Significant Lives: biography, autobiography, and women's history in South Asia

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When I chose a title for this talk, I must have been recalling – though I didn't realize this at the time -- a justly-celebrated essay by Carolyn Steedman, published in 1992 in the journal *History and Theory*, and titled 'La Théorie que n'en est pas une: or, Why Clio doesn't Care.' In that essay, partly reworked from her own recently published biography of the socialist educator Margaret McMillan (Steedman 1990), Steedman suggested that the practice of biography made for a new understanding of women's history,

> which might be described as an altered sense of the historical meaning and importance of female *insignificance*. The absence of women from conventional historical accounts, discussion of this absence (and discussion of the real archival difficulties that lie in the way of presenting their lives in a historical context) are at the same time a massive assertion of the littleness of what lies hidden. A sense of that which is lost, never to be recovered completely, is one of the most powerful organizing devices of modern women's history (Steedman 1992: 43).

Steedman sees herself, then, as extending what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese had said more cryptically ten years earlier: that 'women's history challenges mainstream history, not to substitute the chronicle of the female subject for that of the male, but rather to restore conflict, ambiguity and tragedy to the historical process' (Fox-Genovese 1982: 29).

The 'sadness' of this effect, Steedman said, was present in working class history too, but the lack of detail about working lives had a greater *prefigurative*

force: 'oppression and repression have a meaning within the narrative structure of people's history and labor history in a way that is not the case in women's history' (Steedman 1992: 43). For Steedman, then, female *insignificance* was precisely that: women's absence from conventional historical accounts was 'meaningless' in a strong sense. Having said this, Steedman proceeds, in this dense and fascinating essay, to note how meaning *is* made, quite differently, in the literary text, where the feminist aesthetic can go to work, as she puts it, 'writing polyvalency and fragmentation as resistance and critique of an existing patriarchal order' (Steedman 1992: 34). Biography and autobiography, literary forms that nevertheless lay a claim to the historical archive, certainly posit *meaningfulness* as a prime objective of their narrative projects. In their different forms, spiritual, hagiographical, documentary, exemplary, confessional, official, tutelary, sensational, psychobiographical – and allowing for the necessary contrasts between the genres of biography and autobiography, and the textures of public and private spheres -- they offer up the model of a *significant life*, even though, in the historical context, that life-story may 'explain only itself' (Steedman 1992: 43). For Steedman, writing the 'historical biography' of a woman, Margaret McMillan, who led a public life (and also wrote a biography of her sister that can be read as covert autobiography), the problem of placing her subject's life within social and political history meant that the narrative closures of biography and autobiography – ending in the figure of a person – were in conflict with the open-endedness of history, and that formal, generic, and disciplinary concerns would be inextricably entangled.

Looking at women's lives in South Asia, as I want to do today, it is impossible to break free of these entanglements, to separate the strands of narrative self-justification from the cobwebs of historical obscurity and neglect: though one way of understanding the problem would be to ask again what we mean by history. For the moment, however, I will bracket that question, and turn rather to actual biographies and autobiographies of South Asian women, paying attention to a perceived disproportion, or lack of balance, between the two genres. I will argue that while women's autobiographies have been of quite extraordinary importance to feminist scholarship in India, and have been in many ways the single most important resource in constituting an archive of women's experience that might feed activism

and theory, biographies of women are relatively scarce and – with some notable exceptions – unremarkable. For Indian biographers, Edmund Clerihew Bentley's observation that 'Geography is about maps/ But biography is about chaps' is literally true: biography *is* (mainly) about chaps. By contrast, the first prose *autobiography* in the Bengali language, perhaps the first to be printed in any Indian language, was composed by a woman. From the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, we have a substantial number of personal narratives – written accounts, journals, dictated reminiscences – that have allowed us to recover 'in their own words', the hidden lives of women, and made space for them in a social imaginary that has important literary and aesthetic dimensions, and exceptional ethical and cultural force. Most of these lives have precisely the kind of historical *insignificance* of which Steedman speaks: yet through the act of narration itself, they gain resonance in textual space.

Women's narratives: Autobiography

Let me illustrate this by citing two autobiographical narratives by women, composed almost a hundred and fifty years apart, but making an extraordinary cultural impact despite the historical insignificance of the lives they record. The first is Rasasundari Devi's *Āmār Jiban* (My Life), published in two parts in 1868 and 1897, the second part carrying a preface by the poet Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother, Jyotirindranath. The second is a memoir published only ten years ago, *Dayāmayeer Kathā* by Sunanda Sikdar (2008), which won a number of literary prizes and was translated into English by Anchita Ghatak for the feminist publishers Zubaan in 2012. Both works are set in rural East Bengal, and both authors would be unknown had they not written their personal histories: in Rasasundari's case, *absolutely* unknown, since there is no archival record of her existence; in the second, that of Sunanda Sikdar, who belongs to the modern biopolitics of official documentation, *comparatively* unknown, since her life-records might exist, but the memoir's subject, the child Dayamayee who spent her first ten years in the village of Dighpait in East Pakistan, would never have acquired the shape of a life.

