A Memoir of Pre-Partition Punjab: Ruchi Ram Sahni, 1863–1948

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Book Review


Neera Burra brings to us a memoir of a remarkable personality, Ruchi Ram Sahni, who confidently straddled almost a century of rapid and sometimes bewildering change in India, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Before I speak of the self-fashioning of Sahni in his autobiography, which he called ‘The Self-Revelations of an Octogenarian’ (in fact, there are no sensational revelations that we expect from the more recent and risqué versions of the genre), I must commend Burra for her effort in introducing this handsome volume.

Burra, a great-granddaughter of Sahni, has undertaken this project not only with enthusiasm and curiosity, but as a labour of love, to bring to us an ancestor who she’d heard many a story of. Even more significant is the research she has undertaken in the process of trying to access all the writings, as far as possible, of a man who wrote (and spoke) prolifically. These include his writings from the newspaper Tribune; his participation in Punjab Legislative Assembly Debates for a two-year term; the delving into the large and scattered family archives for his writings and photos (Sahni had nine children); trawling the archives in India and Pakistan for information; and, most remarkably, enthusing government and university authorities to pay heed to their archival materials by initiating their digitization. Thus, through her substantial Introduction, we get to know much more about Sahni than we’d have known if we only read his memoirs. Most significantly, we get a small peek into his private life about which Sahni gives us very little except for the early years spent in Dera Ismail Khan, now in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan. In some ways then, we can call Burra’s undertaking an instance of what Smith and Watson refer to as a ‘filiation narrative’, here intergenerational, and done with pride in the family.1

If we understand memoirs and autobiographies as reliant on memory and experience, i.e. interpreting the past, and as performative in rhetorics, and truth-telling in intent, then what do we learn about Sahni? Sahni presents himself as an intrepid man of indomitable spirit, captured by Khushwant Singh in the phrase that Sahni was fond of – mere yaar patang udaya kar, kat jaye te gham na khaya kar (my friend, fly a kite, if it is cut down, do not grieve) [p. xvi–xvii]. Or even what his father Karm Chand told him when the family fell on bad days after losing their ships and investment: Rochi Rama, badli aaye hai badli, busle, busle, busle. Sade leere hee gille karenge, hor ki karenge? (Rochi Rama, the clouds have come. Let them rain as much as they like. What else can they do except wet our clothes?) (p. xvi). In keeping with this spirit, we learn of the many experiments with life and career instantiated by Sahni. The most significant of these was the decision to leave home at a young age and undertake the arduous journey from Dera Ismail Khan to Jhang to get to the high school in Adhiwal, of surviving a whirlpool in the mighty Indus, and later taking the decision to go to the high school in Lahore and thence onto the Government College, Lahore. Later in life too, Sahni’s career – in teaching, in popularizing science through lectures and public experiments with the likes of his Professor J. C. Oman, in setting up a workshop to produce scientific equipment of the best quality in Punjab, of moving on despite the humiliation of being superseded for a professorship by a colleague twenty-six years his junior due to entrenched racism, travelling to Germany to conduct research in radioactivity at the age of 51 in 1914, and from there to Britain when the World War 1 broke out – all speak of looking at life as an adventure and soldiering on.

Scholars who have studied Indian men’s autobiographies produced from the nineteenth century onward have commented on their focus being public life: life as a witness to history, and the shaping of modern subjectivity. The silence on intimate relationships, either because the conception of a private life was still in the process of being ‘invented’, as Kaviraj suggests, or because the notion of privacy in domesticity was so far removed from Indian familial and caste traditions as to seem alien, is true for Sahni’s writing as well.2 Speaking of caste as a factor in one’s cultural makeup, we get a fascinating glimpse of Sahni’s boyhood years, and a sense of how Khatri boys in trading and shop-keeping families were brought up, or even how certain neighborhoods/mohallas were organized around caste conglomerations, something already known from the so far more accessible Prakash Tandon’s memoirs.3 However, Sahni’s sense of living through a significant historical time is paramount, seen from his multiple attempts to write of his time. Besides his autobiography, an
enterprise he began repeatedly – 1907, 1914, 1933, and, finally, 1942 when he succeeded – he wrote multiple volumes of HOMOT (History of His Own Times), of which Burra found eleven volumes, and also SHOMOT (The Short History of His Own Times). All these writings must be seen as conjoint projects, the autobiography perhaps tracing the self in public life, the others the salience of public life in significant historical times. And in all these, the construction of the modern, inspired, ‘improving’ self, dedicated to publicness and service.

There is much in the memoirs that will interest the cultural and social historian looking for interesting insights into the colonial period in Punjab. Sahni’s support for the Brahmo Samaj in Punjab when it was the more partisan Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha, or the Sanatan Dharm Sabha that held sway among men from backgrounds similar to those of Sahni’s is worth noting. His atheistic, agnostic, caste-breaking proclivities are also important to note, along with some wonderful recollections of his father’s religiosity, which nurtured a piety across the Hindu and Sikh religious forms and rituals, something that other auto/biographers also speak of. Sahni’s later support for the Sikh gurdwara reform is significant, as also his comments on the changing Hindu–Muslim relations. Sahni is also important as an educationist, a scientist and a rationalist. His nationalism is shining, but like other Punjabis of his generation, the support for Gandhi, non-cooperation, and the Congress is equivocal.

In short, scholars will delve into the myriad writings of Sahni to read of fascinating times through this extraordinary individual’s life, as they will read Sahni to understand how an enterprising Punjabi constructed his modern self.

NOTES

4. Reena Nanda, From Quetta to Delhi: A Partition Story (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2018).

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