Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and Trajectories - Book Review

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"Women’s Organizing in Sri Lanka and the Place of the Movement History"

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In the project to write a history of a country’s women’s movement, Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran’s book, Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and Trajectories (2012) begins by asking whether or not the collective identity of ‘women’s movement’ has narrative viability. As the book states in its introduction, there are those who write about the idea of a women’s movement, with the contention that there is no movement—"the proponents of the non-movement theory"—and those who write about the idea of a movement with "the movement theory" (xii). In citing these "contending schools of thought" that exist before its publication, Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka suggests how a ‘history’ of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka could have narrative viability. As the book suggests, for ‘non-movement’ and ‘movement’ theorists alike, it is still possible to make the history of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka the subject of their writing because, whether or not they agree that it exists on the ground, they recognize that there are narrative prospects about the writing of its ‘history’, even if not everyone believes that it can be written about as a history.

The ‘women’s movement in Sri Lanka’ has life as an important discursive proposition. For many years, this proposition has had its place as the reference point for narratively organizing ideas and beliefs (introducing, excluding, including, delimiting, entertaining and so on) about women’s organizing in Sri Lanka. It is both produced by and productive of discourses about what a movement should look like; what women’s organizing in Sri Lanka amounts to; and what a Sri Lankan women’s movement should ideally be. Women’s Writing in Sri Lanka is no exception in making this proposition the occasion for its history. As its introduction says it seeks to "identify trends of a social movement from a theoretical point of view and to see how it fits into the Sri Lankan women’s movement and whether it could in fact be called a women’s movement" (xii).

When I say that the project of writing the history of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka is to invoke a well-worn discursive proposition, I do not mean that a movement does not really exist on the ground; I don’t mean that it only exists at the level of discourse; I don’t mean that a history of it is implausible; and I don’t mean that feminists only dream the idea of it up as a tactical move. What I mean is that, whether acknowledged or not in the writing, this proposition has an existence in discourse (as a trope) that functions in this way as the spur to history writing: the articulated uncertainty of its premise (the very idea seeming to be besieged) and the many possibilities of defending it and debating it one way or the other being the very grounds on which yet another women’s movement ‘history’ gets some purchase. Of course, the proposition of a history of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka does intersect with the ‘real world’ movement; the point is that it is not limited to it and in fact is made to be productive of many important symbolic aspects that are not tangible, like the articulation of the romance, the promise and the difficulty of entertaining its possibility.

A book like Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka seeks to attach its reader to its history writing precisely in this way: by citing the enduring power and relevance of this apparently threatened discursive proposition, as well as its romance, promise, and difficulties. If we accept that the signs ‘movement’ and ‘history’ will not be deployed literally or discretely, that they draw meaning and narrative force from the discursive proposition of ‘women’s movement in Sri Lanka’, then we need not think that the ‘history’ narrated in Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and
Trajectories, necessarily leads us to expect history as genre in any literal sense. In fact, that expectation might be confounded by this book. The selection and organization of material in any ‘history’ are determined subjectively. However in this case, those aspects are more idiosyncratic than subjective and perhaps a little too idiosyncratic for a first time reader to get a coherent sense of a movement in the making. Furthermore, the framing of the historical account (coloured by the author’s perception) is also perhaps more impressionistic than is useful. All of this should be noted from the perspective that a ‘history’ is anyway an abstract and overlarge category for how a book actually presents as a set of narratives.

It is more productive to consider how the history writing in Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka is organized with reference to the discursive proposition of its title. A notable way in which the book does this is by privileging the movement theoretician’s version of history, which is of an evolving women’s movement, over a non-movement theoretician’s version of history, which is of scattered “donor-driven” NGOized women’s groups. For instance, the following commentary can be found in Chapter 2 (“From Ideas to Institutions”): “the situation on the ground is a far cry from the armchair criticisms of some feminists who do not show a sense of solidarity with the feminist cause and do not consider the work already done in the sphere of securing women’s rights” (p. 69). It is preceded in the Introduction by the following section: "the arguments and theories used by non-movement theoreticians can be invalidated when the historical reconstruction of women’s involvement is traced" (xiii). The account of the "NGOisation of the women’s movement" is on record but loses ground as ‘history’ because it emerges in connection with ‘the women’s movement’ proposition. As mentioned before, it is also an example of how the book sets up its narratives as history, which is in and amongst suggesting the romance, difficulty, and ultimate promise of discursively sustaining the movement idea. At the same time, it sets up a qualitative difference between types of feminist historiography, also extensively quoting from ‘movement’ theorists like Kumari Jayawardena.

