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The rise and fall of collective public action in the aftermath of the Gujarat Earthquake of 2001

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Seats removed from the damaged public auditorium in Anjar following the Gujarat Earthquake (Photograph Edward Simpson 2003).

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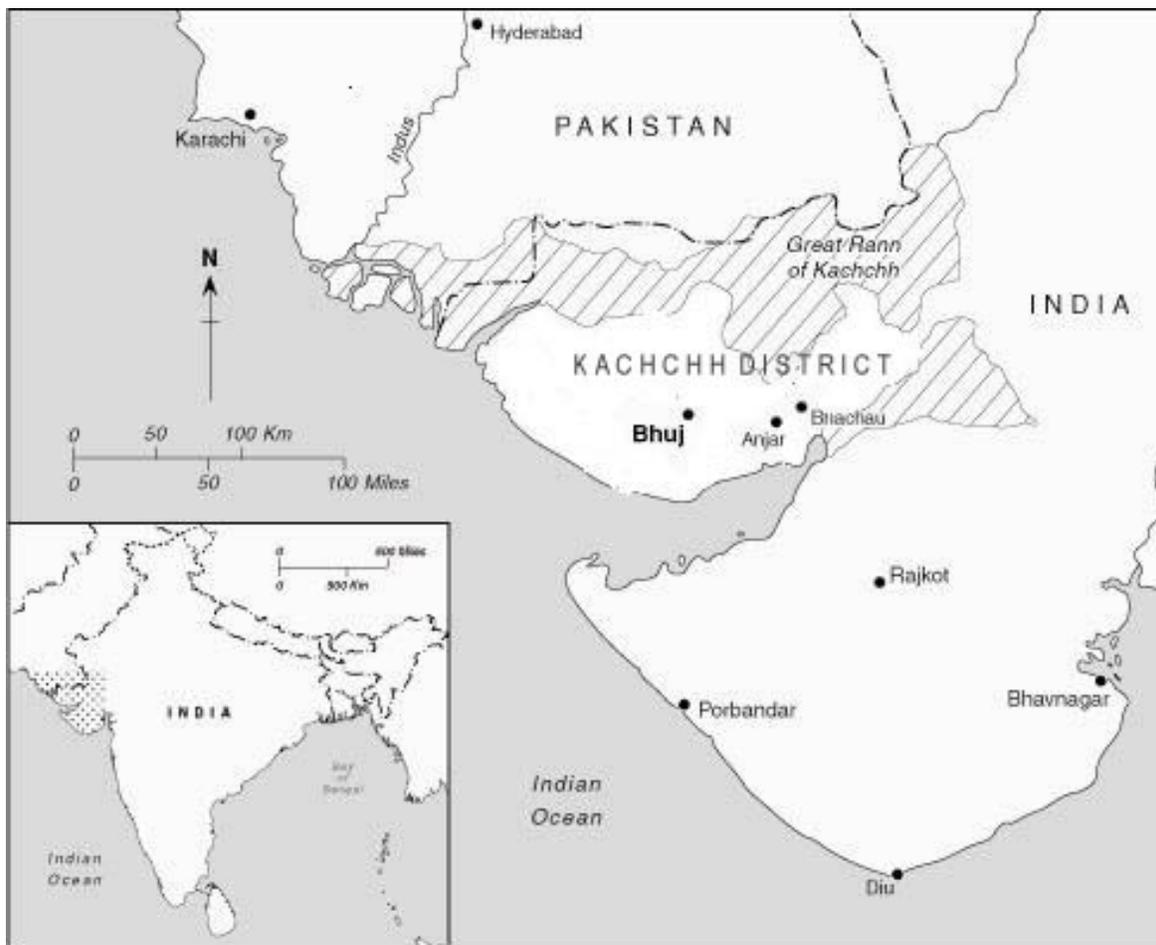
Abstract

In the aftermath of natural disasters there is typically an upsurge of collective public action and protest. Individual concerns inter-mingle with collective endeavours in both traditional and new ways. This article explores such collective forms of public action in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, and the role of nostalgia as a mobilising political force in particular. Nostalgia emerges as both a creative and cathartic force, but its effects on public action are short-lived. It is argued that nostalgia has a short life span not simply because the disaster moves into the past and new concerns come to the fore but because the changing dynamics of the relationship between individuals and social collectives make nostalgia an unsustainable form of collective representation.

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Introduction

January 26th is Republic Day in India, a national holiday. The celebrations of 2001 marked the 51st anniversary of the implementation of the Indian Constitution. Throughout the country, ceremonies were taking place and children were parading through the streets waving the national flag. In Kachchh District, in the far west of Gujarat (see Figure 1), everyone can remember where they were and what they were doing on that particularly ill-fated morning.



The authors are not responsible for the accuracy of administrative boundaries.

Figure 1. Map showing location of Kachchh District.

Some thought the unusual rumbling they could hear was caused by passing helicopters, some thought it was a distant flour mill and others thought that war

had broken out again with Pakistan and bombs were raining down from over the border. At 8:46am an earthquake struck taking with it the lives of some 14,000 people, most of the dead were from Kachchh and 2,339 of these fatalities were in Bhuj where most of the fieldwork for this paper was conducted.

I had conducted doctoral fieldwork in Kachchh before the earthquake and made a number of close friends in Bhuj, the district capital. I returned to Kachchh in 2002, and since that time have spent a further sixteen months with them and with other people researching various aspects of the post-earthquake reconstruction. This time has been as challenging as it has been interesting. Thousands of people still carry the physical and mental scars left by the disaster, although, often, I feel these healing wounds are only indirectly visible – seen for example in the tenacious pursuit of hobbies, routines and other activities such as political protest. The air is often heavily laden with pessimism, and sometimes hypocrisy.

In this article, I explore the rise of politicised regionalism after the earthquake in Kachchh. Politicised regionalism was itself, arguably, an occupation pursued so as to disguise other wounds and inadequacies. In a broader sense, this article is about memory and the role of nostalgia in societies affected by disaster. The ethnography is primarily derived from urban caste Hindus who own property recognised by the state. Although this sample has obvious shortcomings, the popular movements discussed here had a wider support base.ⁱ

The narrative of the paper is straightforward: after the earthquake grief and blame found expeditious and cathartic expression in the pre-existent structures of identity and party politics, which culminated in a call for Kachchh to be made independent from Gujarat. This political coalescence was a form of collective nostalgia for the unique identity of the district (however thus conceived). In this instance, nostalgia emerged directly from the loss of the ways and places of life

before the disaster, but it was also, fundamentally, inseparable from the alienating vicissitudes of a post-disaster boom economy and the phenomenal growth of the state, a growth that went hand in hand with reconstruction. In many ways, it was not the destruction of the earthquake that made people nostalgic, for this was simply too sudden, absolute and difficult to comprehend; rather, it was the process of putting things back together again, and the attendant reflections upon how this should be done, in which nostalgia was to play a creative political role, at least for a while.

The literature on nostalgia suggests that it thrives as a form of collective action (see Davis 1979: 49) and, as such is a unique form of reciprocal interaction between individuals and social collectives. After the earthquake, nostalgia certainly flourished as a form of collective action, but it also subsequently failed, or at least receded. It is tempting to conclude that nostalgia can only be a temporary or short-lived form of political mobilisation, its coalescing powers simply having run their natural course. However, I wish to give a more sociological explanation to the decline of nostalgia: simply, the relationships between individuals and social collectives were broken down by the steady tide of events in the years after the earthquake. Or, to put this in stronger terms still, the interests of individuals and the collectives that had come to represent them grew to be incompatible. Such incompatibility is most clearly seen in the decline of the regionalist protest movements I have already mentioned, and although it was undoubtedly present in one form or another in other spheres, it is these protest movements on which I wish to focus.

