



## In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today

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## In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today

### I

THIS IS NOT A PAPER. It is a preliminary statement of some of the difficulties of writing the history of violence, more specifically in this instance the history of sectarian violence in colonial and postcolonial India. The history of violence has been treated in the historiography of modern India as *aberration* and as *absence*: aberration in the sense that violence is seen as something removed from the general run of Indian history: a distorted form, an exceptional moment, not the “real” history of India at all.<sup>1</sup> Violence also appears as an absence—and here the point applies more emphatically to a field wider than Indian history—because historical discourse has been able to capture and re-present the moment of violence only with great difficulty. The “history” of violence is, therefore, almost always about context—about everything that happens around violence.<sup>2</sup> The violence itself is taken as “known.” Its contours and character are simply assumed; its forms need no investigation.

The statement presented in the following pages is very general, a bare outline of a larger argument about the nature of evidence and the modes of analysis and representation employed in historical discourse. I proffer it in this form in the hope that it will focus some points for consideration in a way that a more detailed statement might not. But I do so with some hesitation. One reason for hesitation is that the formulations presented here are far from being adequately worked out at this stage; by the nature of things, they may never be adequately worked out.

Another reason for hesitation is that I have had to adopt in this piece a more personal tone than is perhaps, as yet, common in social science and history writing. My statement arises in large part out of the experience of the Bhagalpur “riots” of 1989, which figure in some detail in the latter part of this essay. In writing about this experience I make considerable use of personal impressions and insights gathered as part of a ten-member team sent out under the aegis of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), Delhi, to investigate the situation in Bhagalpur. The use of the “personal” is of course now encouraged in

both social-scientific and political analyses and writings. However, the important advances occasioned by feminism notwithstanding, its use is something that many of us are still learning to negotiate, and I remain uncomfortable about what may appear as an excessive intrusion of the author's self in the pages that follow.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I hesitate because my criticism of some of the most significant writings on contemporary social and political conflict in India may appear ungenerous, especially in respect to scholars and activists who have come out boldly against the sources of oppression and exploitation in our state and our society. I can only say that the kind of criticism (and self-criticism) presented here would have been impossible but for the pioneering investigations and studies of individuals like Asghar Ali Engineer and organizations like the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and the PUDR.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that my criticism of their writings on contemporary politics and strife will appear academic and of little immediate relevance. I should like to believe, however, that there is some dialogue between the "academic" and the "political," and that some of the arguments in these pages will contribute in a small way to the continuing debates on vital political issues of our times.

The present statement deals with the historiography of sectarian strife. This historiography functions, and has long functioned, in a political context where the rhetoric of nationalism is of central importance. In recent times, especially over the last two decades, this rhetoric has taken on a new tone and a different kind of stridency. The highly centralized state power that now goes by the name of the Indian nation state has spoken more and more brazenly on behalf of a get-rich-quick, consumerist "middle class" and its rural ("rich peasant") allies. In furthering the ambition of this sectional interest, the state has shown a willingness to mark all opposition as "antinational"—whether this opposition has been located in the industrial working class, among the rural poor, or in other regional and local movements.

The "fragments" of Indian society—the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, activist women's groups, all of which might be said to represent "minority" cultures and practices—have been expected to fall in line with the "mainstream" (Brahmanical Hindu, consumerist) national culture. This "mainstream," which represents in fact a small section of the society, has indeed been flaunted as *the* national culture. "Unity in Diversity" is no longer the rallying cry of Indian nationalism. On the contrary, all that belongs to any minority other than the ruling class—all that is challenging, singular, local—not to say, all difference—appears threatening, intrusive, even "foreign" to this nationalism.

Writings on Indian politics need to foreground this state-centered drive to homogenize and "normalize," and to foreground also the deeply contested nature of the territory of nationalism. Part of the importance of the "fragmentary" point of view lies in that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles

for other, potentially richer definitions of the “nation” and the future political community.

I do not suggest that resistance by the “minority” always, or even usually, functions consciously in this way. But the historian, social scientist, or political activist who stands back to analyze the conditions of Indian society will perhaps agree that this is an important part of what is happening. There is an historiographical issue involved here too. For the narrow and diminishing view of nationalism described above is bolstered not only by a reference to current world trends in the economic and political practice of states, nor only by those who speak of ancient India as the cradle of civilization and the storehouse of all that is good and valuable in the contemporary world, but also by a “modern” and avowedly secular nationalist historiography that has reinforced notions of a natural Indian unity and an Indian national essence.

This historiography has elevated the nation state—indeed, a contingent form of the nation state as found in India today—to the status of the end of all history, so much so that “History,” in schools, colleges, and universities in India, still ends for the most part in 1947. It has also created for us the neat binary categories with which we have all had to work: secular/communal; national/local (all too often read as “antinational”); progressive (“economic”)/reactionary (“cultural”)—categories that historians have only recently begun seriously to question.<sup>4</sup>

Even today, after decades of powerful and sophisticated history writing by Left-wing as well as nationalist and other liberal scholars, the view from the “center” remains the recognized vantage point for a meaningful reconstruction of “Indian” history, and the “official” archive (government records or, for an earlier period, court records) the primary source for its construction. This historiographical practice fails, it seems to me, to lay sufficient stress on the provisional and changeable character of the objects of our analysis: “India” as well as “Pakistan,” “Awadh,” or “Andhra Pradesh”; the Hindu or the Muslim “community,” the “nation,” “nationalism,” “communalism.” By attributing a “natural” quality to a particular unity such as “India,” and adopting its “official” archive as the primary source of historical knowledge pertaining to it, the historian adopts the view of the established state. This has surely happened in the historiography of modern India. The inordinate emphasis placed on the (given) unity of India and the unity of the struggle to realize “her” independence has meant that the history of India since the early nineteenth century has tended to become the biography of the emerging nation state. It has also become a history in which the story of Partition, and the accompanying Hindu-Muslim and Muslim-Sikh riots of 1946–47, is given short shrift.

The history of sectarian strife in general, and of what is called “communalism” in India, has been written up as a secondary story. “Hindu” politics, “Muslim” politics, and Hindu-Muslim strife appear as minor elements in the main drama of India’s struggle for independence from colonial rule, and they are asso-

ciated usually with the machinations of the colonial ruling class. Histories of Partition too are generally written up as histories of “communalism.”<sup>5</sup> These are, as one might expect, anything but histories of noble endeavor. They are not even, to any substantial degree, histories of confused struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss; of the tentative forging of new identities and loyalties; or of the rise among uprooted and embittered people of new resolutions and new ambitions. They are, in the main, accounts of the “origins” or “causes” of Partition, investigations of the chances, the political mistakes, or the less amenable social and economic developments that allegedly brought about this tragic event. In this account, moreover, the tragedy appears as one that, for all its consequences, miraculously left the course of Indian history unaltered. In spite of the emergence of two, now three, independent nation states as a result of Partition, “India,” this historiography would seem to say, stayed firmly—and “naturally”—on its secular, democratic, nonviolent, and tolerant path.

Bipan Chandra’s *Modern India*, perhaps the best textbook on the colonial period available to school-leavers and junior undergraduates, illustrates these points very well indeed:<sup>6</sup>

On 15 August 1947, India celebrated with joy its first day of freedom. The sacrifices of generations of patriots and the blood of countless martyrs had borne fruit. . . . But the sense of joy . . . was mixed with pain and sadness. . . . [For] even at the very moment of freedom a communal orgy, accompanied by indescribable brutalities, was consuming thousands of lives in India and Pakistan. (305–6)

There is “pain and sadness” at what can only be read as the hijacking of an enormously powerful and noble struggle. We read on:

The symbol of this tragedy at the moment of national triumph was the forlorn figure of Gandhiji—the man who had given the message of *nonviolence, truth and love and courage and manliness* to the Indian people. . . . In the midst of national rejoicing, he was touring the hate-torn land of Bengal, trying to bring comfort to people who were even then paying through senseless communal slaughter the price of freedom. (306; emphasis added)

Who hijacked the movement is not explicitly stated at this point, although other pages make it clear that Hindu and Muslim communalists, political reactionaries, and of course the British were to blame (296–97 and *passim*). This hijacking leads to senseless slaughter, hundreds of thousands of lives being lost as “the price of freedom.” Something is elided here, however. Which people pay? For whose freedom? Rather than ask these questions, Bipan Chandra’s textbook goes on to record how Gandhi died, assassinated in January 1948, “a martyr to the cause of unity”; and how the people of India, “with confidence in their capacity and their will to succeed . . . now [after August 1947] set out to build the just and the good society” (306–7).