A further very important way in which the movement idea is discursively productive of the ‘history’ can be found in the decision to include personal portraits of key women figures who, if not all identifiable as activists (especially those from the early period), are described as "emancipated women". This book is alive with many such colourful portraits, from Gajaman Nona in the 18th century to 19th century figures like Alice Aserappa, Alice de Boer, and 20th century women such as Mary Rutnam. This interest in offering the personal life for consideration in a women’s movement history, if not new, is still very welcome, also because it is done with a deliberate political consciousness. In a subsection titled "From ideas to institutions and their socio-political significance", the following commentary can be found: "The next period reveals an over determination of institutions, and organizations, to push the personalities of women into the background" (p. 65). Clearly, the concern in this book not to lose the intimate identities of women activists to a forest of faceless institutions arises from the knowledge that the "personalities of women" do constitute a different sort of historical material on the subject for which it is important to find a place.

While the book emphasizes the correlations between these individual women and their efforts at organizing for women’s concerns, readers may not find any sense of satisfying connectedness amongst the different portraits. This is because the book unapologetically maintains the discreteness of the portraits where, contextually, it was appropriate to highlight individuals as playing a role in raising women’s issues. The following commentary can be found in a section subtitled "Dialogues from the Metropolis": "In dealing with the history of the women’s movement one may notice that from its inception individual women have been noted—i.e. persons who were intricately and unavoidably involved in its history." (p. 84). This is to the book’s credit because, as social movement theorists have argued, the individual woman is often not enough the object of theorizing women’s activism. As Martin, Hanson and Fontaine (2007) suggest, it is important to entertain "notions of women’s activism focusing on the crucial role played by individuals embedded in communities in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change" (p. 78).

Of course, the book’s interest in the individual woman’s activism is also an interest in a pre-lapsarian narrative of early movement building. A prime example is the portrait of Mary Rutnam. Consider the following excerpts:
Making women organise separately with a collective consciousness was her pioneering effort. (p. 16)

Many of the contemporary issues of the women’s movement were inspired by Mary Rutnam’s ideas and concerns. (p. 16)

She was both an ideologue and an activist in the franchise movement in Sri Lanka. The Ceylon Women’s Union, the Tamil Women’s Union and the many Lankan Mahila Samiti that came into existence then, for the first time in our history, took the form of a women’s movement with networking and exchange of ideas. Women for the first time developed a movement consciousness amongst themselves, mobilising and organising themselves for themselves. (p. 17)

These are just a few examples of what is a temporal narrative—an impression that it is possible to tell a story from another time of unalloyed pleasure and purpose about the institutions and organizations of early women’s organizing, unlike the present moment of cynicism about professionalization, NGOization, donor-driven agendas, and so on.

One of the book’s chief contributions is its methodology, which consists of “interpretive analyses of the women’s movement through field research and interviews” (p. 82). The organizations and individuals interviewed make for an impressive scope, from Colombo, Kurunegala, Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Moneragala, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Galle, Matara, Hambantota. In all, the book’s material is made up of interviews with 162 organizations and individuals focusing on different issues and at different stages in their activism. Of course the range of research participants could be expected to include individual researchers as well as dedicated women’s groups or organizations that have built a focus on gender into their work, as it does. However, it is distinctive about this book that it pegs the participation that is not so easily categorized as a group or an individual or a specific focus. For instance, it picks up the case of university academics whose participation consists of a certain kind of engagement with women’s groups—a "collaboration"; that their roles are often an extension or an exploration of their existing professional capacities, and that their contribution is the less tangible area of expertise. The following commentary makes this clear: "[University academics] have been on the boards of these [women’s] organizations and have been peer reviewers for the journals, and have undertaken to lecture on the Certificate Course in Women’s Studies conducted by WERC and participate in its Gender Sensitisation training workshops” (p. 84).

The point to emphasise here is that the methodology is not just a means but actively constructs the book’s attachments to the movement idea. Because the methodology is intuitive in its grasp of different types and levels of participation, roles, work, engagements, contribution etc. (as in the example with university academics), it puts together a persuasive impression of a women’s movement that can be seen to be in process if the reader is equipped with the right tools and analysis. Consider the following statement: Besides the women’s groups in the region, there were the women trade unionists, the women’s movement of the national liberation armed struggle groups, and other political struggles that women undertook, in order to challenge state repression like the Mothers Fronts in the North and South, with very specifically focused temporary issues. The cumulative effect of these provides a very rich informative history of the fragmented nature of the women’s movement. (p. 83).

