when I heard the news of Nirmala's last breath. I of course knew about her long disease and was expecting this to happen sooner or later, but there is always a part of hope that we could meet again and continue our passionate discussions about society, women, India and France. However, my overall feeling is an immense gratitude for what she offered me as a life-changing experience.

I had the great chance to spend 4 years in Pune (2006-2010) as a representative for Asmae, a French NGO working in partnership with other NGOs worldwide for children rights. I was first introduced by in Maharashtra Nirmala for a one-year assignment with Vanasthali Foundation team - working on an impact evaluation for its 25th anniversary.

We had a first contact by phone – and Nirmala's voice is indeed what has left a strong impact on me. A deep voice, able to be so strong to call out VIPs, political leaders, as well as large women groups, raising issues and expressing her disagreement to make things changed – but also to be soft-spoken, sympathetic, even charming, whenever needed. Over the phone, when I was still in Paris, she was trying to convince me not to come over to Pune, explaining how difficult living conditions could be for me in India and questioning my readiness to adjust. That was indeed the first test I had to pass

with her! And over the year spent at Vanasthali, I got used to her voice calling me in the late afternoons, once office work was over and we could have very long discussions on many topics, comparing France and India on their approach to gender and women issues, old age home, social work as well as music or literature!

Beyond her voice, what has left a strong impression on me is her eyes. The way she looked at you was so intimidating, very deep, sometimes strong and demanding (exigeant), looking for something deeply buried, with the firm intention of revealing your inner truth. I sometimes felt like a little girl being scrutinized without being able to hide nor escape. I guess her eyes reflected both the hard situations she witnessed and her strong will to change them. The way she looked at landscapes and villages we crossed during our long car trips across Maharashtra, to meet Vanasthali teachers and trainees, has been very instructive for the foreign ignorant I was. From a simple scene or a detail, she could elaborate on sociological analysis and cultural explanations. I learnt so much by listening to her and looking at things with her.

According to me, her eyes and her voice were main tools for her dedication and commitment to empower women as agents of change in Maharashtra. She refused situations of injustice she could observe, and she raised her voice to make change happen. I remember male politicians or social leaders feeling disturbed or even ashamed by her words – or sometimes amused and charmed, and thus getting convinced to give more time, energy or money to her cause. From her, I learnt about the importance of never giving up when you fight for a cause. She knew how to sow small seeds of change, in people, and waiting for the seed to grow. Refuse, claim, sow, be patient. And be rooted as well. She used to tell her memories about her one year stay in France, an experience that definitely contributed to shape her commitment – while being very lucid about her will to make change happen in her own country. I keep this precious in my mind, and that's the reason why I came back to France and got involved with social organizations here. Of course she was asking me several times to continue to support Vanasthali Foundation's work from Paris – and I am very impressed by the long term friendships she could establish overseas, but I felt the best way to continue her legacy was to act locally as well.

However, this portrait would not be fair without mentioning the kind of mischief (malice) I discovered while traveling and working with her. Beyond the public character, I really enjoyed her sense of humor when observing people and situations. Her face would lighten up with a laugh due to a memory or a child's word, and I always felt warmed up by this spontaneity and the bond it created with her. It was great seeing her simple joy when we brought back decorated paper napkins from France – a treasure she would hang on her walls – or children and trainees' creativity's results. This pragmatism and mischief revealed according to me how far she in a way remained with a child's mind, in spite of her long experience and achievements – being able to constantly question established institutions and ways of thinking.

Such a strength combined with spontaneity made me think of a French phrase, from a movie title, “la vieille dame indigne”, when thinking of her: the very precious positioning of an old lady who, based on her experience, feels free to think and act outside of mainstream ideas and models. For all this, and this huge legacy, there is only one word for me – though I know it is not very used in Marathi: Merci, Nirmala.

Agnès