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## Edward Simpson

### Memory and Earthquake Forgetfulness in India

Earthquakes rupture everyday life. In the process, different kinds of memory practice come to the fore. Some of these may relate to personal loss, others to collective identity, state control of narratives, or the importance of remembering the possibility of disaster for future risk or mitigation planning. Over the last few decades, there has been a great investment after natural disasters in linking memory to heritage or to collective catharsis. Humanitarian organizations and governments have sponsored memory projects, publications, and memorials in the attempt to harness the power and influence of memory for the collective good. In the process, the focus on the importance of memory has obscured parallel processes of forgetting. Memory has perhaps been romanticized and turned into an object of social capital that the dispossessed can take inspiration from, if only given the correct encouragement.

As memory has taken a place in the humanitarian repertoire, indigenous knowledge has been seen as a repository of accumulated wisdom, rather than a hotchpotch of contradictory ideas. Memory has become a stable sociological condition that can be worked with as a resource. In this paper I suggest that memory is central to what happens after disasters, but so too is forgetting, and there is nothing inherently stable or constant about either category.

I conducted research in Gujarat, India, on post-earthquake reconstruction between 2001 and 2011.<sup>1</sup> My attention was drawn to the importance of memory for regional identity, collective struggles, and the ways in which lines were drawn between insiders and outsiders.<sup>2</sup> I followed memorial debates and the ways aid organizations cultivated an awareness of heritage, monuments, and folk traditions, which they felt might otherwise be lost in a rush towards the type of bland modernity fostered by neoliberal reconstruction regimes.<sup>3</sup>

1 Edward Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India* (London: Hurst, 2013).

2 Edward Simpson and Stuart Corbridge, "The Geography of Things That May Become Memories: The 2001 Earthquake in Kachchh-Gujarat and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Pre-memorial Era," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 3 (2006): 566–85.

3 Edward Simpson and Malathi de Alwis, "Remembering Natural Disaster: Politics and Culture of Memorials in Gujarat and Sri Lanka," *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 4 (2008): 6–12.

Throughout the course of this research, memory was a prominent ethnographic theme. Memory brought people together and gave them a sense of belonging and distinction.

The key lesson from that research is that memory politics are vitally important and always contested, and that there can be no quick fix. Efforts to intervene in the landscapes of memory will always produce differences of opinion and disputes over ownership, and provoke the range of emotion from ambivalence to enthusiasm. At the time, however, I thought such efforts were largely misguided and hasty. Looking back, it is now easier to see how these conversations were vital in Gujarat and how new forms of uneasy peace have been created from conflict and disagreement about who had the right to talk and remember. In sum, memory interventions are important and helpful in the longer term—even if, in the short term, the effects are almost inevitably conflict and disagreement.

The same hindsight also makes me more aware of forgetting. In what follows, I describe the repeated collapse of the town of Anjar and the repeated return of its inhabitants to inject new life into the ruins. Each earthquake is also accompanied by other momentous events: 1819 coincides with the consolidation of British colonial rule; 1956 sees Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the great men in the modern history of the country, come to inaugurate a new town at a safe distance from the ruins; 2001 sees the incredible tragedy of 184 school children parading for the Republic killed in the same spot. Despite the potency and poignancy of each of these dramatic events, after each earthquake people gradually return to rebuild in an area that history, if not science, as we will see, suggests is dangerous.

The 2001 earthquake happened on Republic Day, a national holiday. For the nation, it was an occasion to raise the flag and sing patriotic songs. Plates of a geological fault slipped, causing the ground to convulse. Widespread damage to property and life ensued. The worst-affected areas were the towns of Bhuj and Anjar and some other places in Kutch District in the west of the state. These towns had a strong claim on the traditions of the region and this fact was consequential for what was remembered and forgotten. In Anjar, 184 children participating in a parade to mark Republic Day were crushed to death. This loss sat poignantly at the center of the heart-wrenching national tragedy.

The earthquake of 2001 uncovered both material evidence and neglected memories of previous earthquakes. In Bhuj, the inner fortress of the former kings shed its skin of roughly hewn stone, revealing an older and elegantly ornamented façade of marching

elephants and other portentous signs. No one knew of the older structure; it had been forgotten. The bastions had been strengthened following their partial collapse during the earthquake of 1819. The history of forgetfulness vividly displayed by this exfoliation dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century; then, the convulsions of the earth coincided with the arrival of British colonial power and an unorthodox regime change in the palaces of Bhuj—seat of royal power in a provincial but self-contained and influential kingdom.

