

Family History in Late Colonial India

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In this innovative and interesting study, Antoinette Burton raises questions and extends the parameters of discussion in relation to a number of key issues that concern the relationship between women, the home and colonial modernity in twentieth century colonial India. Through the choice of materials on which she bases her reflections, she offers new definitions of what constitutes an archive, challenging frequently accepted notions of what represents reliable evidence for the writing of history. By looking at the very different kinds of writings produced by three twentieth century Indian women – Janaki Majumdar (1886 – 1963), Cornelia Sorabji (1886 – 1954) and Attia Hosain (1913 – 1997) – she both interrogates the status of the traditional archive and provides concrete examples of ways in which the concept of the archive might be extended into

new and productive areas. All three women, according to Burton,

made use of memories of home in order to claim a place in history at the intersection of the private and the public, the personal and the political, the national and the postcolonial (p. 4).

In breaking down distinctions between public and private histories, on the one hand, and historical and literary study on the other, *Dwelling in the Archive* highlights the extent to which 'women's worlds' can command universal significance and, thus, help to re-shape understandings of history more generally.

The close interconnection between the home and history is acknowledged in much historical writing about political and social change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Asia. 'Domestic space' undoubtedly represented 'politicised space' in colonial India, but it was something with which British and Indians alike had an ambiguous relationship, and hence Burton's comment that 'house and home had long been highly charged ideological categories in the context of the Raj' (p. 7). Although colonial rule was frequently deemed to have stopped at the door of the household, in reality its presence could go a long way in determining the significance of what existed, or took place, over the threshold. The British in India, for instance, tried to balance their desire to influence and shape this space against the need to avoid being seen by their Indian subjects as interfering too greatly in what could be argued were essentially private matters. Likewise, Indians sought to maintain control over what measure of independence or autonomy that remained to them under colonial rule, and hence carefully guarded their domestic portals. But, at the same time, the institution of the family, together with the home inhabited by it, came to assume enormous political significance, as the 'Indian-ness' that both were presumed to represent was debated long and hard by reformers of one sort or another. To successive generations of Indian nationalists, for example, the home provided evidence of 'authentic' India and the nascent Indian nation.

By the late nineteenth century, domestic space had become the centrepiece of public debate, and the home and those associated with it - women - had become closely associated with resistance against 'the materialist values and incursions of a Western, colonising culture' (p. 33). Under these circumstances, Indian men discussed long and hard what kind of new woman the new India required. On the whole, the consensus that emerged among them was in favour of wives and mothers who were better educated than in the past, and, thus, better skilled at organising and managing their families, and hence their homes, in the changing and challenging realities of the times. The lengthy debates of the nineteenth century that focused on proper 'feminine values', a proper 'feminine curriculum', and the growing value attached to domestic, or home science, for instance, and which continued into the twentieth century, highlighted this concern. Activities that were identified with the home took on political significance during this period. Hence, consumption, so frequently associated with the domestic environment, represented a highly political activity during the various Congress-led nationalist campaigns of the early twentieth century, as Indians were encouraged to boycott British-manufactured goods in favour of home-produced alternatives. Twentieth-century Indian women also sought to appropriate discourses of house and home: leading Congress activist, Sarojini Naidu, for instance, in the nineteen-twenties,

figured India itself as a home whose true mistress had been usurped by 'guests and strangers': a house that had to be restored to its rightful proprietors, one whose orderliness depended on the ministrations of the Indian woman-as mother (p. 10).

Thus, it is within this framework that Burton highlights the ways in which 'domestic architecture', as preserved in the writings of Indian women about the home, can be used as a form of archive through which to access new insights about late colonial India. In writing about domestic arrangements, whether in the form of private memoirs, official and demi-official reports, or fictionalised accounts, these sources, she argues, offer 'counter narratives of colonial modernity', that 'capture the rifts and fissures of modernity in late colonial India' (p. 7).

Burton's introduction, not surprisingly, explores a range of historiographical and methodological issues with significance for her study. For instance, there is the whole business of the 'validity' of personal testimony and memory. Here Burton acknowledges that 'scholarly attention to memory in the past two decades has given women's historical experience a foothold in history' (p. 21). At the same time, however, she points to the fact that memory retains its reputation for being of relatively dubious authority, something that she feels is accentuated by its all-to-frequent identification with things feminine and thus, by implication, unreliable. The truthfulness of the narrator is still something that comes out a distant 'second best' to the presumed dependability of 'properly' archived sources.

