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Female, Sikh, Militant…: The Story of the Self as History in Sandip Kaur's Autobiography *Bikhṛā paĩdā*[*]

SUMMARY: The Indian State has a long history of military interventions at numerous, mostly peripheral locations. Most of the interventions are protracted and may be viewed as virtual civil wars, each side producing and legitimizing its own version of events. This paper will focus on the fallout of the Punjab insurgency (1970–1995), and its decisive point, the Indian army intervention codenamed Operation Bluestar (June 1984), as narrated by a former militant, Sandip Kaur. Her Punjabi book, *Bikhṛā paĩdā* ("Difficult Journey") (2008), written by somebody who is not a writer, represents a sub-category which "inhabits (…) margins of literary and autobiographical writing" (Butalia 2017: 20). Hence, it offers a unique glimpse into the process of identity construction, both at the personal and the communal level, enacted against the larger backdrop

[*] This essay draws on an earlier paper, "Female, Sikh, Militant… Telling the Story of the Self in Sandip Kaur's Autobiography *Bikhra Painda*," presented at the annual conference of The British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS) held on 3–5.4.2019, at Durham University, UK. In current article I use Anglicised versions of Indian names, hence Sandip Kaur for Sandīp Kaur. This name is spelled also Sandeep Kaur (Gayer 2012a and Gayer 2012b).

of national games played out on the regional scene and informed by Sikh 'metacommentary' (Oberoi 1987: 27).

KEYWORDS: autobiography, Sikh, militancy, Sandip Kaur, identity formation, metacommentary

> Memory has known only two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run on parallel tracks but until now have always remained separate. Lately the boundary between the two has blurred.
>
> Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History* (1996b: 20)

The backdrop

Reporting on the ongoing sit-ins against the implementation of the new agriculture laws (2020), with a large number of the participants from Punjab and Haryana, many of them Sikh, encamped on the Delhi border, Bhavna Vij-Aurora speaks of a "concerted and well-planned attack (…) by the BJP-led government (…) to discredit the movement" and adds, "[t]here is nothing random about the use of words like 'Khalistan,' 'Maoist' and 'tukde-tukde gang'[1] in context of the farmers' protest"(Vij-Aurora 2020). The present resurfacing of the label 'Khalistani' to cast aspersions on the Sikh participants by forcibly locating them within a specifically regional, purportedly secessionist

[1] Khalistan—'Land of the Khalsa,' a state envisaged as Sikh homeland by the separatist; Maoists, Naxalites—communist militant groups; 'tukde-tukde gang' or 'break-up gang'—a pejorative political catchphrase used by BJP to accuse their critics of sedition and secessionism.

narrative from the past follows on the heels of similar allegations of being anti-national made against those objecting to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (2019) or Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act (2019). Bandying about words with anti-national connotations has long been the centre's way of dealing with dissent by creating its own narrative and mobilizing public opinion behind its political agenda, be it in the context of regional demands for greater self-governance (Kashmir, the North-East, Punjab or the Naxalite belt in Central India) or in support of wide-sweeping economic and political measures/laws garnering for the centre the ever-increasing powers.

The so-called Punjab insurgency, which forms the backdrop of Sandip Kaur's early life, goes back to 1970s and constitutes one of the many *loci memoriae* or 'memory places' (Nora 1996a: xv) of the Indian nation-state, albeit a 'memory place' which, when viewed from the vantage point of the centre, is minor, peripheral and almost illegible for enacted largely in the vernacular, hence easy to ignore.[2] Its mental stage was (and still is) defined, as suggested by Harjot Singh Oberoi, through the twin concepts of territoriality, understood here as "the belief that a territory belongs to a particular community, and that this sense of place, among other factors, binds that community together, endowing its constituents with a significant emblem of self-identity" (Oberoi 1987: 27), and metacommentary—"a story they [a people] tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1975: 448), "a kind of coded reading of their experiences, needs, feelings, and world views" (Oberoi 1987: 27). In the Sikh context, this would be "the stories an narratives the Sikh Panth (the Sikh religious community) has told itself, from the time of its inception, about the Punjab" (*ibid*.).

[2] The invisibility of vernacular discourse in a multilingual country like India in the context of Sandip Kaur's autobiography has been addressed in my paper, "Female, Sikh, Militant… Translating Sandip Kaur's Punjabi Autobiography *Bikhra Painda* into English," at the International Conference, "Translating Minorities and Conflict in Literature," Cordova, Spain, 10–11.6.2021.

As active participation in the political life under the British in the period leading to independence entailed communal self-definition including "construction of religious boundaries" (Oberoi 1998), production of "imaginary history" (Murphy 2012: 134–145) and setting out clearly defined political goals, the turn of events in 1947 left the Sikh community with their hopes thwarted, their imagined homeland (never until now enclosed by rigid boundaries) cut into two, their lives disrupted, their holy places left behind in what became Pakistan. The later reorganization of the Indian state of Punjab on the linguistic basis (1966) did not solve the lingering problems and in 1973 the Sikhs put forward the Anandpur Sahib Resolution listing their grievances—political, economic and religious.[3] The demands were further expounded in 1978, and to give one a sense of times very different from our own, let me mention Resolution No. 9 which sought permission to broadcast *kīrtan* or religious singing from the Golden Temple, then, in the radio-dominated, pre-universal-coverage TV era—a potentially seditious demand (at least in the eyes of the government); now, in the digital age, something one would not give a second thought to.

Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, saw the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as a secessionist document and rejected Sikh demands. Moreover, she was unhappy with the outcome of the 1977 elections in Punjab where a coalition led by the Sikh-majority Akali Dal came to power. Seeking to split the Akali Dal and gain popular support among the Sikhs for her own Congress party, she decided to play devil's advocate and create opposition to the legally elected Punjab government. She surveyed the Punjab political scene and her eye fell on one Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, an orthodox religious leader of little consequence. In no time, he found himself catapulted, with her help, into the centre of Punjab politics. Bhindranwale, however, soon disassociated himself from Indira Gandhi and the Congress, joined hands with the Akali Dal

[3] Anandpur Sahib Resolution was adopted 1973 and further endorsed in 1978 (Singha 2000: 19). It did not envisage an autonomous Sikh State of Khalistan.

and in 1982 took over the Dharam Yudh Morcha, a broad-based movement aimed at implementing Anandpur Sahib Resolution. (Young Sandip Kaur remembers taking part in the Morcha led agitations together with her mother and even being detained overnight).

Meanwhile, as a direct result of being targeted by the government officials and the police for their support of the Resolution, a section of the Sikhs, including some of Bhindranwale's followers, turned to militancy. After several rounds of futile negotiations, Indira Gandhi took a step that not only proved to be her unmaking but, in the words of the BBC reporter, Mark Tully, turned out to be her 'last battle' (Tully and Jacob 1985). In an unprecedented move she ordered the Indian army to storm the Golden Temple, where Bhindranwale and his cohort were entrenched. In an operation codenamed Bluestar launched in the first days of June 1984, right at the time when Sikhs commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the Indian army, with the help of heavy artillery and tanks, fought its way into Harmandir Sahib. The shrine was severely damaged and apart from the militants, including Bhindranwale, many civilians who had gathered at the gurudwara in thousands for the *gurpurab*,[4] were brutally massacred. Unrest convulsed Punjab, and as a result, many religious Sikh leaders as well as ordinary Sikhs were systematically arrested, tortured and killed.

The desecration of the temple and the bloodshed committed within its walls shook the Sikh community no less than the 1947 Partition and ultimately led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards five months later, on 31 October 1984. This was followed by Congress-aided anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, long-term discrimination against the Sikhs by the majority community, and an unprecedented growth of militancy in Punjab. The state government joined hands with the central government in waging ruthless war on its Sikh citizens. Darshan S. Tatla writes:

[4] *Gurpurab*—Sikh religious festival, most often the anniversary of the birth or death of a Sikh guru, else a seminal event of Sikh history.

> As a result of the government's intense media campaign after June 1984, Indians were constantly reminded of how Mrs Gandhi's 'tough action' had defeated 'schemes for dismembering India' (…). Characterizing the Akali Dal's demands as 'anti-national,' the Sikhs were stereotyped at best as untrustworthy, at worst as 'traitors.' Rajiv Gandhi, the next Prime Minister of India, lost no time in making capital out of his mother's assassination. During the 1985 parliamentary elections, Sikhs were presented as the 'enemy within.' (Tatla 2006: 66)

The over decade-long militancy and counterinsurgency polarised society along religious lines, resulted in innumerable human rights abuses and deaths on both sides of the divide, including the targeting of Hindus by Sikh militants, and ultimately placed many young Sikh males in the crosshairs of the state apparatus significantly limiting their life options, often to just two—joining the militants or migrating abroad (cf. Chopra 2011). Surveying the aftermath, Gurharpal Singh writes,

> The scale of disorder in Punjab can be appreciated if we examine the death toll since the 1980s. In one figure, quoted by K. P. S. Gill, Director-General of Punjab Police, almost 25 000 deaths were recorded between 1981 and 1993 as result of militant violence and counterinsurgency operations by the security services. Human Rights groups have put the figure much higher to account for 'involuntary disappearances;' they estimate that illegal detainees varied between 20 000 and 45 000. (G. Singh 2000: 163)

Viewing the same landscape through a feminist lens, Butalia points out that though "the lives of women in the Punjab were deeply impacted" somehow "both research and journalistic writing have barely addressed this aspect" and deploring this state of affairs, adds:

> [i]t is as if all those writers who have spent years researching what happened in Punjab have not noticed at all that the wave of Sikh militancy deeply touched women, that it drew in many of them, and that it left large numbers bereft, widowed, without their men,

