



Nationalism and Politics through Bina Das's *Memoir*

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Abstract

The paper, 'Nationalism and Politics through Bina Das's *Memoir*' is an analysis of the author's political-prison memoir which probes into the much argued domain of nationalism with the prime focus being on colonial Bengal. One of the youngest patriots to have dared to shoot the then Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson at the Convocation Ceremony of University of Calcutta, Bina Das continues to be an unacknowledged nationalist. A common facet of Bengali women's political participation in the nationalistic strife against the British hegemony was their ungrudging compliance of imprisonment. Time spent in confinement was high yielding as to combat the monotony of their prison existence, women harnessed and nurtured strong solidarity among themselves. They taught each other to read and write so as to enable them to expand their nationalistic disposition and wrote their own tales in prose and poetry which was their modus operandi to resist the colonial regime and the offensive practice of state apparatus. Even though they were enclosed behind the bars and cut off from society yet, they were keenly aware of all that was occurring outside through their avid reading habits as being political prisoners they were entitled to claim for books, newspapers and periodicals. The memoir gives a vivid account of the workings of a prison - segregation of prisoners which was not only gender specific but also on the basis of the prisoner's social and educational standings. The stark difference between criminal and political prisoners highlighted the injustices and tortures that were meted out to the poor, illiterate peasant women whose crime was to resist their patriarchal in-laws. The upper and upper-middle class Bengali women moving out into the public sphere and readily participating in the nation's concern led to a change in the meaning of the *bhadramahila* (gentle woman). While most of the men thought that women would go back to their previous position of being tender and affectionate in the private arena once the country attained freedom however, women thought rather differently and were now ready to withstand any force that might lead them back to the dingy and confined *andarmahal*.

Keywords

nationalism, prison, women, memoir

Early Years

Bengali women in the late eighteenth century were viewed as unsafe, unguarded and unprotected. They were earmarked by the social reformers and the British missionaries as the site for reform and it was also the women in whom it deemed necessary to impart the western beliefs and ideologies. With the advent of time and progress of society the British administrators wanted their Indian civil servants to have English educated wives to continue the ensured loyalty; similarly on the other side the nationalists wanted their *bhadramahilas* to be educated in the Western philosophies but to follow the doctrines of the ideal Indian womanhood. This dichotomy of demands created a generation of women in the latter half of the nineteenth century who were educated, with a thinking, rational and logical mind of their own and ready to participate in the socio-political movements against the hegemony. Women's participation in the public arena created an aberration with the social nexus as picketing and political demonstrations exposed women to the British administrators. The Bengali patriarchy anchored onto the notions of women's chastity and respectability which could limit their action in the public sphere. (Forbes 16) These were also the factors which the colonial masters and the nationalists used against each other as political weapon. It is interesting to note that women used this opportunity to defend their respectability in the political sphere in the process making it clear that their chastity was no longer a monolithic context in the given colonial socio-political setting.

The image of the *bhadramahila* as constructed by the nationalists was one who was a 'repository of the inner spirituality of indigenous social life' (Sarkar 23) this was particularly designed so as to enable a culturally superior stand among the *memsahibs* and the women of the lower strata. The reform that was started with *Streesiksha* was not restricted within the four walls of the house as by the early twentieth century a host of women empowered with knowledge started communicating with the outside world. This communication was engineered by their personal narratives which majorly documented their intimate deliberations to the changing scenario of colonial Bengal. Slowly as career options started to open up, women started to move into the physical space of the public taking an added interest of the political gamut. From 1920s, women's participation in the nationalistic causes increased in the Congress led movements and also in the varied other organisations that were self-reliant. It was only after 1928 through the Scavenger's Protest and Jute Mill Strike that women from the lower rung of the society participated in the protests and rallies which rose out of their need to liberate themselves from

unfortunate working conditions. Women's interest in the political front soon gave rise to a host of notable names of Bengali women from various Brahmo and upper middle class houses who wielded their power in mobilising and inspiring their sisters. The narratives of women written during these transitional times of transient values of the World War divulges not just about their activities in public but also in the private. Similarly Bina Das's (born in 1911) memoir becomes an archive in itself to review the association between the home and the world which majorly contributed to her becoming an integral part of the nationalistic struggle.