The narrative of this paper then, takes us through the familiar sociological terrains of alienation and group dynamics to arrive at a point, harder to describe in such conventional sociological terms, where some individual and 'collective' memories and actions (two manifestations of nostalgia) are not only incompatible but belong

to different orders of things.ⁱⁱ In other words, in the aftermath of this earthquake, very good reasons emerged why individuals did and then did not donate grist to collective mills. Why this should be the case is not only interesting for a sociologist, but should also be of interest to those working in the field of post-disaster reconstruction more generally.

Social Theory and the Earthquake

In France, in the early 1940s, the age of Holocaust, Maurice Halbwachs posed what now seems an extraordinary question. He asked: 'What would happen if all the members of my family disappeared?' (1992: 73). The question was part of his attempt to show that collective memory is not natural, nor is it part of a mystical group mind, but is always partial and socially constructed (also Halbwachs 1980). He suggested that individuals carry collective memories; there are as many collective memories as there are social groups; and memories of the same fact can thus be placed in different social frameworks because individuals are part of more than one group (see Connerton 2004: 36–40). Halbwachs also saw that memories are brought together as forms of association only by the various ways in which people can also become associated (1992: 53). Individual memory is therefore part of collective memory because we cannot think about it without the use of other thoughts which have come from the social milieu. In this way, the framework of collective memory binds our most intimate of remembrances to one another (1992: 53). For Halbwachs, then, should his family have disappeared, he would for a short while retain the habit of attributing meaning to their first names, and act as if the influence of the group pressure was still upon him. He may even have found unknown persons who once knew his kin, for whom their first names would still preserve a meaning. Yet, according to him, the dead retreat into the past not because of the measure of time that separates them from the living but because nothing remains of the group in which they passed their lives; the group, that is, that *needed* to name them. With the exception of what he calls 'fictitious' contacts through cults, the individual who stubbornly repeats the names of the dead will soon experience universal indifference.

There is a vast body of work on different kinds of memory, trauma, and memorial devices written after Halbwachs.ⁱⁱⁱ In some of this literature, Halbwachs is treated as an historical figure worthy of a footnote; others characterise his project as a

parallel but less successful venture to the work of Bergson (2004) and Freud (1924) on internal individual memory processes. Halbwachs is also often seen as relying on the idea of a super-collective mind derived from his mentor Emile Durkheim. It is a shame, however, that Halbwachs' work should be so regarded because, as an example of *Annales* sociology, it is outstanding (see Coser 1992) in that it discretely points to the limits of the concept of a super-(collective) organic mind by showing how such a mind exists only in individual and group interactions. For sure, there are some quite valid criticisms of Halbwachs' analysis, including his zealous separation of autobiographical and historical memory and his anguished conceptualisation of family and peasantry (the two principle examples he used to make his case in 1992). However, more importantly, Halbwachs (along with many later writers) pays too little attention to the mechanisms of the mediation or what Paul Connerton called the 'characteristics of transfer' (2004: 39) between individual and collective memory, a point also suggested by Antze and Lambek (1996: xx).

Following Halbwachs' general lead the following pages explore some of the cross-over points between individual and collective memory in post-earthquake Gujarat. I draw on Halbwachs for this task not simply because I think he has been generally misunderstood or because, like others (notably, Parry 1986, 1994), I see some general compatibility between *Annales* sociology and the study of Indian society, but rather because his style and the stark nature of the questions that drive his writing easily translate into the absolute and dramatic losses of my friends and informants in Gujarat. The visceral nature of his question places it on a high plateau from where the ridges and hillocks of other arguments fall away but can still be scrutinised from the clear vantage he offers. Given such a view, I hope the following mundane observations will be allowed to pass without further remark: not everyone has the same memory or memories; what people remember

is malleable, invariably politicised, can be altered, and was subjectively acquired and *re*-presented.

In the prevailing discourses among the regionalists in post-earthquake Kachchh, individual and collective were often seamlessly linked by the socio-cosmic terms of kingship and power. Notions derived from the Hinduism of kings and Brahmins (such as ritual protection, territory and rule) have been collectively presented as if individuals were inextricably bound to the region (and the town at its core) by a series of mutually resembling and interconnected, but also hierarchically distinguished and ranked, components. Social hierarchies and the accompanying distribution of rights and privileges, therefore, had a spatial, temporal and ritual representation in the form of the town itself, which centred on the figures of the former kings and the myths surrounding their rule. Other ideas, however, notably those concerned with personal relationships and death, suggest an irreconcilable distinction between individual and community (or collective). Therefore, I suggest that the initial collective opposition to the state (specifically, to the Government of Gujarat) based on the first set of somewhat 'nationalistic' ideas (I will explain what I mean by this later) floundered as the individuals in the collective entered into autonomous pacts with the state they opposed, and as their interests and patterns of collective action grew increasingly fragmented both from internal and external pressures.

The main body of the article is divided into two sections. Halbwachs resides in both and is firmly resurrected in the conclusion. The first section recounts a loose chronological sequence of the narratives about the earthquake. These narratives are generally those I heard most frequently and they provide a sense of what happened and how the pressures and conflicts among the affected have altered as the earthquake recedes into the past. This account starts with the earthquake and moves on to describe a series of regionalist protests against the government

of Gujarat about the perceived mismanagement of reconstruction activities. The second section of the article narrows in focus to conceptions and expressions of nostalgia in the post-earthquake years. Drawing on the work of Bryan Turner (1987) and others, I discuss first how a general sense of historical loss after the disaster and the intervention and phenomenal growth of state bureaucracy alienated the survivors and spawned the possibility of regionalist protests based on certain nostalgic visions of the historical past. I then explain why the regionalist movements petered out by looking at the longer-term consequences on society of widespread death – the fragmentation of many moral certainties and the collapse of particular kinds of meaningful social networks. These social networks, by which I mean nothing grander than those formed of friends and acquaintances, had allowed for the creation and objectification of collective memory (in Halbwachs' sense) and collective action (such as campaigns for regional autonomy). As such networks collapsed, the sense of collective has grown faint and people have had to ask themselves what they want the future to look like – a question that is surely as salient in most small towns in South Asia as it is in Bhuj.

In the years after the earthquake, there has been a convergence of the ways different people publicly narrate their recollections of the disaster. Generally, people proffer personal accounts of where they were, what they were doing, who was lost to them and a catalogue of some of the horrors they witnessed. A surprising number of survivors I spoke to were in the bathroom at the time of the earthquake, and this fact has given rise to a certain amount of toilet humour about the disaster. More generally, people readily bring to mind images of their highly disrupted town, the collapsed buildings and the panic on the faces of others. These accounts then tend to give way to a series of standard observations about the months that followed – some of which I heard from quite literally hundreds of different people. Two things strike me about these standard narratives: the first is that they are highly depersonalised, as if the narrator is content to use the thoughts and observations that have taken root as a form of collective narrative;

the second is that they stress very normal things such as buses and police stations behaving in abnormal ways.

Before I turn to describe these narratives, however, two methodological points should be made in order to describe the perspective taken in the material that follows and to aid the reader to recognise the various kinds of data presented. First, my focus is on some of the ordinary people of Bhuj who experienced the earthquake and its aftermath. Their experiences and narratives of the disaster generally differ quite dramatically from the impressions garnered by others reading newspapers, reports, and government publications in faraway places such as Ahmedabad or New Delhi; it thus follows that their *post-hoc* rationalisations also take different trajectories. It also follows that the nature and focus of the material presented here, as a piece of anthropological writing, is of quite a different order to other accounts written about the earthquake as commentaries on disaster response, policy design, and the effectiveness of reconstruction initiatives; this article is in no way a commentary on these issues (for that see Simpson 2007). Secondly, drawing upon Jenkins' (1994) description of anthropological purpose and method, I start with standard narratives of various kinds about the disaster (the kind of story people would tell unknown researchers if asked in an interview situation), but then move beyond such words to explore the motivations and areas of knowledge that are simply hidden from view by these 'standard' accounts of what happened. This is what competent anthropologists generally consider to be ethnography. This form of ethnography is quite different to simply interviewing notables, trained representatives of identifiable NGOs, and 'victims'. The anthropological method takes time, patience, and is informed by a great deal of complementary local knowledge. It is only in the realm of social interaction accessible through ethnography that the incompatibilities between individual and collective concerns are revealed. I stress this elementary point of disciplinary methodology simply because I have presented earlier versions of this

paper to large number of non-anthropologists who seemed to have very ill-informed ideas about what ethnography is.