> often ostracized by society and with the responsibility of bringing up families on their own. (Butalia 2017: 21)

Sandip Kaur's autobiography, written by a woman but from the position of an active perpetrator of violence whose sense of the self had been nurtured by the Sikh ethos, offers an insider's view of a society convulsed by the 1984 trauma and reeling under the feeling of emotional distress and betrayal best encapsulated in the word 'hurt.' Radhika Chopra, who studied the impact of state actions on the Sikh sense of the self, explains the term thus:

> As a term in everyday speech, 'hurt' signals a sense of deliberate offense or politically intentioned injury of community sentiment. Punjabis use the English word 'hurt' to denote the feeling of being seized by pain, as well as to suggest intentionality embedded in an act—'hurt paunchya' (hurt reached/connected). Sometimes it is replaced by another English word that conveys the sense of embodied emotion: 'feel hoya' is a phrase that continually occurs among Punjabi speakers to suggest emotional distress. (Chopra 2010: 122)

The 'hurt,' initially evidenced in fictionalized narratives (short story, novel, poetry, drama), was all the community could voice at first.[5] With time, the same stories, set alongside witness accounts, both written and oral, and supplemented with visuals (Chopra 2013, 2015, 2017; Devgan 2013, 2015, 2018), grew to provide 'the other side' version of events—a discrete history put together by the community, for the benefit of its members, and in defiance of a single, pan-national and sanitized chronicle of the times produced by the state. Neither this counter-narrative nor Sandip Kaur's autobiography can be fully understood without keeping in mind the metacommentaries such as those provided by the Sikh and Punjabi scholars quoted above.

[5] Cf. Punjabi stories of Waryam Singh Sandhu, Ajeet Cour; poems by Harbhajan Singh, Amarjeet Chadan, Surjit Patar, Mohinder Kaur Gill, and others.

Close encounter with a militant self

I heard of Sandip Kaur and her autobiography, *Bikẖṛā paĩdā*, for the first time in March 2017, from Urvashi Butalia. Soon after our conversation, Butalia's paper, "Sandip Kaur's *Bikhra painda*: a militant woman's story from Punjab," appeared in the journal *Sikh Formations*. The paper included some nine pages of the autobiography, in Butalia's English translation, which narrated the story of Sandip Kaur's first attraction to Sikhism and the Sikh militant movement while still a child. Apart from the translation and brief analysis found in Butalia's article, there are hardly any references to the autobiography or its author in the scholarly papers dealing with the events of 1984 or the insurgency, probably because of the inaccessibility of the text to those who do not know Punjabi. Surprisingly, even the authors of a recent publication on the subject seem totally oblivious of Sandip Kaur or her book and write:

> Readers are still waiting for a Punjabi equivalent of Visier Meyasetsu Sanyü, a man whose childhood and teenage years were spent dodging the Indian Army, and who, amazingly, emerged from the jungles of Nagaland to write a gripping autobiography. Maybe one day some survivor, some released convict, some escapee settled abroad, will open his notebook and write *Maiñ uhanã de naal si …* (I was with them.) (Jaijee and Suri 2020: 149)

So far, I have come across just a few academic mentions of the book (e.g., Tatla 2015: 326). Of those the most extensive, though still limited to the opening sections of the text, are in the articles by Laurent Gayer, grounded in interviews with Sikh women militants including Sandip Kaur (Gayer 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2019).[6] For obvious reasons, the most comprehensive work on the subject, based on conversations with former militants, albeit living now in US and Canada, namely Cynthia Keppley Mahmood's *Fighting for the Faith and Nation. Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, published in 1996, does not mention Sandip Kaur, who was

[6] Gayer 2012a and Gayer 2012b are almost identical.

then still in jail, nor her book which came out only much later, in 2008. The most exhaustive and informative academic account, based on direct interaction with Sandip Kaur in 2011, is provided by Soibam Haripriya in her article, "Married to martyrdom: The remarried widow of a Sikh martyr (Punjab, post-1984)." Though the article does not name Sandip Kaur, referring to her merely as "widowed informant, Bibi," numerous details, including the fact of her having authored an autobiography, allow one to identify Bibi with Sandip Kaur (Haripriya 2018: 279).[7]

One of the questions foremost in the mind of interviewers, scholars, but also readers, are the circumstances of "how and why women are drawn to violence" (Butalia 2017: 21). Terrorism studies indicate that "women join terrorist groups for reasons very similar to those of men, both due to a desire to fight against grievances and due to the social influence of friends and family" (Cragin and Daly 2009: 15). Moreover, it appears that "women's motivations tend to be intricate, multi-layered, and inspired on a variety of levels. Anger, sorrow, the desire for revenge, and nationalist or religious zeal coalesce in ways that make any simple explanation impossible" (Bloom 2011: xi). However, "while external observers typically interpret women's activism as motivated by personal factors—in particular, romantic relationships with male activists and sexuality more generally—women's own accounts stress their political commitment and agency" (Hamilton 2007: 106), the last being also the case of Sandip Kaur. In his study, based on interviews with female Sikh militants, whom he classifies under three broad heads—women with "no political antecedents," women who "fell in love with a militant" (and married him) and "women who wanted to marry militants in order to take part in armed struggle" (this being, incidentally, the largest group) Gayer places Sandip Kaur within the last (Gayer 2012a: 4–5). Right

[7] I have stumbled on Soibam Haripriya's article by pure chance after reading her poems and then, going on to her academic writing. Also, one needs to remember that Haripriya and Sandip Kaur communicated probably in Hindi (as some of Sandip Kaur's answers are quoted in that language) as Haripriya does not know Punjabi and has not read the Punjabi autobiography.

after the account of her simple wedding ceremony, Sandip Kaur writes, "I knew in my heart that this marriage is but a formality [entered into] for the sake of the struggle, nothing else."[8] Haripriya, too, reports: "She [Sandip Kaur] informed us that her marriage [to a militant] was her deliberate choice, 'because I thought of it first'" (Haripriya 2018: 272), conforming Gayer's findings of Sikh female militants' "deeply instrumental relationship towards marriage—and towards men—which did not stop with militancy and often perpetuated after these women returned to civilian life" (Gayer 2012a: 6). I will tangentially revisit the subject later.

That Sandip Kaur has retrospectively turned over in her mind a number of narrative possibilities and with time fashioned her story to conform to a well-rounded, clearly articulated template is evident in an interview that appeared on 15 November 2016, corroborating yet again that "women's activism was more prone to take place at the intersection of 'social time' and 'biographical time,' where political commitment and domestic life come to overlap" (*ibid*.: 3). In an answer to the question as to when and why did she join the struggle, Sandip Kaur, who does not shy from the camera or her interlocutors and whose numerous interviews can be accessed on YouTube, points to the desecration of the Golden Temple as the defining moment of her life, when she probably experienced her identity most acutely:

> After the Indian army attack on the *sanctum sanctorum*, Sri Harmandir Sahib in June 1984 I decided to join the armed Sikh struggle for which I had to struggle hard to have my family agree to it but I succeeded. The organization advised I could join after marrying one of its fighters and in March 1989 I got married to Bhai Dharam Singh Kashtiwal. I remained active in the armed struggle for about 3 years before getting arrested on July 21, 1992. My husband S. Dharam Singh Kashtiwal got martyred on December 28, 1992. After four

[8] "mere dil vicc ih pakkī sī ki merā ih viāh keval sãgharś laī ikk phārmailaṭī hai, is tõ vaddh nahī" (Kaur 2008: 34). All translations, unless specified otherwise, are mine.

> years of imprisonment, I got released on May 5, 1996, and started struggling for the education, nourishment and well-being of families of Sikh martyrs. A detailed elaboration of my struggle could be read in my book "Bikhra Painda." (P. Singh 2016)

In another interview, referring to her present work with children, Sandip Kaur, a mother who had to leave her two-year old son with her in-laws when incarcerated, elucidates further:

> I realised then that my son was lucky to have grandparents back home, but what about those children who have no one around. I pledged to support the children of those [who] died during the movement… (Paul 2015)

Remarried now to a Punjabi publisher and writer, Baljit Singh Khalsa, with whose moral support (and probably editorial assistance) she wrote the book, Sandip Kaur devotes her time to the Trust[9] run in the name of her former, dead husband and to children, earlier mainly those of the former militants and now also girls not wanted by their parents. Her autobiography, *Bikhṛā paĩdā*, its title translated most often as "Broken Road," though sometimes also as "Lost" or "Scattered Road" (Gayer 2011: 123), describes both phases of her life: the period of the militancy and the post-militancy charitable work. However, keeping in mind Sandip Kaur's highly focused approach to the act of self-representation knitting into one whole all aspects and all phases of her life conceived as a forward march on the way of faith, the title, to my mind, could be best rendered as "Arduous/Difficult/Tough/Tortuous Path," or even better, "Difficult Journey," as the standard Punjabi dictionary gives *paĩdā* as 'distance,' 'journey,' 'trek,' 'travel;' 'distance travelled' (PED 2009: 568). The title seems to be taken from a verse quoted many times throughout the autobiography, at times in a slightly

[9] Bhai Dharam Singh Khalsa Charitable Trust set up in 1996; present headquarters—Sultanwind, Amritsar.

changed form: "Taxing valley, difficult journey, but we carry on."[10] As Sandip Kaur explains right at the beginning of the book (Kaur 2008: 27), the line comes from a poem of a well-known Punjabi poet, Bhai Vir Singh,[11] and repeating it, she writes, used to boost her courage. The two key words of the brief line, namely the adjectives *aukhī* and *bikẖṛā*, evoke in Sikh readers/listeners resonances going back to the Guru Granth Sahib (henceforth GGS),[12] for example, through a very popular hymn and prayer, "aukhī gẖaṛī na dekẖaṇ deī (…)" (GGS: 682) ("He does not let [the devotee] see a difficult time…"). The word *bikẖṛā* (also as *bikẖā*), derived from the Sanskrit *viṣama*, appears many times in the GGS, most often as a qualifier of *mārgu* or *pãthu*, i.e., 'road,' referring here to human existence and means of liberation, and is translated usually as 'treacherous' else 'difficult,' 'hard.'