Here “Gandhi” and “the people” become symbols of the nationalist essence, the Indian spirit, and symbols that may easily be substituted for one another.

“Gandhi” clearly stands in for the people in the nationalist account of India’s anticolonial struggle. Similarly, with Gandhi gone, “the people” apparently take over Gandhi’s work and march forward, unaffected by Partition, riots, refugees, and the like, to build “the just and the good society.”

Sumit Sarkar’s more critical textbook, meant for more advanced undergraduate and graduate students, puts forward a different argument but arrives at the same conclusion about the secular path of the Indian people.<sup>7</sup> Sarkar writes movingly of “the Mahatma’s finest hour,” from 1946 until his death in January 1948, when he labored almost single-handed to try and restrain the passions that were leading to the slaughter of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all over northern India. The futility of such “isolated personal effort” was, however, evident, the historian remarks.

“One might still argue,” Sarkar says, “that the only real alternative lay along the path of united militant mass struggle against imperialism and its Indian allies” (438). He goes on to describe in fairly optimistic terms the continuing potential for such struggle:

Despite the obvious disruption caused by the riots, this possibility was by no means entirely blocked even in the winter of 1946–47. Five months after the August riots [the “great Calcutta killings” of 1946], the students of Calcutta were again on the streets on 21 January 1947 in “Hands Off Vietnam” demonstrations against the use of Dum Dum airport by French planes, and all communal divisions seemed forgotten in the absolutely united and ultimately victorious 85-day tram strike under Communist leadership which began the same day. (438–39)

The author refers also to the “strike wave” of January–February 1947 in Calcutta, Kanpur, Karachi, Coimbatore, and elsewhere, only to add: “The strikes . . . were all on purely economic demands; what remained lacking was a sufficiently influential and determined political leadership” (439).

I have quoted from two of the best general books on the history of colonial India and the Indian national movement, both from scholars writing within the Marxist tradition, to emphasize my point about the quite remarkable dominance of the nationalist paradigm in the writing on Partition and Independence. This history writing is part of a larger nationalist discourse, which finds powerful expression in films, journalism, and literature as well. Partition was, for the majority of people living in what are now the divided territories of northern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, *the* event of the twentieth century—equivalent in terms of trauma and consequence to the First World War (the “Great War”) for Britain or the Second World War for France and Japan. The experience of the First and Second World Wars is commemorated in Western Europe and Japan through the erection of major national monuments; there is, not surprisingly, no equivalent for Partition in India. However, the erasure of memory goes further in this case.<sup>8</sup>

As in history writing, so in films and fiction, Indian intellectuals have tended

to celebrate the story of the Independence struggle rather than dwell on the agonies of Partition. This statement requires considerable qualification. There has been a great deal of writing on Partition and the sectarian violence of 1946–47 in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi. But “Partition Literature” of the early period—of which Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s devastating stories are the outstanding example—was largely confined to the strife-torn areas of Punjab and its environs in the decade or so after Partition.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent literary statements on this theme that have come out of northern India fall much more clearly within the secular nationalist problematic, for which Partition was a history gone wrong—a puzzling and in effect inexplicable failure. The classic of this genre is probably Rahi Masoom Raza’s *Aadha gaon* (1966).

More remarkably still, sectarian violence and its consequences do not figure as a central motif in the Bengali literature of the post-Partition period. A recent study notes that while the famine of 1943 appears to have moved Bengali writers deeply, “the Partition of Bengal [dividing East Bengal, which became part of Pakistan in 1947, from West Bengal, which remained part of India] that . . . conclusively changed all erstwhile socio-economic configurations in and after 1947, never became a dominating theme of Bengali fiction even during the 1950s or shortly thereafter.”<sup>10</sup>

In cinema, of course, the great Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak produced a series of unparalleled filmic statements about the pain, despair, and hopes of those dispossessed and displaced by Partition: *Komal Gandhar* (1959), *Subarna-rekha* (1962), *Titash ekti nadir nam* (1973), and, somewhat more indirectly, *Meghe dhaka tara* (1960). But Ghatak remains an exception—and not because of his brilliance alone. In Bengali cinema generally, as in the huge Hindi-Urdu film industry centered in Bombay, as also in the large number of documentary films produced by the Films Division of India, filmmakers have paid relatively little attention to the history and consequences of Partition.

Among Hindu/Urdu films, the example that stands out against this trend is M. S. Sathyu’s *Garam hawa*, a remarkable statement of the early 1970s that sensitively portrayed the collective insanity, the uprooting, the meaninglessness of existence, and the fear-laden searches for new meaning “elsewhere” that were the lot of so many people in the aftermath of Partition. The more recent television serial *Tamas*, based on Bhishma Sahni’s novel of the same name published in 1972, has acquired a special importance because of the numbers it reached. However, the story marks a return to a less subtle nationalist statement in which *agents-provocateurs* and mysterious evil folk pulling the strings from behind the scenes mislead an innocent and bewildered but brave people. Partition is represented here, moreover, in the likeness of a natural disaster in which human actions play little part, far removed from the run of daily life. As we have already noted, this is also the line that respectable, academic nationalist historiography has followed.

The reasons for the kind of suppression described above are not hard to find. Difference and strife between Hindus and Muslims persist in India today, and in relating the history of such strife there is the real danger of reopening old wounds. In addition, there is no consensus among us about the nature of Partition. We have no means of representing such tragic loss, nor of pinning down—or rather, owning—responsibility for it. As a consequence, our nationalist historiography, journalism, and filmmaking have tended to generate something like a collective amnesia. Consciously or otherwise, they have represented Partition and all that went with it as an aberration. The day of the establishment of Pakistan, 14 August 1947, becomes an accident, a “mistake”—and one for which not we but “others” were responsible.

I should like to suggest, further, that our analyses of politics and strife in post-Independence India have run pretty much along the same lines. The following pages seek to demonstrate this through an examination of the historiography of “contemporary communalism.” There is another incidental benefit that may flow from such an examination. Recent events and the writings upon them reveal, by their immediacy and uncertainty, many of the hazards of evidence and of representation from which historians of earlier periods sometimes believe themselves to be immune.

Although the immediate context for my observations is the experience of recent “riots,” especially one in Bhagalpur in 1989, I wish to stress that the difficulties of evidence gathering and representation encountered here point to the folly of using accounts of, say, fifty or a hundred years ago as if they were somehow “transparent”—biased accounts to be sure, but accounts that may be balanced by setting them off one against another, by appropriate additions and subtractions, to give us a more or less adequate reconstruction of “history.”

## II

It has become commonplace in India now to describe one instance of strife after another as “perhaps the worst since 1947”; such has been the magnitude and brutality of sectarian violence in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> In any event, Bhagalpur was indeed one of the most devastating examples of Hindu-Muslim strife in the country since Partition. This round of violence began in the last week of October 1989; arson, looting, and murder spread from the city to the surrounding countryside and raged practically unchecked for several days. The situation was then brought under some sort of control by military and paramilitary forces, but an atmosphere of fear and terror remained for months afterwards.<sup>12</sup>

Given the scale of the “riots,” and the infamous role of the local administration in encouraging the attacks and suppressing evidence, it is impossible to estab-

lish the “facts” of this occurrence—what traditional historians like to call the “nuts and bolts” of the story. Possibly as many as a thousand people were killed in the course of the violence, most of them Muslims, but estimates of the casualties still vary enormously.<sup>13</sup> During the first days of the “riots,” trains were stopped repeatedly at different places in Bhagalpur and its neighboring districts; from several of these, Muslim travelers were dragged out and lynched. No one can say for certain how many were killed in this way—not even disturbed Hindu travelers who happened to be caught on one of these trains and saw people being pulled from their particular carriage. In the major attacks, in the rural areas as well as in the city, neither old people nor infants, neither women nor children, were spared. There is widespread feeling that women were abducted and raped on a large scale, but none of the surviving victims will talk about rape; the five specific cases recorded by the PUDR team that conducted investigations in Bhagalpur in January 1990 were incidents that Muslim women informants had themselves heard about.