The shared narratives of the earthquake commonly recall that trees were left standing eerily amid the rubble and that dogs fled the town. In Bhuj, many told me with a chuckle about the convicted murderer who had walked free from a mental hospital to help the injured to safety. Idols were shifted from temples and placed in the safe custody of the police. The postal service was unable to deliver letters to houses that no longer stood, addressed to people who no longer lived. The government opened its coffers and freely distributed money in the form of emergency cash doles to all, regardless of their need or status. A temple in which the names of the god Ram had been publicly chanted day and night for eighteen years closed its doors, its congregation silenced. Of the troubled weeks that followed people recall hijackings, violence, embezzlement, favouritism and discrimination in the distribution of relief materials, and the name of a doctor who used an emergency relief tent to keep dust off his car. Astrologers and seismologists predicted further tremors; some of the former were arrested for rumour mongering. The government started to operate free bus services into, and throughout, the district. It is said that this policy brought unknown and frightening faces in search of booty. Elsewhere, fresh water was seen to burst forth from the land and salt water emerged from a cemetery in the village of Faradi. K.K. Shastri, leader of the Vishva Hindu Parisad (VHP), opined that the presence of sweet water in the soils of Kachchh was a sign that the mythical Saraswati River had resurfaced after five thousand years.

The highly influential local newspaper, *Kachchh Mitra*, had shifted production to its publishing group's offices in Rajkot immediately after the disaster. Looking through their back issues from after the earthquake, it is clear that the authoritative tones in which they wrote about the earthquake had left the page

and had entered everyday conversations. On the third page of the issue it produced on the 29th of January (the first edition after the move to Rajkot), the earthquake was described as “*tandav*” – Shiva’s dance of destruction or death. Two days later, the paper observed of Bhuj: “the town, like a ghost, is beginning to stink” (*Kachchh Mitra*, 31.1.01). A front page editorial asked, “Why is the God of Death Yamraj [elsewhere in the paper, Kal Devta] so annoyed with Kachchh?” and, “Why after two years of drought has Kachchh given its children death instead of water?” I heard these turns of phrase frequently in relation to the earthquake, and on a number of occasions people referred me directly to the newspaper both as a means of discovering out what ‘really’ happened and as a way of stressing the scale of the tragedy (for parallels see Perez-Lugo 2004). Many recall the endless pages of printed death notices as private losses were announced publicly.

Later, the newspaper was to play a central role in the larger protest movements against the Government of Gujarat, but in those early weeks it printed angry and bewildered commentaries criticising the government and building contractors for the high-rise buildings in which many fatalities had occurred. These stories later became part of the pressure for court cases against builders, and contributed to the lynching of a wayward contractor and a sustained campaign to lop off all floors over the fifth of those buildings which had survived the earthquake. In a later editorial, some two weeks after the earthquake, the newspaper stated “multi-storey culture and cement and concrete jungles are not part of our history” (*Kachchh Mitra*, 13.2.01). Only five days after the earthquake, when corpses still littered the ground in the old court area of Bhuj, the newspaper printed pictures and descriptions of collapsed local heritage buildings: the cremation memorials for the former kings of Kachchh, the palaces and the town’s ancient gates, walls and temples (*Kachchh Mitra*, 31.1.01). Thus, from the beginning, even before the intervention of external agencies, there was spontaneous and important talk of

heritage and identity, and the terms in which the earthquake was to be discussed in the future were established.

These general kinds of narratives have clearly gone some way to creating a shared experience of the disaster – even if actual individual experiences were highly disparate. In their telling, these narratives have been recorded, documented and published not only by other journalists but also by film makers, lawyers, doctors, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on health, counselling and rehabilitation. In the process they have become news, public culture, case notes, legal cases (notably those relating to property and compensation), NGO publications and the writing of social science – and in a sense part of a collective narrative which will, I suppose, eventually acquire a history. They have passed, quite simply, from being the words of a single public speaker or the text of a journalist to form part of a set of discursive tools with which the earthquake can be discussed without reanimating the worst of its horrors.

Conversely, however, as the relief operations gradually turned into longer-term rehabilitation programmes, outside agencies brought with them their own agendas as they sought to consolidate their position in Kachchh. In this way, the various ideologies of nationalism, ethnicity and religious legitimacy that accompanied the arrival of NGOs were given to the local population along with material resources. These ideologies have been incorporated into the designs and names of new settlements and have thus become linked to popular narratives and ceremonies (see Simpson 2004), then to newspaper accounts and to official histories, museums, memorials and ceremonies. These in turn are linked to theories propounded by politicians, and indeed by academics as well.

I started this paper with a discussion of the work of Halbwachs who asserted that there are as many collective memories as there are social groups. I now wish to explore the possibilities of this idea in relation to the earthquake material. The narratives discussed above might belong to a collective memory of – let us say -- the Bhuj citizenry, but, as Halbwachs had also pointed out, since individuals are part of more than one group. Memories of the same fact can be placed in different social frameworks. It also follows that different communicative groups can have different kinds of memories; thus, various religious groups in Kachchh developed different causal explanations for the earthquake which cast blame for the disaster on the decadence or failings of other communities. For example, some orthodox Sunni Muslims claimed that other Muslims, notably those associated with reformist groups such as the Ahl-e-Hadis and Tablighi Jamat, had suffered higher casualty rates because they had spurned the protection of traditional local saints. Similarly, within the setting of a caste or religious community (for want of a better word), narratives about social justice and the distribution of resources took on decidedly barbed tones, again apportioning blame to other communities, the government, or, indeed, to particular sections of the same community. I do not, however, want to give the impression (as Halbwachs arguably does) that the only spaces in which collective narratives were established were within pre-existent communities with shared interests, because clearly the regional protest movements (to which I come later) were born from new kinds of temporary alliance (read Halbwachs' 'group') that were only made possible in the devastation wrought by the earthquake.

Immediately after the earthquake there was a scramble for the rights to give, distribute and receive short and long-term aid as well as succour and leadership. This was intimately connected to prevailing patterns of Hindu nationalist politics, religion and nostalgia in Gujarat, as well as among the sizable international diaspora of Gujaratis. In Bhuj the disruption of this period is often called the

'second earthquake' as the Government of Gujarat acted indecisively and inconsistently. The cumbersome scale of its bureaucracy led many to liken the government to a faceless monster. The complexities of urban reconstruction, the sheer size of the task and clear divisions in popular opinion contributed to further delays in government action. There were some who thought Bhuj should be built anew in a different location; others favoured rebuilding it the way it had been where it was. As the months wore on, concern rightly shifted to temporary shelters, the implications of having lost documents relating to property and finance and the lack of governmental coordination. Later, it was formal planning considerations, policies for rubble clearance and disposal, equitable levels of compensation and taxing questions about the rights of tenants and apartment owners that preoccupied many. There were surveys and resurveys, and a perplexing system of damage classification was introduced which was pegged to levels of compensation. In response to each issue, the public came together in various ways to protest and to demand what they considered their due. New forms of collective action came to the fore. Former tenants and apartment owners, for example, formed groups, the membership of which cut across all previously locally known patterns of social differentiation.

Later still, there were questions about permanent housing, infrastructure, the shape of new towns and villages and the fear of high levels of taxation as the government attempted to compensate for the various emergency tax breaks and its high levels of borrowing from development banks. The result of all this is the most pervasive of all collective narratives: many poor people got rich and many wealthy people were impoverished. Although it is tempting to take this narrative at face value, with the benefit of hindsight I now take it to mean that the social order was disrupted and that the things that people were thought to represent could no longer be taken for granted.

