The Historiographical Operation
Memory and History

Can a historical event, such as Partition, be understood as an action that “resulted” from complex, wide forces of history or also as an event continually brought into being by the play of subject memories? A relationship of complementarity exists between the problems internal to history and the demands and desires of memory, so much so that together they form integral parts of a single operation, the historiographical operation. Yet memory sometimes appears the obverse of history making. Human action, as this article remonstrates, sometimes overcomes the bounds of passivity imposed by memory and this is also what determines history.

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The main point (in this chapter) consists, therefore, in denouncing the illusory attribution of memories to ourselves, when we claim to be their original owners.

– Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay ‘Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling’ first appeared in the journal Economic and Political Weekly under the title, ‘Remembered Villages’ (August 10, 1996, pp 21-43). Later it was republished as part of his book, Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies, where Chakrabarty took pains to locate the theme of this essay along with some other related themes in the context of his broader argument about modernity, subjects of modernity, etc. ‘Remembered Villages’ occupies a critical position in the history of cultural studies in India – I am speaking here of the genre of cultural studies, which developed in this country after some social scientists in the name of moving away from a dogmatic version of Marxism left the materialist view of history and politics in the wake of the defeat of socialism in eastern Europe and the former USSR in 1989. ‘Remembered Villages’ became a sort of “cult” feature, and a compulsory item to be cited in the literature on the Indian Partition, in particular the Partition in the east. Some social scientists eulogising this “culturalist” turn, claimed that path-breaking research in combining the theoretical apparatus of the literary and humanist disciplines had become possible with this turn. Chakrabarty has tried to elaborate this point in course of his several essays published in the book. He wants a dialogue on the questions raised, and appeals that history should be seen as “a democratic dialogue with the subaltern”. But to all these associated points we can come to later, to the extent that they are relevant to this particular essay.

‘Remembered Villages’ or the more politically correctly titled, ‘Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling’ tells us of the way some Hindu refugees after coming over to West Bengal remembered their villages, lives, communities, professions, and also remembered the others, the Muslims, who did not have to leave their lands. The essay notes what it describes as the poetry and the pathos of this remembrance, and tells us that the way memory works as in these instances is beyond modern historical scrutiny. Chakrabarty says that his “aim is to understand the relation between memory and identity”, the “shared structure of a sentiment”, “the sense of trauma (after a great calamity such as Partition) and its contradictory relation to the question of the past”. Trauma is memory. In this context, one of Chakrabarty’s principal arguments seems to be that “the narrative structure of the memory of trauma works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative”. According to him, “a historical narrative leads up to the event in question, explaining why it happened, and why it happened when it did, and this is possible only when the event is open to explanation. What cannot be explained belongs to the marginalia of history”. Conceved within a sense of trauma and tragedy, these remembrances do not lead up to Partition. Their recall is of a particular type; they recall the life suddenly terminated there, on the other side, without notice, the communities abruptly fractured, the villages or the ‘desh’ (the country) abandoned in an inexplicable hurry – all that the history of partition cannot explain, and cannot convince the readers who were the sufferers or the victims of trauma. The trauma in short is overwhelming, the event in this case meaningless.

Chakrabarty, therefore, talks of the language of homelessness, which we should presume from his argument is beyond historical understanding. This language is made of a mixture of the sacred and aesthetics, which he claims is a “modern value”, whose elements are patriliny, the idea of antiquity, village connections with nationalist history, and modern secular literary narratives of the beauty of the landscape of rural Bengal. In short, romanticism (a modern phenomenon) leads to trauma and recall. It builds the sacred, reconnects in a particular way with history and nationalism, yet builds in, again in a particular romantic way a pastoral view of life – all of which determine the relation between memory and ethnicity, which will then situate the “other” in an ambiguously opposite pole to this remembering animal, who is the pastoral, romantic, revivalist, modern, forsaken, uprooted, refugee Hindu.

