

Reading the Colonial Archive

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October 23, 2014

My presentation today will reflect on my method and process in writing, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*.¹ I use method in its broader aspect, to refer to issues posed by the colonial archive, not in the technical sense as the micro practices of archival research. I also hope to convey in my remarks something of the necessarily tentative, incremental and open-ended character of the research process. The uncertainty of research contrasts sharply with the authoritativeness manifested by a finished work, which if it is coherent can elicit from the reader an unstated, "But, of course!" It may read as if what it argues had always been self-evident to its author and merely needed to be put down in order that it may be shared with others. Nothing is further from the truth.

Genuine inquiry involves inhabiting a space between cognitive abeyance and cognitive freefall; until, gradually, cumulatively, non-linearly, and retroactively, one marshals the conceptual and empirical resources to elucidate the questions which prompted one's investigation. It is an unpredictable process which can require one to recast one's initial questions or else to abandon them to travel in an altogether different direction.

In recognition of this challenge, I offer four points of orientation:

- * We live in infinity but for the most part social theory/scholarship is written as though the world were a finite object that can, and must, be convincingly, if not exhaustively, described.
- * We have at our disposal language which by its nature constrains our imagination even as it unleashes it.

*Any analytic effort can only trace some aspects of the concatenation of cause-effect interrelations that bear on the project at hand. The omnipotent researcher evincing mastery over her object of study makes way for the modest explorer conscious of the rich partiality of her understanding.

*We are situated beings. The stories we tell locate us.

How then do we embrace the particularity of our endeavour, claiming neither too much nor too little about the worlds we conjure with our words?

A point of clarification: It might seem odd to name infinity as an interpretive horizon when as humanists and social scientists our work addresses the social not natural or cosmic worlds. I invoke infinity as a way to situate our scholarship, to alert us to the danger that the focus we are required to cultivate might lead to us to forget that from a broader purview our work is irreducibly local. We are subordinate clauses in the grammar of the universe, though our work is no less important for being so.²

II

Late summer 1982:

I had enrolled as an M.A. student in Comparative History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with the intention of studying the relationship between women's movements and the Left in India. I had returned to academic life in 1981 after several years in the workforce, my quest prompted by my involvement in the then burgeoning autonomous women's movement in urban India. Not having studied history for my undergraduate degree, the learning curve was expectedly steep. That afternoon I was poring over Ramakrishna Mukherjee's rather dry history of the East India Company. I was about to be overcome by post-lunch lassitude when I came upon a set of assertions which were about to change my life.³

Mukherjee states that the incidence of sati (widow burning) rose under British colonial rule and colonial policy was responsible. This claim - argued with passion but not much by way of substantiation - was contrary to everything I had learned. The British had always been applauded for prohibiting the practice. I was immediately intrigued. That afternoon I learned two things that were to help me as a student.

First, always read for unfinished thoughts and incipient intuitions that you, as the reader, may wish to excavate and pursue even if the author does no more than assert them, or nonchalantly consign them to a footnote, or else bury them in heated declarations about colonial retrogression, obscurantism, decadence, venality and conspiracy. The last is perhaps most easily dismissed. But, as I was to discover, even a narrowly instrumental Marxist reading of social phenomena such as that proposed by Mukherjee can contain insights that are worth disentangling and working through. My second learning lay in the force of my reaction to Mukherjee's claims. It enabled me to viscerally grasp how history is never laid to rest but always haunted by the promise and threat of its revision.

The historian speaks at once to past and present; indeed at times even, *of* past *and* present, though the latter more obliquely than the former. Still, what is it that enables a question about the past not simply to propose itself in the present, but rather to take up residence in one's mind and gather about itself the sense of urgency? Put another way, what conditions enable us to grasp our curiosity about some aspect of the past as a kind of instinct about a problematic in need of exploration? Mukherjee's claims might have occupied me momentarily, like countless thoughts that arise and dissolve in the unending flow of consciousness. But it lodged itself within me emitting a charge that was impossible to ignore.

Feminist historian Arlette Farge, describes the allure of the archives as "a roaming voyage through the words of others, and a search for a language that can rescue their relevance." She continues,

It may also entail a voyage through the words of today, with the somewhat unreasonable conviction that we write history not just to tell it, but to anchor a departed past to our words and bring about an

"exchange among the living." We write to enter into an unending conversation about humanity and forgetting, origins and death. About the words each of us uses to enter into the debates that surround us.⁴

The year, as I noted before, was 1982. The political and intellectual context in which I sat hunched over my library book was one brimming with excitement. Foucault had directed attention to the nexus of power/knowledge in an entirely new way. Documents could no longer be seen to merely contain information but equally the frames within which it was produced and understood. The linguistic and discursive turn (which owed as much to Lacan and Derrida as to Foucault) was re-writing social science and humanities. Feminist scholarship was re-construing its subject: shifting from "women" to "gender" as analytical category and dimension of social experience. Anthropology was confronting the politics of its complicity with colonialism and posing urgent questions about the location of the anthropologist and the writing practices of ethnography.

