

Review

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Sangtin writers and Nagar, R. 2006. *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

The stories in this book will agitate your heart and energise your intellect, and stimulate and open up your imagination to the possibilities of women's agency and endurance. The book was first published in Hindi as *Sangtin Yatra* (a journey of solidarity, reciprocity and of enduring friendship). The English version *Playing with Fire* appeared as a response in defence of the first book. *Sangtin Yatra* gives us hope that women can move from individual empowerment to form a collective countervailing power bloc. In the Foreword, Chandra Talpade Mohanty captures the theme and spirit of the book. She acknowledges the book as a gift 'which enacts and theorises experience, storytelling and memory work as central in the production of knowledge and resistance'.

Playing with Fire was conceived and researched by nine women¹ but portrays the lives of seven village-level activists from diverse castes and religions. The seven activists are: Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Shashi Vaish, Shashibala, Surbala and Vibha Bajpayee. These women have worked in seventy villages in the Sitapur District in rural India. The women work for the Nari Samata Yojana – a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which seeks to empower rural women of the Dalit castes (lowest castes). Eight of the women started an independent organisation, Sangtin, that befriends poor rural women.

What the book offers

This is one of the few intimate books in the development and gender field that presents the stories and perspectives of village-level fieldworkers. Very often fieldworkers do not get to tell their own stories as the seven women reflect, 'so often we have asked other women to share their personal stories

but no one has ever asked us to tell our own' (2006: 15). It is in these personal and collective journeys that we are given intricate and in-depth pictures of the power structures in the Indian family, which 'are often difficult to observe and record', and as another fieldworker writes, 'many fieldworkers are unable to effect change in their own homes and quietly endure family violence – but outside the home in a collective and in the community they are towers of strength' (Krishanmurty, 1999: 118). These are the stories that often feminist researchers or even activists hesitate to intervene in, the stories of individual oppression in the family. The reflective stories tell how women negotiate these multiple oppressions and strategically challenge them. The collective stories become a 'chorus' as they inform us how their personal consciousness developed and changed. The vivid and compelling stories tell us how personal issues get intertwined with the political and social and rescue that long forgotten feminist slogan that the 'personal is political'.

Their autobiographical journey done through collective writing and reflection is underpinned by the women's dreams, starting from children through to youth to marriage, to becoming mothers and then facing the world of work. Throughout their journey, they question and challenge power and their life stories show how working and learning result in changing people's lives and that learning can be subversive. The book also gives us insights into how NGOs operate in rural India and questions assumptions about poor women's oppression. The women argue that NGOs should work with all women as women from all castes and classes suffer different forms of oppressions and also have prejudices that require critical questioning.

Content

The stories offer us analyses into how the different layers of the social unit oppress women; first at the unit of family life; then at the community level and then the wider social and global level. Their reflections illustrate how people imbibe the dominant ideologies that imprison women and illustrate how the different oppressions are interconnected and that it is difficult to tackle one oppression at a time. The women write that each social unit is filled 'with poisons of casteism, classism, communism, and sexism' and 'how these blend into one another [...] that their bitterness remains intact on our tongues even after all these years' (2006: 16).

Their journey takes the reader through the sufferings that many Indian women endure. It is called 'dukh' in the Indian language and is often

considered as the 'tragedy of womanhood' in India (Krishnamurty, 1999: 115). Some of the biggest tragedies or burdens are often associated with respectability of families, clans and communities which include demands for dowry, purdah, forced marriages and humiliations such as those encountered by women without husbands. These burdens are carried by women since childhood and are seldom escaped. I quote some of these heart-wrenching reflections: 'we are so intertwined in the grief of not realising our dreams that we fail to identify the flashes of happiness'. These were locked, but the collective writing of the journal has opened up issues and allowed for more analytical discussions to fight battles against oppressions and find the desired notes to 'sing and scream' (2006: 67).

Methodology

The reflective method of journal writing is transformative as women write their biographies in a dynamic way to 'convey the idea that human beings are active agents in making meaning of their lives rather than being singly determined by historical and social factors' (Merrill and West, 2009: 4). The book tells us and opens the spaces that feminist research has for such a long time wanted to record – the way people give meaning and create their world in the family, community and in the wider world. The collective methodology of writing, reflecting, of producing knowledge using its starting point as women's lives, the accountable and reciprocal nature of the writing and disseminating the research is set out in the introduction and in the first chapter. In addition, in these chapters and in a postscript, the writers detail the challenges presented when their parent NGO tried to silence them and claim ownership of their voices. In these chapters, we are given some insights into how NGO's reinforce class, caste and power hierarchies. It is laudable that this project carried through all the necessary steps of transformative feminist research as so often we are tempted to skip a few steps on the way either for logistical or egotistical reasons.

The strength of the book is in the collective methodology of writing and reflecting, and the wonderful prose makes your heart really want to sing or cry depending on the passage. The book is very compelling and the reader is under the spell of the journey of emancipation and every instance of recollection, of the release from the burden of their socialisation, from class and casteism, is not so much felt as a release of a structure or even a category, but something that happens in human relationships. The biographies show us how

actively they “learn” their world and their place in it as well as how they have challenged centuries old rules.

Conclusion

In the spirit of *Sangtin Yatra* (of enduring friendship), I believe that all development workers, adult educators, gender activists and field workers would welcome and salute this book from rural India. In South Africa, we have similar stories and as women in rural South Africa say, ‘you have lit the fire now bring the fuel’. We need to hear more voices of women in development contexts to keep the fire burning and to build on the collective spirit of the *Sangtin* writers. The book is testimony to the critical and powerful role that reflection on our life journeys can play in overcoming poverty, the reflections will ring true for many women who tirelessly and courageously try and follow their dreams.

Endnotes

1. The nine women include the seven village-level women activists, Richa Nagar who was the only English speaker and did the actual writing, and Richa Singh who was the co-ordinator of the Nari Somata Yojana Project (NSY) and one of the founders of the Sangtin organisation.