
Histories of Love and Revolution

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How far we have travelled from 1984, the year when the Indian Association for Women's Studies met in Thiruvananthapuram! The members of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana from Hyderabad first unveiled what would become their path-breaking oral history of women who had participated in the Telangana movement, between 1946 and 1951. At least one ardent supporter of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) publicly dismissed the effort of the collective in speaking of "that magic time," which offered women in the (then undivided) party a vision of a new tomorrow—only to betray them when the movement was crushed. It was then too disturbing to admit that the personal, the sexual, or the domestic, were as crucial to a feminist political subjecthood as structures of economic exploitation. It was too risky to admit that the party too was patriarchal, that those very rebels who had taught women defiance of feudal and capitalist structures (as well as familial ones) would fail them, dashing all hopes of resetting private/personal relations, either within or beyond the party. One might say that most party cardholders or sympathisers (including women) were wary of, if not hostile towards, the term "feminist."

Since that groundbreaking volume of life stories of women in the Telangana movement, *We Were Making History: Women and the Telangana Uprising* (wwmh) we have had other feminist writers uncovering the "public secrets" of revolutionary movements. Srila Roy's (2012) *Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence, and Subjectivity in India's Naxalbari Movement* revisited both the exhilarating and dark moments of the Naxalbari movement for its women. Then Kavita Panjabi's (2016) *Unclaimed Harvest: An Oral History of the Tebhaga Women's Movement* in fact claimed Tebhaga as a feminist historical legacy, embracing

BOOK REVIEWS

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its contradictory fullness, with women building political solidarities and comradeship, but also ties of affect, love, and desire across class, caste and ethnic divides, in startlingly new ways. Both these works continued what the wwmh had begun—and emphasised that a political history is also a history of affect. Unlike the historical works that had long acknowledged women's participation in the defining moments of revolutionary activism, a feminist recovery of these legacies involved tracking the complex and often contradictory intersections at which women came of political age, to reveal their heroic femininity (since not all women political activists were feminists).

Ania Loomba's *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* foregrounds, as the very title indicates, the braided histories of love and revolution. The book both shares the pioneering questions and methodologies of the wwmh and departs from them in interesting and productive ways. On the one hand, Loomba continues to build up a rich vein of oral history, inviting the life stories of important women activists, the "wholetimers" of the (undivided) Communist Party, on the other, she goes well beyond, delving deep into memoirs and autobiographies, but also into imaginative representations of those moments of political activism, in novels, films, and images. The seven chapters of the book therefore span, unevenly, the period between the 1920s (when the party was founded) to the 1960s (when the party split). Interestingly, as Loomba admits at the outset, "None [of the women she discusses] would have called themselves feminist" (p 3). She cites

none other than her own mother, Primla Loomba, who once declared, "Ours is not a feminist movement. Our fight is not directed against men but against the social, economic and political institutions that exploit both men and women" (p 5). Yet all her subjects (not least her own mother) made unusual choices for their time, even if they embarked on journeys that remained "incomplete." How is the feminist project of mining memory to be accomplished?

Mining Memory

The work of excavating not just the public activities, but remembered feelings and emotions about those moments, calls for unusual methodological skills. The feminist historian here is not merely surmounting the problem of an impoverished or non-existent archive. How does one convince a subject that her quotidian life or even her daily grind of organising or educating is worth recalling? How does one avert the "spontaneous tendency toward amnesia" as Luisa Passerini (1992) once asked? wwmh had also asked: "How do we evaluate women's work, when not just the official records, but the women themselves, continually make distinctions that devalue and marginalize their importance?" (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989: 31). Loomba encounters precisely such an attitude in Murtazai Shakeel, who asked: "Why do you want to interview me? I was never anyone important. I was the comrade who brought the tea and spread the durries at the meetings" (p 253). By what methods might we coax out memories from such reluctant subjects, and by what tools turn it into a specifically feminist memory? It is striking that Murtazai continually turns, throughout her very touching life story, to the larger-than-life presence of her brother, the well-known Urdu poet Niaz Haider, who took her education in hand, and made her pledge her life to the party (p 254). "My brother had *stuffed revolutionary spirit* in me" as she unselfconsciously puts it (p 257, emphasis added).

