

## Book Reviews

---

### *Autobiographies and Women Activists: A New Perspective of Open and Distance Learning, Barnana Guha Thakurta (Banerjee); The Registrar, Netaji Subhas Open University, ISBN:978-93-82112-58-7, Hardbound, Price: 395*

The book attempted to wed rich themes of feminist political activism in Bengal to the vivid autobiographies of the female political activists of the fifties and sixties, hooking readers with an illustrious narrative. It piqued us with personal and political life of the women activists that drove hard the readers to contemplate the meaning and the scope of the book with rigor and zest. Thus the driving point of the book had been to probe into the life-course of these activists through their autobiographies. The book chose to cherry-pick autobiographies as a way to study the life and role of the activists since through this approach, both the personal and political life of the women activists can be explored with clarity and precision. This approach claims to be unclichééd since it had decided not to tread the hackneyed path of studying the life and work of the women political activists through their participation in political processes, movements or their travails and tribulations, but had rather taken up a fresh perspective.

The author, Dr. Barnana Guha Thakurta (Banerjee) feels that the perspective is a step ahead in understanding the role of the women activists with precision since the earlier attempts failed to comprehend their characters from multiple angles. The making of the activists cannot be gauged solely by the official discourse where the activist tends to speak out more as a member of any political affiliation and hence lack clarity and entirety. Such approaches tend to be more myopic and fail to bring out the true selves. Dr. Banerjee feels autobiographical approaches instead attempts to “bring forth their inner voices through their personal account explicitly stated in their autobiographies. This is important not only for the discipline of Gender Studies but more for the discipline of Political Science since much of their role studied so far, was determined mostly by the official discourse where the activist tends to speak more as a member of any political organization and hence, may not reflect their true selves.” (Guha Thakurta Banerjee:2018:10). Dr. Banerjee moreover, felt that political connections often

flagged the individuals with political compulsions and obligations that made them oblivious of the interstices of life that might otherwise be found through their banal activities best unfurled through autobiographies. Banerjee felt, “when we look them through their autobiographies several small incidents of their lives unfurls the different shades of their personalities along with the inner relation which they shared with the organization. Here lies the significance of an autobiography” (2008:10).

**Biographical research** is a form of qualitative research approach sharing alliance to the social interpretive research paradigm. The biographical research is based on the reconstruction of life histories and framing their meanings based on biographical narratives and documents. The method for their analysis consists of interview protocols (memorandums), video recordings, photographs, and a diversity of sources. These documents are collected and analysed according to specific rules and criteria. The vantage point for this approach is the comprehension of an individual biography in terms of its social constitution, political turmoil and its historical interstices. The biographical approach was impacted by the symbolic interactionist and the phenomenological approach of Alfred Schütz, Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann and ethno-methodology of Harold Garfinkel. Therefore, autobiography is understood in terms of a socio-political construct that can help in bridging the gap between micro-, meso-, and macro- levels of analysis. The biographical approach is particularly important in German sociology. This approach is used in the Social Sciences as well as in Pedagogy and other disciplines.

This book stands out for its unique approach and its contribution in the realm of studying the autobiographers from the postcolonial eyes. Such studies though rampant in the west had not been much conducted in our country. Further the book stands out for its adroitness in delivering

the right approach in understanding how the women haggled with other agencies. They did this to negotiate their private and public life thereby unveiling the thin film with which they cloaked their class and gender symphony.

The Introducing chapter hails the readers with a charm that persists us to analyse the women activists not just as some individual personae but also as a clog of a mass society. We are convinced that, “autobiography has been one of the most popular and highly appealing forms of literature. It deeply engages our interest since through another life we get to relate and know the very nature of our own selves (Guha Thakurta Banerjee: 13).

Starting from the relevance of autobiographical analysis in the second chapter attempt is being made to shift from a nomothetic study to an idiosyncratic one. One of the milestones of feminist scholarship is its engagement with autobiography. It has radically affected the very approach of comprehending life-worlds and has made head-strong entry into the serious business of academics and produced an altogether different form of literature with an embedded form of scholarship. The Third chapter of the book mainly focused this area. The author showed how with the exit of grand theories, banal things became the points of departure from which to understand the bigger collaborations. Therefore, “The journey though was initiated with the ushering in of postmodernism which moved away from grand theory to emphasize on more trivial yet significant things in life” (Guha Thakurta Banerjee: 15). The author hand-picked the vivid autobiographies of three women members of the communist party, such as Manikuntala Sen, Nibedita Nag and Reba Roy Chowdhury. This had been done to highlight the different voices from the same organization. The detailed autobiographies of three activists indicates the extent to which life experiences, the matrix of activism and comfort levels of the female activists may vary within the same organization.

Chapter four puts to the fore autobiographies of three women activists of the unfragmented Communist Party namely Manikuntala Sen, Reba Roy Chowdhury and Nibedita Nag for a detailed and more elaborate investigation. The analysis of this chapter tried to put forward an intersectional understanding of the life of the activists as portrayed through the entanglement of gender, party and politics in their writings. Finally, the major arguments are collated to assume a different meaning of the communist movement, perhaps from a feminist vantage point.

Books in the recent past which introspect such understandings do not find much place in the Indian panorama. However, one may speak of Lipika Kamra’s *Self-Making through Self-Writing: Non-Sovereign Agency in Women’s Memoirs from the Naxalite Movement*, an article in which memoirs and autobiographies of women Naxalites, K. Ajitha and Krishna Bandyopadhyay in 1950s and 1960s bring out their experiences of participation in the movement. Kamra argues for a non-sovereign agency of these women in self-making through their autobiographical narratives. Yet another book of this genre is Joya Mitra’s prison diaries, called *Killing Days*. *Killing Days* is a prison memoir—not of Mitra alone but of all the women she meets and shares her pain and anguish with throughout the period of her incarceration. Mitra realizes that the women stationed in the prisons are more the victims of deprivation and unlawfulness than mere executors of crime.

Guha Thakurta (Banerjee)’s book stands out on this sparse ground owing to her matured way of inter social communication. At a time when it is believed that communist parties never regarded gender as one of the criteria to analyse politics, instead it is always the class that is prioritized, Guha Thakurta Banerjee’s book comes as an eye-opener. She shows how the women communists publishing their own run magazine with women-friendly issues pose a challenge to the declared party policies. Herein lies, the significance of the book and its way of insinuating the agency of the women through their otherwise mundane autobiographies. The book truly serves a purpose and the author succeeds in making a cutting rejoinder on the face of the stereotyped interpretation of the communist movement and many other movements to come.

Dr. Srabanti Choudhuri

*Assistant Professor in Sociology,  
School of Social Sciences,  
Netaji Subhas Open University.*

---

Kamra, Lipika, *Self-Making through Self-Writing: Non-Sovereign Agency in Women’s Memoirs from the Naxalite Movement* », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*[Online], 7 | 2013, Online since 15 October 2013, connection on 23 January 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3608> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.3608.

Mitra, Joya. (2004) *Killing Days: Prison Memoirs* [Hanyaman, 1990] Tr. Shampa Banerjee. New Delhi: Kali for Women & Women Unlimited.