This assumption, not surprisingly perhaps, has made it very difficult to retrieve information about the kinds of lives and experiences that have slipped through the official archival 'net'. And while feminist historians, among others, have long used what might be regarded as unconventional sources, these alternative archives persistently encounter negative assumptions regarding their validity. This is the case in South Asia, just as much as elsewhere, despite the fact that recent efforts there have 'done much to disrupt the alleged self-sufficiency of the official archive' by democratising what counts as an archive (pp. 24–25).

As Burton explores through her three chosen subjects, there is a dynamic relationship between discourse and reality, which need not be viewed as opposing domains but, rather, as interdependent and enriching. Just as women writers in other parts of the world have frequently used the home to stage dramas of remembrance, these three Indian women deployed 'their memories of house and home as archival sources for the writing of histories that tried to capture the rifts and fissures of modernity in late colonial India' (p. 7). In the case of the earliest, Janaki Majumdar, hers was originally a personal memoir, unearthed thanks to a piece of good fortune on Burton's part, which highlighted the mobility and uncertainty of life as a member of a family in the process of experiencing the full blast of 'colonial modernity'. Daughter of one of India's most famous early nationalists – W. C. Bonnerjee (first president of the Indian National Congress) – she grew up in two worlds, those of India and Britain, as a consequence of her father's decision to educate his children in England. This trans-national existence, and, in particular, the impact which it had on her mother, Hemangini Motilal, forms the bulk of Majumdar's memoir (edited by Burton in a separate volume, *Family History*, in which she provides an introduction that, in albeit more succinct fashion, includes some of the main points raised in *Dwelling in the Archive*). Caught between the desires of an anglophile father, and a mother who was forced to juggle family needs with her own against a backdrop of exile and displacement, Majumdar's recollections (written in 1935) represent 'an essay in remembrance whose objects of imagination and desire are the houses of her family's past' (p. 32). Memories of her family's homes, whether in located in Calcutta or Croydon, provide the structural heart of her family history, and prove very revealing in relation to the dense history of family life. Like other published memoirs by Indian women that date from the colonial period (1), it uncovers a world of experience formerly hidden from public gaze.

Family History also performs another valuable service by highlighting that it was not just men whose lives were literally detached from their roots by the modernising impulses that were flowing through particular sections of Indian society by the turn of the twentieth century. Women, too, could find themselves transported, first perhaps away from their 'traditional' family homes to the more 'modern' houses that were springing up in particular parts of India's cities; later they could stray further afield, even abroad as in Majumdar's mother's case, thanks very often to familial responsibilities of one sort or another.

Certainly, recent publications on the subject mean that we are now familiar with the degree of two-way travel that took place between India and Britain, with movement taking place in both directions and

involving more Indians than was previously acknowledged. Apart from anything else, the number of Indians who came to Britain as students has demonstrated the extent of this kind of movement and interaction.

Family History, however, draws our attention to the fact that some – although admittedly not many – Indian women came into 'first-hand' contact with British society, and that this was happening as early as the later decades of the nineteenth century. In addition, through its recollections, we are able to explore the domestic context of early Indian nationalism, transposed, for much of the time, to a late Victorian suburban setting. In effect, we get to hear female voices, and, in the process, we learn about the kind of 'normal' everyday business that revolved around the trials and tribulations, and the pleasures and satisfactions of family and home. All this represents valuable insights into the complexities of late colonial modernity, as experienced by individuals who perhaps had little direct control over what was happening in their lives.

Burton's second subject, Cornelia Sorabji, had a much greater degree of control over what she did and when and where she did it. But, as with Majumdar's female family members, she too was moulded by her family circumstances. Born in India to Christian missionary parents of Parsee origins, she was also educated in Britain, and spent the rest of her life moving between the two countries. Trained as a barrister, she was appointed Lady Assistant to the Court of Wards in 1904, in which role she came to assume 'fame as a *zenana* expert' (p. 67). The *zenana*, or women's quarters of elite Indian homes, as suggested above, were frequently regarded as all that was 'wrong' (although also sometimes 'right') about authentic, traditional, 'old' India. Sorabji's assumed authority about this world meant that she was at the heart of early twentieth-century debates about what role the precincts of house and home should play in shaping 'modern' Indian culture and society. In a range of official reports, essays, memoirs and speeches about the 'problem' of *pardahnashin* (secluded) women, Burton suggests that Sorabji was involved in a process of

scripting and rescripting of [the] self through a set or series of 'Others' [that was] symptomatic of any number of elite, educated women struggling to stake a claim for themselves in and for modernity in the context of colonialism (p. 98).

