

Book Review

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals: Political Lives of Memory*, Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2024, 248 Pages ISBN 978-81-967852-1-5, ₹ 1250 (hardcover)

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Over a century after the infamous massacre of Jallianwala Bagh (1919) at Amritsar in Punjab, the tragedy continues to incite strong emotions among Indians. In the aftermath of the First World War, Punjab had become a hotbed of anti-colonial protests partly because of the price-rise and food shortage. There were daily protests and violent clashes against the Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the arrest of senior Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi. In the immediate aftermath of the arrest of Congress leaders Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal, a peaceful sit-in was organised at a park surrounded by walls on three sides and single narrow entrance. The Brigadier General Michael O' Dyer ordered firing at the unarmed and peaceful protesters until the ammunition ran out. Several people jumped into the well to escape from the bullets. According to the British' official count, 379 people died although several other studies estimate it to be many times more. Historian Savita Narain puts the number of deaths to 1000 although uncertainty over the issue remains.

It is hence natural that even after a century, the history of Jallianwala Bagh ignites the pains and agony among Indians. In nationalist historiography and dominant narratives, the tragedy is often placed as a key turning point that galvanized the nation against the British rule. At the time of the centenary commemoration, and even afterwards, a host of works of art,

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literature and films have come up revolving around the tragedy, including two recent films *Kesari Chapter 2* (2025) and *Sardar Udham* (2021). While undeniably significant in its impact, this focus has overshadowed other crucial aspects and perspectives, including the stories of those left behind, the women and children of the deceased.

A recent book published from the Jadavpur University Press, *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals: Political Lives of Memory* (2024) by Kolkata based feminist researcher, writer, translator, and curator Sarmistha Dutta Gupta foregrounds the horrifying experiences of the women who are often forgotten in popular historical writings. *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals* is written with a ‘pedagogic approach’ based on narratives from experienced family history, unwritten local oral narratives, and personal experiences (10).

Dutta Gupta had put up an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial at Kolkata in 2020 on the theme ‘ways of remembering Jallianwala Bagh and Rabindranath Tagore’s response to the massacre’ with the intention of bringing to life the experiences of the women who are often forgotten or marginalised in mainstream historical writings. The book is the culmination of her research on the subject, written like a diary.

The traditional historical accounts of the tragedy usually focus on the predominant role of the men obscuring the contribution of women. While history mentions the contribution countless prominent women figures like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Phool Kaur, Pushpa Gujral and Bhag Devi who actively participated in the freedom struggle (49), what amuses the author is that there are no archival accounts of Punjabi women who were directly involved as protest leaders. Neither of them was shot dead nor became Shaheed (martyr). The role, lives, sufferings, and the form of resistance of the women can

only be traced in the writings of short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) and poet Krishan Chunder (1914-1977). Contributions of women, even in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, did not receive much recognition. Through Jallianwala Bagh Journals, the author actively seeks to amplify the role of women and marginalised voices so far overlooked while writing the history of the freedom struggle.

Their contributions speak volume about their strength despite bearing family losses. One such woman was Puran Devi who was just 19 years and was expecting her first child when her husband died in the massacre. As a single mother she struggled hard to raise her son only to lose him during the partition riots, co-incidentally when her daughter-in-law was expecting. She had to start all over again and now look after her widowed daughter-in-law and grandchild. Despite this, she dedicated herself to the social work in Hrishikesh, and worked for the empowerment of the women and helping them achieve financial independence.

Attar Kaur, who had guarded her husband's dead body at the Bagh, did receive some recognition though, and a road was named after her, and she was bestowed with the honorific of 'Jallianwala Bagh ki Jyoti' [The Light of Jallianwala] (53). Both these women had also refused the compensations from the British government as acts of their defiance against injustice, upholding grief and memory of the massacre.

Further many bereaved women like her donated their children's old clothes to the Jallianwala Bagh Memorial Fund. The women whose husbands were deported to Andaman had donated their gold bangles to these funds displaying immense personal strength in the aftermath of the Jallianwala massacre (45).

Besides contributions of women, Dutta Gupta also highlights how the protest was also an expression of plural values that India has always stood for. She uses the photograph of a list of names of those martyred in the massacre to point out how protesters included members of all communities, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Dutta Gupta notes, 'Jallianwala Bagh is a symbol of unity among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs against an oppressive regime' (177).

The opening pages of the book contains the interview with the noted historian Professor Vishwa Nath Dutta in Amritsar. The 93-year-old historian shared his horrifying experience of the aftermath of the massacre. The author also came to know about the much lesser known 'Hussaini Brahmin' community, which had fought in the Battle of Karbala and later they settled in the Punjab-Sindh area' during the course of her research (23).

Unlike other books dealing with the history of Jallianwala Bagh (or otherwise), this book is not divided into neat chapters. It is a journal (as the title affirms) with day-to-day entries of the events. The author tries to interweave a connection between each date of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre with the contemporary protests across the country.

Although, India is a democratic and secular country now, but still, we witness such atrocities by the state agencies. This is an interesting aspect of the Journal where the author connects contemporary political churnings with the times of the Jallianwala Bagh. She posits that the farmers' protest (2019), the scrapping of the Article 370 (2019), the 2019-2020 protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) in New Delhi and Kolkata are very much similar to the atrocious Rowlatt Act or the 'Kaala Kanoon' (black laws). She also strikes a similarity between the Punjab which was cut down from rest of the country after Jallianwala Bagh incident and the way Kashmir was locked down after the abrogation of the Article 370. The migrant

workers with their bag-packs were forced to crawl in Badaun, (Uttar Pradesh) during the Covid 2020. This incident bears resemblance with the martial law implemented in Knoriyawala Gali (near Jallianwala Bagh) where Indians were forced to crawl on their bellies (92).

The tyrannical rule of the British had cut off electricity and water supply in Punjab. Similarly, after protests began against the three 'anti farmer bills' passed by the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party, the government took steps to cut water and electricity supply in the protest camps (31-32).

The book is not without limitations though. Dutta Gupta is not a trained historian, and consequently this is not a typical book of history, and does not engage much with the historical sources. To be fair to the author, the book does not make any such claims either. The work is based on oral history and local accounts of women who suffered through and in the aftermath of the massacre, and makes substantial contributions in challenging the established doxa on memory and narrative buildings.

Her style of writing has attracted the reviewer's attention towards the pains and sufferings resonating with those experienced by an individual, the family or the community just as they were during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.