

Searching for Roots

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In line with the tradition of freedom-fighters writing about their political exploits and prison-life experiences, several political activists in the post-colonial era, particularly those associated with the Naxalite Movement, have published memoirs and accounts of their sufferings in jail or in police custody. The book under review is not only a significant addition to this genre but it provides a different kind of narrative where memory subsumes under history and vice versa.

In the first chapter, Bharatjyoti Roychoudhury who joined the Naxalite politics of the 1970s, dwells on his activities centring round Birbhum and some parts of Bardhaman (Burdwan) districts of West Bengal. He was arrested in 1973 and sent to Suri jail—the same prisonhouse in which his father Prodyot Roychoudhury, a freedom-fighter, had once been put behind bars in connection with the Birbhum Conspiracy case (1934). This dramatic coincidence lends a new dimension to the narrative and decides the course it will take to in the following chapters. In retrospect, the author also takes a critical look at the politics he had engaged in.

Roychoudhury describes in detail his political activities, the humiliation he was subjected to by the police and the ruthless physical torture inflicted on him in the name of "interrogation". He does not mince his words to mention the names of the police officers who tortured him. His language is emotionally charged, marked by a literary style but devoid of phony self-pride or sentimentality. He uses no invective against those police officers; like a keen observer, he rather describes their physical features and facial countenances. His elaborate narration of his meeting with Ayan Rashid Khan, then SP of Birbhum (pp 27-42), leaves no doubt that Khan stood apart from other members of his ilk. Roychoudhury however does not forget to mention that one of those officers, who beat him up, now passes for an intellectual and he has written a book on the left extremist movement in West Bengal (pp 16-17).

For obvious reasons, Bharatjyoti frequently refers to his father who was also once involved in what the British termed 'terrorist' politics. His narrative contains a touching episode of father-son meet in court (p.35). Father brought some sweets for his son but was prevented by the police from approaching Bharatjyoti. An enraged father addressed the judge straight away and reminded him that even the British police were not so heartless. His reaction moved the judge who instructed the police to allow the father to feed his son. Roychoudhury's parental background has not only left a deep imprint on his narrative but has given it a distinct shape. Postponing his prison life account for the forthcoming second part, Bharatjyoti veers round to a 'search for roots' and in the subsequent chapters traces the history of political movements in Birbhum district. He began writing about his personal experience but now takes on the role of a researcher and seeks to situate Birbhum in the larger context of Indian freedom struggle.

Roychoudhury's effort is commendable. He has meticulously documented the history of political stirrings in Birbhum, especially the growth of revolutionary terrorism under the leadership of Jagadish Ghosh (pp 49-50).

But he fails to marshal facts in proper order and the focus on Birbhum gets lost in the morass of events (many of which are irrelevant to his project) that he chronicles like a textbook-writer. This part of the narrative belies the expectation that the opening chapter roused. In addition to numerous printing and spelling errors some factual inaccuracies also need to be pointed out. As for example, *Jugantar*, initially was not the name of a group but of a weekly journal. While M N Roy did not have any direct link with the workers' and peasants' party, Bhupendranath Datta never joined the Congress (pp 45-46, 76). S N Sanyal's group (HRA) was founded not in 1926 but in late 1924 (p 45). There was no institution called *Sriniketan* in 1910; it came into being in 1922 (p 63).

However, so far as Birbhum is concerned the book deserves to be treated as a valuable document. Culling information from both printed and oral sources, Roychoudhury, with great care, has documented the series of stirring events that rocked a district in the course of the anti-colonial struggle across the country. The reference to the institution *Amar Kutir* and the political leanings of some individuals attached to Rabindranath's *Sriniketan* (pp 62-66) calls for special attention. □□□

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Satchallish-Sottor : Age Pare (Political Movements in Birbhum, 1947-70 : Before and After) by Bharatjyoti Roychoudhury. Muktomon, 2008. Rs 125.