We may ask, historically, who is this figure? What does this figure politically signify? Chakrabarty of course does not ask that. His culturalist explanation stops identifying this figure. Our inquiry can of course begin, as if it were a game, from there. We can then observe this figure’s particular history, that is, the history this figure has created and played a part in, this figure’s limits and potency, the historical trajectory of this figure from a struggling, at times melancholic, ‘bhadrakol’, one drawn to leftist politics in the beginning and subsequently reaching out.
to the revivalist right wing politics of Hindutva later. One can also see the class structure of the particular ways in which different people negotiate the present — some had to go to the distant islands used by the colonial authorities as a penal colony to rebuild lives, some had to go to a completely alien land, dry and arid, to sustain themselves; and some wrote poetry and fiction and non-fiction in course of their salaried lives. We can also see the total metamorphosis of this figure from the romantic-pastoral-idyllic to a consumerist, upwardly mobile, quarrelsome urban inhabitant. This figure of the “pessoptimist”,5 the wailing Hindu Bengali, may be good for literature and sentimental evocation, but without much worth in politics, except as being foot soldiers of certain urban and semi-urban formations. Also, we may contest Chakrabarty’s notion that these remembrances stop short of reaching the event, and we may say the obvious, namely, that these recalls indeed tell us what the “Great Partition” was. In fact similar to the structure of historical explanation, memory too shows a structure to it – lending to explanation, more importantly amenable to being a part of history. Just as earlier memories fed into history, similarly these memories born of the event will feed into the subsequent history that this event will create. This is precisely what critical studies on partition are showing.6 In brief, one can say, the attempt to separate beyond a point history and memory is a failed one, the sign of infantilism that seems to have one can say, the attempt to separate beyond a point history and memory is a failed one, the sign of infantilism that seems to have been able to give us a working definition of modernity, as it does not in the introduction, that only politics makes sense of the binaries, and dialectics though a dirty word these days helps us to see the closure and make an opening.

It is from this political sense that we must revisit the memory-history question, and examine their relationship anew. Historiographical operation is a political process. I intend to speak of that here to put the matter in that perspective.

II

Historiographical operation of course begins with the archive. In archives, for instance on the Great Partition, we shall find hundreds and thousands of letters, memos, reports, notes, diaries, parts of books, pamphlets, manifestos, drafts of resolutions, texts of actual legislative enactments — all these would be constituting the archives, we must remember at this point, are oral in origin, contemporary in nature, and therefore present in sentiment. The professional historian is a reader there, inasmuch as our professional cultural chronicler Chakrabarty is a reader of certain literary texts. That is to say, if this history writing is a modern activity, the authors of cultural studies are equally modern, and we do not want to quarrel; but on many a count, more modern. More than remembering, theorising the remembrance in defence of the apolitical is the most modern of our intellectual pursuits.

However, before we can consult the archive, there has to be archiving of material. Even though hypothetically everything can be archived, only some get through the gates to classify as “archival material”. For the historian if that is a grand deposit, for the cultural studies theorist or the cultural chronicler again only some select texts constitute the chronicler’s archive. Thus, one may ask, why pick up these texts that speak of the abandoned villages, and why not other available ones that remember other things, separate activities — of politics, of families, of dreams, etc, for instance, the remembrances of Mani Singh, or Manikuntala, or Ila Mitra, or indeed of scores of other memorial accounts of those who stayed back with equally potent dreams of a united land?7 In short, what our cultural studies chronicler or the theorist does is analogous to the work of the historian. Only the style is different, and at times, the claim. In any case, we have to remember that to relate a product to a place — and this is what Chakrabarty does — is to envisage history as operation, that is to say as a process, which has these three elements: place (location, profession, or milieu), procedure (analytical way, such as history writing, or cultural chronicle composing), and the construction
of a text (an act of literature). If we consider the operation as a procedure, a process, we are insured against positivism – precisely this was the intention when we said that archiving has to be seen as a part of a critical social activity and process.

