



Book of Abstracts

Freedom at Midnight
Women's Voices and the Indian Freedom Struggle

Friday, 17 February 2023

A national conference by
the Department of Liberal Arts
Indian Institute of Technology Bhilai
under the aegis of
Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav Scheme
Indian Council of Social Science Research



Keynotes

*Between Communalism and Nationalism:
Women political activists in Bengal (1946-7)*
Debjani Sengupta

In Bengal, narratives of the 1947 Partition deal mostly with the aftermath of the upheaval: the enormous social, economic, and political costs that the Partition brought in its wake. These post-Partition narratives offer the possibility of action, of coping with the loss of a homeland, of livelihood and exile. Yet, our understanding of those tumultuous years often marginalize and ignore the work of numerous political activists immediately before the vivisection who were engaged in resisting the communal conflagrations while experiencing its violence.

The writings of Ashoka Gupta, an All India Women's Conference worker, show us the struggles, compromises, and voices of political workers who were an integral part of the movement towards independence and whose personal story exemplified the larger struggles women were undergoing in our country. Similarly, the social work by MARS (Mahila Atmaraksha Samity), a woman's wing of the undivided Communist Party of India, that came together in 1942 and continued to work both during and after the Partition, is a remarkable history of women's participation in pre-independence politics, the contours of which have remained forgotten in the historiography of Partition Studies. These gendered experiences and writings have a different relationship to the production of hegemonic views of the nation in their multiplicity of practices of agency and politics through a confrontation and resistance to communal ideology and a praxis of service that surmounted class, caste, and religion. In the years before the country was divided and torn between communities and ideologies, the lives of these unsung women allow us to understand an aspect of our past that needs to be reiterated and retold.

Debjani Sengupta is the author of *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities* (2015) and has edited *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* (2011). She has co-edited, with Rakhshanda Jalil and Tarun Saint, an anthology called *Looking Back: The Partition of India 70 Years On* (2017). Sengupta's most recent publications are *Women's Writing From India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: The Worlds of Bangla and Urdu* (2019) and *Bangladesh: Writings on 1971* (2022), both co-edited with Rakhshanda Jalil. She completed her doctoral work on the Bengal Partition from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University and teaches at Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi.

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Prison Narratives of Satyagrahi Women
Paulomi Chakraborty

Women's prison narratives offer us rich opportunities to examine what freedom meant to women in India in the first half of the twentieth century, when the nationalist movement for independence was unfolding. This talk will explore how texts of women who went to prison as part of the Gandhian satyagraha negotiate with prison as a space, especially in relation to gendered experiences of domesticity, the formidable and abiding institution that frames the



selfhood of middle-class women. This will provide us a context for reading what imprisonment signified to the writers, and indeed what then freedom meant, and how their texts posit and shape their political choice of embracing imprisonment. It will then probe the creative processes of writing the authorial self that is staged by these texts.

I will argue in this talk that integral to making of this writing-self—one that is relatively autonomous, assertive, and assessing notions and limits of freedom—is the relationship of this self with the common prisoners, the fellow-inmates awaiting trial, under-trial, or convicted. One of the most important dynamics of this relationship is visible in the great compulsion in these texts to record and put to a ‘hearing public’ harm or injury done, much more to the self, to the abject non-political women prisoners, who appear to be truly unfree, who, to use an enduring metaphor, cannot speak for themselves. I will suggest that the status of the text as a testimonial on behalf of these ‘other’ women plays a critical role in the political becoming of the texts as well as well their authors. While I will attempt to gesture to other examples, the focus of this talk will be on two works: *Shadows on the Wall* (Bombay, 1946 and New York, 1948) by Krishna Hutheesing (née Krishna Nehru; 1907-1967), and *Jenana Phatok* (‘Women’s Prison’, original in Bengali; Calcutta, 1948) by Rani Chanda (née Rani Dey; 1912-1997).