Rasasundari's text constitutes a foundational moment in South Asian women's writing, because the whole focus of her narrative is on acquiring the means

of self-representation, that is, writing: on becoming, as she puts it, *jitāksharā* 'winner of letters', a stronger expression than the neutral *sāksharā*, 'lettered' or 'literate'. The historian Tanika Sarkar titles her account of Rasasundari's life, accompanying a part-translation of the text, *Words to Win* (Sarkar 2013). The struggle that informs Rasasundari's autobiographical self-representation is carried on during her adult life like guerrilla warfare: occasional raids, retreat and consolidation. For Rasasundari, the conservative Hindu prohibitions against educating women (see Ramabai in Kosambi 2000: 173) had left her unlettered since early childhood, when she had been allowed to sit and listen to the boys' lessons in her paternal family. In adulthood, learning to read becomes an endless struggle, in which silence and stealth are Rasasundari's only weapons. One of her first forays is to steal a page of her husband's *Caitanya-Bhāgavata* when she finds it outside the kitchen, and to compare it with her son's writing exercises and those 'letters of the mind' that she has retained in memory from childhood. It is a slow and almost impossibly frustrating process. Married at twelve, she is twenty-five when she learns to read the *Caitanya-Bhāgavata*, in moments snatched from housework, in the kitchen or in her bedroom where her sisters-in-law cannot see her. She is past forty before she learns to write, since, as she explains, to write you need so many things: paper, a quill, an inkstand, someone to instruct you. It is only after widowhood, when she comes to live with her son and is relieved of the immense burden of housework she had borne almost from the start of her married life, that she can write her history.

The first part of *Āmār Jiban* (1868) consists of sixteen compositions (*racanā*); the second (1897) contains another fifteen. Each composition is preceded by a devotional poem expressing intense Vaishnavite faith in a loving deity. The first part is more directly autobiographical: in the second, commenced when the author was eighty-seven, religious devotion predominates. Rasasundari's life was untouched by the waves of reform that were sweeping across Bengal in the 19th century: her literary exposure, oral or written, would have been confined to the religious texts that shaped devotional life in Vaishnavite households, such as the *Caitanya-Bhāgavata* and

the *Caitanya-Caritāmrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj.[1] In fact, as Tanika Sarkar argues, Vaishnavite hagiography is the principal model that draws her to tell her story as a living example of the extraordinary grace of Krishna, her lord of compassion or Dayamadhav. *Āmār Jiban* is constructed around two poles of the self: the constricted, painfully burdened, physically exhausting life of the kitchen and the household, and communion with a deity whose love is infinite and emancipatory. Rasasundari's faith, prompting her to address much of her self-history to God, allows her to create, through the text, the ultimately unconfined space, the perspective of infinitude, within which her struggles and privations will assume their own value and proportion. For her, the poles of the domestic and the spiritual are not spatially distinct: they exist within the same domestic geography, the one always capable of being superimposed upon the other. This is important because Rasasundari's entire life is spent in the *antahpur*, the house's inner apartments; much of it is physically spent in the kitchen. This constriction of space, mental as well as physical, exists in a complementary relation with Rasasundari's extreme timidity and shyness, which constitute an important and recurring feature of her narrativization of her own subjectivity. Rasasundari describes herself as having internalized almost completely the strict social restrictions placed upon married women in the *antahpur*, making them part of the 'nature' of the virtuous Hindu wife that male editors found it easy to approve. Yet the autobiography also contains much by way of personal anger, resentment and frustration, and the writing of it, the forming of a textual self, is a gamble unsuited to that 'nature.' Rasasundari's self-risking (in print, not just the written record) makes her a unique exemplar of women's lives, hidden from official history, in the long nineteenth century.