Archives produce documentary proof; in the same way that literary texts become the evidence of the cultural theorist. We must be aware of this gesture. This gesture of setting things aside, and then drawing them to this side, that is to the writer’s table, of treating them as a composite material, and then working on them is the way in which the break with oral techniques has been accomplished, and progress has been made from oral testimony. Archives break with the provisional nature of oral testimony. The act of doing history thus begins. The point is: does the cultural studies theorist or chronicler do anything significantly different as an operation? The answer is no. Both want to exhibit proof, both are gestures, both use oral testimonies of what was the “present” to say what was the past.

Yet, the exercise of making this analogy is of minor importance, for we are not in the business of scoring points here. The point is that in studying the victims and actors of the Great Partition, their politics in enacting, remembering selectively, forgetting again selectively, and politically acting on the consequences of the event, we are actually studying an operation – at whose core lie the relationships between testimony, documentary proof, the exercise of writing on that passage, and more significantly effecting through the exercise, the passage from memory to history – an operation which always suffers from the crisis produced by the dual existence of traces and discontinuities. Paul Ricoeur writes, “A crisis of testimony: this is the harsh way documentary history contributes to the healing of memory”. Can we think of then a general crisis of testimony and “declarative” memory? I think this is precisely what has happened today, and this what a group of scholars writing on the history that the Great Partition on the east created has described at length. To be truthful, politics as action is most responsible for paving the way for a general crisis of memory to emerge. For, that then is the time of the overwhelming present.

Partition historiography indeed has a notable lesson for us in this respect, particularly for those of us who are occupied above all with “our modernity”, and following that “our time”, “our epoch”, and “our present”. It once again proves that the main task of critical philosophy as related to history is to reflect upon the limits, that knowledge of history while considering itself to be absolute, would attempt to transgress. Therefore while we reflect upon our modernity, this reflection is the typical of our modern engagements. Dislodged from the shaky state of having to constantly reflect on our modern time, historical criticism moves towards the transgression by way of producing or helping to produce political knowledge. This is important to note, for while the concept of modernity is based essentially on a history of representations, and therefore eternally repeatable in some variable forms (thus our modernity/their modernity, current modernity/past modernity, global modernity/particular modernity, etc), historical criticism supersedes the banality, and produces actions, which transgresses limits produced by memory and creates new “present” times and conditions. Historical criticism offers us new insights into what Pierre Nora calls the “strange places of memory”. Is this a locality? An archive built in mind? The nation? Any other place between history and memory, or, a family, or any other collective – are these the strange places? In any case we have a rupture, a loss, but also the emergence of a new phenomenon, called memory-history. But there is the loss of memory-history also along with the emergence of a history of histories, in other words, the historiographical consciousness. Historised memory kills “pure” memory, and becomes another history. The horizontal view of social bond breaks down. Divisions set in as more and more commemoration takes place of memory. In the era of commemoration, an undiluted political act, the meaning of patrimony changes from one of inherited property to the possessions of who we are. The significance is profound. For that is how the historical nation emerges – the lament of the partitioned people becomes one of the elements of the ethnic core of the nation. Will these places of memory disappear? Judging from the trajectory of the activities of the partitioned people, politics will be largely responsible for contesting the domination of commemorative memory. Of course traces will remain – the archival trace, the psychic trace, and the political trace. But the domination of memory over politics disappears through the operation of history. Declarative memory and procedural memory both point to the lived body, and as Ricoeur says, the lived body finally is an active body that not only commemorates or remembers, but acts and refuses to remain solely an object. This body not only recalls, it also forgets, and then forgives too.