By the middle of 2001, the Government of Gujarat implemented legislation for the creation of Area Development Authorities (ADA).^{iv} In essence, this provided the government with the legal right to alienate the people from what they considered inalienable, their property. In Bhuj, the public consultation and draft planning exercises were handed to an outside private agency which used English as its working language.^v

The implementation of the plans was through the local Bhuj Area Development Authority (BHADA). In line with the policies of the development banks that were financing reconstruction, this private agency was keen to create a participatory planning process at both conceptual and developmental stages. The public consultation exercise proved to be very successful, but not perhaps in the way intended, and gave space for people to articulate their private interests in the sentimental language of collective nostalgia. Large numbers of people found good reason why their homes should not be destroyed and used the language of heritage and 'shared identity' fostered by planners and development banks to explain their case. It appeared to many as if the government were taking away property to make way for new roads and 'modern development' without compensation; this caused widespread anxiety and resulted in a number of suicides. To an extent, the utter tragedy of these suicides stood as a metaphor for the popular perceptions of maladministration and alienation. Gangs of private contractors, mostly from distant parts of northern India, descended on the town at night with monstrous machinery and hoards of (supposedly) wild and unruly labourers from Madhya Pradesh to demolish what remained of the old town and make way for new roads. These processes became known as 'cutting' and 'town planning', or simply as 'TP' (again, English words are used for the traumatic process). Mosques, temples, and community buildings fell at night amid clouds of dust and the harsh glare of arc lights.

For many people, the three years after the earthquake were full of uncertainties and worries. Perhaps one of the most eloquent summaries of this toughest of times was given to me by Haresh, the manager of a bank in Bhuj. He claimed that although the earthquake took thousands of lives, the aftermath had slowly killed many more. He suggested that the tensions of life after the earthquake had eaten away at peoples' brains, and steered them quietly towards premature death. He saw in his bank how people worried about money, where they were to live and how to get what they were entitled to from the complicated machinery of the government. 'Tension' (also an English word, commonly used in Gujarat) is life threatening, more than mere stress. Its more dangerous forms are caused by the separation of the body from its familiar habits and routines. Financial and physical insecurity, the uncertainty of government plans, the predations – especially at night – of what became known as the *saat bagari* (the seven crows: contractors, engineers, demolition crews and the like), and the uncertain future have preoccupied people, in Haresh's view, to the point of distraction, and later to death.

I do not wish to suggest here that anxiety was solely about the lack of money, because for many people there was also an unfamiliar superabundance of cash which often took them into perilous new worlds of consumption. Those who had regularised property but had previously scraped by on low wages suddenly had tens of thousands of rupees in the bank from government compensation schemes. The money was, of course, intended for new housing, but agencies selling motorbikes and television sets prospered. For others, cash sums from insurance companies and the government came at a very high price: the loss of relatives and/or body parts. Many, encouraged by an emergent class of brokers profiting at the interface of the people and the newly enlarged state, also made false claims for compensation and for enterprise grants. Two years later, government audits revealed some of the false claims and many beneficiaries, having spent the money on luxury goods, faced the worry of further debt or

imprisonment as well as the problems associated with a lack of funds for the construction of a permanent shelter. There were other changes afoot too. Widely discussed in Bhuj was the statistic – of unknown origin – that for every person in Kachchh an astonishing seven hundred thousand rupees had been spent on reconstruction. Four lane highways now skirt Bhuj; an enormous ‘quake proof’ hospital, built with funds from the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund, struggles to find suitably qualified staff who are willing to live in Kachchh; meanwhile, tax breaks were set for a minimum of five years for heavy industry willing to locate in the area. This new industry and the construction boom have attracted thousands of contractors and labourers from other parts of India. It is now common to hear Hindi spoken on the streets of Bhuj (it was not before), and new hotels, restaurants and cyber cafés compete to win the business of the immigrants.

Three years after the earthquake I was told by a medical doctor involved in agitations against the government that:

What we see now is a Marwadi *seth* [boss, capitalist] opening factories or heavy industrial plants here. He of course employs Bihari or Orissan labour and they come and create ‘minority communities’ in Kachchh Right now, the land of Kachchhis is being taken away and their resources utilised by others. Kachchhis have learned to tolerate this injustice.

Meanwhile, the English word ‘mugging’ entered the local vocabulary as levels of crime, and certainly people’s fear of crime, rose dramatically. Local people unerringly blamed poor migrant labourers from other parts of the country for a spate of burglaries and lootings. A general impression was created that Kachchh was simply invaded by lawless foreigners without the locals putting up so much as a fight, though it is worth pointing out that by March of 2001, less than two months after the earthquake, ‘People’s Rehabilitation Committees’ had been formed in the principal towns of Kachchh. In Bhuj, the District branch of the Congress Party handed a memorandum to the local administration accusing the ruling Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP) Government of 'unpardonable negligence'. This action sowed the seeds of malcontent, and popular protests came to dominate all future anniversaries of the disaster. On the first anniversary, a group of elite citizens raised an unusual inscription, an inscription of failure, which read:

We deserve to be condemned forever.

We the people who have been suffering from the effects of the earthquake for one year in Kachchh meekly announce on this 26th January 2002, the 52nd Republic Day, that we have not experienced any empowerment because after 54 years of Independence we do not have competent, honest leaders who may be able to rescue us from rampant corruption, they have failed to develop a compassionate bureaucracy.

We are placing this inscription as an admission of our gross failure for the guidance of our future generation[s] so that they take a cue from our utter failure to make our motherland a better place to live.

Inevitably, given the scale of the destruction left by the first earthquake, the bureaucratic machinery of the second 'earthquake' was frequently exposed as inadequate. This led to accusations of nepotism, cowardice and inefficiency against bureaucrats and elected politicians. Undoubtedly, many of these claims contained elements of truth; others were solely inspired by personal ambition, political opportunism or sheer rage. In the flurry of transfers, additional deputations, corruption scandals and policy changes, a number of widely-supported calls were made for Kachchh District to be granted political autonomy from Gujarat.

Some called for the return of the pre-independence monarchy; others demanded a return to the supposedly glorious days in the 1950s, after Independence, when Kachchh was ruled from New Delhi before it became a peripheral district in the state of Gujarat. Others simply asked that the national government should take

charge of reconstruction to save Kachchh from the insensitivity and corruption of the Government of Gujarat. All shared the concern that the 'outsiders' governing and reconstructing the land had no clue about local conditions, the sensitivities of the population or the nuances of local culture and that, through their ham-fisted efforts, 'Kachchhi identity' or 'pride' (*asmita*) was being destroyed. 'Group 2001' an organisation of the elite citizens of Anjar, for example, publicly burned the Government of Gujarat's policy papers and pledged to write 2001 letters in their own blood to the President of India. A week later, a newly formed organisation in Bombay, calling itself 'Vatan' (homeland), launched an appeal for Kachchh to be made a Union Territory. They wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to visit Kachchh because they felt the 'political tours' offered by the Government of Gujarat misleadingly conferred the impression that the state government was in control of the situation.

The then Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, and his deputy, L.K. Advani, were due to arrive in Kachchh in June of 2001 on a two-day tour. In the days leading up to their visit, Himmat Morbia, a local Congress Party spokesman, pledged to hang black flags around the town to reflect the 'people's simmering wrath' over the clumsy and inefficient handling of the disaster by the Government of Gujarat. Ratnakar Dholakia, one of the leaders of the people's movement in Bhuj, also faxed the PM, asking him to intervene directly in the rehabilitation of Kachchh, over the heads of the government of the state. While the Gujarat branch of the ruling BJP had placed advertisements in local newspapers asking people to go about their business as usual, Pushpadan Gadhvi, the BJP representative for Kachchh in the Loksabha, had publicly backed the idea of Union Territory status for the District. The national leaders' visit was met with a near total strike and black flags fluttered on the streets; both Vajpayee and his deputy, however, publicly dismissed the call for regional autonomy.