Paulomi Chakraborty is Associate Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in IIT Bombay. Her publications include a monograph, *The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political*; essays in journals such as *Interventions* and *English Studies in Canada* and book chapters in edited volumes such as *Handbook on Gender in South Asia*, *Being Bengali: At Home and in the World*, *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement, and Resettlement*. Her gender-focussed research interests are in the 'turbulent 40s' in Bengal, and cultures of the political left and women in organized politics particularly in the context of mid-twentieth century India.



Panel: Indian Feminisms and Nationalism

*Women and the Woman's Question:
A Study of Early Women's Magazines in India*
Roopa Philip

Women's magazines can be defined as periodicals intended specifically for the female reader and, by extension, containing features and topics of particular interest and relevance to the female reader. The inception of these magazines across India can be traced back to the latter half of the 19th century, when they were associated with various reform movements and the dissemination of their ideology to women—who were ultimately the target and object of 'reform'. These magazines were influenced and shaped by similar women's magazines that were prevalent in Europe. Found in various vernacular languages of India, these magazines reflect the debates initially around femininity and women's rights and roles within family and communities. As the nationalist struggle gained prominence, these magazines start to discuss the roles and responsibilities of Indian women within the emerging nation and the nationalist discourse. However, since these magazines were intended specifically for the woman reader, the editors and contributors are also mostly women. As a result, they also contain early voices of women—some of which can be termed as feminist, within what was an otherwise male dominated discourse of reform and nationalism.

Despite the regional and cultural variations that mark these women's magazines, they reflect the conciliatory and at times controversial views of women on the nation, freedom, and modernity. This paper argues that these magazines often illustrate the women's perspective to the woman's question that was crucial to discourses of nationalism and reform.

Roopa Philip is a faculty at the Department of English (PG) at Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Bengaluru. She completed her PhD from JNU, New Delhi. Her area of research was Feminist Consciousness in Early Women's Magazines in Malayalam. She has presented 3 papers at international conferences and published 4 research papers related to this area.

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*Consensus and Dissent in Nurturing a Nation:
Writings and Activism of Women Nationalists in India*
Rachna Mehra

The discourse on India's freedom movement is associated with important milestones achieved under charismatic political figures—who were usually men. The contribution of women is documented as diligently following the male leader or serving as their obedient counterpart. Women nationalists who initiated or led a movement are rarely seen as autonomous entities. They are appreciated for their immense contribution and execution but not for planning and decision making. This paper contends that women were not playing a second fiddle, complementary or supplementary role to tasks assigned to them. A close analysis of writings and speeches by Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Anis Kidwai, Mridula Sarabhai, and Kamlaben Patel reveal that they took cudgels against the state when it came to nation building in the post-partition period.



Moreover, the role of women in the rehabilitation process was a far cry from a seamless exercise of following a set pattern of rules formulated from above. They dissented against the authorities and amongst themselves as to the course of action to be taken given the knotty state of affairs on the ground. Their grass root realities often dictated the circumstances under which they made decisions and took risks in implementing them. Hence, it will be interesting to bring out the agency of women as they countenanced dissonance and paradox which they embraced as part of nation making exercise along with working towards a consensus in their day-to-day activities.

Rachna Mehra teaches in the urban studies programme at the School of Global Affairs, Dr B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi. Her research interests include Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and urban history of small towns and cities.

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Feminist Writings in Pre-Independence India:

A Comparative Study of Begum Rokaiya's Sultana's Dream and Tarabai Shinde's Stri Purush Tulana

Mukesh Tiwari

Feminist writings in early 19th century India were largely an account of personal lives or autobiographies that were published more than ever before. There was a spurt of feminist writings in the second half of the nineteenth century. Awareness towards women's issues was on the rise as society was male-dominated and their condition was at the lowest ebb. Besides, issues like sati, child marriage, illiteracy added to the gravity of the situation. Revolutionary changes in ideology of women writers can be witnessed in the new breed of women writers of the time. Their autobiographies were confessions reflecting the stories of their struggles.