What is beyond question is that the extent and ferocity of the attacks were unprecedented, even for a district that has seen much sectarian strife before, including “riots” in 1946. At the worst stage of the violence in October–November 1989, some 40,000 people were forced to leave their homes and live in makeshift relief camps. Destruction and looting of property occurred on a massive scale for several weeks. The fears generated among the heavily outnumbered Muslims were such that a great many were unwilling to return to their homes even three months after the initial outbreak of violence; an estimated 10,000 were still in “relief camps” toward the end of January 1990, apart from those who had moved in with relatives or friends in “safer” places in or outside Bhagalpur district. At this time many Muslims were pressing for the permanent retention of military or paramilitary forces in the vicinity of their villages or wards (*mohallas*) as the only trustworthy means for their protection, and some were demanding that they be given arms by the government for the same purpose. The air was still thick with rumors, and isolated attacks and looting continued to occur; one such incident was reported as late as March 1990.

How do we write the history of such an event? In Bhagalpur, the state’s “archives,” those official sources that generations of historians and social scientists have treated as core accounts, more “reliable” or at least more “comprehensive” than any other source, are largely missing. Like historians generally, various teams of independent investigators visiting Bhagalpur have been eager to obtain the official account in order to establish “some overall picture” in the midst of an otherwise confusing investigation.<sup>14</sup> But the view from the center has largely been destroyed in this instance, at any rate for the first few, absolutely critical days of the “riots.” A *Sunday Mail* (Delhi) report of 11 February 1990, made after a fortnight-long investigation into the Bhagalpur carnage and its aftermath, sums up the situation in this regard:

Crucial records of the period, especially those from the tables of [the] then district magistrate [DM] and superintendent of police [SP] are missing.

Evidence strongly suggests that [the DM] in all probability destroyed the log book of the Central Control Room in which the many SOS received in the fateful week were recorded. The fresh log book that has been placed in the office strangely makes no mention of the incidents. . . .

[The SP at the time], who has since gained notoriety, too has left his successor . . . without a clue to work [with?]. His records too show a single joint report on the Chanderi massacre [one of the worst incidents in the countryside], just because Patna High Court had issued a notice.

Even the joint report of the DM and the SP on the first incident at Tatarpur Chowk [in Bhagalpur city] on October 24 that had lit the fuse is among the papers not traceable.

The fact, incredible as it may sound, is that there is no statement of facts available in either the DM or the SP's office.

This kind of destruction or removal of records is of course not unprecedented: the British practiced it on a large scale in India after 1937, and no doubt there have been many other instances since Independence. What is less frequently observed, however, is the destruction entailed in the systematic construction of evidence on all sides, official and unofficial, when an event of this kind occurs. Violence produces the necessity of evidence gathering, of uncovering hidden processes and contradictions that we might normally prefer to ignore, but violence also wipes out "evidence" and even, to a large extent, the possibility of collecting it in a manner and form that is deemed acceptable by today's social sciences. Let me illustrate this with reference to the PUDR team's work in Bhagalpur.

In spite of the size of this team and the very long hours it put in during its eight-day visit to the district, our investigation was subject to severe constraints.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the people we spoke to in Bhagalpur were Muslims. They were the primary victims of the "riots"; they were in the relief camps; they were the people who were willing to, perhaps had need to, talk. Hindus in many of the badly affected areas met us with studied silence, if not hostility.<sup>16</sup> The Hindus we could speak with easily were from a narrow stratum: middle-class intellectuals, political activists, professionals and officials with established opinions (or "theories") about what had occurred.

In addition, we were confronted with the problem when we met victims of the violence, or other eyewitnesses, of what questions to ask, and how. The forms of our questions suggested particular answers, and there were particular answers that we were more ready to hear than others. This is a point to which I shall return. But we faced a further difficulty at the outset: How does one ask the victims of such barbarism—the father and son, or the mother and four little children, who survived because one was away and others managed somehow to hide in the fields from where they could see elders and young ones, kith and kin and neighbors, women and infants in arms, every one who was found in the Muslim

quarter of their village being slaughtered—How does one ask such victims of terror for details of what they saw?

And yet one asks—because “investigators” are bound to ask. And sometimes the victims, survivors, and others standing by begin to talk without even being asked—because they have been asked so many times already, or because there is need for a public narrative of their suffering. However, this narrative too assumes a set form. It appears as a ritualized account, a collective memory or record that has been generated on behalf of the entire community—“Muslims” or “Yadavs” or “Hindus” or whatever. The standard practice in the affected *mohallas* and villages we visited was for us to be taken to a central spot where many people gathered, and the “elders” or the “educated” gave us what might be called the authorized account of local happenings.

The teams of three or four members that went to any one place tried to get around this screening by breaking up and talking to different groups individually. But in several places women and youth were restrained from holding independent conversations with us; in one village some of the local people (especially women) turned somewhat aggressively upon a woman colleague of ours and upon those village women who had continued to talk in spite of earlier signals asking them to stop. However, even when women, youths, or for that matter children spoke up separately and differences of emphasis and priority surfaced, their different accounts still emerged as part of a collective statement. The broad outlines of what occurred appeared to be known to everyone in the same way, and the concerns were common: the suffering of the collectivity, the need for protection and compensation, the identification of those who had proved to be friends in need (mainly religious organizations and, in places where the Left had a presence, Left-wing activists and associations).

The PUDR team went to Bhagalpur three months after the outbreak of this violence, and it is possible to suggest that the ritualized nature of these collective accounts was much more firmly set by then. Yet I have no doubt that a collective memory, in a set form, will have come into being very soon after the occurrence of the events it describes. This has to do with the living conditions of the local communities, the history of past strife, and the difficult relations with the state. But it has to do with another factor as well, that the purpose of the public narrative is at least partly to impress a particular point of view on the state and its agents.

The situation produced by any large-scale outbreak of violence deepens the divisions that may at any time be seen to exist between privileged people and common folk in India. Such situations also work to level communities and make entire groups that are under suspicion a part of the “common folk.” At these times, the informants—distant villagers, illiterate artisans, faceless members of a makeshift relief camp, and even the elite of a community such as medical practitioners or university professors—tend to become part of a collective subject that

approaches the investigator as “a person of influence” and appeals to her/him for Relief, Justice, Mercy.

Consequently, much of our conversation with local people in Bhagalpur had to do with minute details of property losses, injuries, and deaths that we did not necessarily consider central to our investigation. We were asked repeatedly to come a little further, to this village or the next, to see for ourselves the destruction of this house, to make a note of these names too. We were asked also to record “First Information Reports” and evidence where the police had allegedly failed or refused to record these, or at least to help in getting them recorded because, as a number of informants said, “We live under constant threat and may well be killed before anyone bothers to take down our evidence.” We were met in other places with the bare response: “We don’t know anything. We were not here.”

Sometimes, as the denial of all knowledge of what occurred in a particular place will have indicated, the collective accounts we heard partook of the character of preemptive narratives. They were constructed, more or less consciously, in order to falsify particular “theories” or explanations of the course of events. “Hindus,” who were accused of forming an armed procession and adopting extremely aggressive tactics during its course through the city of Bhagalpur, thus sparking off the violence of 24 October, declared that the procession was an ordinary religious one, like any other on important festive occasions, and that it was accompanied by large numbers of women and children singing devotional songs and playing on musical instruments as they went along. “Muslims,” who were accused by the local administration and by others of making preparations for a “riot” from long before 24 October, declared all over the district and almost without exception that they had never had any quarrel with the Hindus and had no reason to fear a riot, that perfect amity had always existed between the Hindus and Muslims of the district, and that “even in 1946–47” while the rest of northern India burned, there was no (or very little) trouble in Bhagalpur.

Even where the defense of the immediate group or collectivity was not an issue, as when we spoke to urban professionals and intellectuals, the defense of something larger and more intangible was sometimes at stake: the “good name” of the city (or region), for example, or the very possibility of Hindus and Muslims living together in the future—as of course they must. It was this kind of thinking that led many people to stress the importance of letting bygones be bygones. Some similar reasoning perhaps lay behind the pronounced tendency to lay the blame for the strife on “outsiders”: political leaders in Patna and Delhi, “criminal gangs,” a corrupt and spineless administration. The theory of “criminal” instigation and conduct of the riots has been especially popular. The argument is that “criminal castes” from across the Ganges (which flows west to east through the district just north of the city of Bhagalpur) came into the city and other strife-torn places in large numbers, that these castes (designated “criminal” by the erstwhile colonial regime) are the cause of much of the lawlessness in Bhagalpur even at other—

“normal”—times, and that criminal gangs making free use of these “outside” elements were largely responsible for the violence of 1989.