Sunanda Sikdar's memoir of her 1950s girlhood in a small East Bengal village, officially East Pakistan after India's Partition in 1947, is set over a century later. Unlike Rasasundari's, it is almost accidental, forced out of her by her inability to carry any longer the burden of a past that she had deliberately 'forgotten' in a different country, and left behind when she crossed the border into India at the age

[1] The *Caitanya-Bhāgavata* is a 16th century Bengali hagiography by Vrindavan Das Thakur of the Vaishnava saint Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534); the *Caitanya-Caritāmrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj was composed some years later and sets out Caitanya's devotional (*Bhakti*) theology more clearly.

of ten. Her autobiography is an exercise in recovering the suppressed memories of her early years, part of a life cut asunder by the processes of political division, migration and resettlement. As such, it attempts to reclaim the girl left behind, to give shape to an identity that gains wholeness through writing. The genre of personal narrative allows women to compose their textual identities in two senses, *identity a*s *self-sameness*, being identified with one's own event-history, and *identity as sign*, being identified as different from others. This assumes historical resonance precisely because it makes a claim for women to enter two related discourses: the *philosophical* discourse of a *self* identical with its own event-history, as claimed by consciousness and memory, and the *political* discourse of the *person* as a forensic category identifiable as itself and none other, and claiming responsibility for its actions (as John Locke would describe it). It allows these narrated identities to enter the archive and to constitute in many ways the single most important resource for a whole generation of feminist scholars and researchers working to make women's history visible. Yet, as I will suggest, for women the claiming of a self may not be immediately translated to a public, or political, recognition of personhood. I will return to this point in a moment.

Any list of South Asian women's autobiographies would range from those composed by relatively privileged public figures, like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's *Jībaner Jharā Pātā* (*Life's Fallen Leaves*, 1943) and Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling* (1935), to less-known individuals who began to write down their personal narratives from the late nineteenth century onwards. In Bengal, there is a succession of examples: Kailashbasini Devi's *Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* (*Diary of a Housewife*), the life-histories (narrated and transcribed) of Saradasundari, mother of the Brahmo reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, and Nistarini, sister of the Christian minister Kalicharan Bandyopadhyay; and most vivid and striking, two memoirs by the great theatre artist Binodini Dasi, *Āmār Kathā* (*My Story*, 1912) and *Āmār Abhinetri Jīban* (*My Life as an Actress*, 1924-25). In Marathi, we have Lakshmibai Tilak's *Smriti-chitre* (*Memories*, 1934-36), and Dalit autobiographies such as Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (*The Prisons We Broke,* 1986) and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (*The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs,* 2003). There are numerous examples in other Indian languages as well. Narratives by women of personal, class or caste struggles, such as Baby Haldar's *Ālo*

Āndhāri (*A Life Less Ordinary*, 2004) and Sujatha Gidla's controversial family history *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) continue to make a powerful impact. All such narratives, different as they are, address the question of identity. Yet for women especially, the making of a textual identity often seems to work *against* a liberal ideology of the self, demonstrating the difficulty women experience, in a grossly unequal society, in aligning *selfhood* with publicly or socially constituted *personhood*. The act of narration, of looking back and composing, or recomposing, a life, is of course a gesture towards claiming personal identity. At the same time, women's history tends to challenge the liberal humanist illusion of a fully self-conscious, socially visible, and individually responsible personhood: an illusion that also sustains biographical fictions. Feminist studies, looking at the hidden struggles of women in workers' and peasants' movements (Rege 2006, Omvedt 1980, Stree Shakti Sangathana 1989, Panjabi 2017) have in common with people's history a stronger sense of the collective and its place in the historical process.

Women's Lives: Biography

It is important to bear this in mind as we move from women's *autobiographies*, a genre of extraordinary resonance and depth in South Asia, to *biographies* of women, which are relatively scant and unimpressive. The reverse is true of men. The Brahmo scholar Sivanath Sastri wrote a relatively barebones autobiography, but produced a classic account of nineteenth-century intellectual history built around a single, male individual, *Ramtanu Lahiri o tatkalin Bangasamaj* (*Ramtanu Lahiri and the Bengali Society of his Time*, 1903). The only possible parallel to this, almost a century later, is Uma Chakravarti's *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (1998), of which only the last chapter (47 pages) is on Ramabai. The preceding 299 are an incisive analysis of traditional patriarchy and its 'transformed variant' in colonial India, with a critique of the system of gender control imposed by the Chitpavan Brahman Peshwai upon nineteenth-century Maharashtra.

In 2013, the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi brought out an annotated bibliography of biographies and autobiographies of Indian women (Vyas and Sharma 2013). Apart from a record number (84) of biographies devoted to

India's only woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, assassinated in 1984, female autobiographies are relatively more prominent. An early exception to this rule, one to which my attention was drawn in an illuminating conversation with my friend and fellow-academic Barnita Bagchi, is Harihar Das's monumental *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (1921), with a foreword by H.A.L. Fisher in which he states that: 'in the long history of the contact and interfusion of East and West, I doubt whether there is a figure more encouraging or **significant**.' For Fisher, the *significance* of Toru Dutt, a poet and novelist who died aged 21, with her Indian upbringing, European education, and versatility in English and French, lay precisely in the 'interfusion of East and West' that she represented. Eight years later, Leonard and Virginia Woolf published Gurusaday Dutt's slender biography of his wife, the social reformer and activist Saroj Nalini (*A Woman of India*, 1929; the same year as *A Room of One's Own*) from the Hogarth Press.