Tarabai Shinde, known for *Stri Purush Tulana*, emerged as a prominent feminist thinker and critic. In her writing, she exposes male stereotypes and images of women as formed by the patriarchal set-up. Her writing examines the dynamics of roles and responsibilities of men and women and practices that needed to be re-looked at. Similarly, Begum Rokaiya, author of *Sultana's Dream*, also criticized the customs of society and the ordeals women suffered because of the code of conduct and directives prescribed by men. My paper will analyse the emergence of feminist concepts in these writings and attempt to understand how they expedited the process of revolution for the independence of the country.

Mukesh Tiwari is an Assistant Professor of English at C.V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar. He received his PhD from Banaras Hindu University and has published research papers in different journals on contemporary Indian English Fiction. His current research interests include Ethnography and New Urban Realism in Contemporary Indian English Fiction.



Panel: Women's Nationalism and Gandhian thought

'Muslim' Women and Gandhian Ideology:

The Self-Narratives of Syeda Monowara Khatun and Raihana Tyabji

Sreejata Paul

This paper examines the involvement of Syeda Monowara Khatun and Raihana Tyabji—commonly identified as Muslim, based respectively in Bengal and Gujarat—in the Indian freedom struggle through their rhetoric and embodiment of Gandhian principles. Khatun (1909–?) portrays her—and, in a larger sense, her family's—interaction with Gandhi's ideology and politics in the autobiography *Smritir Pata* (Pages of Memory, 1989), whereas Tyabji's (1907–1975) intimate, almost filial, relationship with Gandhi himself is best outlined in interviews published in Ved Mehta's *Mahatma Gandhi and his Apostles* (1977) and Jayshree Mehta and Usha Thakkar's *Understanding Gandhi: Gandhians in Conversation with Fred J. Blum* (2011). While Khatun, daughter of a zamindar in Jessore, was introduced to such ideology by her father and brothers and lived it from afar, Tyabji met Gandhi and became part of his inner circle through her mother. Keeping these details in mind, the paper asks how Khatun and Tyabji's Muslimness, even if nominal, mediates their relationship with Gandhi and his work. It highlights Khatun's participation in swadeshi initiatives and her inscription of rural Bengali soundscapes enlivened by Gandhian thought in the context of the Khilafat Movement and juxtaposes it alongside Gandhi's learning of Urdu and inclusion of Quranic verses in prayer meetings through the influence of Tyabji, amidst her heterodox spiritual beliefs and practices drawn from Vaishnavism and Tantrism. In doing so, it shifts focus away from what Gandhi did for women of the subcontinent to how women themselves inspired Gandhi, and how they made sense of and worked with Gandhian ideology. The paper also challenges established feminist scholarship on Gandhi, both its approbation of subcontinental women's emergence into the public, through Khatun's seclusion, as well as its critique of Gandhi's blindness to women's subservient role in sexuality and reproduction, through Tyabji's debate with him and disavowal of brahmacharya.

Sreejata Paul is an Assistant Professor of English at Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Greater Noida, India. She holds a dual-badged PhD degree from the Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay) and Monash University (Melbourne). Her research and writing revolve largely around gender and Islam in South Asia.

*Inlays of the Female Self in Gandhism:
Tracing the Crisis and Constitution of Identity in Jankidevi Bajaj's
My Life's Journey: An Autobiography*
Sragdharamalini Das

Under the auspices of the feminised politics of Gandhism, women are known to have achieved a distinctive visibility as nationalist activists and leaders. Their public constitution considerably drew from their private lives in a movement that was primarily based on gaining mastery over oneself (swaraj). Taking cue from such a heightened focus on the individual self, this paper is interested in exploring the formation of the female identity in Gandhism,



not as much as a discursive idea as its lived-reality. For this purpose, it offers a close reading of the autobiographical narrative *My Life's Journey: An Autobiography* (2019) by Jankidevi Bajaj (1893–1979). Born into a traditional middle-class family in Madhya Pradesh, in her social activism alongside Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, Jankidevi metamorphosed from an anxious and self-loathing child-bride living affluently under purdah, constantly coping with the grief of repeatedly losing her loved ones, to a powerful embodiment of Gandhian philosophy. The paper analyses this transformation through Erik Erikson's framework of identity crisis, a psycho-social framework of understanding a state of unresolved tension in an individual trying to re-form themselves. It argues that the Vaishnava roots of Gandhism offered an upper caste/class female participant like Jankidevi a familiar medium of self-reflection on her private crisis under the otherwise radically modern dispensation of Gandhism. Thereafter, it discusses how her writings hint at the projection of this personal crisis onto a crisis of the Indian society under colonialism, both ultimately resolved in the adoption of a Gandhian way of life through which Jankidevi creatively attains a concrete sense of self-identity as a woman.