The age of religious wars in Europe (1559-1714) produced in course the modern European state system. Looking back at “our religious wars” (after all the analogy is not very stretched, though national and princely armies were not deployed in our case, thus killings were more haphazard and stopped quickly), we can say that at the end of the countless killings and displacements, the states in south Asia found their shape and location, the borders were more or less durably drawn, religious-ethnic identities of the political formations were clarified, and even though large numbers of people died, populations started growing at the end of the wars, assured of better times. People commemorated independence with some silently living with their memories, and most important, every single participant in these wars, whether Hindu or Muslim or dalit, gentleman or uncivilised, ‘baboo’ or peasant, had this idea that the female sex was inferior – it was a responsibility or burden to be protected, sacrificed, or conquered in those hard times fallen upon the country. And like the witch hunters in the times of the European religious wars the witch hunters in the Great Partition saw no way out of the poverty, disease, crime, war-time famine, deaths, and subordination, etc, except by killing the witches, devils, satans, and infidels, and claiming to cleanse the earth. There the balance stood as far as politics was concerned in 1947. In case of Europe it took a hundred years only for the renewal of wars now in national forms. Memory of past wars was extremely short-lived. In our case, “national memory” into which all these individual memories had been inserted was even shorter in life. War flared up in 1948, and then again and again through the subsequent 60 years. Clearly the imprint of ambiguity that had marked the genesis of the Great Partition as an event was there on the relation between history and memory also, both of which were to be essential ingredients of future politics.

We are in some sense in all these references speaking of the “conditions” of modernity. By conditions in this case I am indicating the relation between war and state making and the way popular collectives have played their roles in this exercise and have viewed their own roles. Broadly speaking and in a general form, we can then say that while the ensemble of the conditions of modernity bolstered by
the bourgeois revolution has not been just a consequence of
conquest by a new class of state institutions, or the organisation
of a new institutional system, it is also a result of two classes
of technologies: first, a group of technologies that has made
possible the mechanical reproduction of everything human (in
this case, reproduction of memory through print publication, or
as Walter Benjamin reminded us of mechanical reproduction of
art and its impact on time and space), therefore expanding the
conditions of human action; and second, a group of technologies
– of power – that make human action less possible, and whose
essential element is discipline, and hence, imposing passive
conduct. Conditions leading to the Great Partition and produced
in its wake demonstrated both the eventualities. This dialectic
of modernity generates a new set of questions that indeed should
have been addressed or at least anticipated by our cultural studies
specialists. Henceforth this dialectic would allow the conditions
of modernity to question the claims of modernity, a point that
Dipesh Chakrabarty misses altogether. As I have indicated before,
we can see a remarkable complementary relation between the
problems internal to history and demands and desires of memory,
so much so that they become the integral parts of a single
operation, the historiographical operation. On one side the burden
of memory crippling human action and reinforcing commemmo-
rateive gestures – an absolute embarrassment for politics, on the
other hand, the historical indications of new activism brought
out by precisely these “conditions of modernity”, that make a
break with memory, and become the coveted moment of politics.
This is precisely what happened during the growth of leftist
politics on both sides of Bengal in the decade following the year
of Partition. Human actions must be therefore considered deeply,
in details, which take hold of the passion of the bodies and thereby
demonstrate their critical power, by which I mean the power to
transgress the limits set by the conditions existing, in this case
limits set by memory.

Politics too criticises modernity, by proposing (of course not
all forms of politics propose that) a critique of modern rule, by
mounting attacks, by taking up themes of representation, par-
ticipation, rights, and justice at their face value and challenging
the internal deficit of modern politics, and organising resistance.
Critical politics therefore operates not on the principle of remain-
ing “outside the modern”, but on the principle of threshold. On
the threshold of thought and action, straddling the original world
of action and the interminable world of failure and death, politics
is the parenthesis of history and sentimentality. It is in this way
that politics envelopes society, generates obstacles to overwhel-
ming power, producing not only macro, but also and more important
micro resistances, and encouraging in the process, an ethics of
dialogism. Politics produces the political subject, who acts in the
plural, whose self is always concerned with relations.

