SURVIVING IN A MORTUARY

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During the Spring of 2006 I came once again to the Wissenschaftskolleg to complete the first draft of a manuscript on the mass violence that accompanied the birth of India and Pakistan as independent nation-states in 1947 and the memories of which still constitute the underside of the political culture of the region. The data consisted of a series of intensive interviews – done by a whole range of researchers, from psychoanalysts to historians to political scientists – and a survey of roughly 1350 persons: survivors, witnesses, bystanders and perpetrators.

I did complete the draft, but it did not go the way I had anticipated. The data posed formidable problems of interpretation and comparability, other than the standard prob-

lems of reliability and validity. After all, we had interviewed people who had experienced and witnessed traumatic events more than fifty years ago and many of them were in their late eighties and nineties. A huge majority of them suffered from age-related problems, both physical and mental, and their relatives and caretakers often made sure that the interviews did not remain one-to-one. The interviews were constantly interrupted by visitors, doctors and relatives coming in to administer drugs or to enquire about the wellbeing of the interviewees or to simply make sure that the interviewees were not overly tired. In that sense, what we had amassed was not, in retrospect, formal interview records but accounts of encounters and conversations between persons belonging to two different generations around memories of events that had been "worked upon" and had, as a result, acquired a different status over the previous five decades. I had to learn to look at the data differently.

The resulting draft carries the impress of that journey. The manuscript has turned out to be not so much a book on the causes and correlates of genocide as a search for new ways of looking at genocide and other instances of mass violence and a search for clues to the resistance that ordinary citizens, deprived of the benefits of ornate theories of genocide, mount at times when their fellow-citizens face death. It soon became pretty obvious to me that the categories they deploy to explain the violence they confront and their own behaviour in an extreme situation are not the ones we employ to interpret their behaviour. One of my goals has been to identify and weave into my theoretical apparatus at least some of the categories the victims, the bystanders and the perpetrators, particularly the victims, deploy.

This personal journey now bears the deep imprint of the fellowship and intellectual ambience at the Wissenschaftskolleg, where I plodded a second time through my large volume of data, both qualitative and quantitative. The Kolleg, everything said, is an institution that does not merely try to assemble a lively group of scholars and thinkers every year but one that also remains committed to providing them with an intellectually challenging yet human-scale environment. It leaves its Fellows very few excuses for not doing what they come to do; everyone of them has to ultimately learn to make peace with himself or herself, rather than with any imposed routine or protocol.

In this context I want to emphasise that my major gain this year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was not the completion of the draft. It was my uninterrupted encounters with the data and my interactions with the other Fellows who, often unwittingly, forced me to rethink my project as something more than an academic *post mortem* – as something like a

modest homage to the unknown millions who survived the killing fields of northern and eastern parts of South Asia without any help from international aid agencies, clinicians specialising in post-traumatic stress disorders, human rights activists, and the post facto interventions by other sundry experts that, while immensely worthwhile, also often lead to the infantilization of communities, cultures and societies that have gone through the experience of genocide.

There is much bitterness among the survivors and witnesses who recapitulated for our sake their experiences during those blood-chilling days. There is also in many of them, even now, deep scars of their experiences – the touch of depression that has dogged the steps of many as they have walked through life, the ambivalent ways they revisit a past that has bisected their lives, a persistent touch of interpersonal distrust and cynicism, and the somaticization of a sense of loss that they have not been able to get over even after sixty years. But there is, in many them, also a full-bodied resilience and affirmation of life that inspires hope and, if I may add, respect.

It seems that, in a society where communities have not broken down entirely and where community life continues to survive as a robust entity, genocide meets much more resistance than in more individualized societies where some degree of anonymity and impersonality obtain. In the sample survey we did, preliminary analysis suggests that at least 26 per cent of the respondents said that they received some help from the enemy community. This is likely to be a gross underestimation because, in the more intensive interviews, we found that many respondents, who in their bitterness had subsequently joined ethno-chauvinist parties and movements, were reluctant to admit the help they had received from the enemy community.

This year my colleagues included a number of persons directly or indirectly concerned with some of the issues I deal with in my work. The new work of a number of those working on secularism and secularization and especially the lively conference on the subject at the Kolleg were exceedingly useful for me to hone my conceptual tools. The presentations of some of the participants brought out sharply that those caught in mass violence are unlikely to obediently use our favourite categories and theoretical frameworks. Even those who resist such violence feel no obligation to conform to our ideas of knowledge and the moral preferences of what could be called the dominant culture of the global knowledge industry.

Equally important was my exposure to comparative data and insights into genocidal situations. This time I was lucky that there were a couple of Fellows interested in the adjacent

areas of public and private memories and forgetfulness and their vicissitudes. As I have already indicated, “memory work” is a crucial aspect of my study and I have learnt much from the experiences of researchers who have intellectually coped with lost lifestyles, dying vernacular religious traditions, and cultivated or institutionalized forgetfulness. At one instance it could be ritual chants of Eastern European Jewish communities, at another, reflections on mysticism that have traditionally cut across boundaries of religions, castes and sects but now survive in cultural contexts that may not be openly hostile, but are certainly less than hospitable. My work now carries the stamp my encounters with these experiences. My work now bears the stamp of these experiences.

It would be unfair to the Wissenschaftskolleg to word this report in such laudatory terms that it becomes a hagiography of an institution. However, all social research is shaped by human relationships. Not merely the collegial atmosphere and social interactions among the Fellows, but also the warm, friendly, supportive ambience created by the staff is what has made the Wissenschaftskolleg so distinctive. The four months I was in Berlin this year have made me aware, once again, that the major achievement of the Kolleg is not its ability to assemble diverse intellectual talent from all over the world, but its ability to ensure scholarly exchange within a human-scale institutional setting. This cannot but be a challenging and enriching experience for anyone exposed to it.