Book Review

Memories of a Rolling Stone by *Vina Mazumdar*
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Vina Mazumdar – academic, activist and an institution builder, needs no introduction. One of the most celebrated figures of the women's movement in India, her contribution to the movement and feminist research is seminal. A social scientist of enormous repute, Vina*di*, as she is fondly known, has been a committed and passionate teacher, one of the key researchers and writers of the landmark report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India – *Towards Equality* and the founder of the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi. Her autobiography -*Memories of a Rolling Stone* published by Zubaan Books in 2010, is a significant contribution to the rich repertoire of women's writing in India. This witty, reflexive and lucid narrative captures one's attention right from the first page. The memoir documents her eventful life- from her childhood, gradual politicization, marriage and family, experiences as an academic and administrator. It also describes her involvement with the women's movement where she acknowledges lessons learnt from rural women, the enormous collective labour involved in writing the Towards Equality Report and finally the setting up of Centre for Women's Development Studies to initiate focused scientific research on women that is strongly rooted in women's lived experiences.

While reading the book, it becomes amply clear why autobiographies by women are increasingly being acknowledged as a significant genre of writing. Autobiographies are acts of self assertion and self consciousness.[1] Publication of autobiographies not only signify a shift of real spaces – the diary moving out of the private spaces of the *almirah* or chest of drawers where it laid hidden within folds of clothes, and then thrust hastily to the public spaces of the editor's table, the publication press, to a shelf in a bookshop and finally into the hands of the unknown reader

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[1] *See* generally Linda Anderson, Autobiography (2007)

who now has access to the author's life as mediated by his/her reflections. And this is where the gender play comes in. Nancy Miller argues that the genre of autobiography is implicitly bound up with gender. Autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal though, in fact, it signifies the centrality of masculine, middle class modes of subjectivity. It focuses on the extraordinary lives of 'great men' with reputation who have contributed to history. In contrast to this is Virginia Woolf's position that it is important to run the pages of the dusty and hidden volumes, rediscovering lives which were relegated to the backwaters or shadows of history. In fact their 'obscurity' could be used to interrogate the notions of 'exceptional' and 'unique'. Women's autobiography therefore becomes a social and political text of significance. It challenges the centrality of the masculine discourse as well as the notion of what constitutes 'historical importance'. The traversing of spaces from the private to the public proves to be more difficult for women socialized into gendered constructs of dignity, passivity, docility and norms of self-sacrifice intrinsic to her role as the custodian of family/community honour. However auto/biography – especially those written by women are interesting texts not for what they offer to the readers but for what remains hidden. Her life story will echo with unsaid stories, silences especially about intimate relationships, yet it is an exercise in discipline to be able to portray a thematic chapterization of a seamless life. It entails a conscious effort in selection of experiences, put in a format delineating what can and must be said, what may be said and mentioned in passing and what experiences are best left unsaid. This memoir is significant in a myriad of ways. As a well-known public figure, the chronicles of Vina Mazumdar's eventful life shares many features of an auto/biography written on or by important individuals (read as 'great men'). But what makes this book significantly different is that it is by a woman whose life story is a direct affront to patriarchal normative structures. Simultaneously, it also reflects the common concerns of a working mother juggling professional and personal commitments. A brilliant and illuminating narrative, this memoir is a treat for readers.

The book is divided into six chapters, three of which discuss a twenty-year period each. The first chapter traces the first twenty years of Vina Mazumdar's life from 1927-1947– her childhood to her gradual induction into politics in college. The next chapter discusses her experiences