Even without reference to Vyas and Sharma's useful list, I think we can trace three major types in South Asian biographies of women. In the first category is hagiography, which has a long, but fragmented and textually unreliable history in the subcontinent – for example the anonymous 'lives' of saint-poets like Akka Mahadevi (c.1130–1160) or Meerabai (c. 1498–1546). Adulatory accounts of exceptional modern women, usually unscholarly and inextensive, tend towards hagiography even in a secular context (sometimes there is a religious context as well).[2] In the second category are a few modern scholarly biographies of exceptional figures often already 'placed' in official history, such as Suparna Gooptu's and Richard Sorabji's biographies of the lawyer and reformer Cornelia Sorabji (Gooptu 2006, Sorabji 2010), or Meera Kosambi and Uma Chakravarti's work on Pandita Ramabai (Kosambi 2000, 2016; Chakravarti 1998), and studies of other exceptional figures in music or the arts, such as Sukrita Paul Kumar and Sadique on Ismat Chughtai (2000), Vikram Sampath on Gauhar Jaan, or T.J.S. George on M.S.

[2] E.g. Muriel Clark, *Pandita Ramabai* (London: Morgan and Scott, The New Missionary Series, n.d) and Basil Miller, *Pandita Ramabai: India's Christian Pilgrim* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1949); Padmini Sengupta, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman* ([on Kamala Sattianadhan] Calcutta: YMCA Pub. House, 1956); *Women Workers of India* (London, Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1960); *Toru Dutt* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1968); *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1970); *Sarojini Naidu* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1974).

Subbulakshmi (Sampath 2010; George 2016). To a third type belong exemplary, brief accounts of 'pioneer' or 'famous' women of India, often printed in a series designed for public instruction.[3] In politics, sport and music, there appears to be a natural progression today from the idealizing heroic biography to the postmodern film genre of biopic, particularly favoured for South Asian sports heroes. More serious film 'lives', like Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1977), on the Marathi stage and screen actor Hansa Wadkar, are unusual.

Women as Subjects, Women in History: Two Examples

But instead of surveying the field, I want to focus on two contrasted biographies, illustrating some of the entanglements I referred to at the start, between the record of an individual life and the idea of a history – that might also be a disciplinary history – in which that life is placed. How does writing lives confer significance in terms of an aesthetics and politics of the text, and how can it negotiate historical absence or lack? My first example is a short account (57 pages) of the life and work of the social anthropologist Irawati Karve (1905-70) by Nandini Sundar, contributed to a book called *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, edited by Sundar together with Patricia Uberoi and Satish Deshpande (Uberoi et al 2010). The second, a work of a completely different kind, is Mythily Sivaraman's attempted 'biography' of her grandmother Subbalakshmi, in *Fragments of a Life: A Family Archive* (Sivaraman 2006).

I. Life, Work, History: Irawati Karve

Sundar's account is not really a biography, in that it is only a single chapter in a book devoted to the 'makers' of Indian anthropology: eleven men and one woman, which may be par for the course in a number of disciplinary histories. It is an advance on those short biographical essays that circulate online, or are printed in slender booklets, to encourage and inspire later generations of scholars. But quite apart from

[3] See the series *Pioneer Women of India*, published by Thacker and Co, Bombay, 1944; other similar series are available from later dates. Online biographies are popular, like those of scientists and historical figures at https://www.livehistoryindia.com/

my own long-standing admiration for Irawati Karve, I think that the book itself addresses some questions we want to put to ourselves here. In their introduction, Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande cite André Beteille on the importance of disciplinary history, given the notorious brevity of institutional memory in India: '[o]nce key players have left the scene or the chain of apostolic succession has ruptured, there appear to be few institutionalised mechanisms for preserving professional history' (Uberoi et al, 1). There is no centralised archive that might receive the field-notes, unpublished materials and offprints of individual scholars, no long-term plan for smaller museums and collections, not even a university mechanism for preserving syllabi, teaching plans, and project reports. Historicising the disciplinary past is a neglected activity, so much so that new generations of scholars forgetfully start over again as if they knew nothing of the findings of their predecessors. But it is surely important that the editors seek to redress this amnesia, not by writing a history of sociology and anthropology (since they bracket the two disciplines) but by producing biographical accounts of twelve leading scholars, who had a key role in shaping not only the disciplines, but also the institutions where sociology and anthropology are practised. In fact, the editors mention L. P. Vidyarthi's two-volume *Rise of Anthropology in India: a social science orientation* (1978) and Ramakrishna Mukherjee's *Sociology of Indian Sociology* (1979), with his earlier article in *Sociological Bulletin* (1973), and their indication of 'phases' and periodized 'groups' to chronicle the history of their disciplines (Uberoi et al, 8-9). Why then do they adopt biography as their chosen mode of doing history?