One of those to meet with the Prime Minister was Kundanlal Dholakia, an intense and highly articulate man now in his eighties. Dholakia is no stranger to politics, having served as a local municipal leader and later as Speaker of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly. He told the PM of the ‘step-motherly attitude of the Government of Gujarat towards Kachchh’ and expressed what he saw as a ‘deep yearning for making Kachchh a Union Territory’. Long after Vajpayee’s June visit, this frail old man with soul-piercing eyes sat down in the compound of a blood bank in Bhuj and fasted for nine days. His overarching complaint was that the Government of Gujarat was destroying Kachchh through their failure or unwillingness to understand local needs, conditions and sensibilities, and therefore governance should be passed to the Centre. On the ninth day of his fast, I.K. Jadeja, then State Minister for Urban Development, conceded Dholakia’s demand for more sensitive town planning, but would not entertain discussions about the incompetence of his own administration. During 2003, the collective protest movements began to falter and fragment and were largely superseded by the pursuit of individual interests. In the following section I explore the reasons behind this failing of collective memory.

Nostalgia

Images and conversations reflecting nostalgia for the past are commonplace in Kachchh today and were at the heart of the separatist agitations. The literal meaning of nostalgia is ‘homesickness’, and in quite a literal way, I think, seven years on, many people in Kachchh miss their former homes and the people who made life what it was – but I also think there is more to it than that. The term ‘nostalgia’ was coined in the seventeenth century by one Johannes Hofer to describe the despondent disease of Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home (Davis 1979). In moral philosophy and anthropology, however, nostalgia is more specifically associated with particular kinds of alienation from natural and social

worlds in both space and time. The sociologist Bryan Turner (1987) has shown how nostalgia operates as historical process, linked in western societies to the waxing power of the state and the sense of decline inherent in Abrahamic religions (see also, Davis 1979; Lerner 1972; Sahlins 1996). There are four dimensions to what Turner terms the ‘nostalgic paradigm’ (ibid.: 147–56). First, he identifies a general sense of *historical loss*, which the nostalgic attempts to recall. Secondly, nostalgia also emerges at the point at which *simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity are lost*. Thirdly, he suggests that, as individual freedom and autonomy disappear, then *genuine and moral social relationships collapse*, and the certainties of what is lost are evoked as nostalgia. Finally, Turner notes how the *absence or indeed loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty* is associated with the production of nostalgia.^{vi}

In the sections that follow, I utilise Turner’s paradigm to present different aspects of the post-earthquake ethnography and to illustrate some of the nuances of the political economy of nostalgia, particularly, in this case, its precarious position between individuals and collectives. Here, I am less interested in developing typologies of nostalgia (see Boym 2001; Stewart 1988: 227) than in illustrating some of its different dimensions. In my view, Turner’s sense of *historical loss* was expressed in the Kachchh case as a movement for regional autonomy; this was the pre-eminent expression of collective nostalgia in post-earthquake Kachchh. However, I seek to show that the other conditions Turner identifies as causes of nostalgia led, in this case, to people turning away from their own nostalgic pasts, as other and sometimes contradictory factors came to bear on their plight. My primary intention is to use Turner’s model as a provocative way of thinking through my ethnographic data, rather than to further or refute the model. Before I do this, a few words are necessary on what I perceive to be the general limitations of the model, which at times seems to confuse the conditions for the emergence of nostalgia with its symptoms.

For Turner, human history (in western societies) is generally perceived as the collapse of the values which once provided unified relations, knowledge and indeed experience. It seems to me that he is suggesting a theory, after Weber, in which nostalgia only flourishes in the shadow of state development and increasing levels of secularisation. The counterpart to this development is the destruction of religious certainties which are fractured by catastrophic social processes such as the emergence of markets, capitalist relations and the city. Thus, with the death of God, so to speak, and the loss of moral coherence, the isolated individual is increasingly exposed to the constraining social processes of modern institutionalised regulation (the state), which gradually undermine and strangle the individual.^{vii}

In Turner's model, however, there is for no way of accounting for the actual social mechanisms through which nostalgia is created and deployed. Likewise, there is no manifest consideration of the rules of engagement between people and the state, or, for that matter, between individual and collectives. Furthermore, the boundaries between the four dimensions of the 'nostalgic paradigm' are rather fluid, and it is in this regard that the model appears deficient when it is held up against the complexities of social life.

Historical loss

As already mentioned, bodies still littered the ground when the first public discussions about the loss of historic buildings in Kachchh took place. Before the earthquake, Bhuj was a small and intimate place with a population of around 140,000; many buildings and locales quite literally represented popular ideas about the history of the place, the kind of people who lived there, and the sorts of relationships they had with others. As the months passed after the disaster, those calling for political autonomy became increasingly interested in publicly enlivening the traditions, rituals and myths of the pre-independence kingdom of Kachchh. Their collective nostalgia reflected Hindu ideals of kingship, focused on a time when the social and ritual order of Bhuj mirrored that of the wider kingdom of which it was capital. To my mind, this reflects more on the 'inventive power of traditions' (after Sahlins 1999) than it does the 'invented traditions' of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

Kachchh was one of around 565 semi-independent kingdoms in India. It was ruled by Jadeja Rajputs from the sixteenth century until 1948. Within the principal domain there were semi-autonomous tributaries and fiefdoms, and within these were villages and hamlets with lesser headmen, who together formed a political unit known as the Bhayad (younger brethren and political subordinates of the main Jadeja lineage). Political authority, although centred on the royal court in Bhuj, was dispersed hierarchically throughout the kingdom, congealing around local political centres to form ritual and political microcosms of the central Jadeja lineages. At the head of this ritual and transactional hierarchy was the royal court in Bhuj and the King, whose duty it was to protect his kingdom, his subjects, the social and caste order, and to guarantee safety, prosperity, and well-being. Such order was ideally continuous with the order of the universe. The Hindu kingdom was correspondingly conceptualised as a microcosm of the universe and, ideally, their ritual and symbolic boundaries coincide (Fuller 1992: 106). In this sense, the

order of the kingdom is itself part of the socio-cosmic order, preserved by the king and the protective deities.

As with other kingdoms, the disintegration of Kachchh as a political entity shortly after Independence only partially eroded the symbolic power of the protective territorial goddesses and the significance of the socio-religious institutions of kingship. The worship and rituals of the principal goddess of the kingdom, Ashapura Ma, remained important in the post-Independence era, replicating traditions of the past even in the absence of actual political authority. More recently, however, the traditions of the Goddess have been rejuvenated to become a rallying cry for Hindu exclusivity (Tambis-Lyche 1997), and in the early 1990s the erstwhile heir-apparent allegedly demanded his turban back from a local museum claiming that he would soon be needing it for his return to official duties. After the earthquake, the traditions of the Goddess have grown even stronger, and the rituals of land purification, previously associated with the foundation myth of the kingdom, have been more broadly appropriated by common people to purify and protect land designated for reconstruction projects and their new houses (see Simpson 2006). Ideas about royal heritage are clearly at the heart of many post-earthquake notions of identity. However, in a more general sense, the image of a fading Kachchhi identity is also raised in relation to the collapse of particular temples and the redistribution of wealth, power and order as well as in relation to the renewed attention to folk traditions, dress, music, art and vernacular architecture.

Such images, poignantly represented by the collapse of the physical institutions of rule such as palaces, temples and city walls, are at the heart of the narratives on behalf of the movement for regional autonomy, as well as a more general and collective post-earthquake nostalgia. The central myths of the kingdom trace the fortunes of the chief Jadeja lineage through successive periods of rule. The origin

myths of other local castes are typically grafted on to these central myths, such that a particular caste will narrate its arrival in Kachchh during the reign of a particular king, how they brought with them this skill or that deity, and how they settled in this part of the town and formed certain kinds of relationships with other people at the behest of the ruler. To my mind, this is a collective narrative in Halbwach's (1992: 53) strict sense, and it is worth noting that even myths intended to undermine the hegemony of the royal myths – such as those told by some Muslims which reject the idea that Kachchh was originally a Rajput kingdom – tend to use the moral and structural frameworks of the central Hindu myth for establishing legitimacy.

