

[The Eye: Iconoclastic Zine for Young Indians](#)

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Small Staff and Little Money Haven't Deterred The Eye from Trying to Make a Difference

Interviews and report by Anandhi, New Delhi

It took some sleuthing to find The Eye, perched atop a garage at the back of a modern house in Delhi. But how to get up? Ah! I found a hidden spiral staircase and ascended, wondering if this was really the office of SPIC-MACAY's youth-driven culture journal. Suddenly a young girl (everyone younger than you in India is a "girl") in a bright red saalwar kameez opened the door. Convinced that I am at someone's private residence, I apologize, "I'm sorry. I thought this was the office of The Eye magazine. I am afraid I have come to the wrong place, but the address isâ€¦" "Yes, it is. You have come from Hinduism Today? Rukmini is waiting for you."

The office we entered was very small. Two big tables occupied most of the room. An electric kettle bubbled in a corner. On the wall hung a board with cover pages of The Eye pinned to it. On the table were strewn a few books and a newspaper. No hustle and bustle here. This is The Eye, the culture magazine published by Spic-Macay-that unique society dedicated to inspiring youth to better appreciate India's classical art traditions, especially music. Year-round, they invite India's greatest singers and instrumentalists to perform for students-an interesting group raised mostly on techno-synthesizer sounds mixed with playback voices modulated beyond human recognition. When the traditional artists do their magic, live, the reaction is always the same-students are "blown away" that classical could be so "awesome."

Called a "Written Word Movement," The Eye is a SPIC-MACAY effort to cultivate interest among university youth in the world of ideas, specifically through the crafted, intelligently written word-as threatened a species in India as everywhere.

Editor-in-chief Rukmini Sekhar entered the office with a smile, hands folded in a namaskaram. Having read some of her maturely composed editorials, I expected a middle-aged lady. Instead, she was quite young, and very charming. "Did you find it difficult to find the place?" she politely inquired. "I am so happy you have come." She introduced her colleague, "Poornima looks after the magazine in general and is totally committed."

"This doesn't have the appearance of a magazine office," I comment. "Where are your other colleagues? Where are the artists? Where is your press?" Both Rukmini and Poornima smile. "This is it. We don't have a press. Eye is printed elsewhere. Those who put together this magazine are friends and well-wishers. They do this because they think it is worthwhile. "Even the artists?" I ask. "Yes. Even the layout artist."

At first glance through a few issues, I note a staggering editorial diversity-art, spirituality, ecology, socio-economics and lots of fiction, by the nation's best. Doomsdayists told them that India's youth wouldn't touch it. Too cerebral. They were wrong. The Eye just celebrated its third birthday with a healthy following of 30-and-unders. But it's not all that smooth sailing. Due to limited resources, The Eye has just cut back from bi-monthly to quarterly.

For a person who is accustomed to read magazines with a tilt towards politics, culture, party interests, social issues, etc. The Eye seems a magazine without a particular goal. After browsing through some of the back issues, it is evident that the editorial staff is trying to present to the readers as many subjects as possible, in as concise a manner as possible. The variety is staggering.

Each issue explores one major subject, for instance "Storytelling and Folklore" with a mix of short articles. But it is quality treatment of this main theme that is their forte. Instead of letting one writer, corner and constrain the subject, they invite a number of minds to commune with the subject. Contradiction is game and dogmatism is discouraged. Eye's topics are novel.

One whole issue was on walking. It was one of the most soulful issues, tackling walking as art, spirituality, social protest, music and sensual pleasure. Included was a spell-binding diary of two penniless Indian idealists who walked around the earth

for peace-got attacked by sandstorms in the Khyber pass, were saved from a -30°ree; winter by two women from a Russian tea factory, jailed by President De Gaulle and ultimately joined a 700-mile peace march to Hiroshima. Another issue featured Nada-three-score pages that actually made the "Soundless Sound of the Universe" sing for a while. A recent issue on dharma-a tough enough nut to crack, much less make exciting-took the student far beyond the simple Hindu prescription/definition "Dharma is righteous duty." It had more the feeling of an astrophysicist digging into the elusive photon and finding it divine, decidedly real, relevant, even mechanical. (See sidebar, "Eye Excerpts" below)

Full of questions, I sat with Rukmini Sekhar [see "From the Crow's Nest"]. Her answers revealed to me something of The Eye's soul, something of the soul of India's youth, seeking the depths of meaning today as indeed they always have.