The first autobiography by a Bengali woman came in the year 1876 titled, *Amar Jiban* (My Life) by Rassundari Devi and then almost half a century later came Bina Das's *Shrinkhal Jhankar* (Sounds of Chain). Das's memoir is the first political autobiography to have been written by a Bengali woman and had not women like her actively participated in nationalism and adhered to "écriture feminine" (Cixous 14) the genre of political memoir in regional language would not have seen the light of the day. Not just in the field of personal narratives, periodical writings which previously dealt with women's education, conjugality and ideologies of womanhood soon navigated towards patriotic writings in the later half of the nineteenth century. Apart from her tireless life, she penned down a novel commemorating her father, the scholar Benimadhab Das who also happened to be the teacher and influencer of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose at Ravenshaw Collegiate School. Das had also extensively contributed to the journals, *Mandira* and *Jayasree* the editor of the former being Kamala Dasgupta and the later was edited by Lila Nag, a revolutionary who founded the Dipali Sangha, a women's organisation in Dhaka for mobilising women (Chowdhury 61). The new age women not only partook in the affairs of the state but also safeguarded their literary space as often to its added advantage this creativity became a catalyst for organisational mobilisations (Sen 191).

The periodicals started to entwine religious concepts to the idea of incarceration as in an article they had described the imprisonment of women to that of the goddess Lakshmi or *grihalakshmi* of the Bengali home being in jail to fight the demon ruler. Most popular anecdote was the equating of prisoners to various incarnations of the Hindu God Narayana. A woman prisoner's mother had said that she would like to imagine her daughter as Prahlad, the greatest Disciple of Narayana when one day God would break the prison doors and unite the mother and daughter (Forbes 23). Various legends of Krishna were reiterated as Krishna was born in the prison of Kangsa who was likened to the oppressive British administrators. On the other hand the prison was transformed into a

holy shrine as Krishna's birth in prison purged the space. Even though the religious sanction gave women the added motivation to go to prison for the sake of their motherland yet this same incongruity of enmeshing religion and nationalism has been a common preoccupation of every age (Chowdhury 50). Reminiscent of this was also Sri Aurobindo's tryst with Krishna in the Presidency Jail which is elaborately written about in his *Tales of Prison Life* (Karakahini).

Growing Up Days

Das, a student of the Diocesan School and Bethune College was imprisoned in an attempt to shoot Stanley Jackson, the governor of Bengal during the University's Convocation ceremony held on 6th February, 1932 however, even though she was against the colonial raj yet, she had great regard for the western system of education and had expressed in the courtroom confession statement her deep gratitude towards the Christian nun teachers of her institute who too harboured deep affection towards her (Das 11). Just as the patriarchy acted as a catalyst in bringing about the social reforms so too, the Western influence was equally responsible in uplifting the position of women. Even though the Indian women were doubly marginalized at the hands of colonialism and the native patriarchy yet, those two aspects were also the reason for their edification.

Even though politically charged women like Das had devoted her life for the nation's cause yet, their personal lives depicts a domestic picture of close knit family members where the father is no longer an autocratic or only revered being but rather inspiring and affectionate towards his daughters, credit for this system had to be levied to the new family structure that was employed in the Bengali household. In an instance Das's father while meeting her daughter in the prison had remarked that both his daughters had inherited their courage and fortitude from their mother who had constantly inspired them to be determined about their political endeavours (Das 77). That fathers and uncles were no longer feared and had rather become good companions comes out easily from Das's own words,

“The greatest gift from our father was unfathomable love, affection and boundless freedom with parental concern. I realised the difference when we compared ourselves with other girls of our age...I do not know if our parents spoiled us but there is no doubt that without such adoration in the very beginning of my life, I could not have won the strength to challenge the hurdles in the later days” (Das 25).

The purpose of nineteenth century Streesiksha reform was to build mothers who would inspire her children to liberate their nation and Bina Das's mother is a product of the New Woman who is educated and rational minded in the process being able to instil in her daughters the right values of life.

The inception of education at home was an ever-pleasant memory for her. The recital of Rabindranath Tagore's poems by her elder sister, Kalyani Das, the imparting of fundamental English by her mother in the kitchen and the enumeration of Dwijendra Lal Roy's nationalistic drama by her father, concocted a montage of an informal and intimate family surrounding (Das 30). While reminiscing about her childhood days Das confesses,

“My childhood centred on my home, protected by the abundance of affection from my parents... I loved to listen to the stories sitting on my mother's lap. It seemed more interesting to me than playing with the friends of my age. I maintained the practice of reporting all my activities like a vivid story to my mother even after attaining maturity. I have never had such an attentive listener as my mother.” (Das 34)

This easefully builds a picture of mother-daughter dyad as, Adrienne Rich is of the opinion that motherhood as an institution was founded on the assumptions of the patriarchy which trivialised the female experiences and overlooked the delicate nuances binding the duo (Rich 302). The image of the mother as constructed by Das is unique as she perceives her as a dynamic participant in the upbringing of her daughters. She not only enjoyed a strong emotional tie with her mother but also recognises the intellectual debt and the political inspiration she derived through the relationship. An intimate bonding with the mother who could contain her emotions with self-restraint and courage inspired most of the women who dared to devote themselves to work outside their family.