As many, including Loomba, have long noted, mining memories can be a

tricky business, since, for one, they often reflect the preoccupations of the present, which frame the remembrance of things past (p 278). To recall Alexander Portelli's early words of warning about the memories of left-wing cadres, sometimes the past is suitably "altered" in its retelling as it strains to fulfil, in surprisingly structured ways, the frustrated hopes of an earlier time (Portelli 1991). Second, and once more relevant to the task of mining the memories of communist and revolutionary women, the habit of exercising "revolutionary vigilance" (not allowing that which is not publicly understood as strictly selfless, revolutionary activity from being spoken or written about) is deeply ingrained. Even a researcher such as Loomba, who is hopeful that such vigilance can be made to give way, is forced to admit that hours spent with Sarla Sharma yielded nothing about the "everyday experience of politics ... questions of marriage, mothering, and domesticity, let alone sexuality" (p 30), in short nothing more than what an earlier transcript at the Nehru Memorial Museum

and Library already contained. Kondapalli Koteswaramma "speaks minimally about her marriage with the communist leader Kondapalli Sitaramayya, who brought her into the movement," and not much about her tragic personal life thereafter (p 264). Though Srila Roy (2012: 108) says that "free choice marriages and consensual unions were privileged over, and at times in explicit rejection of, the normativities that govern Hindu Bengali marriage ideals and practices," women were painfully conscious of the limits of those "choices," yet rarely expressed their unease.

From whence this puritanical and formulaic pattern of memory among Indian communists and revolutionaries? Loomba rightly notes that when Marxist organisations claim that a focus on the private is too "bourgeois," they are, ironically, only accepting the most bourgeois conception of the public/private divide (p 11). But as Loomba also shows us, there were some who challenged what revolutions demanded of their cadres: how else may we make sense of Vimla Dang's autobiography, which escapes this iron

frame, to focus so exclusively on her "communist love story" and her long and satisfying political and personal life with Satyapal Dang? (pp 244-53)

The Party as Family

Loomba's book appears to be something of a cathartic journey, as a party child (p 9) who came from one such "whole-timer" household, suffering the privations of everyday life, and yet, most important, sharing some deep structures of feeling with her parents. There is indeed here "partial identification with the research objects" (Mies 1983). Stories of self-sacrifice and of the selfless donation of money and time to the revolution abound in the book—some such as the Dangs even relinquishing the pleasures of child-rearing (p 243), others, such as Ushabai Dange, asserting, despite her bitterness about the rough deal a party life had dealt out to her children, that one had to give up one's life in order to bring about real social change (p 174).

As previous writers such as Srila Roy (2012: 109) have shown, "the party

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became the social consciousness of the collective, substituting for parental authority and mimicking middle-class morality in the underground." The party became the new family, replacing the social world that was made to vanish. S Sugunamma (wrongly cited as Sugunanna in Loomba's text) had it: "So the Party was like a large common family. We dreamt that the Communist Government would come—and all families would be communes like this" (p 132; Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989: 87). But the party could not, as Roy's quote reveals, quite extract itself from the structures it critiqued. It patrolled relationships, often harshly, but also encouraged only certain kinds of alliances. A well-known marriage celebrated on the terrace of the Communist Party of India headquarters was between P C Joshi and Kalpana Dutt in 1943 (p 130). Other marriages, such as Murtazai's were also arranged by the party. If Murtazai became, for 35 years thereafter, a textile union organiser, it was because she was under the tutelage of these two men, her brother and husband, both wedded to party ideals though in very different ways (pp 256–59). Even the revolutionary ideal of the "commune" in Bombay, which Loomba describes, is only a partial success.