The book and its frames

The whole autobiography is over five hundred pages long and consists of five titled parts, each divided into numerous, very short, mostly only numbered chapters. The book opens with a bunch of recommendations, an introduction and author's preface— of which more later—and closes with a bunch of appendixes ("Ãtikavã̃;" Kaur 2008: 516–528). The titles of the five parts of the autobiographical narrative, which chronologically maps the trajectory of Sandip Kaur's life, are as follows:

1. "Ghar khet tõ ran-khet tak" (*ibid*.: 9–36)—"From the home pitch to the battlefield"[13]

[10] "aukhī ghāṭī bikẖṛā paīdā, par asã̃ calṇā" (Kaur 2008: 511); "aukhī ghāṭī bikẖṛā paīdā, par asã̃ turnā" (*ibid*.: 27, 33, 514, etc.).

[11] Bhai Vir Singh (1882–1957) was a famous Punjabi writer, publisher and leading ideologue of Singh Sabha movement. Sandip Kaur mentions his novel *Sundari* (1898).

[12] As Guru Granth Sahib, in its printed version used for worship, is standardised and consists of 1430 pages (*aṅg*s), this article follows the usual academic practice of employing the acronym GGS plus the relevant page number.

[13] While reading Carrie Hamilton (2007) I was astonished to see that one of the chapters carried the following title: "From the domestic front to armed struggle,"

2. "Dalī̃ mukāblā" (*ibid*.: 37–168)—"The deadly encounter"
3. "Sīkhā̃ te sañgīnā̃ de pahire heṭh" (*ibid*.: 169–300)—"Under the guard of barred windows and bayonets"
4. "Sevā dā dūjā rāh" (*ibid*.: 301–470)—"The other way of doing *sevā*"[14]
5."Muṛ ūṭhan dī jado-jihad" (*ibid*.: 471–515)—"The struggle to stand again on one's own feet"

Surreptitiously, the titles provide a plethora of information on author's worldview and her way of seeing her life as a part and continuation of a larger, historical struggle for the Sikh faith. For example, both spheres of activity, the home (*ghar*) and the battlefield (*ran-khet*), are staged, through the use of word *khet* ('field'), as the meta-location where a Sikh fights her/his true (or 'just') battles. Even when locked in a deadly encounter (*dalī̃ mukāblā*) else constrained by bars and bayonets, s/he may find a way to move on by focusing on an alternative way of perusing the fight—by doing *sevā*—and thus strive (*jado-jihad*) to get back to his/her feet. For all that, the so framed life can only be a pale attempt at emulating Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of the Khalsa, whose four sons were martyred in the way of faith, or the heroic lives of other Sikh martyrs (cf. Fenech 2005, Gaur 2016).

The first, shortest part of the autobiography covers Sandeep Kaur's early life, from her first childhood fascination with Sikhism, up to the time of her marriage. Like typical hagiographical accounts of the lives of eminent personages this account also opens with formal though brief references to her family—she mentions that her paternal grandmother (*dādī*) came in 1947 from Pakistan and brought up her son and the protagonist's father in great hardship (Kaur 2008: 10, 32–33). This is immediately followed by information on the acreage of the land owned by the family as well as its location thus placing the protagonist firmly in the rural economy and geography of Punjab. Family home is

pointing to uncanny similarities in viewing life trajectories of female militants and gender relations within militant organizations irrespective of geographical location.

[14] *Sevā*—'service,' 'community service.'

in a village called Sarchur (Sārcūr), school is in Landarwal (Landarval), five kilometers away; the *axis mundi* of the Sikh faith, Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple in Amritsar, is mere thirty-five kilometers away. It is pertinent to mention here that Sarchur and Landarwal are both located in the Gurdaspur district, then the hotbed of militancy.

It is in this first part of the book that Sandip Kaur narrates her teenage encounters with Sikh political activism, mentioning, for example, the fact that she used to accompany her mother to protest marches where they would be often arrested and spend a night in a lock-up. There is also her first sighting (*darśan*) of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale when she was ten, her *amrit cakṇā* or the Sikh initiation ceremony at eleven, the destruction of the Golden Temple in June 1984 when she was twelve and her attempt to follow the *jathā* (cohort) of villagers marching to Harmandir Sahib on receiving news of the attack, then her subsequent visit to the temple for the *kār sevā*—community service—in this case, the cleaning of the sarovar or temple tank of the remains of the dead martyred there during the 1984 attack. Of the last Sandip Kaur writes:

> When I stepped down into the sarovar I saw little children's bones, *kangha*s, *kara*s and broken plastic bangles being taken out. The women volunteers had distributed baskets for [collecting] these objects and the congregation (*sangat*) kept on filling the baskets with them.[15]

This simply worded passage conjures in its sparseness a most disturbing scene: temple tank (*sarovar*) drained of water but choked with debris of the aftermath of the carnage, including tiny human bones, tiny *kangha*s and *kara*s, and tiny plastic bangles once worn by little girls—older girls or grown-up women would have worn bangles made of glass. The day,

[15] "jadõ sarovar vic utrī tã vekhiā ki sarovar de añdarõ choṭe-choṭe baciã dīã hadhīã, kãghe, kaṛe te ṭuṭīã hoīã vãgã bahut nikal rhiã san. kār sevā vāliã ne inhatã cījã laī ṭokre lā dite san, jinã vic sãgat ih sabh kujh pāī jā rahī sī" (Kaur 2008: 23–24).

we know, is the 12 of October 1984, for it was then that the *sarovar* was cleaned.[16]

The first part closes with Sandip Kaur's wedding to Sardar Dharam Singh Kashtiwal, a militant to whom she refers throughout the book as Singh Sahab,[17] and whom she marries to become a full-fledged member of the militant underground. She is seventeen.

Part 2 narrates her post-wedding, itinerant, clandestine life, when both husband and wife follow the lifestyle of the militants, constantly moving from place to place, often taking part in armed actions, with Sandip Kaur handling the gun as one of active participants.[18] At one point, she states, matter of fact, "By then I had already received training in using all types of firearms and was good at it."[19] However, just like Keppley Mahmood's or Gayer's informants, Sandip Kaur does not name the specific locations or the human targets of the action/s, nor does she give enough details to identify the events with ease—thus refraining from incriminating herself in unlawful and/or criminal activities.[20]

Part 3 opens with the scene of interrogation in police custody—where Sandip Kaur is questioned as to the whereabouts of her husband—and ends on 5 July 1996, some four years later, when she is

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[16] *Kangha* is a small comb worn by the Sikhs in their hair while *kara* is a steel bangle; both denote allegiance to Sikhism. The Golden Temple tank has been drained of water for cleaning only five times in recent period: June 17, 1923; March 31, 1973; October 12, 1984, after Operation Bluestar; May 19, 1988, after operation Black Thunder; March 24, 2002.

[17] See Opening Words for author's explanation that she will be using honorificum Singh Sahab instead of 'he' or 'his' which would have been the usual way a married woman would refer to her husband in third person, refraining from using his given name.

[18] Kaur uses following terms to refer to the militant life 'underground,' "jujhārū jīvan" (Kaur 2008: 38); "jujhārū zindagī" (*ibid*.: 48); "ãḍargrāũḍ hoṇā" (*ibid*.: 70); "rūpoś rahinā" (*ibid*.: 71); "rūpoś ho jāṇā" (*ibid*.: 128).

[19] "huṇ tak maĩū sāre hathiār calāuṇ dī ṭreniṇg tã hāsal ho hī gaī sī" (*ibid*.: 111).

[20] See also Gayer 2012a: 3, "All my respondents were reluctant to describe their violent actions, for fear of being held accountable for them in a court of law. As a result, the following pages are primarily an exploration of clandestine life-styles and their recollection rather than of actual violent practices."

finally released from jail. We are told that while in jail she had kept a dairy which later formed the basis for her book.[21] With a prescient foreknowledge of an imminent tragedy, she remembers her husband's recent letter telling her that he was tired of waiting for other people's help and will himself find a way to get her out of jail; she then reports writing in her diary on 21 December 1992:

> Today is five months [since I came here]. In any case, I am used to it now; till now I looked up to others for help, but now, who knows how long I will only have myself to depend on …[22]

The entry comes at the end of the chapter preceding that in which she speaks of her husband's death in police encounter on 28 December 1992.[23] Writing from the perspective of many years, she then recalls how on the night before the death of her husband she was restless and could not sleep trying to calm her mind with prayers. How no newspaper was delivered to the women's wing of the jail next morning. How on the same day her younger sister, Nina, and her own mother-in-law came to meet her and told her about her husband's death. They also passed on his last gift to her, a red *salwar-kamiz*[24] suit and a jacket,

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[21] In the Opening Words Sandip Kaur mentions that she kept a diary in jail, smuggling parts of it out of jail whenever possible.

[22] "aj pūre 5 mahīne ho gae ne. khair, huṇ tā ādat hī baṇ gaī hai, akhe maĩ huṇ tak dūjiā de mūh vekhiā e, par huṇ kīnā cir vekhṇā hai…?" (Kaur 2008: 218).