The childhood experience of Bina Das however denounced the picture of a nuclear family as they lived separately from the joint family setup due to the fathers' jobs. This detachment from the larger circle of relatives had a liberating effect on the female members of the family. In the physical space of the nuclear family parents had greater contact with their children making the family close-knit and supportive. It is riveting to note that there was little nostalgia for the traditional lifestyle of middle-class Bengali families, which was often expressed in the writings of the previous generation where the working of the family with the society played an explicit role. The initial impulse to join nationalism majorly came from the intimate intermingling with young brothers and sisters in the family. Das too was swayed by her cousin brother's participation in the *satyagraha*

movements and his ensuing sojourn to jail in 1921. Her sister, Kalyani Das founded the *Chhatri Samgha*, association for physical exercises of girl students eventually to be mobilized in the revolutionary politics. Young Bina had joined the Chatri Sangha along with other such notable women revolutionaries. Apart from building physical strength, women could garner knowledge on international politics in many feasible ways as international books, works on communism and Irish, Russian revolutions were easily available (Das 83). Das's rebellious spirit against the oppressive government started from a very young age when during an examination she did not shudder from writing an affirmative essay on Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way) which was a band literature then and had the audacity to publicly call the novel her favourite (Das 100).

Incarceration

Until the 18th century it was the rebellious peasants and criminals who were detained in prison however, from the twentieth century it was frequented by the Bengali middle class population too. This change in prison setup forced the authority to recognise the middle class as a separate entity in prison and outside and for the native women imprisonment was a common cause to their public and private strife. However, as women started to be arrested for public demonstrations, there rose greater challenge for the prison authorities. Nanibala Devi became the first woman state prisoner in Bengal held under Regulation III of 1818 she was arrested for giving shelter to the leaders associated with the Indo-German Plot. She served rigorous imprisonment with Dukaribala Devi for two and a half years. They were arrested in 1915 for their active participation with the revolutionaries and had to undergo inhuman tortures. (Bandhyopadhyay 32) Previously women's participation in the nation's cause was solely restricted in the literary space or through their practise of *swadeshi* nonetheless, from around 1919 with the advent of non-cooperation movement women actively took part in picketing on streets which ushered their arrests. With time as women started to join the Gandhi led movements or sided with the revolutionaries, their number in the prison also started to increase. The prison life was an integral part of the political women and Bina Das's prison experience constitutes a significant episode in her memoir, exposing the oppressive, arbitrary nature of the state apparatus. Barbara Harlow calls these autobiographies of women a new literary corpus recording their experience of struggle and defiance against the authoritarian regime. The

collective experience that women encountered was based on a bond beyond gender, caste or religion. (Harlow 119)

Family played a vital role in the whole process of imprisonment. Where on one side the families tried to overcome their own personal grief and had to put on a show from exposing their initial shock and actual mental state. Similarly, on the other side they complemented their daughters for daring to show such bravado. Bina Das's elder sister, Kalyani was already in prison for supporting the Civil Disobedience movement when Bina was arrested for attempting to assassinate the Governor. Kalyani recalled that regarding her temporary imprisonment her father used to be very anxious while her mother calmly extended her encouragement saying that the youths are going to jail for their country. However, Kalyani ponders how her parents would hold their ground when they learnt of Bina's arrest, she herself feared that sooner or later Bina would be hanged bringing the eventual separation. Bina knew that her parents would forgive her as they knew that she could do anything for her beloved motherland. When her parents were brought to the I.B officer, he persuade Bina's father saying that the source of the revolver could release her daughter to which Bina had protested saying that her father had never taught her to be a traitor (Das 123). The pistol was provided by Kamala Dasgupta and the mention of it is found in her autobiography *Rakhter Akshare*. The young fighters mostly practised shooting during the night of Diwali to muffle the noise but as Bina had no provision for target practice so she had missed the Governor however five consecutive shots from her pistol had conferred upon her the title, 'Agnikanya' (Das 130).

What happens in the prison is a reflection of what happens in the society outside and in this respect we can say that the prison was a world of its own, the 18th century prison was described as dark, damp and dingy accompanied with a musty smell. Food was inedible and frequently male authorities poked fun at the women prisoners. Bathrooms were located outside and often to the embarrassment of the women, they were sent to toilets accompanied by male guards. Things underwent a change when middle class women started to crowd the cells. These youthful ladies were from respectable families, educated often with university degrees and with an aesthetic taste. Their presence in the prison ushered in alterations, constructing a distinct sense of refinement within the pitiless prison reign. The absence of the blue stretch overhead was the complaint of some while some would crowd over a little window to observe the flow of the serene river water. The yearning for nature's bounty was located in Bina Das's memoir too, one evening she had placed *bael* and *rajanigandha* flowers inside her ward

when she was humiliated for turning the cell into a luxurious room (Das 67). The seasonal changes were distinct and often it brought back memories of home, it must be noted that most of these women prisoners had spent their best years in prison. Fear is an integral factor to the architecture of prison and to instil it the first step that the authorities took was to paint the prison walls with black tar.