Sragdharamalini Das is an independent scholar. She completed her MA in English from the Manipal Centre for Humanities (2020-2022). Her MA Thesis was titled “Ways of Feeling: Evolving Expressions of Affect and Ethics in the Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi, 1951-2010.” She is interested in 19th and 20th century Indian women writings.

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*At Bhakti/Seva Crossroads:
Mirabehn in Indian Nationalist Movement*
Ritu Varghese

Madeleine Slade (1892–1982) is a recurrent name in Gandhian political theology. Christened by the Mahatma as Mirabehn and considered one among the few ardent daughter-disciples of M.K. Gandhi, Slade was a pervasive figure associated with women liberation in India. Gandhi's act of ordaining Slade with the title of Mirabai—the sixteenth century bhakti poet-saint—iterates the religio-political underpinnings of the bhakti movement as an epochal sensibility that later metamorphosed into a social discourse, while attempting to subvert the idea of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ within the discursive ambit of the ‘nation.’ Mirabai, the bhakti saint, is a debated figure in the Indian cultural landscape, where her lyrical compositions known as bhajans, addressed to the Hindu deity Krishna, are considered sites of cultural resistance for the marginalized and women, in particular. Mirabai, an aristocratic woman accused of promiscuity—following her bhakti—in multiple narratives, finds reconciliation in Gandhi when he hails her as a satyagrahi in his public and private dialogues, while carefully omitting her said transgressions. This article explores the role of Mirabehn in women's liberation movement in colonial India, while situating her life and narrative within the domain of bhakti/seva discourse popularised by Gandhi, following Mirabai on his spiritual odyssey. This paper also attempts to situate Mirabehn within the Mira-Krishna narrative personified in her perceived relationship with Gandhi and asserts that her persona as such was to a great extent used/appropriated to serve larger, nationalist ends.

Ritu Varghese is a PhD research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Rourkela. Her research interests include bhakti



and gender studies in South Asia. “Mirabai and the Ethic of Universal Suffering: Reading *Bhajans* in Indian Pedagogy” (2022) published in *The Explicator* is her most recent work.



Panel: Freedom Struggle in Women's Life Writings

Tracing the Notion of Freedom

Through the Autobiographies of Refugee Women

Twinkle Dhall

The Indian national movement was unquestionably one of the most successful mass movements in history, drawing millions of people from all walks of life and political persuasions into activism. It is crucial to note that while we rejoice over India's independence, we also observe the 75th year of the partition of the subcontinent—a tragedy that resulted in unprecedented migration on a colossal scale. Within the dominant paradigm, women's autonomous and unmerged voices are often portrayed as having uniform undertones, and they become even more marginalised in the case of refugee women. The purpose of this study is to explore these marginalised perspectives through the examination of *The Pages of My Life*, an autobiography by Popati Hiranandani, and *The Revenue Stamp: An Autobiography* by Amrita Pritam. It is critical to commemorate the memories recorded by first-generation women authors in their autobiographies in order to acknowledge and preserve the considerable contributions made by women for India's independence. These autobiographical accounts are more intriguing since they are ultimately deepened by inner conflict, hesitation, and anxiety, especially in terms of their own power and authority as authors. Such powerful narratives, while deeply evocative of separation, also bring out the plurality of women's voices and reinforce their agency to critique the patriarchal notions of womanhood, which is essentially a form of tremendous resistance. Most male authors' narratives foreground women's victimisation by underplaying women's agency; in contrast, these autobiographies by women authors are marked by agitation, mobilisation and documentation of their lives being recovered, reborn with economic independence, self-reliance, and a significant contribution to the freedom struggle.