[23] Kashtiwal ingested cyanide during the encounter (Haripriya 2018: 267). Most of such encounters were staged else the result of a betrayal. Policy introduced by K. P. S. Gill, Director of Police in the state of Punjab (1984–1990, 1991–1995) and man credited with stamping out militancy, hinged on two principles, a system of rewards and extrajudicial killings. K.P.S Gill's autobiography, like that of general K. S. Brar, who was in charge of Operation Bluestar (1984), form part of the official narrative of the events.

[24] I find Sandip Kaur's very mention of the bridal-like red suit being given to her (and accepted) together with the news of the death of her husband telling and worth further consideration (Kaur 2008: 220, 222). On bridal imagery, see N.-G. K. Singh 1992, Gaur 2008.

along with his promise to buy her, when she is out of jail, a denim jacket she had set her heart on. Besides the clothes, they also gave her scraps of his last letter which they had to destroy in fear of CID/plain clothes policemen following on their heels. After they leave, Sandip Kaur asks the superintendent of the jail to give her the newspaper as she already knows about her husband's death. She writes: "The newspaper came. On seeing the printed photo of the martyred Singh Sahab I broke into tears."[25]

Notwithstanding her husband's death, Sandip Kaur, charged under the draconian TADA Act,[26] spends four more years in jail. The subsequent, fourth part of the autobiography begins with these words, clearly marking a new phase in her life:

> Now, following the decision I made in jail, I decided to dig in my heels to start a mission to look after the well-being and education of children of the martyred Singhs. I knew that in this mission, too, my family would oppose me just the way they opposed my decision to join the armed struggle.[27]

Thus, this part and then the next, fifth part, speak of Sandip Kaur's decommissioned life.[28] The symmetry in the importance assigned to both stages

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[25] "akẖbār ā gaī. siṇgh sāhab dī shāhadat ūparaṇt chapī photo vekh ke maĩ bhāvuk ho gaī" (Kaur 2008: 222). Apparently, the news of Kashtiwal's death in an encounter were broadcast on TV the night before (*ibid*.: 221).

[26] Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, commonly known as TADA, was an Indian anti-terrorism law, in force between 1985 and 1995 (modified in 1987). It was applied to whole of India. It came into effect on 23 May 1985. It was renewed in 1989, 1991 and 1993 before being allowed to lapse in 1995 due to increasing unpopularity after widespread allegations of abuse.

[27] "huṇ maĩ jel vic kīte faisle anusār śahīd sīghã de baciāṅ dī vadhīā sābhsābhāl te paṛāī laī miśan araṁbh karan val kadam puṭṇe san. maiṁnu patā sī parivār valõ mere is miśan dā vī use hī ḍhãg nāl virodh hoṇā hai, jinhẽ mere hathiārbaṅd saṁgharś 'c śāmal hoṇ de faisle dā virodh hoiā sī" (Kaur 2008: 302).

[28] Gayer points to widow re-marriage as one of the ways of returning female militants to society and references the case of one Jasmit Kaur [name changed]. In order to get out of jail, Jasmit Kaur "decided to remarry under the advice of her lawyer, who

of her life exhibited in the length of the texts devoted to the militant and the post-militant phases unwittingly projects the autobiographical account as possessed of an intriguing balance imputing the presence of a similar balance in the actual life. The feeling of equilibrium is further enhanced by the skilful positioning of the incarceration and its account (Part 3)—presented as a taxing period of questionings, court appearances, prayer and retrospection—right in the middle of the narrative and flanked by the two preceding and the two following sections (Parts 1 and 2, and 4 and 5, respectively). One could even view the first part describing Sandip Kaur's childhood and teenage years with its strong religious overtones and growing adherence to the tenets of Sikhism as an introduction appropriate both to the life of militancy as well as that of charitable work that followed it. Interestingly, each part of Sandip Kaur's adult life is projected as framed by one of her two marriages, providing a clear, socially acceptable contour to her vision of herself as a devout married Sikh woman and a worthy member of the community, the larger, of the believers, and the smaller, of the chosen warriors of the Gurus. Both wedding ceremonies are referred to by their Sikh name, *anand karaj*, legitimizing her marital status both in the eyes of the world and God while allowing her life to be presented as one seamless flow of almost pre-ordained events, devoid of a rupture that would juxtapose her militant self with its later humanitarian embodiment, setting both ways of life at odds. However, as noticed by Haripriya during her personal interaction with the subject, Kaur consistently "deploys the trope of wife-widow and presents herself as the perpetual widow of the martyr" (Haripriya 2018: 265), where such a "possibility of alternating between these two roles as wife and widow is provided by the trope of chastity maintained by the non-conjugal

pleaded that she was firmly committed to reinserting herself into society and 'settle down,' i.e. re-endorse a traditional gender role. This happened to be a successful line of defence, which suggests that *the Indian state was also a powerful agent in the 're-traditionalisation' of female ex-combatants*" (Gayer 2012a: 17; italics mine).

second marriage" (*ibid*.: 275). Yet, it appears, "both the previous martyred husband and the present sibling-like husband are not important to her presentation of herself" (*ibid*.). Having "constituted herself as a unique subject," Kaur indeed, to use Haripriya's words, "projects herself through the known tropes of widowhood and martyrdom" but apparently "complicates both" (*ibid*.). The Sandip Kaur persona that emerges from the Punjabi-language autobiography is yet more nuanced and much more difficult to pin down than the one manifesting itself in the public, both the authorial and non-authorial, epitexts.[29]

It is evident that the earlier mentioned notions of metacommentary and territoriality advanced by Oberoi and fleshed out in the writings of the scholars quoted at the beginning of this article, inform also Sandip Kaur's worldview and underpin her narrative subjectivity nurtured on the "powerful myth of origin, whose principal characteristics are bravery, suffering, persecution, blood, sacrifice, and martyrdom" (Oberoi 1987: 34), though reworked to the demands of time. As intuited by Haripriya, the Sandip Kaur of today inhabits a carefully thought-out persona, probably brought out most strongly by way of the autobiography, now a 'fixed' text in public domain (Haripriya 2018). Generally, the autobiographical "[p]ersona is [a] metaphor for the inscribed self of the text; it is neither guise nor facade" (Barros 1992: 5); such a persona, in Sandip Kaur's case, is constituted of an assemblage of life fragments re-viewed through the lens of time and streamlined to showcase one's life trajectory as an integral part of Sikh history-in-the-making. The act of 'self-making and world-making,' to borrow Jerome Bruner's phrase, the act which would result in an autobiographical account, requires that "[a] narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who

[29] I use terms such as 'paratext,' 'peritext' or 'epitext' as defined by Genette 1997. However, following Summers, I include in paratexts "reviews and scholarship which are not 'authored' by the writer" but are, nonetheless, "authorized or authored by the author-function" (Summers 2013: 14).

happens to share his name" (Bruner 2001: 27). However, "in order to bring a protagonist from the there and then to the point where the original protagonist becomes the present narrator, one needs a theory of growth or at least of transformation" (*ibid*.: 27–28). It is, therefore, not surprising that Sandip Kaur, too, at one point in time, found herself in need to fashion her self into a stable, clear-cut, visually legible persona capable of claiming the authorship of a coherent, socially acceptable and historically grounded story set out in a culturally relevant, autobiographical format (cf. "life-writing and self-making," Harbus 2011: 211).

Scholars studying interactions between literary cultures and cognitive processes (Harbus 2011, Siebenschuh 1989, Eakin 2020) have noticed similarities between "conventions found in life-writing memory studies" and "autobiographic memory studies,"[30] confirming the possibility of an "impact of cultural and educational factors on memory," which led Harbus to conclude that,

> [e]xposure to durable and pervasive modes of life-writing, transmitted culturally, provides frameworks for meaning-making that normalize certain narrative structures and shape the content and organization of autobiographical memory. (Harbus 2011: 206)

Starting from this premise, a scholar of South Asia, working with life writings, would naturally try to locate textual (or oral) antecedents that might have impacted the work at hand and hopefully find literary, but not only, models Sandip Kaur might have followed, be it consciously or not.[31] In the very first sentence of the Opening Words, Sandip Kaur writes,

[30] "The 'autobiographical memory' is understood here as the recollection of one's own prior experiences, a reconstructive act that is always culturally situated, context sensitive and susceptible to narrative configuration" (Harbus 2011: 207).

[31] For the lack of space, I do not discuss historical development or use of autobiographical forms in Punjabi, like the autobiographical compositions in the GGS or Dasam Granth (cf. N.-G.K. Singh 2017, Astha 1959, Rinehart 2017), self-referential poetic utterances (cf. Malhotra 2017) or modern life writing. Neither do I, for the same reasons, try to locate Sandip Kaur's book within the larger body of the South Asian

> Some time back I have read Sardar Harvir Singh Bhanwar's *Ḍāirī de panne jo itihās baṇ gae* ["Dairy Pages that Became History"]. But when I wrote my own diary in the Sangrur jail, I had no idea that those randomly recorded incidents would too [one day] become the basis of a book.[32]

However, it is not clear if her own book tries to emulate that of Bhanwar's or merely situates itself next to it. As she herself provides no further clues, one may only speculate as to what else could have impacted or guided her in her writerly venture. Though she reveals, "[i]n my childhood, whenever I read of someone from a poor family who had become famous, I would be filled with feeling of strange confidence and start thinking of proving myself,"[33] we do not know really what she read. She mentions no books from that period by name (except for *Sundari*, but of that later) though while talking of her family, she recalls with pride that her father had subscribed to two magazines, "Soviet Land" and "Jīvan Lahir;" moreover, he was active, she says, in farmers' movement (*kisān ãdolan*), even courting arrest a number of times (Kaur 2008: 10).[34] Both magazines would have been, besides school books and tracts circulated by the farmers' unions or religious organizations, the primary reading material in her childhood and adolescence, occasionally supplemented by other books offered to the magazine

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women's life writing (cf. Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015; Lambert-Hurley 2018) though surreptitiously I do draw on the knowledge I have imbibed therefrom.