The individual overwhelmed by the labour of memory, reduced
to historical passivity, finally subjecting himself/herself to ruth-
less power (as in the case of Nazism, or Zionism) forms the large,
ill defined, and confused figure of the “average man”, the subjects
of politics. But as I have tried to indicate, this figure marks only
an uncertain phase in politics, though the phase is crucial because
it helps us to understand many later traces and ambiguities. I
have tried to show that this seemingly tragic figure has historical
parallels and historical genealogy. I would like to show further that
the problem of memory as a social defence against change begins
with modernity’s hatred against anxiety, disorders, and what
Foucault called in a different context “the psychiatry of order”.19

Dipesh Chakrabarty asks at the end of the essay, “Subject of
Law and Subject of Narratives”, which is published in the same
book and actually just precedes the one we had been discussing
so far, “Can we imaginatively bring into being modern civil-
political spheres founded on the techniques of the dialogic narrative
even as we live and work through those built on the universalist
abstractions of political philosophy?”20 It is a rhetorical ploy we
are familiar with. Chakrabarty should very well know that dia-
logues are contested conversations, that discourses on cruelty and
tenderness are marked by power configurations, that discourses
do not bring change in an essential sense, and that laws for
the abolition of widow self-immolation and validation of widow
marriage were as much part of the evolving discourse of rights,
dignity, citizenship, dialogues in the 19th century, and modernity,
as his so-called literary narratives were. Literary narratives never
displaced law in politics, just as law cannot displace literary
narratives. But to think of politics, which would be in the nature
of literary narrative and would eschew the obligation and force
of law is not to think of politics, but of literature and culture.
Imagining a civil-political sphere that would rest on a dialogue
on virtues, cruelties, and tenderness, and the discriminate use
of law in reinforcing these virtues is like imagining a sphere without
the dynamics of power, without the presence of those who live
on cruelties, without the mechanisms of force, that is, a sphere
which should not have in the first place any cruelty at all, any
self-immolation by the widows at all and full restitution of
widows. This is the secret desire for harmony, the psychiatry
of order, whose mission to wish away all asymmetries in life, may
be finally by the pathos of abandonment and death.

IV

On that we can wait for another occasion. But clearly there is
a problem, somehow and somewhere in these habitations, not
clearly definable, but clear enough to be pursued. Habitations
of modernity – the problem possibly is not in trying to understand
modernity, but in trying to comprehend it not through its con-
ditions, but through habitations. What is a habitation? Can
modernity at all inhabit anywhere without any trace, any con-
nection, and any transgression? Given that there will remain
traces, connections, and transgressions, the attempt to understand
modernity through its habitations is like locating memory through
locating its locations. In this reflexive exercise, which typically
is a modernist exercise, we are actually reflecting on reflections
– a progressive disappearance of substance in reflections occur-
rings as if a sequential series. Thus Chakrabarty reflects on people
reflecting on the Great Partition, on people reflecting on wid-
owhood, on chroniclers reflecting on cruelty or kindness, or an
ethno-sociologist reflecting on the reflections of the townsfolk
of Benaras on the dirt and squalor of the city, etc. Reflection
in this endless series results in a compact, reconstituted univer-
sality, which becomes the world, the substance, absorbing even
the reflexivity that constituted it.21 Therefore it is not surprising
that we are told that modernity is primarily an attitude; not an
ensemble of distinct forms, and you have to locate the attitude;
and how best can you locate it save in its habitations, that is to
say, by reflecting on how people reflect in these modern times.
Did not Kant reflect on “enlightenment” as an attitude? Did not
Foucault reflect on Kant? And do our theorists not reflect on
our modernity following those illustrious footsteps? In all the
“cases” of reflection (attractive for cultural studies) the “content”
is not a pure given, a self-enclosed entity, the content is all the
time giving way to “void” – the void of Partition, the void of
loss and pathos, void of ruminating, the void created by the lack
of enlightened citizenship, etc – and this void is transforming
into the most appropriate matter for cultural studies. The pursuit of cultural studies is thus a rhetorical art different and distinct from politics, whose only one aspect can be concerned with representations. In cultural studies you are studying attitude, reflecting on reflections; in politics you are studying forms and actions; and in politics as vocation you are acting out.