Twinkle Dhall is a research scholar at the Department of Comparative Indian Literature, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include Partition Studies, Women's Studies, Folklore Studies, and Literary theory and criticism. Her MPhil dissertation was on "Sindhi Short Stories: Nostalgia, Migration and Cultural Loss". Her PhD thesis is titled "Partition of India: A Study of the Reminiscences of Women Authors".

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Rebellion and Nationalism:

Reading the works of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani on her Sesquicentennial Birth Anniversary
Nibedita Paul

This paper looks back at Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's (9 September 1872–18 August 1945) life amidst the sesquicentennial celebrations of her birth anniversary through the endeavours she undertook in mobilising the masses for nationalism, in addition to creating the legacy of her literary contributions. Her autobiography, *Jibaner Jhora Pata (The Scattered Leaves of My Life)*, trans. by Sikata Banerjee in 2011) as well as the periodical letters she wrote are expressive of her rebellious nature which threatened the British government as well as native patriarchy. Her questioning of British hegemony started from a tender age, when she



preferred Indian circus shows over European ones and dared to write an essay in the school examination in favour of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's proscribed text *Pather Dabi*.

In trying to understand Sarala Devi, it is important to look closely at the life and contributions of Jnanadanandini Devi, her aunt, as well as Swarnakumari Devi, her mother, and her sister, Hiranmoyee Devi—these figures lace the corners of this paper. The dynamic persona of Sarala Devi along with her rebellious outlook to life made her prefer the evening science classes at the University of Calcutta, seek a job outside Bengal, as well as enter marriage at a late age. Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda at various moments asked her to work alongside them for the national cause, but she preferred to work on her own terms and do things her own way rather than being supervised. From editing the *Bharati* to forming the Bharat Stree Mahamandal and Bharat Stree Siksha Sadan, laying the foundations for Birasthami and Pratapaditya Utsav, and organising lathi clubs, Sarala Devi's charismatic character is notable for women to take inspiration from in every epoch.

Nibedita Paul is working as Assistant Professor in the English Department of Techno India University, West Bengal. She received her doctoral degree from the Central University of Gujarat in 2022. Her area of research includes 19th and 20th century Indian Women's Writing, African American Women's Writing, Prison Narratives and Periodical Letters of Colonial India. She has published research papers in *Notions*, *Academia*, *postScriptum*, *Anhad Lok*, *Middleflight*, and *Pursuits*.

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A Memory of Quest and Transcendence:

Reading Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces: Memoirs

Antara Chandra

Cultural memory refers to the collective practices that societies use to make sense of their past and build a relationship with it in order to prepare and orient themselves to the future. The understanding of this memory leads to cultural sustainability and well-being as it raises questions of collective responsibility and the performative and productive dynamics of a nation's history. This paper seeks to undertake a comprehensive study of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* with an aim to find out how this autobiography can emerge as a relevant memory in narrative that contributes to the idea of a globalised and pluralistic nation envisioned by stalwarts like Annie Besant, Ramabai, Tagore, and Gandhi at the brink of Indian independence. In the process of reading, the memory of the author becomes the memory of the reader, and this continuity must be established in a rapidly changing world to reassert the formation of one's historical and cultural identity leading to the expansion of choices and alternate futures. There are differences between what is remembered by the state (macro narrative) and the human subject (micro narrative), and therefore the idea of a work of memory shares a shifting and complex relationship with an autobiography in terms of self and other, past and present, and the constant enactment between the embedded and extended selves. The author challenges the memory tradition of Aristotle's gender ethics and creates a new narrative of female leadership that exudes determined authority as well as a strong morale. The self of women is written into an existing cultural memory through memoirs and letters where the past is refashioned, and this autobiography evokes in a broader sense what Alice Walker later termed womanism,



revisiting a memory that creates space for spirituality and collective emancipation wherein care and support are acknowledged, indigeneity is celebrated, and individual human significance manifests itself in the development of an inclusive human community.

Antara Chandra is a doctoral scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Goa. She received her MPhil from Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. She has journal papers and book chapter publications to her credit.