[32] "maĩ kise vele sa. harbīr siṅgh dī likhat 'ḍāirī de panne do itihās baṇ gae' paṛī sī. saṅgrūr jel 'c maĩ ḍāirī likhdī sī tān maĩ nahĩ sī jāṇdī ki ih betartībī 'c likhīān ghaṭnavān ik kitab dā ādhār baṇ jāṇgīān" (Kaur 2008: 5).

[33] "bacpan 'c jadõ hī maĩ kise garīb parivār 'cõ uṭh ke prasidhī prāpt karan vālī kise śk̲hsīāt bare paṛdī tān mere ãdar ikk ajīb jihā ātam-viśvās jāg uṭhdā te maĩ vī kujh kar ke vikhāuṇ bāre socdī" (Kaur 2008: 13).

[34] "Soviet Land," a magazine published in USSR in Russian, appeared also in 13 Indian languages, including Punjabi. "Jīvan Lehir" or "Jīvan Lehar" was a very popular magazine, with circulation of some thirty thousand, published from the Pingalwara Press. After Operation Bluestar government suspended it, fearing that donations coming from abroad might find its way to the militants.

subscribers at subsidized rates. Those would have included the popular fare of Russian classics in Punjabi translation (Tolstoy, Chekov, Gorky, Sholokhov, but also Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, rendered as *Surme di sirajanā* or *How the Heroes are Made*), else their abridged versions. The original Punjabi writings would have been most probably represented by the prevalent, cheap editions of the life-stories of the Gurus (based on the *janamsakhī* and the *gurbilas* narratives), hagiographies of the Sikh martyrs (e.g., of Baba Deep Singh, martyred while fighting against Ahmad Shah Durani, the Afghan invader who had desecrated Harmandir Sahib) or fictionalised accounts of the Sikh past as depicted in Bhai Vir Singh's historical novels, including the already mentioned *Sundari*.[35] There is an interesting aside following Sandip Kaur's first marriage ceremony. She writes, "Once *anand karaj* was over the question of changing [my] name came up" (*ibid*.: 33). So, the militant who had presided over the rite, opened the GGS at random and took out the letter with which the name should begin (it was 's') and immediately suggested Sundari. Sandip Kaur's reaction is worth quoting: "I was incensed. When I was younger, I had read Bhai Vir Singh's historical novel *Sundari*.[36] But could I be a Sundari without having done any *sevā*? No, I am not going to keep Sundari as my name, I decided."[37] Undoubtedly equipped with what Gayer calls 'a romantic

[35] It is interesting to note that militants from another era, the freedom fighters Preetilata Wadedar and Kamala Dasgupta, had been both inspired by literary works, in their case, writings by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1894–1994) (Kumar 1993: 87–88).

[36] One of Bhai Vir Singh's earliest literary creations was the historical novel, *Sundarī* (1898), set in the 18th century Punjab when Sikh fortunes were at their lowest. The adventures of its heroine, Surasti, a Hindu girl kidnapped by a Mughal chief and rescued by a Khalsa warrior only to take *amrit* (and a Sikh name, Sundar Kaur or Sundari), set Bhai Vir Singh on the project of writing an imaginary history of the Sikh community.

[37] "maĩ trabhak gaī. chote hũde maĩ bhāī vīr singh dā etihāsak naval 'sũdarī' paṛiā sī. par maĩ binã kujh sevā kite… sũdarī…? 'naĩ maĩ sũdarī nã naĩ rakkhṇā.' mai·man vicc faislā kar liā" (Kaur 2008: 33–34). The issue of 'naming' (at birth or following marriage) cannot be addressed here. It should suffice to say that Sandip Kaur's given name was

imagination' (Gayer 2012a: 12), Sandip Kaur often considers the present through idealised narratives rooted in the past, for at one point she writes, "Now I could see the display of the bravery of the Sikhs and the dying youth I had read about in old historical novels. All this looked to me like a miracle [come true]."[38]

The reading material would have been supplemented by 'sermons' or *kathā*s heard at the congregational gatherings on the occasion of the *gurpurab*s or other local get-togethers.[39] Sandip Kaur would have also listened to the widely disseminated cassette recordings of speeches by leaders such as Bhindranwale,[40] with their interpretation of the current happenings as yet another phase of the Delhi rulers' unjust dealings with the Sikh community. Besides the radio and an occasional access to the TV broadcasts, newspapers are the only important source of information that Sandip Kaur mentions often, especially when in jail, as in the pre-internet era, newspapers provided the most reliable visual confirmations about those killed in police encounters.[41] In spite of having appeared, while in jail, in the *giānī* certificate exams (Kaur 2008: 246)[42]

Ravinderjit Kaur; she provides the list of names of all six sisters, with herself being the fourth (*ibid*.:10); following her marriage first it was changed to Sharanjit Kaur (which she did not like) and immediately after, to Sandip Kaur, which she uses till now (cf. *ibid*.: 35).

[38] "maĩ purāṇe itihāsak nāvlẽ 'cõ paṛī sĩghẽ dī bahādarī te javẽ mardī huṇ pratakkh vekh rahī sẽ. Meinnu ih ikk kariśmā hī lagg rihā sī" (Kaur 2008: 147).

[39] A *gurpurab* celebration would often gather thousands and usually consisted of *kīrtan* session/s interspaced by *katha*/s (sermon, preaching) on subjects ranging from scriptural exegesis, events from the Sikh history to elucidation of current affairs; these would be followed by *langar*.

[40] For example, Sandip Kaur mentions listening to kirtan on her tape recorder, so it is more than probable that she listened to recordings of speeches or sermons, which she does not mention, as even today they are viewed as seditious material. But she mentions having a video cassette of the Singhs, so probably of Bhindranwale or his lieutenants (Kaur 2008: 145).

[41] Publication of news of slain militants, often accompanied by gruesome visuals, was one of many tactics used to intimidate the public.

[42] A Punjabi language certificate course offered, for example, by the Punjabi University, Patiala.

for which she would have studied some Punjabi literature, most probably literary autobiographies written by Punjabi writers fell outside Sandip Kaur's sphere of interest. She mentions, though without further comment, that while in hiding with her militant group, she had started reading *Jel ciṭṭhīā̃* (or [Prison Letters]) of Randhir Singh (*ibid*.: 62)[43], a Sikh reformer and founder of Akhand Kirtani Jatha, a reformist movement that Sandip's family followed. She was also familiar with K. P. S. Gill's Punjab. *The Knights of Falsehood* (1997), though possibly only after it was published in Punjabi as *Kūṛu phirai pardhān* (1997), for she wrote her second book, *Uṛki saci rahī* ("The Truth Will Out," 2011) as an answer to it, refuting its allegations. What is of interest here is the painstaking setting of the thesis and the antithesis, presented respectively by K. P. S. Gill and Sandip Kaur, within the framework of *gurbaṇī*. The Punjabi title of Gill's English book employs a phrase from Guru Nanak's hymn found in the GGS: "saramu dharamu dui chapi khaloe/**kūṛu phrai pardhān** ve lālo"—"Modesty and righteousness have gone into hiding/**Falsehood presides all over the place**, O Lalo!" (GGS: 772, English tr. N-G. K. Singh 2017: 14). Sandip Kaur's book, written as an answer to Gill's, similarly uses a line from Guru Nanak's hymn to set forth its arguments: "kūṛa nikhute nānakā/**uṛki saci rahī**"—"Falsehood will be destroyed/**Truth will prevail in the end**" (GGS: 953).

Earlier readings of autobiographies by devout Sikh women where a medley of diverse writings was found to be often enclosed within the covers of a single autobiographical volume (cf. Gill 2012) led me to believe that the organizing principle in such cases could simply be the reflection of a deeply interiorised Sikh religious injunction to live

[43] Ranbhir Singh (1878–1961); his autobiography in Punjabi, *Jel ciṭṭhīā̃*, was published in 1938 and remains in print. The first hundred pages describe author's journey to Sikhism and his mystical experiences. The book has been published in English as *Autobiography of Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh* (2012). Gayer (2012a: 17) notes: "The Akand Kirtani Jatha is a reformist Sikh religious movement, sometimes described as 'fundamentalist.' Most of the commanders of the Babbar Khalsa (one of the most powerful and religiously inclined Khalistani armed groups) came from its ranks."

one's life by following the three fundamental precepts of Sikhism—*nām japo, kirat karo, vaṇdh chako*—which translate respectively: "remember God" (repeat the Name), "work hard" (do your job), "share what you have" and partake of it as a community/with the community.[44] Such an approach would allow the author to club all sorts of texts—the actual autobiographic narrative, the peritextual add-ons including the visual material—under a single rubric of the self-referential or the autobiographical. Sandip Kaur's self-narrative and the accompanying it paratexts lend themselves to such a reading with a surprising ease, even more so, since singularly pre-packaged.

It is usual for textual scholars to conflate the book with the text lodged within it but the book is also a physical, multimedial object. Indeed, though "[a] literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text (…) this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations" (Genette 1997: 1). These so-called 'productions,' termed 'paratexts,' surround and extend the text "in order to present it, (…) to make present, to ensure [its] presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption" (*ibid*.). In the case of Sandip Kaur's autobiography, which is swaddled in a profusion of metacommentarial peritexts, both textual and visual, an interesting kind of a third space is produced, a space described by Genette as,

> an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, 'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text.' (*ibid*.: 2)[45]

[44] Cf. my unpublished presentation, "Re-inventing the Self: Literary Autobiography of Mohinder Kaur Gill," ECSAS Paris 2018.

[45] Lejeune's quote is taken from Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Seuil 1975).

