

Living history. Writing life

Romila Thapar in conversation with Naveen Kishore about writing a memoir

Naveen: For those of us who are responsive and responsible beings, a certain reluctance to write about ourselves, our journeys, our political actions, our desire to do the "right thing", does create a checkpoint of sorts. A barrier. If this reticence comes with a desire to protect one's secret introspective cave, space, retreat, then it becomes a constant and often self-adversarial battle between what to share and what to omit. And yet as a historian of stature, an intellect that often jumps into the fray, lends a hand and shoulder, and your name, to political causes, issues that most people turn a blind eye to, this is almost a contradiction. The public figure as a seeker of privacy? But those of us who pick up your "life" as a book, crave insights. Not the instant gratification served up by algorithms. No, we seek life lessons. Again, not necessarily because we wish to act upon them, or adopt them, but out of the desire to turn our own introspection into a participatory activity in these dark times.

Romila: It is a memoir in a way but it's also capturing an age, which I think is very important, something we tend not to do too much of. Memoirs are not just a catalogue of routine existence, they're terribly important. Even the mundane and the ordinary have a place when you're trying to reconstruct an age, an age of thinking and acting and asking—What was it like? Why was it like that? Why did people behave like that? Why did people think like that?

Naveen: But not just an age, also a life, remembered in a certain way. The ordinary, or what I often call "my daily" writing, is actually the memoir I write. Each day is both response and remembrance.

Romila: And in a sense, if you're writing it as a memoir, you're wanting to tell it there's something within you that urges you to tell the world about this. But when you do actually sit down and write it, you may say, "Oh no, who would be interested in this except me?" and so you cut it down constantly. Ultimately, of course, the exciting thing about writing something like a memoir is that it's a nonstop conversation with yourself.

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Naveen: Speaking to oneself at one level appears to be a given. For me the writing is a way I speak to myself. I think it can be a space for extreme and sincere free speech. Language unchained. The present times are witnessing the weaponisation of language. Leading to the enforced taking away of the right to language.

Romila: Some of us do a lot of conversing with ourselves. I have been talking to my journals for the last couple of decades, which is why I don't know how to secure their safekeeping. I could, of course, destroy them.

Naveen: You can destroy them. And you don't need to give any reasons. You do not owe anyone an explanation. On the other hand, what if we were to interpret or redefine the word "destroy" and come up with something close to a "letting go". And let the journals find a different set of "trunks" to reside in. As in a library perhaps?

Romila: Conversation must have a response, yes. So one writes to people. But is it for approval or reaction or for just going further in one's thoughts with the prodding of others? You mention that you write to people you respect, admire and trust. How does one recognise the person one can trust? Is it by instinct? How reliable is instinct? And trust for what? The problem is with sharing because all sharing is in part being vulnerable or revealing some degree of vulnerability, and that makes one hesitant.

Naveen: Trust is instinctive. One that is actually quite the natural impulse for most of us. Almost as if "trust" comes with a built-in possibility of fragility. All sharing is vulnerable. I have always trusted people in a way where the onus of nurturing that trust is on them as much as the vulnerability of "gifting" is mine.

Romila: Gifting is an act of sharing but it is more than that when the gift is not inconsequential. It can be a parting with something that has been a segment of oneself, an emotional, sentimental or formative part of one's life. I am more interested in the next phase of gift-giving, the creation of a link between giver and receiver that arises out of such a gifting. Sometimes the link is far greater in what it creates than the gift itself. The link outlives the gift.

Romila: A discipline like mine is very linear

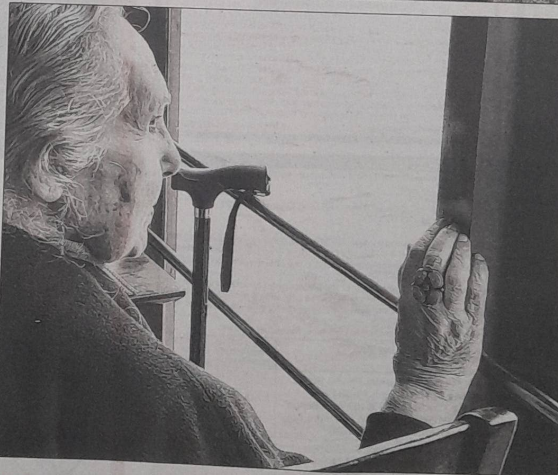
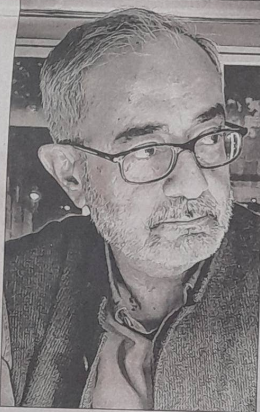
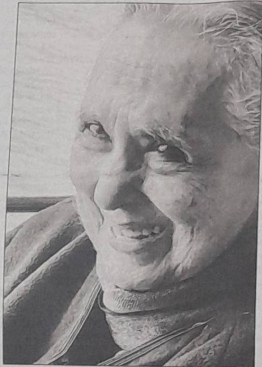
and chronological. It's too bad that I have a bad head for dates, but any good historian has to know the dates first of all. I've often wondered to what extent does that linearity and obsession with chronology condition the way in which we look at an event. Chronology and linearity were until lately the skeleton of history, hence their controlling the structure of historical writing. Similarly, autobiography does not limit itself to a chronological framework. Other aspects of a person's life, not just chronology, can intervene.