David Arnold in his work had stated that as opposed to the Benthamite panopticon prison model the 19th century colonial prison norms regarding dress, diet, hair and work showed that regional caste and religion were respected (Arnold 5). Still there were events where prison administrators were stern on allowing any preference to the prisoners. The Superintendent of Presidency jail in Calcutta had written a letter to allow plain white sari to widowed women prisoners and bordered sari to others, after much dispute on this topic a regulation was passed allowing the same. Bina Das remembers how the prisoners of 'C' category had to wear short gown instead of sari which left them uncomfortable. She helped another political prisoner with her short kurta but the jailer took it away calling it a fashionable blouse and made her wear the prison attire. (Das 88) No matter what hardships came in the way, women found their own way to survive in the unkind prison atmosphere and with scarce amenities available women created a domestic atmosphere within the prison. Cooking for ailing prisoners or for those leaving the jail often revived the sororal bonding that women shared with each other. The public and private space amalgamated into one as prison, considered to be the public arena was refurbished with the doctrines of the private.

The abysmal prison life also gave one the opportunity to enhance oneself. Bina Das had written that the prison was the best place to nurture one's mind to understand one's quest in life. It gave ample time for reading, writing, meditating and teaching - leading one to look deeper within oneself. As the outside was devoid of any motivation so, prisoners were forced to look within to discover the elixir of life. With a busy life in the city one hardly gets time for one's own self so, without those years in prison Das confesses she could not have ameliorated her personality. Censoring of books, periodicals in prison brought in heated arguments between the prisoners and the administrators. *The Statesman* was the only newspaper available which in spite of its imperial prejudice was considered a treasure. Political discussions were an integral part of prison life and it was through these brain storming discussions that Bina Das chose to join Congress while some opted for Communism. Many young girls opted to clear examinations while in prison and Das tutored them frequently. Even though life was stagnant in prison still most

of them wanted to make this time fruitful as once they came out of prison they would be actively absorbed into the nationalistic works (Das, A).

Bonding not only developed between women political and criminal prisoners but also between men and women prisoners. Without any common organisation or ideology to follow, the mutual respect grew within each other from the experience of similar coercion and humiliation within the prison. When Bina Das was admitted in the prison hospital after observing hunger strike, the male prisoners of Rajshahi jail had sent her soap, biscuits, oil and cream to extend their solidarity. It was a common practise to shout out “Bande Mataram” in jail when new political prisoners arrived – which was a way of communication between the prisoners with similar cause. In a place where words were barred gifts, signs and slogans became a way to respond to and support one another (Das 92). This act of leaving behind signs and tokens for the other person to recognise was also a common practise by the Jews in the Nazi imprisonment camps. In solitude or under constant suppression from state coercion the need for company became a challenge for the prisoners.

Without the prison experience such testimony of formation of companionship across gender could not have been possible. The result of non-human treatments to the detainees resulted in such actions of hunger strikes, such challenges were met by the authorities with jail code, medical assistance, weapons or human weapons like convict officers or paid wardens. While writing about the ordinary prisoners, the political prisoners were conscious of their identity and never forgot the class difference. Autobiographical instances show how efforts were taken to ameliorate this distinction but to no avail. However, when Das had started the hunger strike to transfer a libertine jailor, the ordinary prisoners promptly refused to eat saying that Bina was like their daughter and that they could not eat while she fasted. Das was kind and tender towards the non-criminal lunatics in prison which also increased the number of her admirers (Das 131).

Das was first released after nine years of rigorous imprisonment and then again she was imprisoned for three years for her active association with Quit India Movement. She had extensively worked in the Congress and alongside Gandhi. Das had also spoken in her memoir about the good natured government officials who had to do their duty by obeying the Crown but also helped the young rebels in ways unthinkable. While being deported Das was surreptitiously given a paper to write a letter to her parents so that they stay informed about her whereabouts. Later in her life, Das became the member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly from 1946-1951. After the death of her husband she

became a recluse and spent her last days in Rishikesh (Das A). Women's contribution in the anti-colonial struggle of Bengal had created a rich heritage of women's history which had advanced the country towards freedom. Politics was a banned topic for women which was neither taught to them nor discussed however, the arrival of nationalism served as a catalyst for the politicisation of women. This rich legacy of women's potential in the colonial era is proof enough for the mobilisation of women's strength at some future date unknown to the cognition and perceptions of the past.

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