



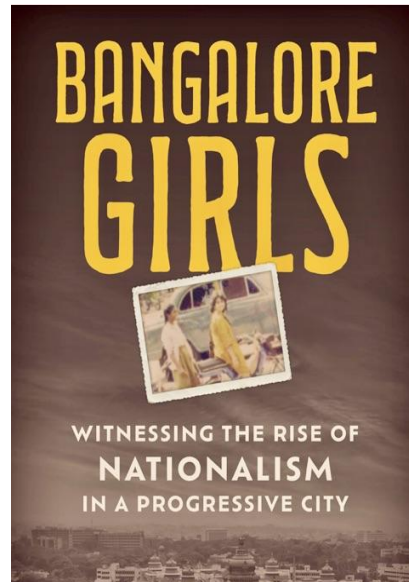
Baily, S. (2024). *Bangalore girls: Witnessing the rise of nationalism in a progressive city*. Rowman & Littlefield.

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Is it a novel? An autobiography? An ethnographic investigation? A history book? A treatise on political science? An analysis of education? Supriya Baily's book about her high school classmates is a rich blend of these genres. It explores the values of independent judgment, self-determination, confidence, and solidarity that a middle-class private school instilled in its students, regardless of their creed or caste. The narrative—beautifully recounted through the voices of the author and her peers—tells the story of the rise of a modern metropolis within a diverse society marked by various traditions and religious struggles, all set against the backdrop of secular education. Furthermore, it serves as a warning about how the growing absolutism and repression in Indian education over recent decades have undermined progress, affecting not only private institutions but also public schools.



Bangalore Girls is a text of scholarly value and literary significance, as it reads easily despite the challenges a Spanish speaker may face in recalling proper names and the names of Indian cities. It is a manifesto against the three Ms (marginalization, manipulation, and misogyny) that have permeated the history of this millennial country, intensified by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi's ascent to power. Furthermore, the imposition of Hindutva ideology and Hindu nationalism, compounded by a tradition of patriarchy, situates women as second-class citizens. However, after dramatically narrating contemporary India's social situation, Supriya conveys hope in the epilogue.

After reading the Introduction, I was already caught up in the narratives and overlooked the endnotes, although they add scholarly support. I enjoyed Supriya's first-person description of the streets, the unpretentious Koshy restaurant with superb Western food and friendly waitresses, with the Baldwin Girls High School (BGHS) girls hanging out with other girls who were no longer children and entering

adolescence. I felt transported to the Piccola House or the movie theaters, which she and her friends shared with boys from other nearby schools. She also describes the influence of U.S. pop culture (Hollywood movies) that people in Bangalore preferred over local films. Along with the personal account, Supriya introduces the voices of her classmates, 30 years earlier, when the love encounters with boys began. She completes the descriptions of riding mopeds and her love of reading and going to bookstores to score some books. Such was the life of adolescent girls in Bangalore at that time – enjoying a carefree social life in a safe city, relatively free from adult supervision.



Supriya Baily

Earlier, Baily recounted the particular history of Bangalore, now Bengaluru, the colonial heritage, the cultural dominance of the middle classes, and the idea of progress. Bangalore is known as the Silicon Valley of India. Its fame as an industrial city and its hard-working people have grown throughout its history. From a small village in the 12th century, it has become a cosmopolitan city of more than 8 million inhabitants where divisions by religion, race, caste, or sex were not as sharp as in northern India. Also, women, although subordinated to patriarchy, were not as mistreated as in other cities or the vast rural areas. She weaves anecdotes of noblewomen and some who played notable roles during the long colonial empire. The influence of the West and globalization is remarkable and a hallmark of the land of Supriya's family. However, although Supriya was born in the U.S., for her and other women of her family who migrated to Canada, the U.S., or Australia, Bangalore remains their home.

Supriya Baily has produced a book that is both a historical and political analysis. In addition to relying on an extensive bibliography, she used ethnography. To consolidate her argument, in almost every chapter, she draws on the memories and current life experiences of her and her friends from the BGHS, those teenagers who are now mavens in various pursuits and have consolidated life paths. Occasionally, memories of their mothers emerge, but rarely of their fathers or brothers. All of them declare themselves against patriarchy, misogyny, and caste and gender differences. They repudiate the practice of *sati* in a country that institutionalized suicide or even the murder of women upon the death of their husbands. However, the author points out one of the great contradictions: India was one of the few countries in the world to elect a woman to serve in the highest office for almost fifteen years, Indira Gandhi. Yet, she was assassinated while prime minister.

