Histories and Memories of 'Survival': 'Welcome' to the Emergency

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Abstract

A review of Emma Tarlo, Unsettling Memories: The Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi, *Hurst & Co., London, 2003, pp. 234+x*

The contemporary literature on history/memory divide, particularly the classical work of Maurice Halbwachs and more recent writings of Pierre Nora, has shown that history and memory are two different and almost contradictory ways to understand the past. It is argued that history notes only those events of the past which considered being 'important' and valuable as 'heritage' for a community, society or nation. The memory, on the other hand, is a feeling of the past, a current of continuous thought, whose continuity is not at all artificial. Memory 'retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive' (Halbwachs1980, p.80). The amalgamation of history and memory in modern societies, Pierre Nora reminds us, has produced a kind of 'historical memory', which is, unlike real memories of pre-modern societies, has been a result of a violation caused by the modern 'acceleration of history'. The line of argument

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proposed by Halbwachs and Nora provides valuable analytical tools to understand the collective remembrance of modern societies. However, does the history/memory divide serve any analytical purpose to study the postcolonial societies like India? Or in other words how to employ the history/memory divide to examine the complex memory patterns in India, where the enterprise of history has always been dominated by political agendas. Emma Tarlo's recent work on Indian Emergency (1975-77) and its collective remembrance, answers some of these contentious issues. The book shows how the 'history' of an event does not adequately address the vigorous dynamics of collective remembrance. Analysing the formation of the discourse of official 'history' of the India Emergency as a 'critical event' from an anthropological perspective, this book tries to map out multiple memories by which this 'event' is remembered or lived in the day to day life discourse of a resettlement colony in Delhi.

The book quite overtly interrogates the traditional disciplinary boundaries of anthropology that mainly focus on 'social structures', leaving the examination of 'events-particularly the violent events' for other disciplines. In response to this methodological limitation, the author proposes a study of the Emergency as a 'critical event' that affected the prevailing socio-political structural configuration and produced a point of reference for an evaluation of the entire political system as a whole. In this sense, the Emergency, as Tarlo puts it quite sharply, fulfils the needs to expose the dynamic relationship between 'moments of disruption and the moments of calm' (p.5). The conceptualisation of the Emergency as a critical event in this framework is justified on the ground that the Emergency not only brought together a whole range of actors - inner city slum dwellers, displaced people, local leaders etc. etc. but also provided a space to social

renegotiation and a privileged access to the semi-obscure social and political structures of everyday life in Delhi (p.7).

The research agenda is situated against the backdrop of two kinds of narratives- the official Emergency narrative that argues in favour of the Emergency and the post-Emergency narrative that looks at the Emergency as a kind of setback to Indian democracy. These narratives, Tarlo seems to suggest, stem from two different perspectives and provide almost contradictory versions of state policies such as urbanisation and the infamous 'family planning campaign'. The dominant official narrative sees the Emergency as a mean to achieve the goal of development/ modernity. The post-Emergency narrative, on the other hand, follows a different trajectory. Tarlo shows that this narrative locates the genesis of Emergency in the early 1970s when the civil unrest and particularly the movement led by Jayprakash Narayan compelled Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi to use non-democratic means to curb the popularity of democratic forces. The declaration of the national Emergency in June 1975 by Mrs. Gandhi provided her more powers to launch anti-people policies like forced urbanisation and sterilisation. The Turkman gate massacre is described as the climax of official atrocities. The celebration of the victory of Janta Party and the defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977 election is the culmination point of this narrative. Tarlo argues that both the narratives are inadequate, short lived, and far away from the actual experiences. In exploring other possible ways by which the Emergency as an event is conceptualised, perceived and seen, the author discovers two domains: the domain of official memory, which produces the 'official' paper truth and the domain of actual collective memory of a resettlement colony called Welcome where the past is lived, felt and experienced in multiple ways.

The Welcome colony situated in the eastern part of Delhi, is taken as a contested a space – a space in tangible as well as imaginary sense - where the official memory is interrogated and contested the multiple forms of collective shared remembrance. The discourse of the official memory revolves around the Slum and JJ Department (Jhuggi Jhopari) files of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) that contain the 'paper truth' about the settlements patterns of the Welcome colony. More precisely, the study looks at the DDA's infamous sterilisation campaign for family planning that was introduced as a kind of incentive. The author shows quite clearly how this campaign became a kind of a 'forcible deal' to have access to some of the basic human rights. The study of these files and documents, which most of the time are not regarded as important sources for understanding the different characters of the state, reveals the fact that the official memory looks at the Emergency as a kind of routine administrative work. The sensationalism of the pro-Emergency narrative disappears in these documents when the ideological justifications of the policy get translated into simple departmental laws. This is one of the most important contributions of the study because most of the time departmental procedures and by-laws are not at all figured out in the academic debates. However, Tarlo goes one step further and also examines different responses of the people to these policies. The study very sharply pinpoints that the people approached the authorities in a very delicate language using the idioms and phases of the official policy discourse for their own interests. It establishes the fact that in India the reception of policy discourse is culturally constituted. In this sense, the study indicates the existence of several 'intermediaries', who act quite professionally to fill up the gap between the people and the policy discourse. These intermediaries translate the policies into the language of the people using

the cultural idioms and the official vocabulary of the authorities. At the same time, they also 'represent' the actual reflections of the people, their anxieties and their queries again using the phrases and idioms of the official administrative language. The existence of this intermediary space is an important aspect of contemporary Indian political system.