The editors answer this question by citing Max Gluckman to the effect that the production of knowledge is a 'social process mediated by and through individuals.' Anthropology, 'more than other disciplines, is embodied in the lives of its practitioners and their experiences in the "field" involving a variety of relationships with "others"' (Uberoi et al, 23). They propose thus that the means for a historical anthropology of anthropology (like Mukherjee's 'sociology of sociology') is *biography*: personal documents and unpublished notes might uncover the 'hidden history' of anthropology, and allow us to 'read against the grain', phrases familiar to us from people's history or women's history projects. Disappointingly, though, they admit that though there was material aplenty for psychobiography, '—of sibling

rivalries, of oedipal struggles, of loss and pain and disappointment, of tangled relations with significant others, of domination, abjection, and rebellion, of self-alienation and self-doubt – these personality conflicts remain in all cases very much in the background, and are certainly not projected as the motor of professional development' (Uberoi et al, 24). The essays assume the 'unity of the self' and even the Western notion of the person as Clifford Geertz described it, a 'bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole, and set contrastively against other wholes and against a social and natural background' which Geertz himself calls 'a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures' (Geertz 1993: 59). The most they offer by way of concession to the distinctively Indian context of their enquiries is that, acknowledging that biography cannot evade the duty of 'delivering a self', they also wish to make that self's relations with others, and with society, as visible as possible, to frame their subjects within 'family, kin, caste, religion, and gender' (Uberoi et al, 24-25).

In this respect, then, the essays are sociological, answering the call of their own discipline. At the same time, the research undertaken by the individual authors was a chastening experience, revealing the limitations of disciplinary memory and the obsolescence of past debates and concerns: even, as in the case of Nandini Sundar's work on Irawati Karve, the lack of lasting influence – which would mean an *absence* from disciplinary history. Why is Karve absent from an official register of contributions to Indian anthropology? The editors ask: 'Was it because Karve practised anthropology in the classical sense (including archaeology, pre-history, and physical anthropology) that she does not qualify as an ancestress for contemporary sociologists/ social anthropologists?' Was her work too regional, did she choose the wrong publishers, did she write too much in the vernacular (Marathi), were her students undistinguished, or was it that she taught in non-metropolitan institutions, and that she was a woman in a profession dominated by men (Uberoi et al, 29-30)? Even the labour of biography, it is clear, will not provide the key to *disciplinary* immortality: and this despite the fact that Irawati Karve was a much admired writer in Marathi, and the author of a classic work on the *Mahābhārata* called *Yugānta* (1968). If we turn from the summary observations of the Introduction

to the chapter on Karve herself, we find precisely these concerns re-articulated in more detail, at the same time as Sundar attempts to recover the contours of Karve's life as an acclaimed woman of letters in Marathi, a Sanskrit scholar, a palaeontologist, serologist and anthropometrist, a collector of folksongs, and a professional academic over approximately forty years, 1928-70. She spent most of her career at Deccan College, Pune, during the first phase of anthropology's disciplinary consolidation in the university. Her master's thesis studied the ethnicity of her own caste, that of the Chitpavan Brahmans. As a 'high-caste' woman married to an atheist, her family's reformed Hinduism was nevertheless quite traditional in many respects. Sundar cites an undated article Karve wrote in Marathi to trace the intellectual tradition she inherited – from the social writings of nationalist leaders like Ranade, Tilak and Gokhale, to classic studies of tribes and castes, to sociological works in Marathi, to the writings of G.S. Ghurye and B.R. Ambedkar's writings on caste. Expectedly, the essay is much more an intellectual history than a personal life-story, though Sundar does make the unexpected observation that because Karve was a woman, her life was 'fuller' than it would have been had she been male (Uberoi et al, 371). In brief snatches, Karve emerges as a vivid, unconventional personality, with strong opinions, 'an exciting and difficult person', hospitable, insatiably curious, given to extensive field-trips away from her children, frank to the point of rudeness (she was not on speaking terms with the great historian D.D. Kosambi), and passionate about a multitude of interests.