The difficulties of evidence gathering are, however, only a part of the problem of reconstructing the history of such events. The question of how to write about such experiences, already hinted at, is equally hazardous. For there is the obvious danger of sensationalizing, of overdramatizing, and thus rendering such strife and its consequences as extraordinary—aberrational. Yet there is, on the other hand, at least an equal danger of surrendering to the demands of an academic discourse, of sanitizing, “naturalizing,” and thereby making bland and rather more palatable what is intensely ugly and disorienting. Academic discourse too tends to push the moment of violence into the realm of the exceptional and aberrant, as I shall try to show in a moment.

Discussions of sectarian strife in India find it necessary to try and balance an account of “Hindu” atrocities by some account of “Muslim” (or “Sikh”) atrocities. So, a few weeks after our visit to Bhagalpur, the Chief Minister of Bihar spoke, in a public announcement on the steps being taken to restore normalcy, of the numbers of Hindu temples and shrines destroyed in the district along with large numbers of Muslim holy places—against all the evidence, for no investigating team had reported a single Hindu temple or shrine damaged or destroyed on this occasion. So too, a documentary film on the Bhagalpur violence, made by an independent and enterprising filmmaker, Nalini Singh, and shown on national television in March 1990, equated Jamalpur (the one Hindu village to be attacked in the course of the “riots”) with Logain (the site of one of the worst massacres of Muslims), implying that the attacks and casualties were of the same order, although the most reliable estimates suggest that seven people were killed and some seventy houses and huts partially burned and looted in Jamalpur against 115 killed and the entire Muslim *basti* looted, burned, and destroyed in Logain.<sup>17</sup>

This allegedly “liberal” demand to document and present “both sides of the case” is frequently accompanied by the social scientist’s search for those “outside forces” and “exceptional circumstances” that are, in this view, likely to be found at the back of such acts of extraordinary violence. For Bhagalpur, journalists as well as other investigators have pointed the finger at “criminal” elements, at the local administration and at the vicious propaganda of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other militant Hindu organizations. As a newspaper report of 19 November 1989 has it:

Is it possible that people who live together [have always lived together] and share each other’s daily concerns—about food and drink, the marriage of daughters, and electoral politics—should become enemies overnight? . . . What have these people to do with the Babari Masjid and Ramjanmabhumi controversy? But the criminal elements of both communities saw their opportunity and very quickly indeed they filled the minds of the people with a poisonous insanity.

That this task of poisoning the minds of the people could be accomplished so quickly does not seem to raise any problems for the writer: its significance is never discussed. Instead we are told, “The Bhagalpur riots are not so much the product of sectarian [‘communal’] feelings as a calamity brought about by the criminals.”<sup>18</sup>

The moral of the story, which carries over from nationalist accounts of the pre-Independence period, is that “the people” are essentially secular. The same newspaper report goes on to say:

The criminals are armed with rifles, guns, bombs, axes, choppers, spears, and the blessings of [powerful] political leaders. What can the people possibly do? [*Bechari janta kare to kya kare?*] The members of both [Hindu and Muslim] communities wished to live together in peace and friendship, but the criminals ultimately succeeded in spreading the poison among them.<sup>19</sup>

Explanations of violence in terms of “larger historical processes” are not so far removed from this kind of analysis as might appear to be the case at first sight. Instead of focusing on the activities of VHP propagandists and criminal elements, or dereliction of duty on the part of local officials, these explanations deal in the “criminalization” of politics; the “communalization” of Indian public life, not excluding the administration; and longer-term economic changes such as the rise of the “backward castes,” emergence of new trading groups, unionization, labor troubles, and the like. The PUDR’s careful and detailed report on the “Bhagalpur Riots,” for instance, makes an elaborate—if somewhat confusing—statement regarding the complex of circumstances surrounding the outbreak of violence:

A common simplification of the riots has consisted in placing the responsibility for them on criminals. We feel it may be more accurate to say that it was the sum of relations between criminals, the police, administration, politicians, the dominant elite and the economy which are responsible and, at any given time, one or all of these—along with some local people—were significant factors and agents in the riots.<sup>20</sup>

Too often, however, the statement of complex, long-term historical processes leaves little room for human agency and human responsibility and becomes a statement about the essential and unchanging (“secular”) character of the majority of the people concerned. The “economic dimension” particularly tends to emerge as the master of all. Two examples from the work of Asghar Ali Engineer, perhaps the most prominent writer on the causes of recent sectarian strife, will serve to illustrate the point. Writing on Jabalpur, 1961:

The *apparent cause* was the “elopement” of a Hindu girl with a Muslim boy. However, although it brought the powerful religio-cultural prejudices between the two communities into play . . . it was not the real reason. The *real reason* lay elsewhere. The Muslim boy was the son of a local *bidi* magnate who had gradually succeeded in establishing control over the local *bidi* industry. His Hindu competitors were very sore over this development. It was

not insignificant that the *bidi* industry belonging to the Muslims in Jabalpur suffered heavily during the riots.

And on Bhiwandi, 1970, he writes:

[Bhiwandi] is a thriving centre of the powerloom industry, with quite a few Muslims owning powerlooms and a large number of Muslim artisans working as weavers on these looms. . . . Also, being on the Bombay-Agra National Highway, Bhiwandi receives a large amount of revenue by way of octroi from the passing trucks. Its municipality thus has a handsome income. Local municipal politics, therefore, assumes [a] great deal of importance. Different parties and political groups vie with each other to wrest control of the Municipal Council. A section of Muslims with their increased prosperity due to the loom industry developed greater political aspirations, challenging the traditional leadership, and this led to communal tension.<sup>21</sup>

In its more extreme versions, this economic viewpoint tends to reduce all history to a fight for land and profit. Here is a journalist's account of the "economy of communalism" in Bhagalpur: "It would be simplistic to dismiss the recent Bhagalpur communal riot as a manifestation of the ugly face of our civilization. Attention must be focused on [the] ruined economy, dying industry and the decadent feudal agrarian structure of the area which provides food [fuel?] to such an event." Further: "Religion is no consideration among the buyers and sellers [of firearms]. Profit is the overwhelming motive. They have a vested interest in keeping the communal tension going. . . . Another factor that keeps it going is [the] profitability of relief camp operations [*sic*]."<sup>22</sup>

Obviously it is not my submission that economic interests and contradictions are unimportant. However, there is more than a narrowly conceived material interest to the history of our times. Yet some of the most sophisticated writing in the social sciences continues to reduce the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control. The thrust of this writing is to suggest that the "real" battle lies not where it might appear—say, in matters of history or notions of honor, or in the centrality of religion or people's attachment to particular cultural and religious symbols—but in the question of immediate material interests. In the quarrels at this level, furthermore, it is above all the elite groups that count. Let me quote the PUDR report once more: "The major material long term benefit the [rural] elite groups are likely to get from the present riots is land." Or again, regarding continuing tension between Hindus and Muslims in the villages: "One of the major factors contributing to this state of affairs is property, especially land, of those who left their homes. Threats continue to be made by those who have now set their eyes on either grabbing or buying land cheap."<sup>23</sup> But are these threats made by them alone?

Let me reiterate, at the risk of redundancy, that my point is not that land and property are of no importance in bringing about or perpetuating sectarian con-

flict. My point is that the emphasis placed upon these factors often leaves little room for the emotions of people, for feelings and perceptions—in a word, little room for agency.

There is another aspect to this question of agency. The mass of “the people” appear to count for very little in our analyses of “riot” situations. It is economic interests, land struggles, the play of market forces, and frequently elite manipulation that make them occur. “The people” find their place, once again, outside history. By that means, perhaps, their pristine qualities (their “purity”) is also preserved. For the message of much of the writing on sectarian violence in India in recent times is the same as that found in the nationalist histories of the pre-Independence period. It is to suggest that events like Bhagalpur 1989 do not represent the real flow of Indian history: they are exceptional, the result of unusual conjunctures. It is to pretend that their occurrence on the scale and with the frequency that we have seen in the 1980s still makes no fundamental difference to the essential “secularism” of the people and to our cherished national traditions: “secularism,” “nonviolence,” “peaceful coexistence.”<sup>24</sup>

### III

This is, to my mind, an unacceptable history. It is unacceptable not only because it tends to be reductionist and not only because it continues to ply a tired nationalist rhetoric. It is unacceptable also because, willy-nilly, it essentializes “communalism” and the “communal riot,” making these out to be transparent and immutable entities around which only the context changes. In this section, I wish to dwell a little longer on the inadequacies of history writing in this vein.

