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Politicising Grief and Memory in Post-disaster Gujarat and Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The aftermath of natural disasters, even more so than events and processes of political violence, has been known to engender a vast and varied array of non-governmental public actions, by global as well as local practitioners. However, it is often the case that public action, and especially local public action, is poorly understood by and often invisible to governments and multi-lateral agencies leading to uneven distribution of resources and inefficient and inappropriate humanitarian interventions which can create new fissures within affected communities. This invisibility and blinkering is particularly apparent when governments and agencies seek to intervene in and place their stamp on 'affectual domains' through various public practices memorialising death and grief. In both Gujarat and Sri Lanka, it is evident that a whole range of different kinds and scales of public collective action came to the fore in the processes of relief and longer-term reconstruction. There is of course a substantial literature demonstrating how collective protest in the aftermath of natural disasters commonly congeals around perceived inequalities in the distribution of resources. It appears to us however, that collective public action also takes many other forms and shapes in catastrophic landscapes, and a primary focus on the material aspects of life in a post-disaster environment obscures many of these important social forms.

This working paper explores some of the memorial practices that emerged after the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat and along the eastern and southern coasts of Sri Lanka following the tsunami of 2004. In both locations, acts of memorialization were inseparable from reconstruction initiatives and politics of all kinds, and at all levels, have influenced the design, location, and inauguration ceremonies of memorials. In Gujarat, memorials are tied to the politics of religious communalism, regionalism, and mainstream Hindu nationalism. In Sri Lanka, memorials are local manifestations of ethno-nationalisms and state hegemony. There is also a clear distinction between memorials created by the people and by the state, in both Gujarat and Sri Lanka.

In both locations, the starting points for many of the debates surrounding memorials, their authenticity, and legitimacy have been informed by patterns of social hierarchy, polity, and so forth that long precede both disasters. The re-animation of pre-existing social patterns has been accompanied by a grooming of the past for images and metaphors to accommodate and mediate expressions of mourning and loss. Both disasters are clearly also breaks with the past, at least in terms of personal memory; but also because of the renewed importance of the past more generally, there is, in a sense, now more past in the present than there was before. The structure and presentation of these nostalgic pasts, and the ways in which they are projected onto the landscape as memorials of particular kinds, has led to the increasing importance of regional identity in both cases. In Gujarat, this led to the rise of a campaign for regional autonomy in the worst affected part of the state and in Sri Lanka this has meant the realignment of various regional administrative and political boundaries.

Even a cursory comparison between memorials in Gujarat and Sri Lanka raises a variety of questions. Some of those we seek to explore here are: Why are a greater percentage of memorials in Gujarat erected by state or semi-state organizations whereas in Sri Lanka most have been erected by peoples' collectives? Why have state-sponsored memorials in Gujarat managed to remain more-or-less secular, perhaps contrary to what might have been expected given the popular association of the state with bellicose Hindu nationalism, while what was initially a similar trend in Sri Lanka has now taken on distinct Buddhist overtones? And why are there no memorials to the Muslim dead in Sri Lanka or Gujarat? Our primary objective here however, will be to explore particular ways in which memory has been politicised, in both Gujarat and Sri Lanka, while simultaneously challenging some of the assumptions on which conventional answers to these initial questions might be based.

The literature makes it very clear that memorials are social objects, products of particular times and places, and open to constant reinterpretation.¹ In this paper

then, we take it for granted that memorials have histories, and that one man's memorial is perhaps a symbol of another's oppression, defeat, or loss. There are however two commonly held assumptions in the substantial literature on memorials and memory that we wish to challenge: First, the common-sense assumption that memorials exist in order to remember an event. In this sense we wish, as other writers have done, to expand the category of memory to include more than straightforward recollection. We see memory as a form of politics in which different domains of knowledge and experience are brought together in unpredictable ways.² In other words, the composition and nature of 'memory' in relation to memorials is anything but a foregone conclusion. Objects do not remember, only people and societies can. Objects may suggest a record and, perhaps, act as an aid for the work of memory. For sure, memorials are commonly tied to particular events, but what kinds of memory can memorials be said to actually represent or, conversely, evoke? People who experience catastrophe, for example, may bring their own inchoate and grotesque memories of particular moments and tragedies with them when they visit a memorial. They may also bring with them memories which are simply too terrible to articulate, and remain hidden from view (Jeganathan 2008).