But on the whole Sundar is concerned with Karve's work itself, which remains, in her opinion, mired in the obsolescent four-field approach of archaeology, physical anthropology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology, subscribing to the notion of 'diffusionism' (i.e., that cultural variation is the result of the migration of different ethnic groups), and drawing upon a strong Indological basis through her reading of Sanskrit texts (notably the *Mahābhārata*) to confirm her hypotheses. An interest in human origins and migrations lay behind her lifelong commitment to the study of kinship and caste, based on anthropometric and 'genetic' data (blood group, colour vision, and other biological variations). Sundar also cites her 'surprisingly contemporary' surveys of women, dam-displaced populations, weekly markets, pastoralists, and the '*vāri*', or the *vārkari* pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which Karve

rather inaccurately regarded as the basis of a Maharashtrian identity. On this she wrote with exceptional energy and insight. 'On the Road' was the first essay by Karve that I read, now very long ago (Karve 1962). Karve viewed Hindu castes and sub-castes as inescapably mixed ('mongrelized'), but she was strongly caste-conscious, and suffered from the Hindu bias that lays sole claim over sub-continental diversity and tolerance, expressing hostility towards Islam and Christianity. Interestingly though, as Sundar points out, much of her creative writing in Marathi is more sensitive towards social differences than the more schematic work in English – a legacy of the colonial separation of spheres.

Sundar's biographical sketch of Karve – for it is no more than that – does have something to say, though in a limited way, about the function of biography in history, particularly in women's history. It places Irawati Karve within the disciplinary changes and battles that took place during her lifetime in anthropology, and it shows her caught up in an intricate web of relations, rivalries, and disputes, though focusing more on her professional than her family life. It also indicates some ideological affiliations (even an incipient feminism), but does not expand on them. Politics is a serious omission: Sundar quotes from a paper given by Karve at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947, a historic occasion where the seeds of the Non-Aligned Movement were sown, but we do not really learn much beyond the Islamophobic tone of the address. But given that Sundar had access to a range of archival material, to Karve's papers, to a bibliography compiled by K.C. Malhotra, to the surviving members of her family, such as her son Anand Dinkar Karve and daughter Jai Nimbkar (her other daughter Gauri Deshpande died, of alcohol abuse, in 2003) and to colleagues and students such as Y.B. Damle and Malhotra himself, we are left thinking of, and missing, the biography that might have resulted, and that the subject clearly demanded. Yet *that* book is one that the author, Nandini Sundar, preoccupied with her own professional commitments, her research, teaching and activism, would never have the time to write. While there must have been gaps and silences in the historical record, and Sundar refers to missing essays and absent witnesses, the fact that Irawati Karve was a professional scholar and writer in a highly literate family, linked by kinship, social and academic ties to established local and national circles, makes her in some ways the ideal focus of a sustained

biographical exercise. Even her lack of disciplinary influence, and the obsolescence of her scholarly methods, issues that Sundar so clearly indicates, and that would see her marginalized in disciplinary history, might have been countered by the richness of significance that a life-writer, 'delivering a self', or rescuing that self from what E.P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1966: 12) might have produced. It is for this reason that Sundar's account, precisely the kind of exercise in 'recovery' and 'redressal' that disciplinary history requires, nevertheless leaves behind an effect of sadness. For the contours of Karve's life, that of a critical, energetic, self-aware, socially conscious, never unproblematic woman, a creative writer as well as a scholar and field researcher, witness and participant in the making of a nation and of an academic discipline, could *only* be recoverable in an aesthetic imaginary, through the literary project of biography, not through record-keeping alone (though Sundar's essay is scarcely that).

II. Significant Life: Subbalakshmi

It is on this note that I want now to turn to a book deliberately titled *Fragments of a Life* (Sivaraman 2006), the biography of an 'unknown' woman who had wanted to be part of the stirring events of her time, but remains excluded from the historical record of India's struggle for independence. This is the women's and Dalit rights activist Mythily Sivaraman's grandmother Subbalakshmi (1897-1978), almost an exact contemporary of Irawati Karve but far removed in terms of education and opportunities. Sivaraman found her grandmother's diary (written in English and covering only two years, 1924-26) with other memorabilia in a blue tin trunk after Subbalakshmi's death. The book is an attempted reconstruction not simply of a past life but of a past time. Like many girls in orthodox Tamil Namboodiri Brahman families of the time, Subbalakshmi was married at 11 and bore her first child at 14. She longed to study and learnt not only Tamil and Sanskrit but English from reading to her grandfather, and some Bengali through her love for Tagore's poetry, but was not educated beyond the third standard (i.e. school year). She collected books in later life and read widely and eclectically, in English, Tamil and Sanskrit: literature, philosophy, psychology, science, history, travel, visual arts, and religious texts, from Tagore and Subramania Bharathi to Freud, Marx and Einstein. She cultivated

friendships, watched birds, went to art exhibitions and subscribed to literary and art journals such as the *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, *Modern Review*, *Rupam*, and Mrinalini Chattopadhyaya's *Shamaa'a*. She deeply admired Gandhi and Tagore, spun and wore *khādi,* longed to join the freedom movement (with a brief activist phase in the 1920s), and was tormented in her last years by the dream of a female indentured labourer in South Africa, calling to her for help. But her life was unhappy: two of her sons died in infancy, she suffered epileptic fits, and her husband was cold, refusing to sanction treatment for her illness, believing her to be mad. She was forced to leave home to put her daughter Pankajam into school, and towards the end of her life she lapsed into clinical depression and withdrawal.