In India, Women's Studies was taking its first firm steps as a field and nationalist historiography was coming under pressure from a group of young historians, the Subaltern Studies Collective, though their work was as yet unpublished. Everywhere, universalisms of every kind were being unmasked and historicised. No social category - gender, race, sexuality - seemed immune to re-thinking. The same was true of key concepts like resistance, domination, culture, agency, power, subjecthood. The force of the ferment was only matched by resistance and opposition from those invested in the perspectives being challenged.

My sketch is a rough one. I am all too aware of the quixotic nature of memory, its tendency to alternate between flickering uncertainly and flaring brightly. Indeed, my first draft included references to ideas that entered the public domain much, much later in that decade! I merely point here to the atmosphere at the time which seemed to be alive in every way. Perhaps it always feels that way at a certain point in one's intellectual formation! One intervention, conspicuous by its absence in my brief account is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1979. I was only to encounter it months after I had begun my research into widow burning. And when I did, it felt like the book for which I had been waiting.

III

Every project constructs its own archive: the set of documents in relation to which it undertakes its exploration. The material corpus that provides the ground for any inquiry is not simply there to be retrieved but is itself an effect of the research, assembled as the process unfolds. My point of departure was the British Parliamentary Papers on Widow Burning, an extensive collection of official correspondence, circulars, minutes, judicial records, police reports etcetera. The Parliamentary Papers had been consulted by countless historians before me. Sati had been an active site of contention not just in the early nineteenth century but also thereafter. Its prohibition in 1829 had been held to inaugurate what came to be known as the Bengal Renaissance, the idea being that colonial rule had roused India out of "medieval torpor" and awakened it to "modernity." Still, the story that I was able to tell was dramatically different from the one that had hitherto been told.

My principal strategy was to pay close attention to what the records *actually disclosed* about sati and Indian society, as opposed to what the documents *repeatedly concluded*. This approach flowed from an interest in a discursive analysis of colonial knowledge production: its contexts, protocols, assumptions; its evasions, silences, excesses; its pretensions. What complicated my journey was the gradual realisation that in taking up this project I was confronting an ideological apparatus that shaped not just the primary materials to be found in the archive but secondary texts also. Historian Romila Thapar states the problem succinctly:

A major contradiction in our understanding of the *entire* Indian past is that this understanding derives largely from the interpretation of Indian history made in the last two hundred years.⁵

In short, one could not uncomplicatedly draw on existing scholarship on colonialism or Indian society at the turn of the nineteenth century in making sense of the archival material on this period. For extant scholarship it turned out also needed to be read against the grain. Both were part of a single discursive formation, the same complex of ideas. Nothing could be taken at face value.

This challenge was especially pointed in the period I did my research since mine was among the first interventions of its kind. In the period since, teleological Marxism and modernisation theory which then dominated the historiography of colonial India have been thoroughly undermined, among others by the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. And Postcolonial Studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary field. Together, they have transformed our understanding of colonialism and its legacy.

IV

The colonial archive comprises materials gathered in the service of governance by an extractive and generally uncomprehending foreign power which, in Ranajit Guha's elegant formulation, exercised dominance but not hegemony⁶. This fact puts paid to any fantasy of research as the simple retrieval of facts even if one were not theoretically disposed to this view. That said, one should not conclude from this that the colonial archive is about Europe and not its Other, that all we can glean from these materials is how colonial power construed colonised society. For one thing, indigenous subjects were critical to the production of colonial knowledge though they were not positioned as equals and what they said was systematically reinterpreted according to an alien cultural logic. Still, to the degree that indigenous voices are part of the record, they offered at least a partial glimpse or account of society. And to the extent that over time indigenous views came to accommodate, negotiate, deflect, challenge and refract this logic, the colonial archive remains an invaluable source.