These are clearly quite different memorial evocations to state discourses on disasters. The memorial then may be a public representation of the diverse and perhaps contradictory experiences of many individuals. Names, dates, particular words and sometimes images become the focus of public attention, replacing the altogether less palatable smell of blood or the haunting image of the face of a dying child. The memorial flattens the extremes of individual memory – replacing it, and, therefore, in a sense, denying it or pacifying it, with something altogether more palatable, if not to say anodyne. This is perhaps one of the fundamental functions of a memorial.

The memorial becomes a device to think about an event. The memorial translates the unthinkable into the thinkable, and the event becomes accessible to others. Other configurations of objects and memory are also possible because although

memorials allow for individual memories, the device itself however reflects more the concerns of those who put it there, and those that control the public activities that may surround it. Thus far, we have implicitly assumed memorials are erected by those who have been directly affected by a memorialised event, those who put them there however, as we shall see, are often other people altogether. In both Gujarat and Sri Lanka, memorials often tended to be done *for* people affected by disaster rather than *by* them.

There is also a tendency in the recent literature to see memorials as cultural indices: different cultures produce different types of memorials, and different kinds of events tend to be marked by different types of memorials (see Foote 2001). The second assumption then, common to the literature we wish to challenge is the idea that memorials represent something fundamental about the culture of the memorialisers. We do not, of course, totally discount the idea that there is a relationship between a memorial and the cultural compulsions of particular societies for this would be perverse. However, we wish to dismantle the commonplace idea that the design, form and location of a memorial, as well as the type of interaction between it and the memorialisers, can simply be read as outward and tangible signs of underlying cultural meanings laid particularly bare by tragedy. It may well be that the squabbles and lobbying that give birth to memorials are revealing of underlying social processes, but memorial devices do not simply represent such processes any more than they simply engage memory. These days, at least, no anthropologist would give credit to the idea that if a people did not build memorials they did not have culture. Conversely, then, why should memorials be seen as the apotheosis of culture, let alone as meaningful units for cross-cultural comparison?

There are two further things to be said on this matter. First, memorial practices, at least those we discuss, are largely borrowings from other times and other places, forms of cultural plagiarism if you like, which remind us that culture, as memorial practices, is not timeless or bounded. Secondly, it seems to us that scholarly schemes on memorials are often imbued with distinctly European notions of state