Thus, thinking about caste-specific histories, for example, is inseparable from a broader history of the town and the spatial distribution of people through its many and varied neighbourhoods. These lesser strands of memory form part of a collective narrative about the town, but they cannot exist without reference to other events which come from the broader socio-historical milieu, in this case the history of rule. In this way, it appears as if the vernacular Hindu traditions of western India link individual to collective as if a continuum because the ritual and symbolic boundaries between household, neighbourhood, region and nation are of the same or at least similar order, and can be similarly maintained and strengthened.

While this view is profoundly nationalist, in the sense of modern political Hinduism, importantly it also unequivocally refuses to recognise a legitimate layer of governance between the level of Kachchh and the nation: India is the kingdom of the divine ruler Ram; the Jadeja Rajputs are the quasi-divine rulers of a kingdom that is itself a microcosm of the nation. The boundaries of Gujarat state, which were drawn on linguistic grounds in the 1960s, have no legitimate place in this continuum and in this way the symbols of regionalism were made to coincide

with separatist perceptions of the material and political injustices of the post-earthquake era.

Loss of individual freedom

We could not work together, there is no community left here, it has gone, broken by the earthquake and then the suffering that followed. It was all we could do to look after ourselves. Those who we knew to be living were often lost to us as they moved away.

These are the words my friend Mohamedhusein used to explain the lack of cooperation in his Bhuj neighbourhood three years after the earthquake. In this and the following section, I seek to account for the fragmentation of the networks that had once made working together, collective memories and separatist agitations possible.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, as I have described it, the state began to impinge on freedoms and autonomy. It took an iron grip by divesting people of property and their property rights and investing heavily in a superabundance of new bureaucracy, which was often uncertain of its proper relationship with the pre-existent bureaucracy. The government became a source of worry and confusion for many people and, as the nostalgia inherent in the separatist agitations reveals, it also became a target for their anger. But there was also a glaring paradox here. On the one hand, people were clearly alienated by the government and from their natural and social environments, often quite literally so, and they publicly resented this. On the other hand, the compensation schemes promised wealth. As a result, access to the government's coffers became highly competitive and a source of jealousy, rivalry and suspicion.

In time, the struggle for compensation became a collective preoccupation pursued along non-collective lines. Once the levels and nature of the compensation had been set, there was little option for most people but to claim as much as possible. Any claim was time-consuming, and involved large numbers of documents and

numerous trips to various government offices. The amounts available were as large as the levels of corruption that surrounded their distribution. The policy atomised communities, forcing people to be secretive about the lies they had told, and indeed many lies about property, death and injury were told for personal gain. In neighbourhoods all over Bhuj, mistrust ran riot as neighbour stopped talking to neighbour, lest the lies told to ensure compensation or new business grants were revealed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, self-interest triumphed over collective endeavours as elementary needs such as housing and dreams of the future took precedence; bonds of solidarity were broken as people were literally scattered across the town by a government unsure of how to proceed.

I suggest that, at a more general level, the breakdown of such networks contributed to the fragmentation of the autonomist movements. At the same time, factionalism and competition increasingly came to characterise the coalition of organisations who had come together under the banner of protest as the divisive nature of party and personal politics started to take hold. The government gradually gained the upper hand and took control as people were lured towards webs of time-consuming procedures and the promises of wealth they held. In short, the initial spurt of collective action and protest against the inaction of the state that had dominated the reconstruction effort in 2001 and 2002, lapsed into self-interested action in the scramble for critical resources. Collective action ground to a halt as individuals increasingly began to pursue and protect their own interests.

The collapse of moral social relationships

The expression of grief has not been a particularly public affair in post-earthquake Bhuj, and the manifestations of stress and trauma tend to be kept behind closed doors or confined to private relations with deities and doctors. Although I have no expertise in these matters, only very occasionally during the fieldwork for this project did I recognise obvious signs of trauma in the faces of those I was with; but people are traumatised, medical case notes say so. The tranquilisers distributed as relief materials after the earthquake continue to be part of the daily diet of many. When I was present during upsets and tears, it was uncomfortable and I always felt, rightly or wrongly, as if I had been party to a secret.

Naranbhai, a tea merchant, for example would occasionally shed contemplative tears when he recalled how, on the morning of 26 January 2001, he had put down his newspaper to investigate the 'rumble' he could hear outside. As he did so his feet were crushed by a falling slab of concrete as the house tumbled around him. Unknown rescuers arrived five hours later and laid him on the roof of a neighbour's house, which was now only a little higher than the ground. For a few hours, he lay alone, in pain, and wondering what was to become of him. Later, other rescuers appeared with two injured women, one of whom was a local primary school teacher whose family was known to him. He talked to them, but later that day, just before dusk, he watched both women die.

Helplessness is what he recalled most readily of those times, and in the intimacy of this kind of conversation, this is universally true. A journalist whom I know well recalled trying to find someone in a position of authority for information and guidance immediately after the earthquake; instead, he found that the hospital had collapsed. The head of a stranger was protruding from the rubble and crying for help, but the rubble was simply too heavy and the journalist was unable to

assist him. He moved on. The memory of the stranger's face, however, remains with him, and occasionally manifests itself in confounding rage.

On another occasion I was sitting in a friend's house when an Indian Air Force jet patrolling the border with Pakistan passed through the sound barrier in the skies above Bhuj. His daughter in her late teens started to wail inconsolably and rushed to the arms of her father. He later explained that she had been trapped in the rubble for two hours and had seen people crushed around her. Two years after the earthquake she was still crying almost every day at unexplained noises and the frequent earth tremors.

The third of Turner's features of the nostalgic paradigm, the collapse of genuine and moral social relationships, clearly also has resonance with the uncertainties of the state and the superabundance of post-earthquake bureaucracy which constrained individual autonomy and reduced the population to a state of dependency. Here, however, I wish to discuss the longer-term consequences on society of widespread mortality, and the effects on people of disrupted moral certainties. Again the focus is on the fragmentation of social networks, but in this case (unlike that discussed in the previous section) the material points to a fundamental discontinuity between individual and collective narratives rather than simply a breakdown of the mechanisms of transfer between the two. I briefly review some of the literature on the relationship between individuals and groups in South Asia, before moving on to consider of how social networks have broken down because many of those who allowed individuals to know one another have simply disappeared.

As is well known, Louis Dumont (1970: 9) distinguished two meanings for the term 'individual': first, the empirical and self-conscious individual who is present in every society; and second, the individual as a 'cultural value'. He suggested that

any approach to the individual in Indian society is misplaced because stress there is placed on the collective, and action is guided by what benefits the group rather than a person's own motivations. Similarly, in some senses, the ethno-science of McKim Marriott (notably Marriott 1976; Marriott & Inden 1977; McGilvray 1982) stresses the collectivist identity of individuals because each person is a composite of transferable particles that constitute their substance, thus their notion of the 'dividual'. Mattison Mines (1994: 1–10, 199–208) offers a rather different perspective; for him 'Tamils' have interior and exterior forms of individuality. The former is essentially self-awareness of personality traits; the latter involves what others know either experientially or by reputation about an individual's life. In a very general sense, I see something of all three notions in what my informants say about themselves in relation to others. However, although I see that individuals are conflated with group identity, are preoccupied with the transmission of good and bad substances and can tell detailed histories of the rise and fall of hundreds of other people and their families, they also generally seem to know themselves in society in terms of who other people are. This often takes them outside the familiar marks of kinship and caste.

Among the people I knew from before the earthquake, the following observations are now broadly true: (i) young men are less likely to congregate on the streets at night; (ii) most people stay in their houses more and watch more television; and (iii) few people from the pre-earthquake suburbs venture into the old town with the regularity they used to. There are quite probably many reasons for this, but one of which I am absolutely certain is that people fear meeting certain kinds of other people. First, there is a tangible fear of encounters with familiar people whose relatives are known to have died in the earthquake. Secondly, I suspect felt more intensely, is the fear of encountering familiar people, only to learn from them that their relatives have died in the earthquake.