The last two chapters of the book examine the shared memories of the residents of the Welcome colony. For the author, these memories provide another complex critique of the Emergency. The study maintains that the Emergency could not be seen as an isolated event in the memory landscape of the local people. These memories are made and unmade by the forces of the present socio-political affairs and discourses. Tarlo explains that the Muslims and Hindus of Welcome, despite sharing some common memories of atrocities during the Emergency, do have very different perceptions about that event. The growth of communal politics in last 10 years has changed the meanings of state 'atrocities' in India. The event like the Emergency is understood in terms of its 'communal' repercussions. For the right wing BJP supporters, the Emergency could be bad because it gave a kind appeasement to the Muslims and Hindus were the prime target, or alternately it could be good because the Muslims were forced to go for the sterilisation. Similarly, Muslim perceptions are negative because the policy of sterilisation simply affected their faith.

There are other memories of the Emergency that directly related to the 'victim-hood' of the common people. DDA's distinction of 'voluntary cases' and 'motivated cases' of sterilisation as the precondition for allotting the plots to the people in the Welcome colony created a kind of 'market' where 'cases' are soled and purchased even by the

poor people to get a piece of land in the capital city. A section of 'victims' of these policies, Tarlo argues, turned into agents of the state. Thus, in her conceptualisation the poor victims could be divided into three categories: the motivator, the motivated and the intermediary.

In the final section of the book the author raises an important conceptual question. Analysing the multiple memories of Welcome residents, their responses and their present political affiliations, Tarlo questions the conceptual viability of the term 'subaltern'. She makes it clear that the actions of these people could not be understood as a kind of 'resistance', as the post-Emergency narratives puts quite repeatedly. On the contrary, in her opinion these narratives are dominated by the idiom of survival rather then the idiom of shock or guilt. She points out that the state repression is a part of every day life in the Welcome colony. People have developed their own strategies of survival to cope with the power structure at local level by employing their own ways of struggles and appropriations.

There are two important points that require a more critical response. Firstly, in her analysis of post-Emergency, Tarlo does not examine different ideological streams that produced a variety of analyses and some where misses the complexities of the post-Emergency democratic rights assertions. It is true that the 'narrative' of post-Emergency most of the time conceptualises the 'event' in a highly elitist manner. Yet, there were different ideological perspectives that provided different analysis of the Emergency. For instance, some left groups described the Emergency as a reflection of the general crisis of Indian capitalist state. Similarly different streams of Indian human rights movement find the Emergency as a starting point of the people struggles for a more democratic polity and

society. The non-party democratic rights groups such as PUCL also came into existence during and after the Emergency. Even the people's movements like the Chattisghar Mukti Morcha and Narmada Bachao Andolan link the Emergency with their own struggles. And of course all of these movements could not be rejected as 'elitist movements'. Thus, the post-Emergency developments could not be understood merely by referring to only one kind of literature.

There is one more clarification. While discussing the communal sentiments of Muslims, Tarlo talks about Imam Abdullah Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid (pp.174, 176). The respondents told the author that the Imam was against the sterilisation and his appeal revealed them that sterilisation is an anti-Islamic act. It is not true. On the contrary, in the early 1970s Abdullah Bukhari issued a Fatwa supporting the family planning programme of the government. His statement was widely circulated as a religious decree and presented as the religious sanctioning for family planning among Muslims. He also used Public Address System (PAS) of the mosque to make this appeal. This 'Fatwa' was highly criticised by the local Muslim groups. Many families decided not to pray Namaz in the mosque. However, from July 1974, Abdullah Bukhari started his anti-government campaign simply by using the PAS particularly before the Friday sermon. He was arrested by the Police in 1975 because of serious tussle between him and the Delhi Wakf Board. In later years when he became the sole leader of the Muslims in India, his pervious 'struggles' became memories of his 'crusade' for Muslim cause. Tarlo does not question this point and the section of the book on 'community considerations' simply rely on 'the memory' about the acts of the Imam during the Emergency as a 'fact'.

And finally, we come to the question of history/ memory divide. In the beginning of this book, the author proposes a guided tour of the important places of Delhi where the memories of the Emergency are scattered. In this imaginary tour, the reader encounters a number of objects: some well polished racks of the Teen Murti Bhawan library, the sophisticated museum objects at 1, Safdarjaing Road, and the dusty files in the record room of the Slum and JJ Department. Pierre Nora would have called these 'objects' the 'lieux de memoir' or sites of memory where 'modern memory' is crystallised and *feels* it's past, escaping from the authorities of history. However, Tarlo does not think so. She invites the readers to the Welcome colony to meet the 'real' people, and introduces their tales as another '*lieux de memoir*'. Tarlo, in this attempt, has successfully woven a rich analysis of the memories of common people that, of course, unsettled some of the fixed notions of the past.

References

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