Some of those present here may recall that the feminist historian Uma Chakravarti, who wrote the 'Afterword' to Sivaraman's book, made a short documentary film on Subbalakshmi's life, *A Quiet Little Entry* (Chakravarti, 2010), tragically succeeded by *Fragments of a Past* (Chakravarti 2013) where the figure in focus is Sivaraman herself. Unlike her grandmother, Mythily Sivaraman lived a full political life, but was losing her memory to Alzheimer's disease. Not only do these paired films (which I viewed when Chakravarti presented them at successive Women's Studies workshops at my university) offer a cinematic supplement to the textual archive of *Fragments of a Life*, but the book, in a sense, stands at the centre of a collective reconstruction of women's history, and I think this is as important and memorable as the text itself. Mythily Sivaraman was drawn to political activism (she was Working President of AIDWA, the women's wing of the Communist Party of India-Marxist) by the massacre of 44 landless Dalit farmers on 25 December 1968 at the village of Kilvenmani in Tamil Nadu. In Chakravarti's second documentary, *Fragments of a Past*, Sivaraman's loss of memory is compensated by the rallying round her of her daughter, husband, and comrades in the struggle within and outside the Communist Party. Indeed, even before Sivaraman's own biographical efforts, her grandmother's diary had already figured in a chapter of Kamala Visweswaran's much earlier book, *Fictions of a Feminist Ethnography* (Visweswaran 1994). Sivaraman's own retrieval of a family archive is sandwiched between a 'Foreword' by Githa Hariharan and 'Afterword' by Uma Chakravarti, with other women, activists, and researchers such as her own daughter Kalpana Karunakaran

or the historian V. Geetha adding testimonies, recollections, reviews that hedge the margins of the text in print and online fora.[4] So the book *Fragments* (2006), despite the lessons of loss, exclusion and silencing it has for us, and even despite the poignant echoing of those absences in the 'memory loss' that Sivaraman displays – and refers to – in the film *Fragments* (2013) of which she is the subject, is in its textual history, and against the odds, a triumph of the women's archive.

But what kind of triumph, and in what sense is a life understood or retrieved? In her 'Afterword', titled 'The Blue Tin Trunk', Uma Chakravarti wrote of the paradigm shift that was required within the discipline of history to accommodate the efforts of feminist historians to bring into focus those 'non-actors' who may have been left out of history's 'mega-events', who may have struggled and failed to transform their own lives as history demanded. She also wrote of the near-impossible task of reconstruction: of the way in which Mythily Sivaraman uses library issue-slips, lists of book-titles, scraps of paper noting details of art-exhibitions, a diary covering only two years out of a life that spanned 81 years, newspaper cuttings, journal subscriptions, letters from friends and relatives, a ruled notebook in which she copied out passages from her reading, and one actual book, the first edition of Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* – together with her own mother's memories -- to put together a portrait, historically contextualized and deeply imagined, of a woman whom she never really knew. Inevitably, Chakravarti says, 'a corollary of the fragmentary quality of the material in the blue tin trunk is the fragility of Subbalakshmi's persona that emerges in the writing – tender, tenuous, almost ephemeral not only because of the kind of material one has at hand to try and make sense of her but, more importantly, because Subbalakshmi remained 'unformed', struggling to express herself, to *be* herself but unable to do so, because of the weight of tradition and the weight of structures in which a person, especially a woman, is embedded' (Sivaraman 2006: 188). Chakravarti also spoke of the quicksilver quality of the reconstructed image – *now you see it, now you don't* – slipping in and out of Sivaraman's pages. For Subbalakshmi made no attempt to write herself as subject, made no mention in her diary of the 'failed conjugality' at

[4] See Kalpana K, 'My Mother, My Comrade' published March 27, 2018, accessed May 28, 2019, in https://indianculturalforum.in/2018/03/27/my-mother-my-comrade/

the core of her married life, concealing, rather than revealing herself in unemotional details of expenses and visits, though 80 of the 188 entries in her diary (from January 1924 to March 1926) are observations of nature. Sivaraman uses the references and lists as clues, filling in details about books, about historical incidents, about libraries, about an aesthetic sense nurtured by nationalist art and through her friendship with Harindranath, Kamaladevi, and Mrinalini Chattopadhyaya and Sarojini Naidu, and above all the nationalist movement and her admiration for Gandhi and Tagore (she had wanted to send her daughter Pankajam to study in Santiniketan). The 'creativity and passion' required of a biographer in these circumstances makes the resulting work expressive also of the biographer's selfhood, from which, Mythily Sivaraman said, she could feel her grandmother 'trying to come out' (Sivaraman 2006: 188).