in the period from 1947-1967 - her admission and years at Oxford, her unconventional marriage to musician Shankar Mazumdar, her four children and her teaching experiences at Patna University and thereafter her role in the University Grants Commission (UGC). She fondly recollects the eventful years at Berhampur in the next chapter. In her brief stint of 16 months there, she experimented with new teaching techniques, improved standards, developed excellent relationship with younger teachers who enthused over her new pedagogic methods and most of all, her students who first resisted the demanding work expected of them, went on strike at the behest of other groups who resisted the changes and finally who broke down in tears, offered to take care of her children and helped her with her packing when she left Berhampur. Vina*di* says 'like all rich experiences, the Berhampur years will always remain with me'. As she says, her life takes a dramatic turn when she returns to Delhi from Berhampur to join the UGC once more and later, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICCSR). The fourth chapter details her experiences while working for the Committee on the Status of women in India and the backbreaking collective labour that produced the groundbreaking '*Towards Equality*' report that remains seminal research on the status of women in India. This work brought her in touch with many women's rights activists and the next chapter is a detailed description of being in the midst of the women's movement. The last chapter titled 'The Last Twenty Years 1987-2007' establishes the importance of women's studies, reiterates the link between research and activism and finally, gives insights on why and how such research should be considered seriously for policy initiatives.

While the whole book is an interesting read, the succinct, lucid and insightful introduction immediately captures one's attention. Although her official identity is that of a social scientist, Vina*di* claims that very few know her as one. She is better known as a 'woman activist', 'a feminist', 'a trouble maker' and a 'gender specialist'. Of all the epithets attached to her, the ones she prefers most are 'recorder and chronicler of the Indian women's movement' and 'grandmother of women's studies in South Asia'. Born in 1927, Vina*di*'s life straddles three quarters of the 20th century and more than a decade in the 21st. She remembers India before and after independence, the pre and post Second World War period and the

emergence of the 'second wave' of the Indian women's movement. She uses the opportunity provided by the Human Resource Development Ministry with her appointment as National Research Professor in 2006 to document her experiences in the women's movement and establish the relevance of women's studies towards initiating inclusive developmental policies.

Born in a liberal Bengali middle class family, Vina*di* is the youngest of the five children. She fondly recollects that her elder sister worried about her frequent job changes, and about her decision to establish CWDS with no guaranteed funds as a gamble. A rebel of sorts, the description of a rolling stone remains Vina*di*'s favourite descriptions of herself that she uses as a title for her autobiography. Her feminist consciousness is evident in her recollection about the contributions of her parents, especially her mother who constantly supported her decisions – first to use buses and trams to go to college, during the turbulent war period at a time when it was unheard of for young girls to travel without a chaperone in public transport. Vina*di* recollects the contribution of her *Pishima* (paternal sister) without whose 'support none of the girls would have any education'. Her years at Oxford won her long lasting friends, helped to develop social skills and enabled her to travel to several places. Returning to India in 1950, Vina was worried about her family's reaction to her desire to take up a job. Her father's reaction was that he was prepared for the logical event. He said that in the years that Vina was abroad, India had adopted a new constitution that prohibited discrimination between men and women and so logically, he could not discriminate between her and her brothers. Since he had always told his sons to be self reliant, he must apply the same principle to his daughter. As a law abiding man, he must adapt to the changing requirements of the law. Vina Mazumdar acknowledges that it took her 25 years to 'realize that very few Indian fathers, brothers or husbands shared that kind of respect for the law'.

Her personal life also demonstrated the challenges that Vina Mazumdar was ever ready to take up. After joining Patna University as Lecturer in Political Science in 1951, she married Shankar Mazumdar in 1951. Vina*di* interestingly says that unlike her, her husband was a rebel. He dropped out of college because his father forced him to study science

while he wanted to study arts. As he had no formal degree, this union was considered an unequal marriage by Vina's conservative relatives but had full support of her widowed mother-in-law and both her parents. She also voices the dilemmas of a working mother caught between the guilt of not taking enough care of her daughter and the recurring guilt of not giving adequate time to her professional responsibilities. Her father helped her reach a decision once again from all her soul searching and she states that even long after her father's death, she felt that his voice always guided her in taking major and difficult decisions in her life.