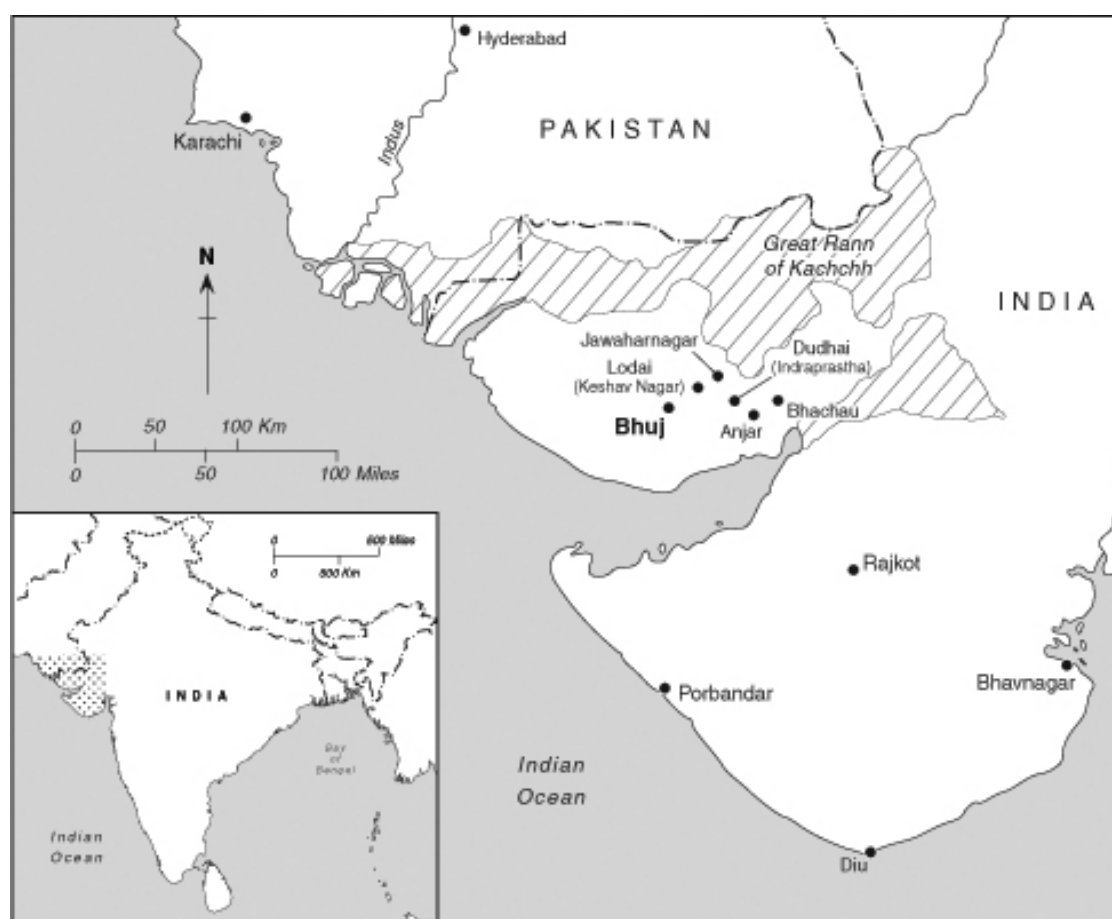
and memory and, more significantly, erroneously rely on the idea that trauma and loss guarantee the authenticity of the cultural sentiment.

By muddying the relationship between memorials and memory, and suggesting memorials are products of cultural compromise, borrowing, and perhaps even the globalisation of a non-governmental culture which seeks to promote particular ideas about memorials as a humanitarian aspect of post-disaster reconstruction (for that is implicit in what follows), we wish to move the focus away from memorials as epitomes of culture toward the processes that produce such objects.

The Gujarat Earthquake

On 26th January 2001, an earthquake hit the District of Kachchh in Gujarat, western India (see Fig. 1). Upwards of 13,000 people lost their lives and around 900 villages were reduced to rubble. The disaster generally affected rich and poor in both rural and urban areas as tens of thousands of ordinary people lost their homes. The earthquake occurred on Republic Day, a national and nationalistic holiday. Kachchh bore the brunt of the tremors and accounted for more than 90 percent of the fatalities in Gujarat. Around 1 percent of this sparsely populated and relatively inaccessible area lost their lives.

Figure 1



The earthquake popularly became known as ‘Shiva’s dance of destruction,’ and was variously described as sounding like ‘a distant flour mill’ and ‘an atomic

explosion.’ Some people believed the world was coming to an end, or that war had broken out with Pakistan. It shook confidence in god and nature. Several theories as to why the earthquake had occurred surfaced quickly with blame being placed at the feet of various wrong-doers. In some quarters, it emerged that the disaster was divine retribution for the wholesale betrayal of cultural traditions in favour of the modern values of consumerism and immorality. Significantly, however, neither the relative intensity of the disaster, nor the accounts of blame and retribution that emerged in the aftermath, have had any lasting impact on the ways in which memorials are being considered: memorials have largely been discussed in terms of state nationalism, not blame.