The fact that Sorabji was both an important witness to, and agent in, the crises of colonial modernity, means that, in Burton's view, her writings do not deserve to be dismissed as unrepresentative of mainstream political trends. She may have taken a number of staunchly unprogressive positions, but this in itself provides valuable evidence of the often unpredictable intersections that took place between colonialism and modernity during the early twentieth century, and, hence, Burton's conclusion that

Sorabji's determination to preserve 'her' *pardahnashin* in the domain of memory was not out of step with the times at all. It [signalled] instead the uneven and unlooked-for terrains of colonial modernity itself (p. 99).

The final woman studied by Burton is Attia Hosain, whose largely but not entirely autobiographical novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (London, 1961), represents the third 'archive' under scrutiny. The youngest of Burton's three subjects, Hosain belonged to an Indian Muslim family that faced upheaval at the time of partition in 1947. Her own life was subsequently spent moving between the subcontinent and London, and so here again is someone who had to deal with a disappearing (or disappeared) world and the implications of this for family or domestic life. Indeed, Burton is of the firm opinion that Hosain enlists house (Ashiana) and home 'as archives in the service of history, and more particularly in the project of memorializing the penultimate decade of British rule'(p. 15). Written on the verge of a post-colonial world (London in the early nineteen-sixties), Burton reads the novel as a memoir of the 1930s, thereby opening the way for discussion of the relationship of the autobiography to history as an enterprise comprising both the personal and the political.

In recent years, there has undoubtedly been much greater attention paid to the impact of partition on ordinary lives. Due notice has been taken of the compulsion to remember the events of 1947, even when the 'archival

sources' involved have not been of the conventional variety. Authors such as Urvashi Butalia, for instance, have highlighted the significance of the house in the family histories of this period. Hosain, thus, is not alone in making connections between domestic space and memory in relation to partition, but, as Burton concludes,

If Sunlight on a Broken Column may be said to anticipate the convictions of contemporary historians of partition who are eager to explore new and hitherto undervalued sources of that past, then Hosain's novel is what all critical history might aspire to be: carefully, quietly and modestly prophetic (p. 135).

The three archives that Burton opens up for wider inspection in this study are all the product of women 'on the move' or transplanted, voluntarily or involuntarily, from their original 'homes'. All were involved in the re-construction of domestic space in new and challenging environments. Certainly, all three women belonged to privileged backgrounds, and it was their elite status that facilitated their mobility and 'hence the "bird's-eye" view they were able to take of house, home and history' (p. 16). Burton is under no illusions that their class status provided them with properties that became the 'stuff of memory', and that therefore they hardly fit the category of the 'subaltern' that has become so popular in Indian history writing. She is also clear that no archive is perfect. Drawing attention to the archival value of women's writing inevitably means

confronting the full range of subjectivities that such an archive can yield, including those that it erases, suppresses, buries, denies. It involves, in short, coming to terms with the proposition that no archive, however antagonistic, fails to inscribe power - even and especially the power of women over their social subordinates, both male and female (pp. 17-18).

In other words, the elite status of Majumdar, Sorabji and Hosain should not automatically or necessarily diminish the 'archival value' of their work, which falls firmly into the 'specific domain of "Indian" history in its bourgeois modern form' (p. 18).

More importantly, as this study shows, their collective output - whether as memoir, official report, or novel - foreground the 'inner recesses of house and home as critical sites of history' (p. 143) and so act as reminders that historians need to be as concerned with space as with time. Thus, *Dwelling in the Archive* underlines that the history of domestic space - the house and the home - is the history of something that is both material and symbolic. By acknowledging and using it, Burton calls for us to rethink how to approach telling the history of gender in South Asia, and also to consider how far less conventional kinds of archival sources can underpin the bases on which 'history' has been conventionally constructed.

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Notes

1. See for example, Shudha Mazumdar's *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, ed. & intr. Geraldine Forbes (New York & London, 1989); Romola Chatterjee's *Courtyards of My Childhood: a Memoir* (New Delhi, 1996); Binodini Dasi's *My Story and My Life as an Actress*, ed. & trans. Rimli Bhattacharya (New Delhi, 1998); and Tanika Sarkar's acclaimed *Words to Win. The Making of Amar Jiban, a Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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