Rather than fragmentation, the impression here is of a collection of both coordinated and uncoordinated human energies, evolving dynamically, in uneven and unexpected, but always surprisingly productive, ways.

In what way the book actually seriously entertains the idea of the “fragmented nature of the women’s movement” is a question that has to be asked. Without discounting the validity of this perception for the organizing on the ground, my argument is that it is, once again, a response to the discursive proposition ‘the women’s movement in Sri Lanka’,...
specifically how this proposition is seen as discursively enacted: i.e. threatened, fragmented, in need of being written into some form of consolidation through yet another movement history. I make this claim in view of the book’s methodology. Oral history data is often deployed in social movement research with the rationale that movement histories are typically disjointed and activists’ oral histories are useful to preserve movement histories. For instance, in using oral history interviews with ACT-UP activists to research AIDS activism, Cvetkovich (2003) argues that "[A]ctivist history [has] ephemeral, unorthodox, and frequently suppressed archives, and... oral history can be a crucial tool for the preservation of history through memory. It can help create the public culture that turns what seems like idiosyncratic feeling into historical experience" (p. 166). Interestingly, the interview data in Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka is often quite discreetly folded into the narrative and does not call attention to itself with too many extended quotations. Nevertheless, the interview data functions as a resource of the movement. The status of this book as a resource book is evidenced in the campaign documents and photos appended, as well as its extended organizational profiles of CENWOR, MWRAF, Kantha Shakthi, Women and Media Collective, Women in Need, WERC, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, Women’s Support Group, and others. Most of the profiles contain detailed descriptions of the structure of organizations—their founding stories, objectives, details of work plans, methods of working, and so on.

Thus, the interview data functions as a resource of the movement (what has been documented of its history because of the view that a movement exists in fragmented form), and methodologically this archival operation turns this book into a resource book for the women’s movement in Sri Lanka (what can be referred to for information, analysis, etc., buttressing the movement concept). Thus, we see again the dynamics of peril and consolidation underlying the movement concept—its discursive dynamics—that then are the occasion for this history writing, that make this sort of documenting, compiling and archiving seem necessary and self-evident. The history writing is thus the mediating manoeuvre, emerging because of and in answer to the discursive proposition of a movement.

A book is more than the sum of its parts, and Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka is obviously a much more expansive text than this review has been able to capture. There is also the risk of overextending or overstating a claim to the point where it ceases to have traction with the text. Nevertheless, based on my reading of this book, I would like to raise the implications, for further efforts in recording the history of women’s organizing in Sri Lanka, of the very notion of ‘movement history’ writing. As I have tried to demonstrate in my review, the proposition ‘women’s movement in Sri Lanka’ is imagined as ineluctable, and it is imagined as a proposition which is discursively defined by the dynamics of affirmation and contestation. Discursively, this is how it is conceived—an arena of debate amongst movement theoreticians and non-movement theoreticians that then should show us how the whole question of a movement is fraught, imperiled, in need of a further historical narrative to elucidate, defend, advocate, persuade, and show evidence. It would be overstating the point to say that the history writing is in the service of this proposition, but it may be justified to say that it is certainly indexical of it and motivated by being indexical of it.

We need movement histories, but what are their implications for women’s organizing? First, as is perhaps evident from this review, this sort of history writing may turn into an exercise of shadow boxing—unaware that it discursively constructs the limits of what it addresses, that it writes to and within those limits, and thus end up writing in response to its own fictions. Relatedly, it may lose touch with the ground realities of women’s organizing that should inspire it, although, of course, our perceptions of ground realities are never direct and unmediated. Second, it could set up hierarchies in the very practice of theorizing social movements. Boundary marking and gatekeeping between those who acknowledge and write from a movement perspective, and those who do not, could be unproductive, a distraction, and politically problematic. Third, it should not stifle other analytics. In narrating the history of women’s organizing in Sri Lanka, writers should be able to rely on some epistemological latitude. This means having the sense of being able to look around for the frameworks that inspire without the impression that one or the other is what is inescapable—that which has to be addressed in order to begin writing, that which is discursively primary and embedded in the very project of recording a history of women’s organizing. And fourth, the polarities by which the proposition ‘the women’s movement in Sri Lanka’ is discursively imagined may not be the grounds to produce as rich a history as could surface. The movement history recorded in Women’s Movement in Sri Lanka makes it an important
document in the tradition of this writing for more than one reason, as I have stated above. Sometimes deliberately, and sometimes in spite of itself, this book offers insights into what recommends it as a movement history as well as what would give pause to someone looking to read about women's organizing in Sri Lanka.

References