Inspite of ill health, Vina takes the decision to go to Oxford to pursue higher studies and takes her two young daughters along, despite opposition from her husband and friends. How she balances finishing her Doctorate in Philosophy in two years, with her responsiblities as a mother, including putting her children in school, getting Mrs. Buswell to take care of her daughters during the week while she studied for her degree is absolutely amazing. After her return from Oxford, she joins UGC as an education officer who was known for her dedication, much to the ire of her colleagues who were constantly told that if Vina could do all her work with four children, why couldn't they? After her teaching assignment at Berhampur, she returned to UGC in 1972 that was another turning point in her career. She became a member of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, set up by the Government with Phulrenu Guha as the Chairperson. 1975-1985 was declared by the United Nations as the International Women's Decade and member states were asked to submit reports. The assignment radically altered the direction of her life. With the pooling of available data on varied sections of India's diverse communities and extensive discussions with over 10,000 women from diverse backgrounds, her reflexivity attained new heights. She realized how people like her were ignorant of the diverse world around them, shattering their own images as renowned social scientists. This exercise in collective thinking brought her in close contact with Lotika Sarkar, Kumud Sharma, Urmila Haksar and Phulrenu Guha – other leading figures in the women's movement. As she spent sleepless nights working on the report, drafting and redrafting it tirelessly with the others, her personal life was turbulent. Her daughter faced problems in college and her relationship with her husband had soured so much that they decided to part ways.

The note of dissent by Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar voiced over twenty-five years ago on the issue of women's reservations in State Assemblies and the Parliament is relevant as it informs contemporary debates over the issue of women's reservation in Parliament. Their position that the formal model of equality does not do justice to the inadequate representation of women in politics is informed by their extensive interactions with women from the grassroots. The *Towards Equality* report was tabled in the Parliament and the ground breaking document got wide media attention. After the completion of the report, Vina joined the ICCSR and later, CWDS was born to conduct action research on women. But what it did to Vina Mazumder and her colleagues was more profound. She says 'my earlier struggles represented an individual woman's effort to balance the demands of professional and familial responsibilities. The new struggle was increasingly a collective, ideological one to rediscover the Indian nation, the world, the past, the present and the future – from the perspective of India's hidden and unacknowledged majority: poor working women in rural and urban areas.' Her self-critical attitude is further exemplified in the next statement where she says that she too contributed to this 'intellectual *purdah* that excluded the majority of Indian women's lives, labour, dignity and dreams from any public attention'. In her later years, she visits women in Jhilimili, a village in Medinipur, a district in West Bengal who forever remain her teachers in the journey of life. Her deep involvement with the women's movement brought her in close contact with other activists and academics. She carefully documents the 1980s when gender based violence is becoming a political issue. Campaigns on anti rape, anti-dowry, child marriage, sex selection techniques and the public furore over the Sati incident of Roop Kanwar in Deorala in Rajasthan in chronicled with great care in this book.

This great journey is told in a conversationalist style, the profound realizations come easy to the reader and we are struck by this simple yet deep narrative. Like many other autobiographies by women, her relationship with her husband is not delved into very deeply. While she analyzes her husband's character and acknowledges his support that gave her the freedom to choose her life, the love and care he showered on their children and his influence in moulding their personalities, what really went wrong in this relationship is not discussed- she chose to keep that to

herself. However nearly at the close of the book, in the afterword, she says that a year after the death of her husband, she quit smoking. She had picked up the habit from him. The last pages of the book also mention the personal tragedies in her life. She lost many of her relatives and friends but in her inimitable spirit she says that while her natal family shrunk, her family also extended with the marriage of her sons and daughters. Like an ardent student of history which always remained her first love, she says that the artificial compartmentalization of the seamless memory into neat partitions is not possible. She writes for the younger generation with the hope that these memories would perhaps 'interest someone at least'. And most importantly she thinks that if her chronicles of the daily struggles waged by her gurus in Bankura and Medinipur persuade the readers to treat them with more respect, then at least one of her aims as one of India's greatest feminists would have been achieved.