Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History

David Arnold and *Stuart Blackburn, eds.*
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Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History is edited by David Arnold (professor of South Asian history) and Stuart Blackburn (research associate), both of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. The intellectual contributions of the editors and nine other distinguished scholars, all of whom belong to a range of academic disciplines, make this collection of eleven essays a remarkable and highly readable work on life histories – biographies, autobiographies, and oral accounts – from India. This volume grew out of the "Life Histories" project established at SOAS and out of various workshops held between 1998 and 2000 at SOAS, the London School of Economics, Oxford University, Cambridge University, and the British Library.

In their well-thought-out and written "Introduction," the editors explain why this volume was published. According to them, for a very long time the life history approach has been gaining wide acceptance among scholars belonging to various disciplines, such as women's studies and black studies, due to a "growing distrust of 'meta-narratives'" and a firm desire to "move towards a more nuanced, multi-stranded understanding of society and a greater recognition of the heterogeneity of human lives and lived experi-

ence" (p. 5). Life histories provide an alternative, individualized, and culture-specific version of "truth" that can problematize and counter any of the naïve truth claims of meta-narratives.

However, until recently, scholars of India have been comparatively "neglectful" (p. 1) of life histories, although they are central to Indian religious texts, literature, and history. In general, South Asian scholars seldom employ the life history form as "genres worthy of systematic analysis" (pp. 3-4). According to Arnold and Blackburn, this general reluctance can be attributed to the paradigm of "collectivity," which was largely shaped by the nineteenth-century Orientalist approach and colonial ethnography that dominated South Asian scholarship for several decades.

From this perspective, India was always imagined as a society deeply conditioned by ties of caste, kinship, and religion, one in which notions of self and individual agency, as well as their literary expressions, were "subsumed within larger social and cultural domains" (p. 5). These essays explore a wide range of biographies, autobiographies, diaries, and oral stories in an attempt to counter this imagination and to analyze the interaction and negotiation there between collectivity and individuality. Life histories are valuable social documents for understanding notions of self, individual practices and intentions, and the importance of collectivities in South Asia.

The essays are organized into three parts based on their form and intent. The first part, "Confronting Modernity," contains three essays on the written life histories of "modern" individuals who were actively engaged with colonial modernity. Arnold's essay examines prison narratives, especially those written by Gandhi, Nehru, M. N. Roy, Jogesh Chandra Chatterji, V. D. Savarkar, and C. R. Rajagopalachari. According to him, the prison experience gave middle-class men and women who had been jailed by the British a unique opportunity for individualistic self expression.

In another essay, Francesca Orsini focuses on the writings of Mahadevi Varma (1907-87), a modern Indian woman who was eager to conceal her personal identity and reluctant to write about herself. Through her stories of other people's lives, however, we obtain a fragmented account of her own life history. Sudipta Kaviraj's essay explores the autobiography (*atmacarit*) of Sibnath Sastri, a nineteenth-century Bengali writer and religious reformer. Sastri's autobiography is a literary expression of a "modern" individual's invention of a private life.

The book's second part, "Translating Tradition," includes four brilliant essays on more traditional life history genres that do not conform to a conventional western pattern of autobiography. Metcalf analyzes Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya's *Aap Biitii*, a twentieth-century Muslim intellectual's

memoirs, written in a "distinctive Indo-Persian cultural and literary tradition" (p. 11). Sylvia Vatuk, in another interesting essay, offers a gendered reading of the autobiography of Zakira Ghouse, a Hyderabadi Indian Muslim woman, which is "full of elliptical references to events that might have caused considerable offence if more fully explicated" (p. 16). David Shulman's essay is based on the Sanskrit biography of Ananda Ranga Pillai, an eighteenth-century Tamil politician, and identifies both the pre-modern and modern elements of this life history. Blackburn's essay throws fresh light on the collective telling of life history by analyzing two different genres of this practice in Tamil: historical ballads (*carita*) and folktales (*katha*).

The last part of the book, "Spoken Lives," features three essays on the oral life histories of socially marginalized and silenced peoples (e.g., women and Dalits) gathered through interviews, conversations, and listening in on other people's lives. These essays attempt to uncover lives and recover voices that otherwise might have eluded the attention of academic disciplines. Kirin Narayan's essay presents the life stories of middle-class, middle-aged women from Kangra and explains the "silences" attending women's life stories in India. Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine elicit the life history of Viramma, an illiterate Tamil Dalit woman who died in 2002, to show how Dalits are silenced and how they can "speak." In the final essay, Jonathan Parry constructs the life story of Somavaru, a Bihari Satnami, who is reluctant to speak openly about emotions and feelings.

The book is a useful resource for all those involved in cultural and religious studies and those interested in such dominant themes of South Asian studies as gender, modernity, colonialism, nationalism, caste, kinship, folklore, and interaction between individual and community. It challenges the prevailing perception that Indian society is dominated by collectivities and that notions of self and individual agency are marginal to South Asian thinking and behavior. Instead, it argues that there has always been a constant interaction and negotiation between notions of self and community in India. The essays on Indian life stories in this volume, moreover, do not reveal a pattern of isolated, autonomous, individual selves, but rather a self within a network of family, kin, caste, religion, and gender. As life histories offer unique insights into the wider society of which an individual is a part, the book also argues that they are important resources for social science research in general and for South Asian society in particular.

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