Some villages in Kachchh were rebuilt by the governments of other Indian states, notably, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Delhi. In these locations a memorial was nearly always incorporated into the plan. In villages built by international development organisations memorials, when they did appear, were largely afterthoughts. Other villages were reconstructed by private welfare and cultural organisations with nationalist agendas. One such village is Indraprastha where a monument to the earthquake-dead was built on top of a small hillock, called ‘Tiger Hill’ (Fig. 2). On a plaque set into the foundations of a pole for the national flag, is a list (in Hindi not the local language Gujarati) of the names of the villagers who perished. The hillock has been planted with sweet smelling flowers and, power and water permitting, a fountain cascades down an artificial watercourse. This type of structure is quite alien to rural Gujarat, as are the associations the



Figure 2

structure somewhat crudely evokes. This monument establishes a direct connection between the earthquake-dead and ideas and symbolism of sacrifice for the nation. The bloody, partially televised, battle for Tiger Hill (also the name of the monument) in Kashmir, was a turning point in the skirmishes between India and Pakistan in 1999. Soon after the Indian army captured the peak, the press

was full of images of the tricolour planted in the scrubby soils of the summit and the Indian soldiers who lost their lives became celebrated as martyrs. The proximity of Pakistan, and Kachchh's popular association with illicit border traffic, means the jingoism of Indraprastha's Tiger Hill is far from hollow, for it imposes Indian nationalistic political idioms on a region that has historically had very close connections with Sind, across the border in Pakistan.

Now, some eight years after the earthquake, two ideas have been sanctioned by the government for an official memorial. Perhaps these are attempts by the state to reign in the confusion of memory and political discontent that has characterised life in Kachchh in recent years. The first is a plantation to contain a tree for the life of each of the 13,000 dead. The architectural consultants awarded the contract to design the park were from a faraway urban centre and envisioned contemplative spaces and a museum. Fantastically, and equally improbably, they also proposed different species of trees represent different caste and religious groups. The plantation was originally planned for a large hillock on the outskirts of Bhuj, but due to a lack of water this plan was abandoned, and, as yet, no alternative land has been found.



Figure 3

The other project is more interesting and involves the preservation of the ruins of the village of Adhoi in the east of Kachchh, as a walk-around memorial (Fig. 3). At first glance, the eerie ruins and silent emptiness of the now almost uninhabited village evoke the tragedy of loss and the destruction of social life. However, not is all as it appears. Adhoi was atypical of villages in eastern

Kachchh, and the haunting ruins are mostly those of the large second homes of wealthy families resident in Bombay, most of which, importantly, are still standing and thus appear as dramatic ruins. In neighbouring and poor villages, shoddy buildings simply collapsed leaving unimpressive piles of rubble and were

therefore not suitable locations for such a dramatic memorial. The second part of the Adhoi illusion is that most of the damage to the houses was caused by the pillaging of building materials after the disaster, for earthquakes tend not to carefully remove wooden window and door frames. Finally, many of the houses of Adhoi's poor, which formed less impressive ruins, have been cleared and their occupants resettled elsewhere, contributing to the feeling of empty desolation.

Pillaging aside, on the surface, the unusual silence of the site suggests a commitment among local people to the idea that the village should be left to stand as a memorial. Probe just a little deeper and it is clear the project was first and foremost an opportunity for some influential property owners to receive substantial amounts of compensation from the government. The project has bitterly divided the villagers, there have been numerous court cases and slanderous battles have been waged in the classified section of the local newspaper. And, despite various government orders, and the high handed tactics of some local men of influence, life is gradually returning to the ruins. This, it seems to us, is all utterly typical of a memorial in gestation.

Just to complete this overview of the haphazard collection of memorials that has been constructed in Kachchh since 2001, it is worth noting that the epicentre has not been marked, perhaps because there is no consensus, and now apparently no interest, in where it was. Bill Clinton inaugurated a memorial in Anjar soon after the earthquake, but it was later removed because it was illegally built on private property. The conventions of Indian sociology might suggest the presence of caste-specific memorials, but there are no such memorials as far as we know.

