III

I have chosen to treat some of the essays in this collection more extensively than others for two reasons: one, they more than others are written within the defined ambit of the title of this book. Two, and this is more to my purpose, they are at a definite angle from the conventional treatment of the subjects and could open up fresh inquiries. But it does not mean I see no merit in other essays. There is reasoned argument in them and a palpable positive direction that appeals to discerning readers. At least one essay, by Loris Button on time in visual and literary autobiography, makes me think again about how time is treated in autobiographies and how language, both visual and literary, offers the continuity in time that autobiographies by their very nature encompass. The essay reminds me of S.H Vatsyayan, whose novel *Shekar: Ek Jivani* is regarded as a fictional autobiography, ruminating as follows in an unjustly neglected series of lectures titled *A Sense of Time.*

I am simply a sack puffed out with air,
Tied at the mouth with ageing,
And promised to death
And yet there's this other thing, this love. . .
This child of an instant can toss aside,
As if in play. Time's stunning hammer[10]

Notes

1. Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, New York: Garden City, 1955, p.212.
2. See Mehaly Vajda, 'Aesthetic Judgment in Painting' in Heller and Fehrer, *Reconstructing Aesthetics*. Oxford, 1986, p.68.
3. Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism*, Vol. I Text, London, 1965, pp.42-43.
4. Ibid., p. 287.
5. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: Art and Politics 1750-1764*, New Brunswick, 1993, pp.30-31.
6. See Peter Brooks, *The Realist Vision*, New Haven, 2005.
7. Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*: New York: Vintage Books, 1962, pp. 110-138.
8. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973, p.142.
9. For further discussion, see Ernst Gombrich, 'The Dream of Reason' in *The Uses of Images*, London, 1999, pp.162-183.
10. S. H. Vatsyayan, *Sense of Time: An Exploration of Time in Theory, Experience and Art*, New Delhi: OUP, 1981. p.30.

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

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 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 Chand 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 the Arya *dharma*. She attended the *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 brahmachari and would call herself a *rand-lugai*, a wife leading the life of a widow. By now her father, who was popularly calles Bhagat ji, had started a gurukul for boys in Bainswada, and also set up in Khanpur the Kanya Gurukul Pathshala, a gurukul for girls, which Subhashi was asked to supervise. In the meantime there was some communal turmoil when Karamat, a Muslim jamindar had a liaison with a Hindu widow Shringar Devi. The Hindu community was up in arms. Bhagat ji warned the woman but she wouldn't listen, and a jat Hindu zealout Basu Ram kills her in a field with his harvesting tools. This infuriates Karamat who vows revenge on the jat community whose spiritual mentor was Bhagat ji. On the fateful day of 14 August 1942 Bhagat ji was found murdered. Subhashini was convinced that the killers of her father were 'Musalman Rangars.' The bunyan tree under which he had died became a sacred spot for the jat community. Phool Chand 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 for 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 the Hindu social order. 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 the 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 the Muslim marauders. Thus the Hindu woman became the agent while 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. Shubhashini could never forget that Bhagat ji 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 the potential threats.

Violence, Martyrdom and Partition also raises some disturbing issues. The legitimation of violence, retributive

or otherwise, in the wake of partition naturalises and re-enforces 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 skilfully 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.

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M. K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule [Hind Swaraj]*: A Centenary Edition with an Introduction by S.R. Mehrotra, New Delhi & Chicago: Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2010, 238 pp. Rs. 495.

Hind Swaraj is acknowledged as Mahatma Gandhi's root text, and even in the closing years of his life he expressed his unchanging adherence to the main ideas expressed in it, first published in Gujarati in 1909. However even when he was expressing his continuing faith in its ideas, apparently in the nature of a paradox, in his letter of October 5, 1945 to Jawaharlal Nehru, he made certain qualifications that he did 'not think' to have made in the *Hind Swaraj*, notably in relation to science, and to some extent towards technological innovations like the railways etc. But it should not be imagined that it had been a frozen text with him even earlier. Commencing from the twenties, he had repeatedly clarified on various occasions that he did not visualize a return to rusticity (my choice of a rather unhappy word), and, that he never advocated the rejection of both the principles as well as the spirit of scientific research. But he never deviated from the position that *Hind Swaraj* contained his basic ideas. Writing in the *Harijan*, on October 10, 1939, Gandhi called *Hind Swaraj* - 'that incredibly simple (so simple as to be regarded as foolish) booklet'. It represented an 'attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, poverty and slowness'. It was the 'picture' of an ideal, which he never expected to reach himself, and 'hence cannot expect the nation to do so.' But he nevertheless asserted that, having 're-read it carefully' in the recent past, he wanted readers to know 'that I could not revise a single idea. I had no desire to revise the language.'[1] Since its first publication, *Hind Swaraj* has attracted critical commentary, not to mention the fact of its almost immediate proscription. Gandhian scholarship has variously seen in it, a fundamental ideological text, a testament of the politics of decolonization, a formative position in the tradition-modernity dialectic, and of course, an alternative economic theory. Commencing with the year 2009, we have witnessed a renewed interest in the work, substantially owing to the fact that it was the centenary of its first publication, although some contemporary trends in world politics have made Gandhi seem much more relevant as a political thinker, than was being acknowledged in the recent decades. However, it is also essential that the text, containing many of Gandhi's key ideas, be also critically interrogated, particularly, his evaluation of some professions, as well as his idea of villages as the necessary embodiments of truth and non violence. This apart from such knotty issues, as those pertaining to its translation, the circumstances of its conception, and the genealogy of its ideas.

S.R. Mehrotra's lengthy and comprehensive Introduction to this centenary edition of *Hind Swaraj*, has addressed itself to some of these issues. Many of these it deals with directly, while some others find indirect elucidation in his tracing of the growth of Gandhi's ideas, done mainly towards the close of the introduction. Regarding the genesis of the text, Mehrotra has adduced Gandhi's statement to establish his contention that the book was written primarily for Pranjivan Mehta. He has also sought to dispel other related 'myths', particularly, that *Hind Swaraj* 'was the outcome of some sudden inspiration'. His argument appears valid that the ideas contained in the text had been forming in Gandhi's mind over a period of time. However, it seems from Gandhi's own testimony that at a certain stage the ideas had 'taken a violent possession' of him. But for me, the appeal of Mehrotra's introduction lies mainly in his highlighting, with his characteristically meticulous scholarship, how Gandhi situated himself in the violence – non violence debate, which forms the core of *Hind Swaraj*. The introduction also mentions in detail Aurobindo's response to Gandhi's "Passive Resistance" in the Transvaal, but unfortunately, it offers no discussion on why Gandhi opted for the term in his English version of *Hind Swaraj*, in spite of the fundamental difference between his and Aurobindo's position on the basic philosophy of passive resistance. It does not seem likely that Gandhi could have been unaware of Aurobindo's definition of the concept, when he was evidently so familiar with the ideas and policies of the 'Extremist Party of India.' In fact Lord Ampthill's disquiet at the possibility of passive resistance in the Transvaal being financed by 'sedition-mongers' in India - mentioned in the Gandhi-Ampthill correspondence otherwise treated in detail in the introduction - was probably directly