A point that I have already made but would like to emphasize is that the grand narratives that we produce—and must continue to produce—as historians, political scientists, sociologists, or whatever—tend to be about “context” alone, or at least primarily: the “larger forces” of history that assemble to produce violent conflicts of the kind discussed above. One advantage, or if you prefer consequence, of such narrativizing is that we are able to escape the problem of representing pain. This is a sanitized history with which we are relatively comfortable. In it, violence, suffering, and many of the scars left by their history are suppressed.

It seems to me imperative, however, that historians and social scientists pay closer attention to the moment of violence and try in some way to re-present it in their writings. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the moment of violence, and suffering, tells us a great deal about our condition today.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the experience of violence is in crucial ways constitutive of our “traditions,” our sense of community, our communities and our history.

The scars of such experience are evident, for one thing, in the popular con-

structions of the histories that we live with—the construction of those brutish (or pious) characters that pass for “the Hindu,” “the Muslim,” “the Sikh,” all too often with quite terrifying consequences. I shall not try, in this brief statement, to analyze in any detail the changing self-image of the different religious communities and their constructions of the “other.” A reference to some aspects of the image of “Hindus” and of “Muslims,” as it appears in recent Hindu propaganda, may help, however, to illustrate the importance of the question.

Many observers have pointed to the new heights reached by Hindu militancy and propaganda over the last few years. This has been orchestrated most visibly by the VHP, and it plainly had much to do with the increased frequency and scale of Hindu-Muslim strife in the 1980s. The point that is perhaps not sufficiently stressed, however, is that the violent slogans and demands of organizations like the VHP, and the “riots” they have sparked, do not poison the minds of “the people” only for a moment. On the contrary—given our history, the resources available to “secular” and “communal” forces in the country, the opportunism of most of our major political parties, and the continued and repeated outbreak of sectarian violence—the most outrageous suggestions about the “evil,” “dangerous,” “threatening” character of the “other” community (or communities) come to be widely accepted and part of a popular dogma.<sup>26</sup>

Nothing but this acceptance can explain the kinds of atrocities perpetrated in recent instances of sectarian strife: the call to leave not a single Muslim man, woman, or child alive, which was acted upon in several places in Bhagalpur; the massacre of all eighteen Muslim passengers traveling in a tempo-taxi along with the Hindu taxi driver, when they were stopped on a major country road two-and-a-half weeks after the cessation of general “rioting,” and their burial in a field which was then planted over with garlic; the chopping off of the breasts of women; the spearing of infants and children, the spears with the victims impaled on them being then twirled around in the air to the accompaniment of laughter and shouts of triumph.<sup>27</sup>

What lies behind this insane and incredible brutality, I suggest, is the belief that the victims are real or potential monsters who have done all this and worse to “us,” or will do so if given half a chance. In many cases, the alleged atrocities for which these actions are supposed to be just recompense are believed to have occurred “yesterday” or “the other day,” in “the town” or a neighboring district or further away: in Bhagalpur the rumor that set off the major Hindu attacks in the countryside was that all the Hindu students living in Muslim-owned boardinghouses in a part of the city near the university (many of whom came of course from the villages of Bhagalpur) had been massacred on the first two days of the “riots.”<sup>28</sup> In other instances, revenge appears to be sought for what “they” have done to “us,” generally, in the past. The relevant point is that what appears to many of us as rabid and senseless Hindu propaganda is widely believed.

In one of its more “restrained” forms, this leads to the view that all Muslims in India are “Pakistanis”: witness, we are told, their response in the course of any cricket match between India and Pakistan. Following from this is the argument that local Muslims are out to create another Pakistan, in one place after another—Bhagalpur, Moradabad, Meenakshipuram (Tamilnadu). By this juncture we are well into that realm where “Muslims” are represented as being inherently turbulent, fanatical, violent.

Aggression, Conversion, Unbounded Sexuality: these are the themes that make up the history of the spread of Islam, as told by the Hindu historians and propagandists. “Wherever Muslim communities exist, there will inevitably be a ‘dance of annihilation’ in the name of Islam.” It is the “religious duty of every Muslim” to “kidnap and force into their own religion non-Muslim women.” Several pamphlets and leaflets distributed by militant Hindu organizations in places where strife has lately occurred show a “Hindu” husband and wife with two children (“Ham do, hamare do” [Us Two, Our Two]) by the side of a “Muslim” family—a man with four wives and numerous children, accompanied by the self-explanatory slogan “Ham paanch, hamaare pacchis” (We Five, Our Twenty-Five).<sup>29</sup> Thus a whole new “common sense” develops, relating to the marital and sexual practices of “the Muslims” (here, as elsewhere, referring only to Muslim men), to their perverse character and their violent temperament.

It will perhaps suffice to illustrate the tenor of recent Hindu propaganda, and beliefs, about the Muslims if I reproduce here the substance of just one leaflet that was distributed in Bhagalpur sometime between the last quarter of 1989 and January 1990. Entitled “Hindu Brothers Consider and Be Warned,” the leaflet asks:<sup>30</sup>

1. Is it not true that the Muslim population is increasing, while that of the Hindus is decreasing [*sic*]?
2. Is it not true that the Muslims are fully organized [prepared], while the Hindus are fully disorganized [scattered]?
3. Is it not true that the Muslims have an endless supply of weapons while the Hindus are completely unarmed? . . .
5. Is it not true that the Congress has been elected to power for the last 40 years on a mere 30% of the vote: in other words, that the day the Muslims become 30% of the population, they will gain power?
6. Is it not true that the Muslims will become 30% of the population in 12 to 15 years’ time: in other words, within 12 to 15 years the Muslims will easily become the rulers of this country?
7. Is it not true that, as soon as they gain power, they will destroy the Hindus root-and-branch, as they have done in Pakistan?
8. Is it not true that, when destroying the Hindus, they will not stop to think which Hindu belongs to the Lok Dal, who is a Socialist and who a Congressman [or woman], who belongs to the “Forward” castes, who to the “Backward,” or who is a Harijan [“Untouchable”].

9. Is it not true that the lives and wealth of even those people will be destroyed under Muslim rule, who use today's corrupt politics to make black money and multiply their wealth? . . .
11. Is it not true that, after the conceding of Pakistan the land mass that remained was manifestly that of the Hindus? . . .
13. Is it not true that Hindus [*sic*] are prohibited from buying land or settling in Kashmir, whereas Kashmiri Muslims are free to buy land wherever they want in the country? . . .
16. Is it not true that Christians [*sic*] have their own "homeland"<sup>31</sup> or country, Muslims [*sic*] also have their own "homeland" or country, where they feel secure in every way, but Hindus have not been able to retain their country because under the banner of secularism it has been turned into a *dharmshala* [hospice]?
17. Is it not true that while Hindus are in power, Muslims can live safely, but as soon as the Muslims come to power, life will become difficult for the Hindus—that is, they will be destroyed?
18. Is it not true that all Muslim legislators [Members of Parliament], irrespective of the party to which they belong, spend night and day working to further the interests of Muslims, while there is not a single Hindu legislator in Delhi who sets self-interest aside and devotes himself to the interests of the Hindus? . . .
21. Is it not true that those Muslim women who have been divorced by their husbands are supported through the Waqf Committee by the Government, with funds taken from the Government treasury; which means that for the maintenance and joy- [or lust-] filled lives of the Muslims, the majority Hindu community has to bear an additional tax burden?

If these things are true, then Hindu brothers you must immediately awake—awake while there is still time. And vow to sacrifice your wealth, your body, your all for the protection of the Hindu people and nation and for the declaration of this country as a Hindu nation.

What follows from all this is of course a dread of "the Muslim" and the demand to disarm "him"—by disenfranchisement and deculturization: Muslims should adopt "our" names, "our" language, "our" dress. What follows is the demand that if the Muslims wish to stay in India, they must learn to live like "us." (Who? This is never very clear, but in the circumstances it does not seem to matter). "Hindustan mein rahna hai, to hamse milkar rahna hoga" (If you wish to live in Hindustan, you will have to live like us); "Hindustan mein rahna hai, to Bande mataram kahna hoga" (If you wish to live in Hindustan, you will have to raise the slogan "Bande mataram" [Victory to the Mother]).