Sidebar: From the Crow's Nest: Interview with the Editor-in-Chief

Hinduism Today: You have been the editor of The Eye since it began in 1992. How did this come about?

Rukmini Sekhar: With nervousness and apprehension! (Laughs.) But before proceeding, let me say a few words about SPIC MACAY, Society for the Promotion of Indian Music, Arts and Culture Among Youth. This organization has been going for 17 years, working to sensitize India's students to the beauty of the Indian classical realm, especially the performing arts. Its less obvious agenda is to inculcate in youth-so programmed now only to "get"-a spirit of giving and serving, as well as catalyze internalization of the spiritual values so deeply enshrined in India's arts.

When Kiran Seth, founder of SPIC MACAY [Hinduism Today, Sept. 1992], and I discussed the journal idea, we only knew that we wanted it to be "inspirational," an antidote to the social/mental complacency among youth and, in an unpreachy way, prod them to develop their highest potential and exercise it as citizens. Eye would include some news, but mainly whet their minds about the various aspects of their four-thousand-year-old culture. Frankly, I personally just hoped it would contribute to a better, more thinking society. Members thought I should be in charge. It sounded daunting and exciting. So, with no formal editorial experience, I decided to have a go at it.

HT: Has it been easy?

RS: Yes and no. Every writer-and many are eminent national figures-agreed to put pen to paper for free. I detected that they felt an inner obligation to share their wisdom with the next generation, not sell it.

We were very broke then and couldn't afford to pay office space rent. Arjun Malhotra of HCL not only took us on in his Barsati scooter but also donated the computer on which I type articles. Then a diplomat's wife, Sujata Pandey, joined us for about a year.

Our next halt was this two-room annex on top of the garage of the home of Mr. & Mrs B.S. Keshavan. The rent is picked up by well-wishers. For a while, I worked mostly alone on the editorial front but was invaluablely aided in graphics and production by numerous high-energy, really talented students studying in Delhi.

One memorable day occurred while I was shopping for clothes. An old friend approached me, Poornima Narayanan, my classmate from college in Kerala, now living in Delhi. I have this terrible habit of talking about The Eye in a sort of breathless, pathetic manner, and I asked her to come over to our office. She did, and now tends the business side of the magazine as well as being our associate editor.

HT: Who pays the bills-ads, subscriptions, SPIC-MACAY or other patrons?

RS: A combination. The Eye has many foster parents, notably, of course, the SPIC-MACAY extended family who bails us out of financial hard times and clusters around each new issue to lick stamps and tell us how great we are doing! Each issue is priced at Rs. 14 which is ridiculously cheap, thanks to a few generous patrons determined that it be affordable for all students.

HT: Are you optimistic about Eye's future?

RS: The journal will never really be very populist. Yet, it is getting recognized. Despite all the problems, we love producing it, definitely see it doing some good and so will forge on. So, if we sound likeable, try us out!

HT: You are originally from South India?

RS: Yes, I grew up in Kerala, but went to school in Madras at Good Shepherd Convent. I studied in Kodaikanal for sometime then did my degree courses back in Madras. So part of me is in Tamil Nadu, part in Kerala, and part here in Delhi.

HT: Anything you can share about your upbringing?

RS: My parents are a very traditional Nair family. My father, a strict disciplinarian, believes in the values found in the Indian classics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana and made me read them. Also Western classics. He insisted I learn Malayalam. Every time I came home for vacation, there was both a music teacher and language teacher waiting for me. I studied Carnatic music for seven years. My father likes temples and the ritualistic aspects of Hinduism. My mother is more philosophical. My upbringing was liberal, a mix of Western and traditional. Very few of my generation grew up like this.

HT: Is the Eye Hindu, per se?

RS: Many people assume it has a thrust on Hinduism, but although it leans predominantly Hindu, it is, in fact, Indian, not Hindu.