I wish to focus on the second form - not to imply simply that people fear meeting family, close friends or work colleagues (although they might do) – but to suggest that people fear, quite literally, meeting distant family and old friends, neighbours and work colleagues who they might not have seen for months or years, given the disruption of the ‘second earthquake’. This is because in such chance meetings the earthquake has to be recalled in order to re-establish a relationship. The kinds of stories these encounters provoke are not macabre reflections on the mutilations or purification of flesh; they simply refresh the constellations of other people that allowed those involved in the chance encounter to know one another; as the landscape of known people is refreshed the dead are erased and, in the process, leave quite unthinkable relationships in place. People can now find themselves with inappropriate or impossible relationships with another once familiar person because those who had made those relationships legitimate have disappeared.

The following examples are taken from chance encounters on the street between a friend, Dilip, and people he once knew. One time we bumped into an elderly woman whose husband had worked alongside Dilip in a government office. My friend used to see him quite often, but had not seen him for the three years since the earthquake. Visibly hesitant, Dilip inquired about his friend and was told he had been killed in the disaster. Dilip sucked his teeth, the conversation fizzled out and we parted company with the old lady. On another occasion we bumped into one of Dilip’s former neighbours whose daughter-in-law had been part of a woman’s organisation of which Dilip’s wife was also a member. The man told us the story of how his son (the girl’s husband) had been crippled and how, unwilling or unable to cope, the girl had returned to Bombay to live with her parents. In these cases, there was no longer any way for Dilip to have a legitimate relationship with the old woman, and no point in continuing to know the man, as the reason for knowing each of them had disappeared.

Before moving to the suburbs twenty years ago, Dilip had lived in the old town and still had family and many acquaintances there. I know he used to go there every day – but now he seldom visits. This is not, as one might assume, because he is afraid of the restless spirits of the dead, but because he fears the living he no longer knows – because parts of their relationship are dead. On another occasion, however, we went on an active search for some of his friends in the old town because Dilip had found a treasured book he had borrowed from them long ago. We were told by their former neighbours that they had moved away, and their whereabouts were unknown. These kinds of encounter made Dilip extremely agitated, and he normally did his utmost to avoid them. Like most other people in the neighbourhood where we both lived, he observed absolutely meticulous daily routines: I believe he did so partially in an attempt to minimise the risk of chance encounters.

It is at this point, as it were, that the characteristics of transfer between individual and collective narratives break down. The collective narrative fails to repair and thus sustain itself because memories are brought together as forms of association only by the various ways in which people can also become associated. Thus it is difficult for individual memory to be part of collective memory because it relies on a social milieu that is no longer what it was or of which many key parts are missing. While one might object that it is perfectly possible to have a creative and meaningful relationship with another living person through the shared memory of a dead person – the evidence from Bhuj suggests that people actively go out of their way to avoid this and the meticulous routines that were also part of life before the earthquake have taken on a new importance in the aftermath.

The loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty

My second and related example of discontinuity between individual and collective narratives also contains within it the seeds of a paradox. In this case, however, it is not strictly limited to those affected by the earthquake – although it is perhaps more visible among them – and is arguably found in many public discourses about the future of towns and lifestyles in South Asia. Thus far, and true to the weight it was given in public discussions in Bhuj, I have focused primarily on the way the past has been ‘retrofitted’ (to use a term from post-disaster engineering) and politicised after the disaster. Alongside this, however, there is a muted but discernable excitement for the new suburbs and the ways of life that they symbolically (albeit somewhat optimistically) represent. Collectively, the citizenry have lamented the destruction of the old town and the history embodied by its morphology and architecture. For some, mostly privately, the earthquake has proved a boon and has offered a way out of the oppressive forms of tradition represented by the old town.

Dinesh for example, lived in the heart of the old city with his mother and brother’s family in a house owned by his late father’s brothers (who lived in Mumbai and behaved as absentee landlords). Since 2001, Dinesh has been very actively engaged in producing local history and in the promotion and presentation of heritage for the regional autonomy movement. Once, he took me to the place where this house had stood, and traced out in the dirt where each room had been. He also took me to the places he used to frequent, described the relationships he had had with the people at this tea shop, at that bench overlooking the lake, where he had played his musical instruments in the evening, and so forth. All of a sudden he said, ‘but we will never come back to this place, we have experienced too many terrible things here and if we come back these things will haunt us.’ At the time, I assumed he was talking about the troubled souls of the prematurely dead and the very real horrors he had witnessed on the day of the earthquake.

Indeed, these things may have been in his mind; but as I got to know his family more intimately, I learned it was probably the living who were at the forefront of his mind, informing what he said. His uncles had been trying to sell the house they had lived in for years; there had been court cases; Dinesh had secured temporary rights over the property; the uncles had come to Bhuj and threatened him; his mother had become unwell with the 'tension' caused by the bitter relations with her late husband's brothers. The uncles had well-placed contacts in their local caste association and had made life difficult, and at times unpleasant, for the family. Perhaps it was no accident that Dinesh was unable to find a willing bride within his caste. Dinesh's brother had a greater interest in attending the temple than in work, and the family survived from Dinesh's modest salary. Consequently, there was no way they could afford to buy another house or pay the spiralling costs of rent. The earthquake essentially offered a way out of these difficulties, and they took the opportunity when their house collapsed.

They pledged their allegiance to a Hindu sect who were looking to consolidate their position in the town. The sect promised to look after Dinesh and his family and to provide them with a small corrugated iron shed in return for their regular attendance in the temple. Meanwhile, Dinesh had also managed to secure compensation for a separate single-room house for which he had the title deeds in the old town. The sect eventually provided permanent housing in the sprawling suburbs at half the cost of construction, and Dinesh took the opportunity to invest his compensation money and a bank loan in the structure.

For many families, such as Dinesh's, there is now a veiled sense of relief that they have been offered a way out of the old town its oppressive, dirty and airless streets, congestion, gossip, hostility and bitterness, and into what is for most still an imaginary life in the suburbs. In other cases, families have fragmented, some taking the opportunity to escape subordinate or dependent or unpleasant relationships. Others have been released from conditions of bondage, and many

from poor housing conditions. Among the more nostalgic, there have been concerted campaigns against the spreading suburbs of broad, well-planned streets, which they saw as an erosion of traditional community forms. With one or two exceptions, though, many of those who were most nostalgic for the old city had long ago moved out of its narrow streets to suburban housing colonies. As the new houses started to take shape, and roads, drains and car parks began to appear, the emerging suburbs became picnic places. Families would journey from their temporary or shared accommodation to the relocation sites at weekends. There they would sit and take in the air and excitedly imagine the future, their new house, and where they would park the new car they were sure to buy. They described how the dust of the building site would make way for beautiful new houses for related nuclear families to cluster together – their houses perhaps divided by a road, and certainly a wall, but not by centuries of oppressive caste history under Rajput rule. Only time will tell if they were right to imagine the future as they did.

Conclusion

The groundswell of collective nostalgia in Kachchh was an attempt to deny the legitimacy and difficulties of present conditions, and also a means of coming to terms with new relationships to the past. In comparison to the generalised nostalgia of the autonomy movements, the nostalgia that individuals commonly express for pre-earthquake Bhuj tends to be more pragmatically immersed in relationships and places that no longer exist in any form other than memory. They are more concerned with the people and places of the 'good old days' than with life in a 'golden age' (a distinction made by Lerner [1972: 245-46]) In both cases, however, the nostalgic seeks the absence of trauma – itself, I am suggesting, the generating mechanism of this kind of nostalgia – and, therefore, in a sense, searches for a time in which nostalgia itself was absent. Perhaps all manifestations of nostalgia take this impossible form as a desire for its own absence. The nostalgic recalls or imagines a time when the burden of hindsight was not so heavy, and when the individual concerned was unaware of which things they would subsequently yearn for.