In short, in Kachchh there is no consistent way of memorialising the earthquake, and most formal memorials have been given to the region by outsiders. If you know where to look, there are other memorials scattered throughout the district, but most of these are similarly incongruous as Tiger Hill and Adhoi, with no local precedent in terms of design or sentiment. Each tends to reflect primarily the agenda and intervention of an outside agency in the reconstruction process, some boldly carry the names of the industrial group which donated them; others have

been abandoned already and now stand in a state of dilapidation. It is not however that there is no precedent for memorials in Kachchh because most villages have a collection of hero stones for those who died sacrificial or pious deaths at their entrance; the former rulers of the land also memorialised extensively, as did the British during the colonial period.

Local people, however, have generally been quite unenthusiastic about public memorials, although some people are clearly aware of their importance and the political functions they can serve. Every annual anniversary of the earthquake has become a time for the disgruntled to voice their complaints and for the politically-minded to point to the failings of their opponents. In Bhuj, on the first anniversary of the earthquake, a group of concerned citizens erected a marble inscription in a steel frame on the main road coming into the town. It read:

We deserve to be condemned for ever.

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 so that they take a cue from our utter failure to make our motherland a better place to live.

Bhuj, Kachchh, India.

This 'inscription of failure', and the political speeches that marked its installation, cultivated the seeds of dissent that had been sown by government inaction in the town. Inevitably, given the scale of destruction left by the earthquake, the bureaucratic machinery of the state was frequently exposed as inadequate. This led to accusations of nepotism, cowardice and inefficiency against bureaucrats and elected politicians. Many of these claims contained elements of truth, while others were inspired by personal ambition, political opportunism or confounded rage. Significantly, however, in the flurry of transfers, additional deputations,

corruption scandals, and policy changes, a number of calls were made for Kachchh to be made independent from 'step-motherly' Gujarat. While this demand never came to anything, the fact it was made at all focused critical attention on inactivity of the state.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'inscription of failure' stands proud today, the local authorities preferring to screen it from public view with some conspicuously well-cared for bushes, rather than provide the excuse for public anger its demolition could be co-opted to cause (Fig. 4).



Figure 4

A year later, in 2003, one of the influential men who had erected the 'inscription of failure' managed to secure funding from an international agency for a 'neighbourhood memorial event'. This event has a hotchpotch of religious and cultural traditions and ideas brought together to mark the beginning of the reconstruction of one of the areas of old Bhuj that had been very badly damaged by the earthquake. The Hindu ritual was paid for (indirectly) by the United Nations, an organization which was presumably keen at the time to be seen spending money in 'culturally appropriate' ways through locally run institutions. At the event,



Figure 5

former residents of the area gave speeches of mourning for what had gone before, and spoke with hope about what was to come. The event climaxed with a heavy metal stake being hammered into the ground to secure the foundations of the neighborhood against the writhing of the mythological subterranean serpent above which Bhuj was held to have been built (Fig. 5). This somewhat bizarre staged ritual mimicked the royal rituals of state formation, in which the first king also hammered a stake into the serpent, and drew upon a further series of eclectic ideas derived from classical Hinduism. In effect, and regardless of their actual intentions, the funders had facilitated an event which was exclusionary along the lines of both religion and caste.

In the years that immediately followed, a small garden of remembrance was gradually built around the concrete structure that housed the new ritual stake, but that too lies forgotten and all but abandoned today. But perhaps, as was also the case with the 'inscription of failure', the memorializing event served purposes other than the creation of an enduring and venerated memorial. The 'inscription of failure' sparked and focused effective public protest against the state; the 'neighbourhood memorial event' clearly brought people together who had been dispersed by the earthquake to reflect in cathartic ways on what had been lost. The rituals, however odd and 'inauthentic' they may have been, marked the beginning of an active neighbourhood committee whose survival and unity, with hindsight, was given by factors completely independently of the ritual which united them in the first place. Both memorializing moments have had consequences which extend far beyond the memorial objects themselves.