Naveen: More like a sort of commenting as you go along...

Romila: Commenting, yes. How an event shapes and develops is very difficult to knit together in a kind of gentle, quiet, unobtrusive way, without making it very clear that this happened and then the later thing was very different for these reasons. It has to be clarified that the narrative alone does not shape and develop what is being described; other features of explanation may also provide an understanding.

Naveen: So the sheer act of chronicling, chronicling the times, your life, the world around us, this whole burden of, if you like, humankind, in a certain kind of way, how does that make its way in because you're affected by it. And, you know, you're writing your life but you're also affected by the lives of others unfolding in these dark times.

Romila: Recording what is happening, whether to oneself or to others, has to be pleasurable, fun or illuminating. But on the other hand, when



you work your way out of that burden, or when you work your way out of what is the obsessive thought, there is a tremendous feeling of liberation. And I think that that kind of liberation in a sense makes up for the depression one might feel about the world around one.

Naveen: In other words, you're part of a particular time. It also somehow creates an ability to resist both the times and what they throw at you. I don't know how you feel about these attempts to reinvent oneself constantly, to ease off the despair, because there's a lot of despair.

Romila: There's a lot of despair. And this is where the non-official writings become very important because the official records are not going to record despair. They're just going to record the narrative of what happened, of events. And it is the unofficial writing, like memoirs and poetry and fiction and so on, which will give you an idea of the nature of that despair.

Naveen: The State as a chronicler is failing us because they're not going to objectively record anything but their own histories in the way they wish to, which is distinct from their doctoring of history as we notice, right? We have the possibility of "multiple" histories; the version that the State re-writes; the newspaper archives.

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under threat because they hold a mirror to the State's version of historical events; and then there is the art and the photography which also document the time in so many different ways.

Romila: What we don't realise sufficiently is that in trying to rewrite history as our State is, it is facing immense problems, because a lot of that history has to be moulded and formulated to adhere to an ideology. Moulding and formulating freely can be artistic and creative, but to make it conform to an ideology makes it much more submissive. The formulation has to be very controlled. Those of us who are opposed to this kind of historical writing are opposed to it on grounds that it is inaccurate. Any pattern that is imposed either of activity or thought, has to be tested for accuracy. For the official State formulation, they have to force one to take it. Give me one good reason why I should accept the history that is being formulated in the government textbooks of today.

Naveen: We had once published a conversation between Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler called *Who Sings the Nation-State?* The main premise of the book was that the sheer act of setting up a nation or a nationalism is carried out by excluding a whole bunch of people. Nationalism exists at the cost of a whole set of communities being excluded because of their minority status.

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Romila: But this raises the other very fundamental question—What is the meaning of nationalism? Can you qualify nationalism? Is it an all-inclusive term or can you say that there's religious nationalism, linguistic nationalism, racial nationalism, ethnic nationalism? Are these nationalisms or are these, in a sense, the politics of identity, which is different from nationalism? We are recognising that the same themes are being studied and read by audiences elsewhere. For example, I write *Voices of Dissent*, on the history of dissent in India, from early India, Buddhist, Hindu times to the Sufi, Bhakti period, all the way to Gandhi. And I would have thought, well, it will have an Indian audience and that's it. But people outside are interested because it is a manifestation of something there's a much greater awareness of concepts that are determining the writing of books, which may be based in one culture but are being read by others. There's a kind of engaging with a universality of concepts, which I think is conditioning a lot of our thinking today, which didn't exist a hundred years ago. So I think there needs to be perhaps a greater reaching out by publishers to say that a book is not just limited to the interests of a particular society. It has relevance for a much larger number of people.

Seagull Books recently published Romila Thapar's *Just Being: A Memoir*. The photographs of the historian have been taken by publisher Naveen Kishore