Nevertheless, the transition to exclusionary nationalism and religious hatred came when fanatical Hindu mobs demolished the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. Seeing the masses in Bangalore inflamed with delirium and anger against Muslims and Islam sharpened religious differences, and marked the end of the reverie of the 35 girls from Baldwin Girls High School who accompanied Supriya in narrating their lives. They ceased to live as if in a bed of roses. It was the beginning of a more authoritarian and masculine form than the nationalism of the past, with strict gender and caste hierarchies. It also marked the rise of the right-wing Hindutva movement

and a populist and charismatic leader, Narendra Modi. Although in the 2024 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party lost its hegemonic role, the political effects of muscular nationalism and its aftermath of marginalization, manipulation, and misogyny have permeated Indian politics for the past 30 years.

In her analysis of Indian politics and the struggles between parties and regions, Supriya Baily often criticizes the populist, jingoistic, and anti-intellectual politics that fuel Narendra Modi's hate speech. "Modi came to power focusing on the neoliberal policies that were important to the burgeoning middle class, but once in power, he was able to move toward more populist policies in part due to his ability to use language to deepen social and religious divisions in the country" (p. 180). However, in several editions of *Morning Consult*, he appears as the most popular leader in the world (*Morning Consult*, 2021). As a Mexican, it was not hard for me to understand why he was so popular. The same thing happened with the former president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who left the country's economy in shambles and an unprecedented institutional decomposition. But with the use of official propaganda, with morning press conferences almost every day of the week, the president attacked his adversaries with aggressive language, invented data, and insulted journalists. For several years, the same pollster rated him as the second most popular national leader.

The greatest richness of Supriya Baily's book lies in her analysis, spread over several chapters and supported by the voices of her contemporaries, of school relations within her middle-class school. She also examines the performance of public education, especially in Chapter 6, "The Battle for Education." She points out the dramatic situation of public education and the low quality of learning of the children enrolled, especially in those schools controlled by the central government. In addition, early school dropout, poor funding, and politicization have consequences that, in any international comparison, place it among the low performers. The worst consequence of the BJP's education policy is the end of secular education. Instead of knowledge, schools inculcate religious prejudices.

Nevertheless, Baily and her friends are the center of attention of the text. The photographs in the centerfolds and the BGHS crest are a visual support to the argument. Not surprisingly, the women who studied at that private school are, for the most part, professionals, critical of their country's situation, sympathetic to the dispossessed. The school planted those values in them. The school's aspiration to educate well-rounded women was captured in its motto: Bend to nothing; Persevere to the end; Flame of hope; Forward ever, backward never; To greater heights; Never despair.

Near the end of the book, Supriya incorporates the events of January 6, 2021, when a mass of QAnon and MAGA fanatics attempted to take over the Capitol in Washington, D.C., where she resides. The images on television reminded her of the events in Ayodhya and the destruction of a mosque. However, her final reflection—critical hope—is that not all is lost. "I am struck again by the power of critical hope, and how accurate they [Supriya's classmates] were in predicting the importance of voting, the power of young people, and the transformative influence of education" (p.200). She evokes the principles of Paulo Freire and other educators to assert: "To engage in critical hope, there must also be a desire to shift education from the historic

'banking model,' which limits the ability for people to engage in critical consciousness and transformative learning" (p. 193). Supriya Baily and her classmates seem to say, we must put an end to authoritarianism, Hindutva ideology, and absolutism.

This point coincides with what I have called *Edutopia* in several of my writings. I use this concept to search for a better route to democratic and equitable education. It has nothing to do with the George Lucas effort, Edutopia, with its emphasis on hands-on, real-world learning, technology integration, and social-emotional development.

Bangalore Girls: Witnessing the Rise of Nationalism in a Progressive City is a book I recommend to students and colleagues interested in comparative and international education. It is about schools in India, but its value is universal.

Reference

Morning Consult. (2021, October 25). Global Leaders' Popularity. *Financial Times*.

About the Reviewer

Carlos Ornelas is a retired distinguished professor of education and communications at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City. His most recent publication is "The Mexican Education Reform Gallop" in the *Handbook on Comparative Education*, edited by Alexander W. Wiseman and colleagues (Edward Elgar).



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