Alongside this argument is sometimes found the paradoxical one that "we" shall certainly provide justice to minorities like the Muslims, for, since they are overwhelmingly local converts, it is "Hindu blood (that) flows in their veins."<sup>32</sup> But the central message remains: "Live like us" or, its blood-curdling corollary, face annihilation: "Babar ki santan—jao Pakistan ya kabristan" (Descendants of Babar—Pakistan or the grave, take your choice), a slogan that appears to have been taken literally by large sections of the police and the local Hindu population in Bhagalpur and some other places.

The obverse of this vilification of the “Muslim” is the promotion of a rather different image of the “Hindu” from that which has most commonly been advertised from colonial times to today. The emphasis in this militant Hindu propaganda is not so much on the nonviolent, peaceful, tolerant character of “the Hindus”—though, astoundingly, even that proposition remains. It is rather more on how “the Hindus” have been tolerant for too long; they are “still too timid”; the need of the hour is “not tolerance but courage.” “The Hindus” must now claim, are now finally claiming, what is rightfully theirs. If “Christians” have their own nation and “Muslims” have their own, why should “the Hindus” not have their own nation, their own country, their own state in the only territory they inhabit, where they form an absolute majority, and where they have lived for thousands of years? For too long “Hindus” have been asked to make concessions on the grounds of their “tolerance” and on the plea of “secularism”; they must be bullied no longer, they must make no further concessions. “Garva se kaho ham Hindu hain” (Announce with pride that you are Hindus), and “Hindu jaaga, desh jaagega” (The Hindus awaken, the nation shall awake), the walls of Delhi and other north Indian cities have proclaimed loudly over the last few years.

That there is nothing changeless or sacrosanct about all these traditions, values, images, and self-images associated with particular communities is strikingly demonstrated by the history of the *shuddhi* campaign conducted by the Arya Samaj and other Hindu organizations from the later nineteenth century onward. Lajpat Rai observed in his *History of the Arya Samaj*, published in 1914, that “the Arya Samaj, being a Vedic church, and as such a Hindu organisation, engages itself in reclaiming the *wandering sheep who have strayed from the Hindu fold*, and converts anyone prepared to accept its religious teachings.”<sup>33</sup> The *shuddhi* movement was a direct response to Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism and their efforts at converting low- and, to a lesser extent, high-caste Hindus in the nineteenth century, and the Christian inspiration of Arya organization (into a “church”) and of Lajpat Rai’s language (“wandering sheep” to be brought back by their shepherd) is evident.

Lajpat Rai noted also that while *shuddhi* literally means “purification,” militant Hindu practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had transformed its meaning. It now applied to a range of practices: 1) *conversion* to Hinduism of people belonging to “foreign” religions; 2) *reconversion* of those who had at some stage in the near or distant past taken to a “foreign” religion; 3) *reclamation*, that is, raising the status of the *antyaaj* (depressed) classes and making them fully Hindus.<sup>34</sup>

This redefinition of the Hindu community and of legitimate Hindu practice, and this adoption of “Christian” tactics like conversion, had something to do with the importance attached to numbers in the political and administrative calculations of the regime in late colonial India.<sup>35</sup> As the assertion of community identity

gathered pace at many levels—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Ahir, Patidar, Nadar, Bihari, Oriya, Telugu—and economic and political competition took on new dimensions, militant Hindu leaders and organizations called upon Hindus to give up “perverse” religious notions and practices, the “silly,” “antinational” tradition of caste divisions, the restrictions of inter-dining and on travel overseas, “fantastic” ideas of pollution and the consequent ban on reconversion that ensured that “millions of forcibly converted Hindus have remained Muslims even to this day.”<sup>36</sup> In the 1920s, Arya Samajis and more orthodox Hindu leaders “rediscovered” the *Devalasmrti*, said to have been written a century or more after the Arab raids on Sindh, which prescribed lengthy rules for readmission into Hinduism of Hindus who had been forcibly converted, and in the 1930s the *vratyastoma* rites (supposedly laid down in the *Atharvaveda* and the *Brahmanas*) for readmittance of those who were earlier judged to have fallen out of “Aryan” society.<sup>37</sup> Shastric authority had been marshaled for a new tradition.

What is true of “Hindu traditions,” that they are neither static nor irreversible, is true of the traditions, images, and self-images of other communities. It may also be said to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to what has for seventy years or more been designated simply as a “communal riot.” The changing character and modes of sectarian strife even over this relatively short period need careful study, and it is necessary to emphasize that there is no essential “riot” around which only context changes.

Sectarian violence in the 1980s appears to have taken on new and increasingly horrifying forms. Recent strife between people belonging to different religious denominations has not been restricted to pitched battles on the streets or cloak-and-dagger attacks and murders in side lanes, which were the chief markers of earlier riots. The worst instances of recent violence—Bhagalpur, 1989; Meerut, 1987; the anti-Sikh “riots” in Delhi in 1984; the anti-Tamil “riots” in Colombo in 1983; the Hindu-Muslim “riots” in Moradabad in 1980; and others<sup>38</sup>—have amounted to pogroms, organized massacres in which large crowds of hundreds, thousands, and even, in places, tens of thousands have attacked the houses and property and lives of small, isolated, and previously identified members of the “other” community.

If just one or two deaths occur in an incident now, as a local leader of the Communist Party (Marxist) observed in Bhagalpur, it is not even considered a riot.<sup>39</sup> Attacks on young and old, the blind and the maimed, women, children and infants; the aim of wiping out the “enemy” and hence physical destruction (of lives, property, tools for work, and standing crops) on a massive scale; the unashamed participation of the police; the lynching of “enemy” people found on trains or buses passing through the affected area—all these have become standard features of today’s “communal riot.”

When the lynching of railway passengers first occurred on a large scale in

1947, it was remarked that the country had just been divided; two new states were coming into being which needed time to consolidate their positions; and the armed forces and police had also been split: confusion, serious crime, and violence were almost inevitable. When such actions were repeated in 1984, it was said that a world leader and enormously popular prime minister had been assassinated; when a colossus falls some upheaval, some exceptional reaction, is only natural. Now it has become unnecessary to plead exceptional circumstances when people are lynched or burned alive in the course of sectarian strife: newspapers report these occurrences, sometimes on their inner pages, without special comment.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, all this is not unrelated to other kinds of violence in the society, in other contexts—which also pass quickly from the domain of the “extraordinary” to that of the “everyday.” Consider, for example, the cursory report on the death of five peasant volunteers from Bihar, among the tens of thousands who had streamed into Delhi in order to attend a rally organized by the Indian People’s Front, who were run over and killed by a three-wheeler truck while they were sleeping on a pavement on the night of 7 October 1990;<sup>41</sup> or the reports on recent attempts at self-immolation by school and college students protesting against the institution of reservation in government jobs for people from “Backward Classes,”<sup>42</sup> which quickly retreated to pages 3 and 5 of the national newspapers after their first, sensationalizing appearance in the press—which was of course no less problematical.

The discourse on violence brands events of this kind as “extraordinary” but treats them as completely ordinary, inconsequential, and unworthy of much attention. It is in this context that I turn, finally, to another “fragment” from Bhagalpur that provides a somewhat different perspective on violence, a different commentary on the meaning of “communal riots” today. I present this fragment here not as another piece, or even another kind, of “evidence.” I propose it, instead, as the articulation of another subject position arising from a certain experience (and understanding) of sectarian strife, one which may say something about the parameters of our own subject positions and understandings. In addition, this articulation provides a commentary on the limits of the form of the historiographical discourse and its search for omniscience.

The fragment in question takes the form of a collection of poems written by a college teacher in Bhagalpur, a resident of a mixed Hindu and Muslim, predominantly lower-middle-class locality that was not the scene of any of the “great” killings in 1989 but was nevertheless attacked repeatedly, traumatized and scarred forever.<sup>43</sup> In Manazir Aashiq Harganvi’s poems, written for the most part during the first five days of the violence, we get some sense of the terror and desolation that so many people in Bhagalpur experienced at this time. The poems speak of darkness, of long nights, and of those days and nights that seemed to

run into each other without meaning and without end. They speak of the hysterical screaming that marked that time, screams for help that were however drowned out by the laughter and shouts of the attackers:

Jaan leva hansī  
Bhayanak kakhāhe  
Bachao ki awāzen  
Balwaiyon ke beech  
phansi rah gayeen

[Blood-curdling laughter / Terrifying shouts / (Our) cries for help /  
Lost among the attackers.]