Even a cursory glance at the metacommentarial 'fringe' or the peritextual space of *Bikhṛā Paĩdā* provides striking insights into editorial strategies of both the author and the publisher, leaving no doubt of it having been designed for the maximum impact on the prospective reader and his reception of the text. Not only do the peritexts set the narrative in a particular historical timeframe but endorse its status as a bona fide counternarrative, that too, with a titillating twist—one authored by a real-life, female militant. However, the very nature of those peritexts precludes most of them from ever being used in a prospective English edition of the autobiography, if such be ever produced (that too, if at all, probably in an abridged form), as being too drastic or too controversial for the mainstream publishing, possibly even inviting charges of partisanship and/or sedition.[46]

The original Punjabi edition is a generic example of a multimedial, metacommentarial hard-copy format often employed by the emotionally invested authors/editors/publishers to present their views on communal traumas in a culturally relevant fashion, and hence deserves to be meticulously examined. The book is a hardcover, with a glossy finish and a dust cover. The front matter and the back matter on the cover of the book and the dust cover are identical, however the dust cover has flaps with additional text—the front flap carries an imbued with nostalgia poem called "Remembrance"/"Yād" written by Sant Ram Udasi,[47] while the back flap has photos of children from the orphanage run by the Trust. The matter on the back cover showcases the Trust, with photographs of children at different activities, the statement of the Trust's mission and the address of the Trust headquarters, including the number of Sandip Kaur's mobile phone. Very telling is the motto at the edge of the back cover adjacent to the spine, given both in Punjabi and English, though the English rendering of the Punjabi words is not exact. In Punjabi we have: "jinã̃ ne sādhe layī lahū vahāiyā, unhã̃ layī

[46] For paratextual impact in context of translation cf. Summers 2013.

[47] Sant Ram Udasi (1939–1986) was one of major Punjabi poets to emerge during the Naxalite movement; he wrote about the revolutionary and Dalit consciousness.

pasīnā vahāyīai" or literally "They have shed their blood for us, let us shed our sweat for them." In English the sentence sounds less dramatic, and its affective tenor is evidently tailored to different linguistic sensibilities: "Martyrs had performed their duties long ago. Now is the need of the hour to fulfil our duties."

Inserted within the body proper of the text are three sets of glossy insets, each of four pages, with photographs, mostly coloured, starting with a photograph of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (a persona non grata with the Indian state) and followed by Sandip Kaur's family photos, including those of her son as a child; then the photos of articles from the newspapers, including the article announcing her husband's death (and the graphic photo of his dead body); and ultimately the photographs recording the current activities of the Trust. Seen together, the photographs, supplementing, but also introducing the text and its author, enforce the impression of a family album else a personal archive where people as disparate as Bhindranwale, the author's son and the children in her care appear as a part of one big, closely knit clan, bound by ties of sacred kinship. Regretfully there is not even a single photograph of a page from Sandip Kaur's diary which avowedly served as the pretext of the autobiography, possibly such a document being, in author's or editor's view, not as important as other carefully appended documents.

The reverse side of the title page is for all practical purposes an advertisement for the Khalsa Literature House, the publication enterprise run by Sandip's husband, Baljit Singh Khalsa, showcasing her two books as well as numerous of his.[48] But on the very next page there is the very telling, coloured image of Mata Bhag Kaur Ji,[49] with Sandip Kaur positioned next to her in a posture of surrender, her body slightly bowing, her forehead on the *kirpan* (sword). The book is dedicated to

[48] It also provides information on the number of published copies of *Bikhṛā Paĩdā*: 1st edition 2008—3000, 2nd edition 2008—4000, 3rd edition—3000, 4th edition—3000.

[49] Mata Bhago or Mai Bhago (*māī bhāgo*), also known as Mai Bhag Kaur, was a Sikh woman who led Sikh soldiers against the Mughals in 1705. She is revered as a saint in Sikhism. Jakobsh calls her "a man embodied in female form" (Jakobsh 2006: 49), hence "an honorary male" or what Block called a "social male" (Block 2001: 227).

Mata Bhag Kaur and those who follow in her footsteps providing Sandip Kaur with impeccable female antecedents. Mata Bhag Kaur is revered for rallying the forty Sikhs (known in Sikh historiography as *cali mukte*, i.e., the forty liberated [from death]), who had abandoned Guru Gobind Singh at the siege of Anandpur Sahib, and leading them back onto the battlefield and glorious death. *Cali mukte* are mentioned in the *ardās* or 'supplication' alongside the names of other martyrs who died for the Sikh cause. *Ardās* is recited at every reading of the Sikh scriptures, at the commencement and concluding of any important task, and at all Sikh ceremonies. Its "powerful associations (…) remain constant for all occasions" and "include remembering the Ultimate Reality, the Ten Gurus, their mergence with the Guru Granth, and events of Sikh heroism, devotion and martyrdom" (N-G. K. Singh 2019: 137). It is probably, besides *japjī* and the six verses of *anand*, the most widely memorised Sikh prayer, interiorised right from the childhood. Its list of martyrs and their sacrifices frame the Sikh martyrology in the most fundamental and fairly graphic way, and its words, recited/heard day in day out, always in the original Punjabi, bind participants into a well-defined community of believers.

(…) The light of the Ten Gurus shines
in the Guru Granth Sahib
Consider its sacred word, envisage its sacred sight,
And proclaim: Vaheguru, the Wonderful Guru!
The heroic deeds of the five beloved ones, the four princes, the forty who attained liberation,[50]
The determined, the devout and the self-denying,
They who contemplated the Name, shared their earnings, established free kitchens, prepared for battle,
They who forgave others their faults,

[50] *pāc pyare* ('the five beloved')—first five volunteers initiated into the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh; *car sahibzāde* ('the four princes')—the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh.

> Remember the purity and goodness of their deeds, Khalsaji, Proclaim: Vaheguru, the Wonderful Guru!
> **The Sikh men and women who gave their heads for their religion,**
> **Whose limbs were cut off one by one,**
> **Who were scalped, broken on the wheel, and sawn in pieces,**
> **Who sacrificed their lives to serve the gurudwaras,**
> **Their faith triumphed.**
> **They served the Sikh religion with uncut hair to their last breath,**
> **Remembering their steadfast faith, Khalsaji, Proclaim: Vaheguru, the Wonderful Guru!** (…)
> (N.-G. K. Singh 2019: 139–140)

On the reverse of the Mata Bhag Kaur page are the photos of the post-1984, badly damaged Akhal Takht[51] and of *kār sevā*—the voluntary work by the Sikh community—here it is the clearing of the post-assault debris from the Harmandir Sahib on 12 October 1984, the date duly provided. (Incidentally, it is the very *kār sevā* that Sandip Kaur participated in when she was twelve.) These two images invariably invoke sorrow in each and every Sikh, irrespective of political orientation or depth of religious engagement, and remain the most evocative metaphors of the unalloyed feeling of the community's hurt. The photos are followed by two pages of high-flowing reviews and recommendations (*huṇgārā*) for the book and its author by persons of note from the community. Thereafter comes a two-page laudatory write-up in the form of a letter by Bhai Jagatar Singh Hawara, written from the Tihar Jail in Delhi. Probably the senior most living militant still in the public eye, Jagatar Singh Hawara (b. 1973) is a controversial figure and a former member of Babbar Khalsa (the very same militant group to which Sandip and her husband belonged). Convicted as a co-conspirator in the 13 August 1995 assassination of the Chief Minister of Punjab, Beant

[51] On the association of the damaged Akhal Takht with martyrdom, and Sandip Kaur's staging of herself in that narrative, see Haripriya 2018.

Singh, he is currently serving a life sentence.[52] The very presence of his letter in the book reaffirms Sandip Kaur's impeccable credentials as a former militant and legitimizes her autobiographical venture locating it within the mainstream militant discourse, while simultaneously raising anxiety in some other readers.

Hawara's letter is followed by a two and half page long Introduction (*bhūmikā*) by Baljit Singh Khalsa, and one and half page Preface (*mudhle śabd*; "Opening Words") by Sandip Kaur. All the peritexts taken together place the narrative firmly in the idealised framework of martyrdom (*śahidi*/*śahadat*) and service (*sevā*), two cornerstones of Sikh belief. Without turning back on the militant struggle and by viewing it as a phase necessitated by the exigent circumstances, the narrative accommodates it seamlessly into the larger scheme of things. The certitude of the militants' fight having been for the right cause is further highlighted by inclusion, in the Appendixes, of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) (Kaur 2008: 523–528) which moves the discourse onto yet another plane, the Punjabi words of the Declaration lending further legitimacy to the autobiographical narrative with its employment of the very same words and phrases to set out its discourse.

Too militant, not militant enough: Deadly encounters revisited[53]

Overwhelmed by the profusion of visual peritexts, some of them dramatic, the first-time reader approaches the text, especially its second part dedicated presumably to the gun-wielding phase in author's life, hoping for an 'action movie' kind of exploits. Instead, s/he finds a mostly bland narrative describing militants' day-to-day life only rarely punctuated by a dramatic event, almost as if the author, in search of "a model of normal selfhood" (Eakin 2001: 121), decided *against*

[52] The assassination of Beant Singh is usually considered to be the last violent act of the Sikh militancy period.

[53] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to add this section and to the editors for including it.

focusing on the violence and *for* 'the descent into the ordinary,' to borrow Veena Das's phrase (Das 2007). Nonetheless, the underlying presence of systemic violence, be it perpetrated by the state or the non-state actors, is undeniable.