James Burnes, the surgeon of the establishment, recorded how the earthquake crushed the tyranny and injustice of the old ruler, as a new and better order of things was introduced by the British government. Burnes saw the earthquake as the “hand of Providence.”<sup>4</sup> James MacMurdo, colonial representative in Anjar, ran for open ground. Later, as he wandered the ruins, he observed that half of the town, which is situated in low rocky ridges, suffered comparatively nothing; whilst the other half, upon a slope leading to a plain of springs and swamps, was entirely overturned.<sup>5</sup>

MacMurdo, who clearly had an exceptional understanding of the region, also remarked that there was no tradition of an earthquake of any violence having previously occurred: “The natives, therefore, were perfect strangers to such a phenomenon, and were terrified in proportion to their ignorance.”<sup>6</sup> In 1819, just to be clear, it seemed to MacMurdo and others that previous earthquakes had been forgotten. In a sense, each earthquake was a new thing.

After the earthquake of 2001, there was a new interest in the older disaster. The tragedy of 184 dead children led people to wonder why Anjar was a site of such repeated misfortune. There was also memory of another earthquake in the same location in 1956. Then too, most deaths occurred on the same slopes of the town, just as they had done in 1819.

In 1956, Nehru visited to offer cheer and condolence. He addressed a large crowd: “This and other natural disasters should not dishearten people. They should attempt at utilising the occasion, good or bad, to bring about some good results. The deaths and

4 James Burnes, *Sketch of the History of Cutch from Its First Connexion with the British Government in India to the Conclusion of the Treaty of 1819* (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2004), 66. First published in 1829.

5 James MacMurdo, “Papers Relating to the Earthquake Which Occurred in India in 1819,” *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* 3 (1820): 90–116.

6 MacMurdo, “Papers,” 112.

destruction were a matter of great sorrow. However, the sufferers should rebuild the devastated areas themselves and in a better way. Make them better places to live in.”<sup>7</sup> It was determined that a new Anjar would be built to the west of the old one. Nehru himself laid the foundation stone and the settlement flourished. It was reasoned that the old town was built on dangerous ground. Despite the dangers, the old Anjar also prospered, becoming the town’s principal and busiest bazaar.

After the 2001 earthquake, there were protests in Anjar. People wrote letters in blood and went on hunger strike to prevent rebuilding on the same site. The protesters wanted the government to intervene and to prohibit reconstruction. At first, these protests were large, but gradually fizzled out as compensation schemes and the routines of daily life took over. There was also scientific disagreement about the safety of Anjar, which cannot have aided clear thinking.

One team of scientists concluded: the 2001 event was simply one earthquake too many for the old city, and the difference in damage when compared with neighboring sectors is not an indication of a higher intensity of earthquake impact in the old city.<sup>8</sup> According to them, buildings collapsed because they were old and poorly constructed, not because they stood on a vulnerable spot. According to another team, the patterns of seismic motion had most probably been determined by the “site effect” of Anjar: the shape of the land and conditions of underlying soil.<sup>9</sup> Hence, they concluded that besides the poor-quality buildings, “site effects” (lake-like sediment) also contributed to the collapse of part of Anjar.

Over the years since 2001, first bulldozers, then planners and engineers, and finally family and commercial life returned to the tragic spot.<sup>10</sup> Today, there remain some empty building plots, but the number is only decreasing and Anjar again flourishes in the aftermath of an earthquake.

7 “Mr. Nehru Visits Anjar Town: Quake Victims Assured Permanent Resettlement,” *Times of India*, 19 August 1956, 1; “Opposition Parties Fomenting Trouble: Mr. Nehru’s Charge: Call to Eschew Violence,” *Times of India*, 20 August 1956, 1.

8 Jean-Luc Chatelain, Bertrand Guiller, and Imtiyaz A. Parvez, “False Site Effects: The Anjar Case, Following the 2001 Bhuj (India) Earthquake,” *Seismological Research Letters* 79, no. 6 (2008): 816–19.

9 B. K. Rastogi, A. P. Singh, B. Sairam, S. K. Jain, F. Kaneko, S. Segawa, and J. Matsuo, “The Possibility of Site Effects: The Anjar Case, Following Past Earthquakes in Gujarat, India,” *Seismological Research Letters* 82, no. 1 (2011): 59–68.

10 I documented this in a photographic project between 2002 and 2011. A selection of these images appears in Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake*.