But perhaps no instance reveals the harshness of the revolutionary party framework and its startling conservatism than the attempt made by Chandra Shekhar Azad of the Hindustan Republican Socialist Army to violently sunder the relationship between Yashpal and Prakashvati (a rather famed love story) because he believed they were "spreading filth in the party" (p 85). Prakashvati lingered in the memories and written accounts of many male "fellow-travellers" (including the likes of Harivansh Rai Bachchan) as a femme fatale, a seductress, and a masculine woman "hyper feminine and yet not really feminine at all" (p 90).

Even those who tread the straight and narrow path—of dedicated party work, while tending children and family—faced their own share of slights and sorrows. Ushabai Dange's hopes for and experience of companionate marriage, her frankness about the stifling confines of the commune, while ending up endlessly

provisioning food and drink to the other comrades in her nuclear household, is summed up well by Loomba thus: "Her book suggests that the home she craved for was always a refuge from politics." In contrast, "For Vimla [Dang], the politics and the romance, the politics and the home, were inseparable" (p 251). Parvatibai Bhore, who called her husband "a jailor" was "permitted to start political work on the condition that she first finished all her household tasks" (p 184). Usha Dutta Verma came to know that her Prince, whose political work she enabled by running her family on the pittance she earned (thereby sacrificing her own political life), was a bigamist, though he seems to have remained unscathed by his decision to deceive Usha (pp 260–62).

'Methodological Promiscuity'

The *wwmh* presented us with a set of oral histories which was only very lightly framed by the editorial remarks at the beginning and end of the book. Loomba's writing is far more interventionist, since the oral histories form only a small part of the material she analyses. She declares the need for "methodological promiscuity" which is occasioned by the object of study itself: women who were in the public eye, and yet shrouded many aspects of private life in their narrations (p 28). Loomba's turn to literature, for which she is more than amply equipped, is justified as recognising the "symbiotic" relationship of literature and politics. In an otherwise compelling account of the intertwined life of love and revolution, the working out of the relationship between literature and politics is less persuasive. It works best when the author discusses the thinly veiled "fictional" account of Yashpal in *Dada Kamred*, an attempt to emplace love and desire at the centre of a revolutionary agenda, especially as they challenge the most fundamental of hierarchical relationships. It also works well when Loomba uses her skills as a literary critic to compare the narrative strategies of male and female autobiographies (particularly in matching the accounts of Yashpal, Prakashvati and Bachchan, and in her analyses of Ushabai Dange). It falters when, despite

talking about the "mutually constitutive" nature of fiction and history, the author refers to the "real life version" of events (p 78) that unwittingly privileges the "real." Where the author really comes into her own, methodologically, is in her discussion of the "family romance" with reference to Vimla Dang's *Fragments of an Autobiography*. Though not intended for publication, Loomba shows that Dang's work, based on her diary, wrestles, as a form, with the well-learned structures of the romance novel (pp 242–53).

The referencing throughout the book is sometimes confusing, given the large number of quotations from biographies, novels, other feminist works, and interviews. The brief and rather tired conclusion (which protects itself from too much scrutiny by calling itself a not-quite conclusion!) only asserts a somewhat banal outcome for such a lively, intense and indeed passionately researched work (namely that "revolutionary and communist women expanded the stage on which women acted in India"). *Revolutionary Desires* is after all much more than an additive history.

More surprising, the conclusion nonchalantly, and only residually, deals with what remains one of the most searing indictments of Communist Party politics over the last three decades, namely its refusal to acknowledge intra-party caste politics and hierarchies (of the latter, there are some hints in the discussion of Parvatibai Bhore). This is surprising: even Murtazai's interesting observation that "Everybody gives a lecture on religion but everybody wears a *janehu* in the party" is read as a comment on religion rather than caste (p 258). Were the activist women Loomba discusses no exception in their blindness to caste? The *wwmh* seems to suggest otherwise. Also, the author would have done well to refer to emerging analyses of Kerala communism's ambiguous legacies to address this gap (as in the work of Dilip Menon and Meera Velayudhan); the story of Bengal on this vexed question is also beginning to be told.

This said, *Revolutionary Desires* is a well-researched, extremely insightful and compellingly written book, which is a must-read not only for Indian feminists

