

BOOK REVIEW

REMEMBERING REVOLUTION: GENDER, VIOLENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN INDIA'S NAXALBARI MOVEMENT¹

Pratiksha Baxi*

Remembering Revolution, a stunning book on the Naxalbari movement of the 1960s, is a must read. This book must be counted as an important contribution towards understanding social and political movements in India. Although there have been other important feminist writings on Left politics, this book forcefully addresses the need for reflecting upon the sexual politics of revolutionary left movements. This book emphasizes that it must not be assumed that radical politics has resulted in a radical critique of patriarchy, especially of sexual violence. This is despite the fact that there is increasing participation of women in violent revolutionary politics, and that women increasingly are becoming the face of such violent politics. The anguishing contradictions inherent in attachments to the idea of a revolution or to the ideology of a movement find courageous treatment in this book. Moreover, *Remembering Revolution* fully redresses the curious lack of feminist attention to the experience of violence in the lives of revolutionary women.

Remembering Revolution is a work which emanated from Srila Roy's doctoral fieldwork in 2003 and 2004. It documents oral histories and offers a reflexive account of the politics of gender, violence and memory. It moves between personal narratives, oral testimonies and official histories, literary and cinematic sources; and archival or auto/biographical works. Apart from archival sources, autobiographies and literary works, this book derives its strengths from the life histories and narratives of twenty former Naxalite women and sixteen men (all Hindus) whom Roy interviewed during her fieldwork. Most of these women were lower middle class; some were refugees from Pakistan. A majority of these

* Assistant Professor, Center for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

1. SRILA ROY, *REMEMBERING REVOLUTION: GENDER, VIOLENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN INDIA'S NAXALBARI MOVEMENT* (2012).

women were educated professionals and continued to maintain links with peoples' movements or women's movements in Kolkata. Only two women no longer identified with politics. The book narrates these women's struggle for financial autonomy after having given up higher education to join the movement and often while bearing the burden of having to support their families.

Further, Roy points out that 'it is also the women who seemed to support their full-time activist husbands with part-time or full-time employment in a model common to political, especially communist families in Bengal where the husband does *rajniti* and the wife *chakri*.² While describing the idealised notions of masculinity and femininity, which were constituents of these women's lives as political actors in the Naxalbari movement, *Remembering Revolution*, interrogates the way violence is folded back *within* revolutionary politics.

Remembering Revolution is truly path breaking in its acknowledgment and analysis of the betrayal women face when met with violence within the movement. In her opening statements Roy says that 'the book overwhelmingly demonstrates how these memories of violence and betrayal—especially of sexual violence at the hands of one's comrades—could not always be articulated as testimony, not at the time of the movement and not even today.'³ While narratives of *heroic* femininity framed custodial violence and torture against women, the sexual violence experienced in shelters or while underground, remained secret. The narratives collated in this book make it evident that radical politics mimes mainstream politics by re-inscribing codes of honour, shame, stigma and other disciplinary techniques of patriarchal control, even when women are situated as agents of political violence. Everyday forms of violence against women by men under whose *protection* they were placed constituted the trauma that unfolded in the afterlife of this violence. By adopting idealised frameworks of *heroic* femininity, Roy demonstrates how former Naxalite women composed their identity through specific techniques of forgetting, repudiation, and abjection. Narratives of how sexual and reproductive inequities persist alongside the emancipatory ideals of revolutionary politics find detailed description in each chapter of this compelling

2 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 39.

3 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 14.

book. This exceedingly important intervention compels us to reflect on the power of public secrecy within radical politics. *Remembering Revolution* insistently demands that as activists, academics or lawyers, we must recognise the systemic techniques of silencing and, denial of sexual violence, is foundational to of all kinds of militarisation of politics—on the left or the right.

Remembering Revolution makes the insightful argument that rape continues to be seen as a 'perversion' of radical politics rather than 'as a product of militarised political culture.'⁴ Treating sexual violence as an aberration of an otherwise radical politics creates realms of exceptionalism, and therefore, entrenches the politics of impunity and immunity. Roy rightly argues that 'rape within revolutionary cultures thus is allocated to the realm of exceptionalism, even as rape is considered a routine part of oppression at the hands of the state.'⁵ Hence, the distinguishable practices of those forms of sexual violence which can find political testimony and protest, and other forms of sexual violence which are treated as unsayable or private, find full articulation within revolutionary cultures. This politics is constitutive of the manner in which memories of the Naxalbari movement are inherited.