We have pictures here of fields and corpses, and the impossibility of counting them:

Ek . . . tin . . . satta  
Sau . . . do sau . . . dhai sau  
Yeh ginti paar nahin lagegi  
Inhen ginne se pahle hi  
Tum aa jate ho  
Bam aur goli lekar  
Ginti ki tadad badhane  
Lamhe ki rupahli tasveer  
Koi dekhe aakar!

[One . . . three . . . seventy / Hundred . . . two hundred . . . two hundred  
and fifty: / This counting will never end / For before it has ended /  
You come again / With bombs and bullets / To increase the numbers to  
be counted. / If only someone could come and see / The beauty of this  
moment!]

We have a representation of the “wake,” waiting for the darkness to end and some light to begin to appear, but also—and more dreadfully—waiting simply for the attackers to come again.

Dangai phir aayenge  
Aisa hai intezaar

[The rioters will come again: / We wait expectantly.]

Among these poems there are many that talk about rape: a metaphorical statement of the humiliations suffered by a community, or a literal description of events that occurred?

Mar gaye bete mere  
Biwi mari  
Aur yeh beti jise tum saath  
mere kankhiyon se dekhte ho

Beshumar haathon ne loota  
hai ise

[My sons have been killed, / My wife is dead / And this daughter, whom  
you observe / out of the corner of your eyes, / sitting by my side—/  
How many have looted her.]

Like the verse just quoted, there are many others that are addressed to neighbors and friends—or people who were once “neighbors,” “friends.” Neighbors turned killers, people—known and unknown—running away from one another, and people (“all of us”) afraid to look in the mirror for fear of what they/we will see. We have in them appeals, and accusations. We have figures of emptiness:

Kuch bhi nahin rah gaya hai kahin

[Nothing is left, anywhere.]

Aadmi bahut hi bauna ho chuka hai  
Apni lambai ka jhootha ahsas bhi  
baki nahin bacha

[Man has become a midget, / Unable any longer even to delude himself /  
about his height.]

Ham behad khokhle ho gaye hain

[We have been emptied {of meaning}.]

Aadhe-adhure log

[Half people, incomplete people.]

And the endless search for ourselves, our loved ones, our friends:

Khud apne aap ko dhoondte hue  
Ab tum us kinare par hkade ho  
Jahan se koi nahin louta  
Koi nahin laut-ta dost  
Ab to tum bhi nahin laut paoge  
Yaad ki sirf ek shart rah jayegi  
ki jab bhi kahin  
Fasad hoga  
Tum bahut yaad aoge

[In search of yourself / You have now reached that shore / From where  
no one had returned; / No one ever returns, my friend. / Now you too  
are lost forever: / There remains but one condition of memory /  
that whenever, wherever / A riot occurs— / I shall remember you.]

It is a fragment that tells us a great deal about the Bhagalpur “riots” of 1989, and tells us also how much of this history we shall never be able to write.

## IV

Standard historiographical procedure since the nineteenth century appears to have required the taking of a prescribed center (of a state formation, a nation state) as one's vantage point and the "official" archive as one's primary source for the construction of an adequate general "history." The power of this model can easily be seen in the writing of modern Indian history.

This is a procedure that is not easily discarded, both because states and nations are central organizing principles of human society as we know it, and because the historian must necessarily deal with periods, territories, social groups, and political formations constituted into unities or blocs. However, the fact of their constitution—by historical circumstance and by the historian—needs to be borne in mind. The provisionality and contested character of all such unities (the objects of historical analysis) must be underlined.

I should like to suggest, in opposition to the established procedure, that, with all their apparent solidity and comprehensiveness, what the official sources give us is also but a fragment of history.<sup>44</sup> More, that what the historians call a "fragment"—a weaver's diary, a collection of poems by an unknown poet (and to these we might add all those literatures of India that Macaulay condemned, creation myths and women's songs, family genealogies, and local traditions of history)—is of central importance in challenging the state's construction of history, in thinking other histories and marking those contested spaces through which particular unities are sought to be constituted and others broken up.<sup>45</sup>

If the provisionality of our units of analysis needs stressing, so does the provisionality of our interpretations and of our theoretical conceits. The arrogation of "total" and "objective" knowledge is no longer anywhere near as common as it used to be in historical writing. Nevertheless the temptations of totalizing discourses are great. The yearning for the "complete" statement, which leaves out nothing of importance, is still with us. That urge will remain an important and necessary part of the historiographical endeavor. At the same time, however, it would be well to acknowledge the provisionality of the statements we make, their own historicity and location in a specific political context, and consequently their privileging of particular forms of knowledge, particular relationships and forces to the exclusion of others. None of this is to deny the importance or efficacy of certain subject positions in a certain historical context. At the present juncture in India, however, the totalizing standpoint of a seamless nationalism that many of us appear to have accepted as social scientists and historians seems especially inappropriate.

The dominant nationalist historiography that insists on this standpoint needs to be challenged not only because of its interested use of the categories "national," "secular," and so on. It needs to be challenged also because of its privileging of the so-called "general" over the particular, the larger over the smaller, the "main-

stream” over the “marginal”—because of its view of India, and all of South Asia, from Delhi alone.

The PUDR team of which I was a member happened to be in Bhagalpur on the eve of India’s Republic Day, 26 January, in 1990. On the evening of the 25th, we heard extracts from the Indian constitution being read out on the national television: “We, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN, SOCIALIST, SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship . . .”<sup>46</sup> The remoteness of Delhi struck us on that occasion in a way that is hard to recapture in writing.

During the immediately preceding days, we had seen men, women, and children in many areas, carrying little bundles of their belongings, running away from their villages to “safer” places for fear of what might happen on 26 January. It was strongly rumored that on that day of national celebration, Muslims—“traitors” as always—would hoist black flags (or even the Pakistani flag) on their religious buildings and there would be another “riot.” We had seen heated altercations among Muslim villagers and townsfolk, between those who said that running away only added to the alarmist rumors and the dangers, and others who accused them of foolhardiness in the context of “all that has happened.” We had been asked in a relief camp to take down “First Information Reports” and evidence because the police, who should have done this, were themselves the guilty party and, in many cases, still ensconced in office. The words “justice” and “liberty” rather stuck in the throat at this time.

The remoteness of Delhi that I have mentioned is not a function of physical distance alone. I have no doubt that many have felt the same remoteness in Kota and Jaipur, in Meham and Maliana (Meerut), in Tilaknagar, across the river Jamuna from the capital of India, and indeed inside the old city of Delhi itself—where, too, talk of “justice” and “liberty” must often appear callous. We must continue to search for ways of representing that remoteness in the histories which we write.

October 1990

## Notes

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1. See the many reviews of *Subaltern Studies* and of Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), which make the criticism that these works have concentrated too greatly on the moment of open revolt and violence. This criticism fits in with a more general trend in “peasant studies” and social history that has led to the recent emphasis on “everyday forms” of people’s existence and resistance. Cf. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