In this article I have described how political protest against the perceived injustices of the government was initially founded on a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individual and collective narratives. At a certain point this reciprocity waned as the forms of association between people changed and the same people became less interested in collective action. I have suggested two related reasons for this: first, because of their self-interested dependency on the resources of the government; second, because the compulsions of personhood and grief fragmented personal networks. Echoing Halbwachs, I have also shown what happens among Hindus in western India when their neighbours and family disappear, and the roles of individual and collective nostalgia in this context. To my mind, this cautions against our making simple and straight-forward assertions about the relationship between individuals and collectives, or any continuity that

may exist between them. I have presented a somewhat cynical view of the role of collective memory and the glorification of the past, but I am confident it is one in which many of my informants would see some truth. Although the time-frame of my analysis is limited to a period of a few years, I have highlighted what happens when individual actions are atomised by traumatic processes and social networks collapse.

Nostalgia might well be, as Turner seems to suggest, a manifestation of the fundamental architecture of the human mind, given a particular history, but it also seems to me to be a creative process and a socially and historically contingent product of particular times, spaces and events which hangs in a balance between individual and collective concerns. Nostalgia may well also be an emotional reaction to trauma and loss, a callous subterfuge for private interest, a medium of exchange for the differences between individuals or indeed a response to the advances of a godless state. However, given that all this occurred under the watchful eye of a long-lived Hindu nationalist government, which routinely invokes the names of deities for legitimacy and power, this material casts a bold shadow of doubt upon this final point and indeed upon the secularisation thesis in general.

It is interesting to note that, in the case described here, the government won through. On the third anniversary of the earthquake, Narendra Modi, the controversial Chief Minister of Gujarat, came to inaugurate two reconstruction projects. He took the opportunity of announcing his government's plans for an official memorial to those who had died in the earthquake. This announcement can be interpreted as either the state's attempt to monopolise and fix memory, or the actions of the only form of human organisation (i.e. the state) capable of ultimately subsuming the irreconcilable differences between individual and collective forms of expectation, desire and indeed memory. Clearly, Modi was still clearly highly irritated by the troublesome noises Kachchhis had been making about political autonomy, and he bluntly told his audience to put the earthquake

behind them because the rest of Gujarat had forgotten about it.^{viii} As the people begin to settle into their new suburban houses, relatively free from the shackles of the past, the flare-ups of memory as forms of regional sentiment, described in this paper, are perhaps, as Nora (1989: 13) has suggested for France, the final consumption of these memories in the flames of history. Here, at least between 2001 and 2004, the state did not have a hand in the design of collective or nostalgic memories, but ultimately it had to rein them into save itself.

Now, some years later, Modi's memorial is yet to materialise, its construction stalled by a protracted squabble over the allocation of suitable land. The old Kachchh has however receded; it lurks cautiously behind the preservation orders of the archaeological and tourism departments of the government; it has been pushed aside by industry, suburbs, and new wealth. Kachchh has essentially been re-colonised (in a mild form) through post-earthquake reconstruction programmes (though it may have happened anyway) by the Government of Gujarat. The population of Kachchh has swelled with people from all over India, which has introduced new languages, lifestyles, and tensions. The district has been firmly drawn into the economy of the nation, the isolationist and distinctive nature of its previous economy and polity – dependent as it was on various forms of international and domestic migration – has also been reduced in character. Perhaps this was also implicit in the post-earthquake policies, for the effect has been to silence calls, which were most audible in the first years after the earthquake, for Kachchh to have a separate political status from Gujarat. That said, in the coming decades, it is not impossible to imagine a backlash against such neo-colonisation in the name of regional or linguistic identity and a renewed series of calls for a separate political status for Kachchh; this time, perhaps such calls will come from Bhuj's emerging suburbs rather than the crumbling mansions of yore.

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ⁱ Telling the same story from the perspective of Muslims, Dalits the very poor, or those whose property was not damaged in the earthquake would yield very different results. These results will be published elsewhere in due course.

ⁱⁱ The literature repeatedly suggests that occurrence of a natural disaster often sparks new forms of political protest. For example, some stress how – in the general *crise révélatrice* of the aftermath – social trends and political tensions existent before a catastrophe take on renewed significance (Oliver-Smith 1996; Skelton 2000; Torry 1978, 1979); others stress how disasters are imagined through existing or culturally salient patterns of knowledge (Doering 2003; Dynes 2003); and others show how competition emerges not only for resources but also to control narratives about the disaster (Boissière 2002). The same sort of interest in the relationship between conditions before and after natural disasters also finds clear expression in studies focusing on political economy (Albala-Bertrand 1993; Kinzer 2001), economic and social impacts (Jovel 1989), the politics of relief (Middleton, O'Keefe and Moyo 1997), race and ethnicity (Fothergill, Maestas and Darlington 1999), the growth of

'civil society' organisations (Shaw and Goda 2004), indigenous communities (Seitz 1998), gender (Reyes 2002) and the vulnerability of the poor (Fothergill and Peek 2004). To my mind, the unspoken focus of this literature is on the problematic question of how various conceptions of the past and identity become meaningful forms of 'collective' action; it therefore follows that the obvious lacuna in this literature (with the exception of Rossi 1993) – and thus what I am most interested in here – is an examination of the dynamics of these processes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Among recent anthropological writing I have been influenced by Anderson (1991: chapters 1 & 2), Bloch (1998), Carsten (2007), Connerton (2004) and Antze and Lambek (1996), and the more general works by Shils (1981), Laqueur (2000), Morin (1971) and Nora (1989), as well as the haunting autobiographical novel, *The memorial*, by Christopher Isherwood (1978). There is also a recent, vigorous and innovative literature on the more specific topics of memory and memorial practices in relation to war and The Holocaust which addresses similar concerns (notably, Foote 2003; Gordon 2001; Inglis 1992; Johnson 2003; Landzelius 2003; Mayo 1988; Sherman 2000; Winter 1998; and Young 1990).

^{iv} The Gujarat Town Planning and Urban Development Act, 1976 (with amendments of March 9th 1999).

^v While a large number of publications were produced in Gujarati dwelling upon the losses of the earthquake, most of the important discussions about post-earthquake reconstruction (and most official reports) were in English, a language quite alien to the majority in Kachchh. Unintelligible new road signs, maps, plans, consultation documents and pamphlets contributed to the sense of alienation and anger among local people. The use of English also reinforced certain lines of class and privilege. This obviously reflects aspects of a certain kind of history of governance and class in India, and in Gujarat more specifically; however, more immediately, it very clearly excluded most local people from the mechanics of making decisions about their town.

^{vi} For ease of presentation, I have reversed the order of Turner's second and fourth points.

^{vii} Similar structures of thought are perhaps seen in Nora's (1989; Legg 2005) well-known vision of France and the French nation, and in Weber's own quest for an ethic of responsibility as the antidote to the polytheism of secular values (B. Turner 1987: 151). It is also clearly seen in some traditions of psychoanalysis and poetry, as well as in stories of the Fall from Eden in the Christian tradition (for discussion, see Lerner 1972: 197–221).

^{viii} The material in this paper is garnered from people who think that what is commonly called 'The Gujarat Earthquake' was in fact 'The Kachchh Earthquake'; therefore, I have referred to the disaster as the 'Gujarat' earthquake in inverted commas to highlight this discrepancy. The naming of the earthquake, it seems, is an example of the very political inequalities my informants were protesting about. In their view, it was 'their' earthquake, but the state of Gujarat, in its 'step-motherly' fashion, managed to claim the disaster as its own. There were casualties in other parts of the state, notably in Ahmedabad, but these were relatively minor when compared to the numbers of fatalities in Kachchh. Modi's apparently insensitive statement passed almost without critical remark in Kachchh; not I suspect because people were in broad agreement with him, but because they simply did not have the energy or the collective forms of organisation to protest against him yet again.