



**Arnold, David and Stuart Blackburn, eds.**, *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005. 323 pp. ISBN 025321727X, \$24.95.

## **MICHAEL H. FISHER**

*Oberlin College*

[Michael.Fisher@oberlin.edu](mailto:Michael.Fisher@oberlin.edu)

People in India generally think of themselves in ways distinct from post-Enlightenment European conceptions of the autonomous individual striving to improve her/himself through personal achievement, so argues the fascinating edited volume under review here. More particularly, the eleven contributors concur that the forms of expression Indians use to describe people's lives are not identical to the European genres of biography and autobiography. Nonetheless, the many intertwined cultures historically present in India provide Indians from a variety of regions, traditions, and social classes with complex means to envision, write, and talk about personal identity through “life histories” and “life stories,” as well as through Indian culturally-specific forms of biography and autobiography. Thus, this volume asserts that Indians, rather than just taking their identities from “collectivities” like castes (as has been so often claimed by many Euro-American anthropologists and orientalists), indeed do recognize “strong individuals—though not individualism” (page 138). Further, the implications of this material and these interpretations inform the contested issue of whether India (or any other non-European society) independently developed its own forms of “modernity,” or adopted them from the West.

All the contributors to this volume engage closely with the core issues identified in the fine Introduction by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn concerning personhood, representation, agency, and voice. The editors explain: “life histories in India are a means for negotiating the irreducible dichotomy of the self-in-society; they are a narrative form for expressing and imagining an individual's existence, which includes group identities and relations with others” (p. 22). This coordinated attention



by all the contributors produces a volume remarkably coherent of the issues considered, yet extensive in the range of examples and challenging in the variety of particular analyses advanced.

The editors have organized the chapters not chronologically—which would highlight a modernizing developmental model—but rather thematically. Nonetheless, most contributors presuppose (and some explicitly discuss) a model of movement from Indian “proto-modern” (p. 176) to European-style “modern” ways of conceptualizing and representing the individual. With the exception of David Shulman's powerful chapter on the Sanskrit biography of the South Indian diarist and broker for the French, Ananda Ranga Pillai (1709-1761), all of the examples are relatively recent ranging from the late colonial to present-day. Therefore, while each of the men and women considered in this volume was heavily influenced by and had access to European culture, the contributors nonetheless seek to identify and discuss distinctly indigenous Indian (and indigenized Islamic) literary and oral traditions.

The first part, “Confronting Modernity,” considers written autobiographies and works of literature by middle-class men and women in recent times. David Arnold studies of the published writings of Indian political prisoners including M.Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru; Sudipta Kaviraj analyses those of Bengali social reformers, concentrating on their “Invention of Private Life.” In all these cases, British cultural and political imperialism challenged Anglicized Indian men to reconsider themselves and their cultures, with formal autobiographies as a means to express their emerging new notions. In a complementary chapter, Francesca Orsini thoughtfully uses her own biography of Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987) to show how Varma used creative forms of Hindi verse and prose to obscure her personal identity, while living without a husband in the public world as a widely-published writer.

The second part, “Translating Tradition,” moves further from European influences. Intriguing chapters by Barbara Metcalf and Sylvia Vatuk analyze how men and women respectively drew upon Urdu Muslim literary traditions to present and comment on themselves and others. David Shulman and Stuart Blackburn both take up South Indian traditions, but from contrasting perspectives. The former looks at written works from Brahmanic Sanskrit traditions, while the latter extends the crucial issues he raises in the Introduction to consider how oral-tradition Tamil folktales and legends deal with personhood.



The third part, “Spoken Lives,” deliberately takes up marginalized people. Kirin Narayan, Jonathan Parry, and Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine deploy anthropological methods to record oral self-representations by high and low caste hill women and two dalits (ex-untouchables) respectively. These cases give the authors particular room to discuss the issue of the editorial voice explicitly, since they themselves shape so extensively these spoken and non-chronologically presented accounts.

The chapters vary in the degree to which they convey the spirit or the substance of the actual texts of their subjects’ lives. Some chapters tend to be more abstract, but all are highly accessible. In nearly all the cases, the original texts have been published in part or in full elsewhere; thus readers will be able to consult those works more extensively than is possible in this collection of secondary analyses. Reading those original works, while being informed by the insights that abound in this edited volume, will prove particularly fruitful. Courses in cultural anthropology as well as in folklore and comparative literature will find this volume particularly rich in its specific examples and also highly effective in its theoretical sophistication.

© 2005 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited and indexed in the December 2005 issue (36:4) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.