

## Searching for Women's Diaries in India

What is a diary? French theorist Philippe Lejeune defines it as a *series of dated traces*. The diary is also: a form of self-care, an articulation of feminine consciousness, an assertion of power and ownership over one's life. It is not simply text, but practice. Anaïs Nin compared sitting down to write her diary each evening with the ritual of preparing opium for smoking. The diary is evidence of a life, and has its origins in spiritual journals and financial account books. How people relate to their diaries has been different across cultures and time periods.

A while ago, I set out to write an essay on the significance of the diary in India. I had been reading the diaries of Anaïs Nin, and Marina Tsvetaeva's Moscow diaries, but hadn't encountered any diaries by South Asian women. A preliminary search online did not yield any useful results, so I sent a few emails to friends and professors, asking for recommendations.

That was over six months ago. Since then, I've asked professors and researchers from Bombay, Delhi, Rawalpindi, Austin, Sheffield, and Adelaide. I've been through the finding aids at the library, emailed translators, journalists and one horary astrologer (who said my question was too specific location-wise). I learnt advanced google skills from a friend who used to be a private detective. Use google translate and search "women's diaries" in different Indian languages, he told me.

As writers, we are taught to avoid using the same word repeatedly in adjacent sentences. I have moved past this advice because what I am looking for can only be described as a diary. It is not: autobiography, memoir, notes, reminiscences, autobiographical account, atmakatha, or creative non-fiction.

I looked through the catalog of Zubaan, a feminist publishing house in India, and came across an autobiographical book by Anjum Zamarud Habib titled *Prisoner No. 100: An account of my nights and days in an Indian prison*. Habib is a political activist, who was arrested in 2003. Her **writings were** used as evidence to bring false charges against her. The introduction to her book makes clear that it is neither a diary nor a memoir.

It's not that there isn't a diary tradition in India. Mahatma Gandhi was a diarist, and some of the wives of East India Company officials kept travel diaries. While reading about Gandhi's diary-keeping, I discovered that his grand-niece, Manuben, also kept diaries. These were written in Gujarati, and are housed at the National Archives in Delhi. In 2013, a news outlet published excerpts of the sections that revealed details about Gandhi's sexual practices. Manuben's diaries begin in 1942, and end in 1948, one month after Gandhi's assassination.

My detective friend, Markus Armstrong, discovered that Cornelia Sorabji's diaries are in the archives at the British Library. India's first female advocate, and the first woman to practice law in both India and Britain, Sorabji kept diaries for most of her life. The diaries in the archives are from 1879 to 1938, with the earliest entry made when she was thirteen. She wrote terse, factual accounts of her days, resembling entries made in a datebook. On some days she wrote no more than 'Leave India' or 'Arrive India.'

Pragya Tiwari, a journalist from India, suggested looking into Amrita Sher-gil, Meena Kumari, and Amrita Pritam.

Meena Kumari, a Bollywood actress from the 50s and 60s, gave all twenty-five of her diaries to Gulzar; a screenwriter and lyricist with whom she had a close relationship. Meena Kumari's husband, Kamal Amrohi, found her diary and in its pages he read 'I have never loved Kamal Amrohi.'

Amrita Sher-gil's childhood diaries are excerpted in a volume of her collected letters and writings. Sher-gil was a modernist painter, credited with being the 'most expensive female painter of India.' She was born in Budapest in 1913 and her family moved to India in 1921. Her diaries are from 1924 to 1926; perhaps she did not remain a committed diarist after the age of fourteen. On 18.12.1925, she writes, 'I was just settling my little cupboard when all of a sudden I noticed my diary, and couldn't resist the temptation of writing in it.' Even though Sher-gil is known for being a painter, the diaries tell us that she saw herself as a philosopher. In 1926, she writes, 'You know I am a philosopher, and philosophers usually work out their thoughts till they get the conclusion of their idea.'

It's possible that the Punjabi poet and novelist, Amrita Pritam, kept a diary. A book titled *Amrita Ki Diary* (Amrita's Diary) was published in Hindi in 1985 by Rajpal Publishers. The book is now out of print. It was published during her lifetime, and edited by her husband. According to worldcat.org, the nearest Hindi edition is in a library 7,500 kilometers from me. The Punjabi translation is more easily available, but I cannot read Punjabi.

I work in the same building as the Harry Ransom Center – a literary archive which, according to an article written in 2007, houses 36 million manuscript pages, 5 million photographs, a million books, and 10,000 objects. They have some of Anita Desai's manuscripts, but these do not contain any personal papers, the website tells me. After looking through the online catalog, and coming up with nothing, I asked a Ransom Center intern for help. She offered to search the internal catalog, but didn't find anything either. We do have G.V. Desani's diaries, she said, Too bad he wasn't a woman.

Desani was a writer, and a professor of Hindu and Buddhist Philosophy. In 1948 he published *All About H. Hatterr*, a novel known for being influential on contemporary Indian authors like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Out of curiosity, I decided to look at his diaries. There are about 20 boxes in the Desani collection at the Ransom Center – these haven't been cataloged yet, so I am not sure of their contents. I spent hours reading through some of Desani's journals from the first few boxes; most of them documenting his time in Sarnath, Benares, and Bombay, in the 50s and 60s. The markings in his journals, and a letter written to a friend, make apparent that he was working on an autobiography culled from these diaries.

I found Desani interesting, even endearing, at first. He gets worked up when his dhobi ruins a silk bedsheet, but also spends time contemplating the suffering of man. 'I realize now that it is necessary to repeat every experience lest its "truth" might escape me,' he writes in an early diary.

Desani was an Indian writing in English who moved to America, worked for the University of Texas-Austin and possibly suffered from depression. These are things we have in common, despite belonging to different genders and generations. I considered abandoning my original project to write about Desani's diaries, but when the journals revealed signs of a sexist attitude, it made writing about Desani feel too much like a betrayal of my original intent.

Meanwhile, a writer working in a bookstore in Austin told me he'd bought a diary from India recently on ebay. It's beautiful, he told me, Leather-bound with handmade paper, and a buckle.

Has it been written in? I asked.

No, it's empty.

Later, I searched ebay for 'used diaries' from India, but found nothing.

In the time it has taken me to write this, three people have found copies of Amrita Pritam's out of print diary. These three copies are on their way to me. One from Chandni Chowk in Delhi, one from a professor in Bombay, and one photocopied from the Goa University Library. I'm not sure what I'll find in there.

The diary contains things that might not find a home in the memoir. It tells us not just who a person was, but who they imagined themselves to be and, on occasion, failed to be. An accumulation of seemingly unnecessary details, hopes, and dreams; a parallel life is lived out in the diary. I like reading diaries because it allows me to escape my own life and share another woman's solitude. 'The most valuable thing in poems and in life – is what didn't work out,' Marina Tsvetaeva has said. The diary, then, saves what is most valuable.

How many diaries are hidden away in archives and attics across the Indian subcontinent? If you know of any, I'd love to hear.