HT: Your logo is the third eye of Shiva?

RS: Yes, but this symbol is now universally accepted as a symbol of wisdom, or supreme consciousness, acceptable to all seekers of wisdom. The "eye" knows no

one religion.

HT: Is the Eye then trying to make youth think like Indians?

RS: The first challenge is just to make people think! People are fed so full with information these days, it doesn't matter how much data and news we put in the journal. It has to provoke Indians to think, then think as Indians, then think for India.

HT: I heard that Swami Vivekananda personally inspires you, true?

RS: The maternal side of my family has always been involved with Sri Ramakrishna and the RK mission. As a teenager, I read Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. I was fascinated by Ramakrishna, a pure mystic with no qualms about flouting the social norm in order to discover life's meaning for himself. I identified with his spirit of adventure. In Vivekananda I discovered a man who not only loved this country but understood its myriad problems. The combination was fantastic. My mother and grandmother suggested that I get initiated into the Order with a japa mantra which they felt would give me a focus for meditation and instill discipline. So I was given a mantra by Mokshaprana Mataji in Madras in 1978. In all honesty, I must say that I should be much more regular in my practice, yet the mantra does give me strength. I visited Dakshineswar when I went to Calcutta and was very moved. There is something there. I have also read the writings of the great Western thinkers and many of our other great sages, including Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi. The kind of total abandonment and mystical state he was in most of the time appealed to me. People should be allowed to be adventuresome if they want to understand Self. Our society puts too many strictures on people and doesn't allow them to explore or experience their deepest stirrings. And a woman's situation is worse.

HT: What Hindu belief most intrigues you?

RS: Karma. I have experienced it. That everything you do has an impact and it can snowball into something positive or something negative.

HT: You live all alone?

RS: Yes, I live alone! It is not easy for a woman to live alone in Indian society. It is so sexist. Society doesn't encourage adventurism in women-a fact of patriarchy. Men do not like to listen to women or take them seriously. And all the time you are made to feel, "Who are you anyway?" When you feel utterly dejected, you are put to the test. If you lean on your inner strength, you grow. If you give in, you don't. But of course, women do feel lonely when things go wrong and you wish there were someone there to help you cope. Though my parents do not like me living alone, it is thanks to them that I have a house I could never afford on the income from this work. When I was younger-I am now 37-I used to feel restless and seek out company. Over the years, I have really come to love solitude. Honestly, with all the work that I need to do I don't really feel lonely. A bit alone and overworked, yes, but not really lonely, at least at this point of time. Navigating a small magazine is not easy. Struggle has its own rewards. I have a fulfilling life.

I don't know whether I want to spend my days proving a point to a spouse or simply just go ahead and do things. People tell me that I'm shortsighted and that I'll regret this decision, and maybe I will. Don't get me wrong-I have great faith in the institution of marriage. As long as there are children involved, there must be nurture and that means commitment. It's just that I wonder whether a few of us can be different.

HT: The Eye is full-time for you?

RS: Yes, six days a week. No fixed hours. I'm not paid much. Commercial salaries are out of the question.

HT: Are you a vegetarian?

RS: Kerala Nairs are sanctioned non-vegetarians. However, over time I have begun to prefer vegetarian food. Being from a fish-eating community, I grew up with it and still enjoy it.

HT: You are very idealistic. Do you have to compromise your ideals in your work?

RS: A metropolis like this runs on its own set of dynamics. Take, for instance ,giving bribes just to get things done. Of course, complying does not make you happy. But if you don't stay somewhat detached, it can really make you genuinely bitter.

HT: What were you doing before The Eye?

RS: My experiment with the corporate sector was disastrous. I wasn't cut out for it. I got involved with SPIC MACAY about ten years ago and worked with intach (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). They work to preserve all man-made and natural heritage. For a while I tried to get young people involved in this and I also got seriously interested in ecology. In 1991, I took some courses at the Schumacher College in Devon, England.

HT: What has been the most inspiring time of your life?

