

Nonica Datta, *Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, xv + 235 pp. Rs.695

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Oral history in recent years has acquired a salience and acceptance that is both popular and academic and has occupied a recognised place within the scholarly practices of numerous academic disciplines, such as anthropology, education, history, geography, political science and sociology. It is an interesting and developing field which plays a vital role in recovering lost histories while enlarging our understanding of the past. As a methodological tool it is being widely used by feminist historians to contest the subaltern status of women and recover histories that would otherwise remain hidden behind the dominant discourses, thus foregrounding the silenced subjectivities of women. One cannot simply run down subjectivity as not expressing visible facts - the ostensible business of history, because what an informant believes is, indeed, a historical fact as much as what 'really' might have happened. Very often, we find that written documents are only the uncontested transmission of unidentified oral sources. The importance of oral testimony lies not in its strict adherence to a so called fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, memory and desire structure it. Education, religion, politics, local and family traditions and public culture -all influence the way the past is remembered and interpreted.

*Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony* by Nonica Datta is based on the oral narrative of a woman in colonial Punjab. The narrative invests new meanings into the received accounts of communal divide and the

concomitant violence which has shaped much of our colonial and postcolonial history. What is significant about this testament is the view from the other side that violence and retribution can also derive legitimacy from the victims' perspective. One could perhaps concede that the specific acts have their own contexts of validation. Datta has worked extensively outside the archive to recreate an account of an individual's history as it emerges in uneasy tension with nation and community, by engaging into debates on women, agency, speech/silence and subaltern interrogations of dominant historiographies. She uses memory as an important tool. Of course, memory comes loaded with ideological and cultural representations of both the present and the past, so that accounts of the past are never 'pure' recall of life as it were. As poststructuralists maintain, accounts of experience cannot give direct access to 'reality' because it is impossible to compose or frame them outside the language and discourses in which we make sense of our lives. Datta is fully aware of the limitations of her approach and as a historian marshals enough evidence to make up a coherent and credible account.

The author's subject/informant Subhashini (1914-2003) was born to a Jat family in Karnal district of Haryana. Her father Phool Singh was a colonial subject in service of the British Raj as a *patwari*, who, by the time Subhashini was born, had resigned his job to become an itinerant Arya Samaj preacher. This was a time when the Arya Samaj movement was gaining ground in Punjab. As a child Subhashini was sent off by her father to a *gurukul* to instil in her the spirit of Arya *dharma*. She attended *kanya gurukuls* in Delhi and Dehradun, to study the basic teachings of Dayanand Saraswati. She also spent some time in Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram, but Gandhi did not impress her much. She was married off, much against her own inclination, though she remained devoted to the ideal of a *brahmacharini* and would call herself a *rand-lugai*, a wife leading the life of a widow.

By now her father, who was popularly called Bhagatji, had started a gurukul for boys in Bhainswal, and also set up in Khanpur the Kanya Pathshala, a gurukul for girls, which Subhashini was asked to supervise. In the meantime there was some communal turmoil when Karamat, a Muslim pastoralist had a liaison with a Hindu Jat widow Shiriya Devi. The Hindu Jat community was up in arms. Bhagatji warned the woman but she wouldn't listen, and a Hindu Jat zealot Baru Ram kills her on a field with his harvesting tools. This infuriates Karamat who vows revenge on the Jat community whose spiritual mentor was Bhagatji. On the fateful day of 14 August 1942 Bhagatji was found murdered. Subhashini was convinced that the killers of her father were 'Musalman Rangars.' The banyan tree under which he had died became a sacred spot for the Jat community. Phool Singh turned from a *bhagat* into a *shaheed*, a *hutatma*, in the memory of the local Jat community. As far as Subhashini was concerned her father had achieved martyrdom, and the day which was to remain etched in her memory became the defining moment in her life. From then on this beleaguered daughter became obsessed with the idea of retribution and took upon herself the moral responsibility to devote all her energies to the education of the girls of Kanya Gurukul, Khanpur, the task her father had assigned her.

The Aryan concept with its associations of vigour, conquest and expansion was an important element in the nationalist construction of a sense of identity, and within the framework of the Aryan there was a *virangana* (the heroic woman) ideal that has for a long time presented an alternative paradigm for womanhood. On the one hand it challenges patriarchy, while on the other it asserts the female potential for power as well as virtue as strong reservoirs against unholy colonial intrusions. Dayanand believed that in the ideal society of the Vedic period women participated in all spheres of public life, and it was the Muslim influence that had corrupted a Hindu social order. A woman was seen

as a symbol of purity and the Kanya Gurukul became a model for women's institutions in many provinces.

Subhashini who strongly subscribed to the tenets of the Arya Samaj had fully internalised the role that was assigned for a Hindu woman. It was an activist and militarist path that was obviously very different from the one advocated by Gandhi, who wanted to deploy the 'femininity' of women against colonial masculinity, but which also saw women as suffering and patient. That is perhaps the reason why Gandhi never appealed to her. For her, women were both victims and agents. If she perceived women as victims, who felt oppressed in the Hindu patriarchal dispensation, she also saw them as agents when it came to defending themselves from 'Muslim marauders'. Thus the Hindu woman became the agent, while the Muslim man became the victim. When Swami Shraddhanand launched his programme of *shuddhi* in the 1920s using the community and nation making discourse he advised the Hindus that the best way to avoid conflict with the Muslims was to take care of their 'own' women and children. Subhashini could never forget that Bhagatji was killed by a Muslim.

Partition is recorded in the popular imagination as a traumatic event, and of unprecedented communal upheaval and pain which rent asunder the lives of the people and left deep scars on their psyche. The two communities have not yet been able to come to terms with the violent rupture. Yet a narrative such as Subhashini's presents us with a completely different perspective on the partition violence. This is an account that views partition as an occasion for retributive justice, and hence for celebration. For her the moment of reckoning though is not 1947 but 1942, the year of her father's martyrdom. 1947 is celebratory not just because it comes as a culmination of the anti-colonial resistance but because the collateral violence becomes a crucial mechanism for the articulation of subjectivities and communal identities. For Subhashini the partition, even if it comes as a tragedy,

accomplishes a certain poetic justice. From her perspective violence is justified because it defends community interests, redresses the wrongs visited on a community, and in the case of pre-emptive violence protects the community from potential threats.

*Violence, Martyrdom and Partition* also raises some disturbing issues. The legitimization of violence, retributive or otherwise, in the wake of partition naturalises and reinforces the pre-existing notions of fundamentally opposed Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities. Datta strictly adheres to her protocol, scrupulously avoiding any normative position while recounting Subhashini's testimony, and skillfully crafts memory as history giving us an account that is credible. In the process she opens up a historian's territory to look at an event from various perspectives, not necessarily congruent.