Nonetheless, the logic of domination that structured official record-keeping and the colonial context in which the debate on sati unfolded constrained the kinds of questions that could be explored. So it was that while I was able to provide a complex account of official, missionary and indigenous discourses on sati, a social history of widow burning was not possible. Even once I broadened the search beyond official records, the materials were simply not to be had. The why of widow burning could only be derived secondarily from the statements of European travellers,

officials, missionaries, indigenous men and the fragments of widows' testimonies at the funeral pyre which, as you might imagine, were overdetermined by the context in which they were recorded.

Consequently, I could map how women's subjectivity was construed but not how women construed their own subjecthood or agency or social possibilities. This limitation is related not just to nature of the archive but also to the character of society at the turn of the nineteenth century, the place in it of women, the degree of women's literacy, the absence of traditions of self-narrativization male or female, etcetera. In context of a pre-modern, predominantly oral society in which the reach of colonial power was neither uniform nor deep, the discourses that circulated in the new kind of public domain that was then emerging, only imperfectly captured life lived outside of the ascendant cultural logic.

I was thus called upon to be continually mindful of the discrepant disjunctions between the world evoked by the texts in the archive and the dense complexities of social life as it was actually being lived. Traces of a world that exceeded the dominant archival imagination kept obdurately appearing; signs on all sides (colonial as well as indigenous) of bewilderment, dismissal, annoyance, frustration, incomprehension, considered appeasement of power, accommodation of "reality." At times akin to a hushed whisper or faint watermark, at other times distinctly audible and clearly discernible, these intimated truths that challenged the facts projected by the archive. My task as historian was to read these traces and inscriptions and to do so in a way that was careful about the claims that could be made on their basis. I will not recapitulate what this mode of reading made possible. To summarize the argument of my research would run the risk of flattening a very complex story. I trust that what you were assigned to read will have provided sufficient context for my remarks on method and process to make sense.

In conclusion, I would like to address the question of my positionality prefacing it with a cautionary observation. Theoretical frameworks are cognitive maps that orient us; but they do not predict what we will notice or how we might understand what we see, feel, read or encounter. So

although we may invoke them in situating our analysis, the question of what makes possible a given interpretation is not fully answerable. Mystery and contingency dog any attempt to account for one's work. In this context the positionality of the researcher is most usefully treated as one element in an explanatory whole: as facilitating or enabling a particular mode of reading, though not ensuring it any predictable way.

What is it that enabled me to see things that historians before had failed to notice in these documents? I would suggest that the answer lies in part with my experience of living between different epistemes, the necessary condition of a transnational existence. Growing up, I had gone back and forth between India and Britain, schooling and working in both places in the years before I began my research. Each was characterised by different regimes of power-knowledge-meaning and each saw, heard and positioned me in accordance with its specific logic. In India, class and caste bestowed upon me full subjecthood and agency and modified the disadvantage of gender. In Britain racism mediated and diminished every aspect - subjecthood, agency, class, gender - inserting me into a still-charged imperial history that was being rearticulated in context of late 1960's migration from the empire's former colonies.

These discrepant experiences contributed to a heightened alertness to the different afterlives of colonialism in the two locations. The awareness was as much visceral and psychic as it was intellectual. And it lit my reading of the documents. On the other side of the world, it gave me cognitive distance from the paradox of a post-colonial India which had confidently confined colonialism to a delimitable historical period even as it had domesticated many of its presumptions in how it had come to understand itself and its past. The experience primed me to be attentive to categories like "tradition," or "modernity," to the politics of knowledge more broadly, an inclination deepened by my education in post-structuralism, feminism, race and cultural studies. The colonial archive became for me, as for so many others, a palimpsest to be read with care and imagination.

My hope in sharing these brief remarks has been to show you the infrastructure or underpinning of one research project, something of how it came into being and took the shape that it did. As you set off on your own projects, to the various qualities that you are encouraged to cultivate as a researcher, I encourage you to add the triad of curiosity, vulnerability and fearlessness. I say triad because each term involves and extends the other. Genuine curiosity requires the courage to be vulnerable, a willingness to be adrift in a sea of "not knowing" even if only temporarily. As for the enabling force of curiosity as a methodological stance, I will let Michel Foucault have the last word.

I like the word [curiosity]...It evokes "care"; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality...a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.

I dream of a new age of curiosity.⁷

¹ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

² Lata Mani, "Interdependence," *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present*, New Delhi: Routledge, 172.

³ Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *Rise and Fall of the East India Company: A Sociological Appraisal*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974, 313-335, especially 323-326.

⁴ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, Tr. Thomas Scott-Railton, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

⁵ Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, Delhi: National Book Trust, 1975, 3

⁶ Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies VI*, ed. Guha, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, 210-309.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in Paul Rabinow ed., *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, New York: The New Press, 1997, 325.