Chakravarti, herself a professional historian, ends by asking what meaning Subbalakshmi's 'aborted existence' might have, what place she occupies in the history of women or in the history of a colonised nation's struggle for freedom. In the structure-agency tension that shapes human lives, Subbalakshmi exercises little agency beyond her struggle to educate her daughter, to wear *khādi*, and to read and think, though we will never know what she thought: 'for the rest', Chakravarti says, 'births, deaths, anguishes, failures, illnesses, silences and erasures punctuate the lives of all women' (Sivaraman 2006: 206). Such questions had been asked earlier from a different disciplinary perspective by Kamala Visweswaran, who used Subbalakshmi's diary and memorabilia, and the memories of her daughter and granddaughter, for a chapter in her 1994 book called *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. The titular emphasis on 'fictions' is deliberate. To write a history is also to make up a story. If Chakravarti is asking a question about history and individual agency, Visweswaran is asking a question about ethnography: what is the truth of a life, and how may it be read? Visweswaran begins her book by commenting on the links between ethnography and literature, and between autobiography and ethnography: her exercise in these blurred genes (to use Geertz's phrase: Geertz 1993: 19-25) is placed in the frame of her own relationship with her grandmother. As she shows, there are many truths to every life: her own readings of Subbalakshmi's diary and notebook are followed by an objection from Subbalakshmi's daughter Pankajam, who feels that her mother has been misinterpreted. The last section of her chapter

contains Pankajam's unfinished, draft 'life' of her mother, and cites an earlier tribute Pankajam composed to her father. And if Chakravarti suggests that Mythily Sivaraman is producing, with 'creativity and passion', something of her own story from her grandmother's 'minimalist' record, so, too, Visweswaran observes that Pankajam, 'with great skill and compassion', has narrated her own history through her mother's life. To add to this, the feminist academic Kalpana Karunakaran (Mythily Sivaraman's daughter, Pankajam's granddaughter), is currently engaged in composing a life of her grandmother, also relying on a family archive containing Pankajam's autobiographical fragments.[5]

I make these points not in order to offer the banal conclusion that every biography is an exercise in autobiography, nor that both are literary, and therefore 'fictional' genres (which of course they are to some extent) but to return to an observation I was trying to make earlier, about the *collective* character of women's history as illustrated in *Fragments of a Life*. If one thinks of the way in which the attempt to recover the life of Mythily Sivaraman's grandmother has become a thicket of closely interwoven narratives by women writers and artists, testifying (like Githa Hariharan in her 'Foreword') to the 'jolt of recognition' with which they approached the subject and the anxious concern with which they returned to it (like Uma Chakravarti with her 'Afterword' and her paired films), or how they examine or supplement what meagre evidence exists (I am thinking here of Mythily and her mother Pankajam, Kamala Visweswaran, Kalpana Karunakaran, and Githa Hariharan, but there are others too), what emerges is a distinctive way of understanding lives and doing history. It is not that the idea of the singular, unrepeatable life, the person whose individual existence must be set against other people and events, has disappeared. On the contrary, it is the focus of enquiry, even as we come up against the sad recognition of how much is missing in the personal record as in the historical one. But at the same time, it seems as though the *search* for that life, or for others like it, can become a collective endeavour, and that multiple searches, across generations and media, can produce the intricate networks and

[5] See https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2019/nov/12/paatis-story-across-five-decades-2060380.html Accessed 4 April 2020.

meshes that constitute women's history, making it, not marginal to mainstream history (as Uma Chakravarti suggests) but its thorny undergrowth. In this case at least, and in many like it, the formal, classical endeavour of biography must be seen to fail. This does not mean that it could not succeed in another instance: in my earlier example, that of Irawati Karve, it might well have succeeded. But here, it is through the collective constitution of the archive, as other narratives, other testimonies, are added to the record of a life only partially recoverable in itself, that the sense of a women's history emerges as an interworked series, where meaningfulness is generated not so much by the portrait, as by the search, and by a process of aggregation, rather than by singling out. The *Fragments* of Subbalakshmi's life, and the *Fragments* of Sivaraman's past, speak to each other of loss, but also of recovery.

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