Remembering Revolution is a sensitive, critical and compassionate account of revolutionary politics, which not only addresses how memories of the Naxalbari movement are inherited but also how these memories are composed. It offers a nuanced analysis of what it meant for women to engage in revolutionary politics; how love and politics were experienced in a field of violence; and how some forms of violence could be spoken about, while others remained a public secret. Roy documents poignant accounts of how sexual violence within revolutionary cultures is remembered and forgotten. Roy analyses voices, which speak out for the first time about memories of sexual violence in political spaces, or the processes by which these memories get composed. Listening most sensitively to these voices, Roy insists that forgetting is not merely 'silencing or erasing' violence but it means 'repudiating' the experience of sexual violence such that women 'disidentify with the issue of sexual violence even against their own experience or injury.'⁶ In other

4 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 15.

5 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 35.

6 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 14.

words, ‘memory functions, in this instance, to normalise male sexual power for the sake of “composure” that some women seek in the idealized images offered by the movement.’⁷ Roy clarifies that while she uses the category of composure to understand how memories are crafted to “fit in” with normative and acceptable public categories of violence, the way our memories are ‘composed’ must be seen as a powerful political practice. In her words, ‘in trying to ensure a fit between our memories and with what is publicly acceptable, self-composure inevitably relies on practices of repression and exclusion that nonetheless threaten its foundation.’⁸

Remembering Revolution is a truly exciting read since it refuses to accept an overtly simplistic rendition of how women recount narratives of violence. Giving time agency, Roy does not claim to recover or give “voice” to the unsayable since this in itself amounts to epistemic violence. Most insightfully, she argues that ‘even when violence is mourned and its testimony is rendered publically tellable, memory can act as a form of forgetting violence and domesticating trauma.’⁹ In other words, even when violence is narrated in public discourse, and even when we mourn such violence, the politics of the way in which memories of such violence are composed also results in a terrible domestication of trauma. Roy argues that naming sexual violence is always difficult, especially since naming sexual violence within a movement from comrades often results in isolation and loss. In this context, Roy examines the precarious presence of feminist languages and solidarities in providing the material conditions of testimony to rape.

Linking the ‘untellability of stories of sexual violence suffered *within* the revolutionary community’ to ‘the ways in which stories of state terror faced by activists, including rape’ acquired ‘a pre-eminent role in the cultural memory of the Naxalbari’, Roy points out that ‘routinized’ experiences of violence and betrayal have not been theorised in ways similar to the trauma of custodial violence.¹⁰ Yet even the public narratives of trauma of custodial torture enact its exclusions. The sexualised torture of men in custody remains a public secret today. In an important move, Roy argues that the cultural memories of Naxalbari meant recalling what

7 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 14.

8 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 9.

9 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 17.

10 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 186-187.

it meant for women to witness sexualised torture of male activists. Roy points out that ‘it is the woman who bears witness to the manner in which torture “emasculates” men.’¹¹ The trauma suffered in the afterlife of custodial violence finds collective mourning wherein the possibility of ‘recovery...is also tied to the idea of justice, not just in a narrow legal sense but as ascribing legitimacy to pain, privately felt and socially structured.’¹² In this sense, for some, the pursuit of justice entails a continued investment in Left politics, in the face of gross violations of human rights, while channelizing emotions of retribution in the aftermath of personal loss or injury. However, Roy cautions us that this complex terrain of political subjectivity is dangerous because the ‘call for justice as revenge’ could *preserve* rather than liberate ‘the survivor from a state of victimhood.’¹³ The impossibility of personal healing in the context of testifying to torture finds sensitive rendition in the stories of the juridical framing of testimony, which allied with the politics of trauma and testimony, disallowed the personal to find articulation. Speaking for, and on behalf of others who were tortured, women activists wrote about their terrible experiences of state torture as an expression of collective pain, hesitant to individualise this experience. Further, we encounter narratives of survival and what learning to survive means, in the aftermath of violence, not as dramatic resistance, rather as a way of recreating the ordinary or the everyday. The focus on the politics of memory and remembrance is then a means of doing ‘justice to the complexity of women’s affective responses’—where political history is understood equally as affective history.¹⁴ While law remains one such register where we find a trace of this affective history, the quest for justice exceeds the juridical.

11 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 161.

12 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 161.

13 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 161.

14 Roy, *supra* note 1, at 43.