As Sandip Kaur's account of the militant life is strictly chronological, with years and months specifically indicated, it is theoretically possible to broadly reconstruct the protagonist's movements, perhaps even identify certain (now historical) events from hints embedded in the narrative. That task, however, is daunting, and would require physical matching of regional archival records such as English and Punjabi newspapers, and the possibly classified government documents, this to be followed by personal interaction with the author and other people familiar with the grass-root level dynamics of the Sikh militant movement.

Moreover, all descriptions of the active, militant phase are largely bereft of violent, self-incriminating facts, especially the nature or the exact geographical locations of specific pre-planned militant actions carried out by her husband's group. On the other hand, the part devoted to the incarceration records in great detail spatial distribution of the prison network and the attendant logistics in respect of those detained under TADA, especially the women. The mapping of the physical locations of the dreaded detention centres[54] and penal institutions[55] is unwittingly superimposed on the sacred geography of Punjab, with narrator offering no comment whatsoever (being unaware?) of the fact as if taking the arrangement for granted.

[54] Kaur mentions, among others, two infamous interrogation centres, B. R. Model School, Amritsar, and Beeco Detention Centre, Batala (Kaur 2008: 161, 167, 171).

[55] Sandip Kaur was initially held and interrogated at Beeco; later she stayed in jail in Gurdaspur (Kaur 2008: 176) and Sangrur (*ibid*: 195). But she was regularly transported for court appearances all over Punjab, wherever cases against her had been lodged. A recently published prison memoir mentions that prisoners were often shifted from one institution to another, to make them feel unrooted and helpless (Ghandy 2021: 116–121).

Similarly, there is a perceptible refusal on Sandip Kaur's part to be drawn, whenever questioned, like in jail, into specific ideological or political discussions regarding, for example, Khalistan, deflecting the subject by stating that she had merely fought the injustice perpetrated against the Sikhs (Kaur 2008: 189). Neither is she, just like other female militants (Gayer 2012a: 16), openly forthcoming about her views on the 'collateral damage' or the deaths of the innocent civilians, often the specifically targeted Hindus, though she recounts a conversation between her husband and another militant, Tasbir Singh Jandher (Kaur 2008: 151–152) which has a direct bearing on the subject. Condemning the killings of innocent Hindu villagers, her husband asks Jandher what were militants hoping to achieve by such an action. "Delhi trembles when Hindus are killed…" comes the reply.[56] To this, Kashtiwal retorts, "[My] young brother, Delhi is not shaken by the killing of poor Hindu villagers eking their living in hardship. Delhi shakes when the Delhi's potbellied chosen, always in the centre of government's attention, are killed…"[57] (*ibid*.: 151).

There are, however, mentions of numerous encounters with the police. In fact, Part 2 opens with a detailed account of Sandip Kaur's first police encounter and the subsequent flight when she and her husband are ambushed while hiding in a village near Shahjahanpur in Uttar Pradesh (*ibid*.: 38–47). With the help of a Muslim friend and numerous strangers, mostly Sikhs, they ultimately get onto a truck going to Punjab, and safety. But on another, much later occasion, when Sandip is already pregnant and alone in a rented room as her husband had just left under the cover of darkness, some militants are waylaid nearby and there is an exchange of fire between them and the police. Somebody is apparently killed and one of the militants is captured, possibly wounded, and brutally tortured—one can hear his screams in the village throughout

[56] "hĩdūā̃ nū̃ māran nāl dillī hildī ā…" (Kaur 2008: 151).

[57] "chote bhrā, pīḍā̃ 'c tāgī-tarśī 'c guzārā 'ć karde ġarīb hĩdūā̃ de katal kar ke dillī nahī̃ hildī… dillī hildī ā dillī de cahete vaḍḍe-vaḍḍe gogṛā̃ vāle jihaṛe sarkārī surkhiā̃ 'c phirde ā, uhnā̃ nū̃ māran nāl…."

the night. Sandip Kaur tries to peer from the rooftop next morning to see if she can get a glimpse of the tortured man but all she can see is the uniformed police. The word on the street is that Kashtiwal was killed in the encounter. Fearing the worse, Sandip Kaur listens anxiously to the radio and waits for the newspaper each morning, scrutinising it for the news (and photographs) of the killed militants, specifically her husband, but finds nothing (*ibid*.: 65–66). Ultimately, after a few days of an agonising wait, Kashtiwal returns.

In this period, Sandip Kaur lives mostly with her husband and participates in the militant activities, taking only a short break for the delivery. She writes that in the last months of her pregnancy they rented a place in Patiala, where her husband gave his name as Amarjit Singh and passed himself off as an employee of the Public Works Department (PWD) (*ibid*.: 89), both of them 'blending in' within the local population (cf. Gayer 2012a: 7). She mentions shopping trips with her landlady, visits to a lady doctor for regular check-ups and going to hospital for delivery. Of her labour pains, she writes, "Whenever pain would become unbearable, I would think, this pain cannot be more than the pain under police torture."[58] Their son is born on 10 May 1990 (Kaur 2008: 91) and after five days both mother and son are discharged. When he is two and half months old, the whole family shifts to Ludhiana where Kashtiwal now calls himself a 'cable contractor' but keeps the name of Amarjit Singh (*ibid*.: 94). Soon after, her mother-in-law takes her son, Kavi, with her to the village (*ibid*.: 95) and Sandip Kaur returns to the group and their usual operational 'area' (*ilākā*). Much later, when her son is already one year old and again with her, Sandip Kaur finds herself in a situation, when running away from the police, she has to leave her son with a village woman, for he is slowing her down (*ibid*.: 101). When she goes back a couple of days later to pick him up, she finds him crawling in the farmyard, trying to catch a duck and thinks how quickly he has

[58] "jadõ ih darad bardāśt tõ bāhar ho jẽdī tẽ maĩ soctī ki ih dard pulīs ṭārcar nalo tẽ ziādā nahĩ hovegī" (Kaur 2008: 91).

adapted to being without her, evidently revisiting her maternal role, when writing her autobiography (*ibid*.: 102).

When in the 'area,' militants live either in the sheds away from the village or in the sugarcane fields. When sugarcane is harvested and the fields are bare, they travel to the hills (*ibid*.: 131), and once even to Nepal (*ibid*.: 137–141). One of the female militants interviewed by Gayer tells him that she met her future husband "in the sugarcane fields" (Gayer 2012a: 6) and that is how she joined the militant movement. Sandip Kaur mentions a number of such weddings where she, being the only woman around, was often deputed to find out from the prospective bride if she was getting married out of her own free will. (*ibid*.: 109). Though 'underground,' Sandip Kaur visits her natal village occasionally, for example, for her brother's wedding. The description of the occasion is replete with details which provide depth to the narrative. For example, on the third day after the wedding the whole militant group, including Sandip Kaur and her husband, are dressing up for the photographs when they receive the news that the police have surrounded the village. They pick up their weapons (Sandip Kaur has a Mauser) and make ready to run but the police does not enter the village so they go on with taking the photos (*ibid*.: 83–84). However, there is a shadow that mars this memory. Apparently the photographs taken at weddings were often used in death ceremonies. Sharing this bit of information, Sandip Kaur, without emotion and in a matter of fact way, writes, "Many such photographs were put up in obituaries/fliers at the bhog ceremonies of the Singhs [euphemism for militants, MP].[59]

Almost at the end of the part devoted to militancy, there is a revealing account related to the killing of Mohan Lal Manchanda, the station director of the All India Radio in Patiala; the names of the individuals taking part in the conversation are openly given, possibly because they are either dead or no longer in India. Sandip Kaur recounts how after an intra-group meeting of the militant leadership in Bathinda

[59] "bahute sĩghã̃ de bhogã̃ de iśtihārã̃ 'te ĩhī phoṭã̃ hī laggdĩã̃ rahĩã̃ san" (Kaur 2008: 85). *Bhog* here denotes the last ceremony after death.

(in which she personally did not take part), she and her husband were being dropped at the bus station by two other militants, Amrik Singh Kauli and Wadhawa Singh alias Chacha.[60] Apparently, Wadhawa, addressing Kauli, remarked: "Say what you want, it was wrong of you to have killed Manchanda (…) at least you should have waited for today's meeting. At the meeting all of us would have decided what to do with him."[61] Though according to available records, Manchanda was kidnapped for refusing to obey militants' diktat to stop broadcasting programmes in the non-Punjabi vernaculars (basically Hindi), Sandip Kaur does not mention this. Neither does she say how he died. Actually, his was probably the most gruesome of the series of killings carried out by the militants: he was decapitated, his torso found later in Patiala and his head in Ambala. Yet Sandip Kaur does not bring up any of that and her sanitized account reads simply: "Manchanda was a certain high employee of the All India Radio, who [on the orders] of the [militant] high command was kidnapped for a purpose, but because of a possibility of a [police] raid, was killed by Kauli's group."[62] This short description of the interaction, including Wadhwa's exchange with Kauli, and the quoted summing up unwittingly provide a number of striking insights, like the confirmation of the fact that Sandip Kaur is indeed well informed about many high level matters related to militant activism, including personal admissions made in her presence; she never talks about gruesome acts if committed by her own group, though does name names if the same are done by others; she does not condone the killings but does not condemn them either, saying basically: we, however, didn't do such things. Manchanda, kidnapped on 18 May 1992, was

[60] Names of most militants can be found on the internet, though several links have been deactivated, possibly censored.

[61] "tũ jo marzī kahi, mancãde nũ mār ke tũ bahut galat kītai (…) tainũ ghaṭṭ tõ ghaṭṭ ajj dī mīṭĩg dī udhīkṇī cāhīdī sī …. Mīṭĩg 'c āpã sāre faislā karde paī uhadā kī karnaī…" (*ibid*.: 144).

