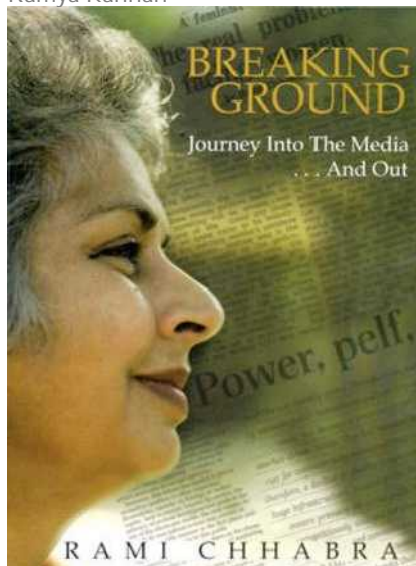


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### An involved bystander

Ramya Kannan



Title: Breaking Ground, journey Into the Media... and out. Author: Rami Chhabra.

Chronicling the history of a nation from a vantage point often makes for fascinating reading. Certainly Rami Chhabra has been at the centre of, and sometimes, in the fringes of some of the key developments this country has seen. A journalist in Delhi from the 1950's, and we must not forget what she herself underlines right through, a woman journalist in what was then a bastion of male journalists, Ms. Chhabra makes full use of her vantage seat watching and recording the largely tempestuous stage play that carried India ahead in the phase immediately after independence.

Earlier last year, Tavleen Singh, another senior journalist and columnist, wrote her own memoirs of the days, pre-emergency to Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Her personalised account in 'Durbar' made waves in Delhi, and the rest of the country, as it brought juicy gossip about the nation's 'first family' back from the past. But the similarities between the two authors end there: the work they did and the ringside position they occupied during crucial days. Chhabra's book is completely different in its tone, tenor, and purpose. It is more than an autobiography; it is nearly a social biography.

That is because Chhabra was also an activist, as she was a woman journalist 'breaking ground' entering a challenging profession that took her to the corners of the world and set her in the most extenuating circumstances. Whether it is her visit to Saigon, at the close of the Vietnam War, her trip to China when the curtain was still down, or an interview with Indira Gandhi during the peak of the Emergency, the author brings the breathlessness of the moment alive, though she is recalling the events many decades later.

The same passion she retains as she describes her work, and the country's progress in family planning, population strategies, working with All India Radio, being pitched head long into nascent television in India with Doordarshan, safe mother hood and child survival, her consultancies with the World Bank across the world, the initial responses to an epidemic that was soon to stun the world — HIV/AIDS.

The difference is that she was 'involved', as she herself says, a privileged bystander at the crossroads, but one who believed, as she says, she could not have merely watched the Trojan forces sneak in.

(Ramya Kannan is senior assistant editor with The Hindu)