RK: As a child. The balcony of our house jutted out onto a lake. This lake became a friend of mine-a powerful area. I used to sit there and watch the lake in all its moods. Sometimes it got black and angry and would even flood our living room! The flicker of the lights of fishing boats at night moving across the lake was like a mystical experience. Happiness stops when wonderment stops. Little things like lights moving on lakes make us happy.

I go trekking often. I like mountains. My happiest moments are when I am in nature. I love literature too. For example when I read the line, "When I hold a grain of sand in my hand I see infinity," I felt high for days.

HT: Do you do yoga?

RK: I do asanas.

HT: You say you want to "make youth proud of being Indian and our Indian heritage." But today so much that we see doesn't inspire pride.

RS: India's greatness is dormant. It is scary to think that in the future kids will not know the greatness of Indian thought. We were the only country in the world with the wherewithal to be different, but at Independence time, we sold ourselves. "Modern India!" (Laughs). Before Independence, we were Indians. We could have chosen a different course. This is the tragedy of the whole Far East. So little left of indigenous culture. Economic development is there, but we have no originality left, no individuality and are increasingly becoming vulgarized human beings. But, amazingly, there is a revival and resurgence coming up. Indian culture will triumph-and even be a guiding light in the future on the planet-even if we have to hit rock bottom first!

Sidebar: Eye Excerpts

Part of the allure of The Eye is that it isn't pure classical. Yes there's the expected, and superb, spotlights on great art and great artists-Subbulakshmi, Pandit Jasraj, et al.-but there's also a very grounded, 90s, loose feel. Here are just a few clips.

This tribute to her music teacher Ustad Zahirauddin Dagar by Rukmini Sekhar beautifully illustrates Eye's philosophy and why she is its editor. "I used to learn from him much more than music. He taught me about about sacrifice and familial love. When the door closed behind us for an hour of music lessons, Bamaji would take me into a charmed world of the most austere music, ascending step by step up the ladder of notes till the raga meandered its way through our beings. My mind, often flitting like a mad monkey, would be tugged to attention by a gentle cough. For most of the sessions, Bamaji's eyes would be closed and finally, when they did open, it was to announce the end of the class." [Vol. II, No. 5]

Nearing 100, famous author Dr. Shivarama Karanth reminisces India "the way it was." "It used to be unnecessary to have written transactions for lending or

borrowing; people relied on word of mouth. At my father's shop, if a customer were to discover that he had insufficient cash to make a purchase, he would promise to make it up by a certain date. It was a general belief that violating a promise of debt is an utter sin. Brahmins would go hungry several days a week but never leave the village. I married a girl from a different caste. I did not give or receive a single paisa. Thinking back, I feel cheated. I could have made a big fortune just by marrying! Today marriage has degenerated into a buy/sell transaction." [Vol. II, No. 5]

Here's a taste of their humorous side, by avowed cynic Ashish Kumar, columnist for Delhi's First City magazine. "In the land of Shantiniketan there is very little shanti. On a visit to this celebrated campus, I asked the university bookshop for an English copy of Geetanjali. The paan-chewing Bhadraklok said, 'Out of print, dada.' Tagore, in his own setting, is in short supply. We talk of the Information Age. The sole purpose of the custodians of information is to sit in custody; the less anyone knows, the better. Ignorance is bliss and bliss is moksha. We have become a mediocre race. VIP culture thrives. Amongst the mail I receive, there was an invitation to attend a VIP Meditation Camp by one Bharat Nirman Society. Societies like these need to meditate on the issue, VIP. Why does one need to be an important person? We do lip service to heritage, history, culture and civilization. But look at our museums. They are museum pieces themselves." [Vol. II, No. 5]

A college girl who loves strolling vents her frustration about boys harassing girls in public—a practice still widely accepted as a "boys will be boys" adolescent privilege.

"It isn't as though young women on the roads of Delhi aren't used to being whistled at or having crude remarks flung at them. But why must we shrug it off as an occupational hazard?" [Vol. 2, No. 3]

And a classic on the spiritualizing force of sound. "What does the sound configuration of mantra and raga do? When vibrations of such carefully constructed sound patterns pass through one's body, as breath or as sound, they stimulate nerve centres and psychic forces, the vitality and intellect, exposing the spiritual capacity." [Vol. 4, No. 1]

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