2. Cf. Lata Mani, "The Female Subject, The Colonial Gaze: Eyewitness Accounts of *Sati*," Paper presented at a workshop on "Culture, Consciousness, and the Colonial State," Isle of Thorns, U.K., 24–27 July 1989, which makes a similar point about agency and the moment of suffering.
3. The same point needs to be made about the kind of historical and social science writing discussed in this essay. I have taken my examples deliberately from some of the best Left and liberal scholars writing today. This is because it is among them, rather than among chauvinist "Hindu," "Muslim," or "Sikh" historians and social scientists, that there is serious debate about "secularism"/"communalism" and the meaning of sectarian violence. It seems to me also that a critique of their writings is not only harder to make but, in terms of building up an alternative to the dominant (chauvinist) political and ideological tendencies in India today, also the more necessary.
4. See, for example, Ashis Nandy, "An Anti-Secularist Manifesto," *Seminar* no. 314; T. N. Madan, "Secularism in Its Place," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 4 (1987); Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920–47: The Land Question* (Calcutta, 1984); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Invitation to a Dialogue," in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 4 (Delhi, 1985); Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990).
5. For a discussion of the peculiar usage of this term in India, see Pandey, *Communalism*, 6ff.
6. Bipan Chandra, *Modern India* (New Delhi, 1971). Page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition.
7. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (New Delhi, 1983).
8. There is no equivalent, for example, to the debates in Germany about the meaning of the holocaust and the whole experience of National Socialism. German historians and philosophers have battled with the question of whether this was a one-time aberration or something produced by a German "national character"; see Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951; London, 1974); Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Germany* (Chicago, 1967).
9. See Muhammad Umar Memon, "Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain" (and the references he cites), *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 3 (1980); Aijaz Ahmad, "Urdu Literature in India," *Seminar*, no. 359 (July 1989); Alok Rai, "The Trauma of Independence: Some Aspects of Progressive Hindi Literature, 1945–47," and Surjit Singh Hans, "The Partition Novels of Nanak Singh," in Amit Kumar Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945–47* (Delhi, 1987).
10. Tapati Chakravarty, "The Freedom Struggle and Bengali Literature of the 1940s," in Gupta, *Myth and Reality*, 329.
11. The strife in Delhi, 1984; Meerut, 1987; Bhagalpur, 1989 have been reported in this way. For a still more recent example, see Tavleen's Singh's report regarding comments on the Gonda riots, *Indian Express* (Delhi), 14 October 1990.
12. The details in the next two paragraphs are taken from the PUDR report *Bhagalpur Riots* (Delhi, 1990), and the notes upon which it is based.
13. While many local people put the death toll at not less than 2000, the official figure for the number of people killed was 414, as of April 1990. The most careful unofficial calculations suggested that perhaps 1000 people lost their lives, over 90 percent of these being Muslims; *ibid.*, 1.
14. I refer here to our own efforts as a team of investigators. Satish Saberwal and Mushirul Hasan also note the "wholly unjustified confidence" of the mass media in the official version of events in recent instances of strife; "Moradabad Riots, 1980: Causes and

- Meanings,” in Asghar Ali Engineer, ed., *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India* (Delhi, 1984), 208.
15. As the PUDR report notes, the support given to its ten-member team by local activists of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) “effectively doubled our strength”; *Bhagalpur Riots*, 70.
  16. It is worth noting that we were repeatedly pressed to go and see those places also where Hindus had been the victims of attacks—notably, a village named Jamalpur and a few sections of Bhagalpur city. We had decided to visit these places in any case, even before our on-the-spot investigations began in Bhagalpur, precisely in order that we might see and hear “both sides.”
  17. *Bhagalpur Riots*, 17.
  18. Ved Prakash Vajpayee, in *Navbharat Times* (Delhi), 19 November 1989 (translation mine).
  19. Ibid. Here is an even cruder example of the same kind of argument: “In India the basic material is very good. I mean, the people. They are honest, intelligent and generous. They are only waiting to be drawn into the national mainstream. What is absent is leadership of the right type”; A. S. Raman, “Leaders to Blame for Communalism,” *Sunday Mail*, 14 October 1990.
  20. *Bhagalpur Riots*, 6.
  21. Engineer, “Causes of Communal Riots,” in *Communal Riots*, 36–37.
  22. Sumitra Kumar Jain, “Economy of Communalism,” *Times of India* (Delhi), reproduced in *India Pakistan Times*, May 1990.
  23. *Bhagalpur Riots*, 32, 37.
  24. I should add that “secularism” and “communalism” are perhaps not the most useful terms to be applied in our investigations of the social and political consciousness of different sections of the Indian people. This is a point that is made by several scholars and also in my book on *The Construction of Communalism*.
  25. A detailed newspaper report on the rape of two nuns teaching at a convent school in Gajraula, Uttar Pradesh, notes that the three rapists, wearing nothing but undergarments, addressed one another as “ustad” and “guru” while they held the nuns at gunpoint; *Hindustan Times*, 23 July 1990. This is the kind of brag commonly associated with young louts found teasing women and girls on Delhi buses and in Bombay films. It is worth pondering the question of how large the step is from this kind of molestation of women to the kind of violent assault involved in rape.
  26. This applies, of course, not only to constructions of the different religious communities but also to stereotypes of different caste and tribal communities as “dirty,” “mendacious,” “turbulent,” “ferocious,” “criminal,” and so on, which have had wide influence since the nineteenth century, if not earlier.
  27. All of these instances are taken from Bhagalpur—see *Bhagalpur Riots*, passim—but the examples could be multiplied from elsewhere.
  28. The rumor was, in fact, malicious and baseless. Most students living in the boarding houses left as soon as the disturbances broke out, if they had not left a little earlier, and many were helped to get away safely by their Muslim landlords. The number of students killed or missing is now computed to be no more than six: of these the bodies of only two students (one Hindu, one Muslim) have been found; *Bhagalpur Riots*, 12. However, in the disturbed and dangerous condition of the city and district in the first few days after the outbreak of violence, many students appear not to have been able to reach their homes directly. During this time, and indeed for long afterward, the story of the massacre of students was neither investigated nor countered by the district

or the university authorities. On the contrary, it was publicized in the press, even aired on the radio (both local and BBC), and was readily and widely credited. It was still widely believed when we visited Bhagalpur at the end of January 1990.

29. See Asghar Ali Engineer, "On the Theory of Communal Riots," in Engineer and Moin Shakir, eds., *Communalism in India* (Delhi, 1985), 62; and leaflets and pamphlets collected by the PUDR team in Bhagalpur. The two preceding quotations in this paragraph are from a leaflet entitled "Bhagalpur ka Sampradayik danga kyon?" issued in the name of the "People of Bhagalpur"; and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, trans. S. T. Godbole (Bombay, 1971), 175.
30. "Hindu bandhuon, socho aur sambhlo," by Dr. Rajeshwar, Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, which is among the leaflets mentioned in note 29 (translation mine).
31. The English word is used in the Hindi text.
32. Cf. A. Shankar, *Chetavni 2: Desh ko khatra* (n.p., n.d.). On some of the logical problems arising out of the declaration that Indian Muslims are converts (forcibly converted) and the descendants of Babar at the same time, see Alok Rai, "Only Bigots Feel That Conversions Follow Invasion," *Times of India* (Lucknow ed.), 13 August 1990.
33. Lajpat Rai, *A History of the Arya Samaj* (1915; New Delhi, 1967), 120 (emphasis added).
34. *Ibid.*, 120n.
35. On the impact of the Gait Circular, which suggested that separate tables be drawn up in the 1911 census for "debatable Hindus," for example, see *ibid.*, 124–25; and Kenneth W. Jones, "Religious Identity and the Indian Census," in N. G. Barrier, ed., *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (Delhi, 1981), 91–92.
36. Cf. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindu-Pad-Padshahi; or, A Review of the Hindu Empire of Maharashtra* (Madras, 1925), 272–73. The words in quotation marks are from Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs*, 154, 188, 192–93, and *passim*.
37. J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayanand Sarasvati: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi, 1978), 170, 322n.
38. For some reports on these, see Engineer, *Communal Riots*; Engineer and Shakir, *Communalism in India*; PUCL and PUDR, *Who Are the Guilty?: Report of a Joint Inquiry into the Causes and Impact of the Riots in Delhi from 31 October to 10 November* (Delhi, 1984); Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar, *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation* (Delhi, 1987); Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (London, 1986); and Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots, Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi, 1990).
39. Interview with Shri Arun, Bhagalpur, 20 January 1990.
40. Budaun and Bhagalpur provide instances in 1989.
41. "5 Rallyists Crushed to Death," *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), 9 October 1990, 5.
42. The protests followed from a government announcement on 7 August 1990 reserving a percentage of government jobs for the "Other Backward Classes," in addition to those already reserved for the "Scheduled Castes and Tribes." For detailed reports on the agitation and protest immolations, see *Economic and Political Weekly*, *India Today*, and newspapers for September–October 1990.
43. Manaazir Aashiq Harganvi, *Ankhon dekhi: Bhagalpur ke bhayanak fasad ko dekhne ke baad* (Bhagalpur, 1989); translations mine.
44. Cf. Antonio Gramsci: "Is it possible to write (conceive of) a history of Europe in the nineteenth century without an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. . . ? One can say, therefore, that [Croce's] book on the *History of Europe* is nothing but a fragment of history"; *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London, 1971), 118, 119. It will be clear of course that I cannot advocate the kind of "objective," "integral" history that Gramsci called for.

45. I might add that, given the very great difficulty, if not impossibility, of translating cultures and consciousness into alien languages, a new historiography also requires a more concerted effort to recover what we continue in India to call the “vernacular” (and also the dialect) in terms both of sources and of the medium of historical debate. Along with that, there is the need to recognize that the “vernacular” may also be the “national,” in more ways than one.
46. Constitution of India, preamble.

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