[62] "mancãdā dūrdarśan dā koī biśeś karmacārī sī, jis nũ jathebãdī vallõ kise maksad laī agvā kītā giā sī, par śāid pulīs dī chāpāmārī kāran kaulī ne katal kar dittā sī" (*ibid*.: 144).

killed a couple of days later, on 27 May and Babbar Khalsa immediately claimed the responsibility. One of the perpetrators, Gurdial Singh Babbar, was pursued by the authorities and killed on the same day. Amrik Singh Kauli was killed a few days later, on 2 June, in a police encounter. In an interview, which appeared on 15 April 1993, K. P. S. Gill, the super-cop credited with wiping out the insurgency in Punjab, told Shekhar Gupta and Kanwar Sandhu, correspondents of *India Today*, that Kauli's killing was the turning point in the state's battle against the militancy (Gupta and Sandhu 2013). Sandip Kaur, though unconnected with this particular case, was arrested soon after, on 21 July 1992, probably as the result of redoubled police activity, which included the dreaded web of "militants-turned-informants" or "cats" she often mentions (Kaur 2008: 56, 129). The death of her husband in a police encounter in December of the same year is also attributed to such a betrayal (Haripriya 2018: 270), projecting a society deeply divided against itself and confirming that methods introduced by Gill—intimidation, bounty rewards for the wanted militants, extrajudicial killings—were indeed working.

There is no doubt that Sandip Kaur's autobiography is a unique document providing not only a witness narrative describing militancy in Punjab but also a women's view of a highly patriarchal militant structure, where, however, a woman could claim a place for herself and carve out a personal sphere with space for a normal family life including the birth and nurturing of a child. No other Sikh militant has produced such an extensive testimony of the personal and the communal as this.

Conclusion: Employing a larger canvas

To understand and analyse strategies employed by Sandip Kaur in fashioning her public persona and presenting her life as a part of the historical account of the times, one may want to view her autobiography in a larger perspective placing it alongside life writings authored by some other female fighters and militants such as Dolores Ibarruri (1895–1989), Leila Khalid (b. 1944), Zohra Drif (b. 1934) and closer

home: Joya Mitra (b. 1951), Thamizhini (d. 2015), Niromi de Soyza (b. 1970), Anjum Zamrud Habib (b. 1961), Hisila Yami (b. 1959) or Avuli Chishi Swu (b. 1955), to name just a few.[63] Judging from reactions during the presentation of an earlier version of this paper, there appears to be a certain anxiety at giving a Sikh, or for that matter, any Indian (though not necessarily other South Asian) militant, a pride of place in the gallery of the universally recognised freedom fighters such as Iburrari, of the Spanish Civil War fame, or Zohra Drif, who had fought for Algerian independence. I do not even attempt, at this point, to place the post-independence Indian militants like Sandip Kaur on the same plane as the Indian female freedom fighters, engaged in armed struggle against the British, such as Lakshmi Sahgal, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta or Preetilata Waddedar.[64] There might, however, be a case to be

[63] 1. Dolores Ibarruri, *They Shall Not Pass: Autobiography of La Passionara*; memoir, written in 1960 and published in 1962, narrates events of Spanish Civil War. 2. Leila Khalid, *My People Shall Live. The Autobiography of a Revolutionary*; self-narrative 'as told to' Lebanese academic George Hajjar. It covers the first 25 years or so of Khaled's life but offers insights into her motivation to become politically active, as well as the experiences of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon in the first fifteen years after the Nakba. 3. Zohra Drif, *Inside the Battle of Algiers. Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter*. First published in 2013 in French. Speaks of Algerian struggle for independence prior to 1962. 4. Joya Mitra, *Killing Days. Prison Memoirs*. Written in prison, published originally in Bengali (1990) and translated into English only in 2004, the book describes author's Naxalite involvement (1970–1974) and the following incarceration. 5. Thamizhini *In the Shadow of the Sword*, original Tamil published in 2016, its English translation in 2021. 6. Niromi de Soyza, *Tamil Tigress*, published originally in English in 2011. 7. Anjum Hamrud Habib, *Prisoner No. 100*, originally written in Urdu, the English translation published in 2011. 8. Hisila Yami, *Hisila. From Revolutionary to the First Lady*, published in 2017 by Viking India and re-published in 2021 by Penguin Books, narrates life of a Maoist revolutionary, who later became part of the new, post-monarchy government; 9. Avuli Chishti Swu has not authored an autobiography herself but narrated her life story to Rashmi Saksena (2018).

[64] Lakshmi Sahgal (1914–2012), a doctor and an officer in the all-women Rani Jhansi Regiment of Indian National Army, which fought against the British by allying themselves with the Japanese; authored an autobiography published in 1997. Bina Das (1911–1986), was a Bengali nationalist freedom fighter who in 1932 attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate the Bengal Governor, Stanley Jackson, and was arrested. She

made by viewing Sandip Kaur's writing through the lens provided by the narrative paradigm of testimonio (Elston: 2016). However, in case of *Bikhṛā Paĩdā*, where the author herself presents the written narrative (without having the authorial function performed by two people, a 'speaker' and a 'listener,' who ultimately writes down the story, cf. Menchú 1984), the aspects of testimonio that would apply would be the 'truth-value,' the 'I' of the author-as-narrator chronicling the communal while telling the personal, and the autobiographical impulse to tell one's story. Examining these aspects, one might need to question the very nature of a militant life, the nature of autobiography, and the possible relationship between them. For example, linking two terms such as militant and autobiography in the blurb or marketing write-up might easily lead to misreading through adoption of the most obvious frames. Adjective militant in front of the noun autobiography assumes a high level of transparency in the autobiographical telling of a militant life, while autobiography labeled as militant not only modifies but defines the narrated life by furnishing it with a predictable content. However, militancy does not necessarily provide a totalizing self-identification, at least not for the Sandip Kaur that emerges from the pages of her book, forcing the reader to view the text not merely as an apology for an armed insurgency and one's role in it, but a valid, alternate history lived through and told from a peripheral location by a subaltern subject. Though in the context of current Indian history writing, it is possible to revisit history-writing practices and present two or even more different narrative versions of the same event pertaining, for example, to the events of 1857 or the struggle for independence (Amin 1996), the same enterprise is clearly wrought with apprehension in case of similar events closer in time. Keeping in mind official exigencies of

published two autobiographical books in Bengali and an English translation of her memoir appeared in 2005. Kalpana Dutta (1913–1995), a Bengali freedom revolutionary who fought with a gun in hand (cf. Dutta: 1945). Preetilata Waddedar (1911–1932) was a Bengali revolutionary nationalist, who led an armed attack on a European club, in which one person was killed and 11 injured; she died by consuming cyanide to avoid arrest.

the nation building enterprise, "the nationalist master narrative (…) induces a selective national amnesia in relation to specified events which would fit awkwardly, even seriously inconvenience, the neatly woven pattern" (Amin 1996, Kindle location: 124–125), a pattern which possibly might change with time, but which at this juncture strives to achieve a centrally controlled homogeneity of historical narrative.

However, what is most striking about all texts authored by the militants is the time gap dividing the traumatic events from the actual moment of writing the autobiographies, most often only following a period of incarceration and the return to freedom (cf. Mitra 2004, Kaur 2008, Habib 2011, Thamizhini 2021). In his preface to Thamizhini's reminiscences, R. Cheran writes,

> I suggested to her [Thamizhini] that she should think about either writing about her life or (…) give a long interview about her experiences. *It was way too early*, she said. She preferred to write fiction and poetry. (Thamizhini 2021, Kindle Edition; italics mine)

Later, he adds an afterthought, "Life writing is a messy affair. There are moral and ethical dilemmas a writer must negotiate" (*ibid*.).

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001) Leigh Gilmore argues that trauma and self-representation require and expand the limits of autobiography, with the representations of trauma hinging on the representations of the self. Often, as in Sandip Kaur's case, "the compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others" (Gilmore 2001:12) coupled with the autobiographical act's allegiance to both history and memory result in the fusion of fiction and facts in the representation of the self as part of a community, a community which is also in the need of representation. The marginalised subject, speaking both as an individual and a representative of the community, sees in the autobiographical genre a project of resistance and a space for presenting the story of their tragedy and loss, 'the other side' version of the events—in the case of Sandip Kaur, a counter-narrative to "the official state memories of 1984 [which] are replete with omissions"

(Devgan 2013: 207). Devgan points to the presence of fissures in the usual dichotomous framings of the 1984 narrative and looks at "crevices in the dominant memories" (Devgan 2013) on both sides of the spectrum. Sandip Kaur's autobiography, though located within the larger archive of the counternarrative, being a simultaneous retelling of the personal and the communal, is also replete with such crevices, papered over by the unitary structure constructed through perceptive arrangement of the material, thoughtful appointments of titles (both for the whole and its parts), deployment of strategic silences and legitimation through carefully chosen paratexts. The very emotive peritextual packaging, designed for an emphatic vernacular reader, makes it a perfect example of a complex telling coming, to borrow Bharati Ray's phrase (Ray 1995), right from "the seams of history."

Ray's assertion that "[w]omen have long been pushed to the seams of history" (*ibid*.: 1) highlights the evident historiographical imbalance with women's experiences and agency blotted out in most history-writing ventures. To be a female militant is to be expunged from history twice over. Re-purposing Nedra Rodrigo words written in the context of Thamizhini's memoirs, one cannot but similarly view Sandip Kaur's autobiography not merely as a personal or communal metacommentary but also a historian's testimonial treasure-throve and an example of historical writing per se, writing which, "[i]n documenting the everyday lives of the rebels, and in speaking of the lives and motivations of women combatants (…) inserts these women into history" (Rodrigo 2021, Kindle location: 162) by giving them voice and space to assert it, though not necessarily yet a place in the history text-books.

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