Yet, we must remember that the urge to study forms to come to terms with modernity (modern forms of exploitation, of commodity production, theft, killing, love, administration, government, law, arts, language use, communication, that is wherever one sees the grid of modern forms typical of bourgeois rule) does not mean that we have done away with signs. Politics too deals with signs, market too conveys its graph through certain signs, popular unrest has signs, emergence of a certain form has some early signs, so has its decay. Signs displace, they create meanings that may have less to do with their original sources, and more to the process of signification, and therefore to themselves. They may thus become forms unto themselves. Studies of Partition thus become studies of signs, they have the value, namely, they indicate how sterile, void, empty, or full politics has become. Like language determining action, signs influence politics. We must, all the more, therefore study the historiographical operation. Michel Foucault wrote in *Death and the Labyrinth*.

Eighth-century grammarians well understood this marvellous property of language to extract wealth from its own property. In their purely empirical concept of signs, they admired the way a word was capable of separating itself from the visible form to which it was tied by its “signification” in order to settle on another form, designating it with an ambiguity, which is both its resource and limitation. At that point language indicates the source of an internal movement; its ties to its meaning can undergo a metamorphosis without its having to change its form, as if it had turned on itself, tracing around a fixed point (the “meaning” of the word, as they used to say) a circle of possibilities, which allows for chance, coincidence, effects, and all the rules of the game. Such a situation creates what we call “tropes”, when words have been turned away from their original meaning to take on a new one, which is more or less removed, but which still maintain a connection. This new meaning is tropological, this conversion or turning away produces the trope, and in this space created by the displacement, all forms of rhetoric come to life, the twists and turns, metaphors, and the repeated invocation of the same word, same sentiment...Readers can see now I hope what I am suggesting in terms of our understanding the Partition narratives, particularly our understanding of the way in which these narratives appear in Chakrabarty’s glass. The original event is far removed, the need to understand it is no longer pressing, or the realisation is now that the original can be understood only through the tropes. Modernity is thus in language and its tricks. Events in the modern glass appear only as displaced meanings. In that labyrinth intoxicated by the pleasure of the search for meanings, one may well say as the poet Faiz said of the verses and the imagery of Ghalib, “the wine of love, fatal to men”...  

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Notes

2 Chakrabarty’s own claim on this is to be found in this book; see, D Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002, p 16. 
3 Ibid, p 33. 
8 The evidence is indeed overwhelming on all these counts, and either one has to be completely dismissive of the political context, as the “cultural studies” usually is, or simply ignorant of the literature. 
9 *Habitations of Modernity*, p xv. 
10 Therefore, while our cultural chroniclers are busy explaining why the “pre-modern” survives with zest in a modern regime, they do not understand why the pre-modern are enthusiastic about the modern. Think of the Nagas, accused of head hunting even in the fifties of the last century appeared in London around the same time in modern suits and costumes in order to present a petition to the British government. 
12 I have written at length on these accounts in *Paradoxes of the Nationalist Time – Political Essays on Bangladesh*, University Press, Dhaka, 2002. 
14 Memory, History, Forgetting, p 180. 
16 One appropriate example of such painstaking historical work, Gargi Chakravarty, *Coming Out of Partition – Refugee Women of Bengal*, Bluejay Books, Delhi, 2005, even though she also mentions Chere Asha Gram. 
20 *Habitation of Modernity*, p 114. 
21 In this case Chakrabarty is at the high point of generalisation, because villages of indigenous people in India – outside and inside – are generally clean, clearing the objects to them is like cleaning the body, and if the gaze on dirt is a question of citizenship, they are as much citizens of the country as the townsmen are; and they too want to prolong life as other subjects of “modernity” want. One is at a loss as to how to treat such generalisations arrived with fragmentary sights; the puzzle is more because why do products of fragmentary sights lead always to generalisations? 