Discussions in Bhuj however about the construction of a collective memorial by the citizenry have not yet amounted to much. Popular ideas have included the preservation of a ruined neighbourhood, a traditional-style house filled with possessions of the dead, and an educational centre decorated with the photographs of those who died in the earthquake. None of these ideas is particularly novel or indigenous in inception, inspired by memorials for the Holocaust in Europe and an earthquake memorial in Japan. Significantly, enthusiasm for these monumental projects evaporated once the possibility of international funding receded.

There are of course a great many ways in which the earthquake is personally evoked in the lives of ordinary Kachchhis, such as shrines in domestic spaces for dead relatives and the preservation of the cherished possessions of the dead; the earthquake itself is far from forgotten. There are also the daily memories evoked by the persistence of the town itself, as people move in and around it they encounter the memories of people who are no longer living. Most memorials constructed by local people and collectives are nearly always tied to reconstruction projects, such as those that mark death and the regeneration of life and buildings within particular urban neighbourhoods (see Simpson 2006), and

the anniversary of the disaster (Fig. 6). Here, memorials, at least for Hindus, are more about the process and meaning of cyclical rituals than they are about the culture of grave objects.

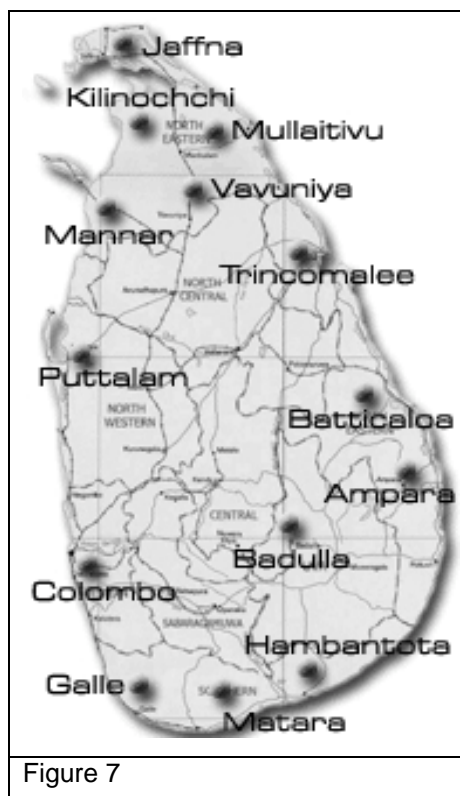


Figure 6

The Tsunami and Sri Lanka

On 26th December 2004, a series of immense waves rolled onto Sri Lankan shores following an earthquake off the west coast of Northern Sumatra (see Fig. 7). The tsunami struck a relatively thin but extremely long swathe extending over 1,000 kilometres, approximately two thirds of the island's coastline. It left 33,000 dead, 3,800 missing and 15,000 injured. It reduced around 75,000 houses to rubble and damaged even more leaving over 900,000 persons displaced and entire districts without basic services.

As in Gujarat, the tsunami was seen as a sign of divine retribution for the betrayal of cultural



of divine retribution for the betrayal of cultural traditions and the embrace of immoral, consumerist, 'Westernised' practices. The fact that many places of worship remained unscathed was used to drive this point home, despite engineers arguing that this was due to superior building materials used in their construction – unlike in the primarily lower income housing along the coast which was unable to withstand the force of the waves.

The areas worst affected by the tsunami – the northern and eastern regions of the island – had for the past twenty five years been the site of a civil war between the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), while most of the southern regions affected were limping back from a youth insurrection, from 1987–1990, which had led to the 'disappearance' of around 40,000 persons. These embattled regions were now not only re-inscribed by the ferocity of the ocean but subsequent waves of reconstruction and memorialization which reiterated socio-political tensions and fissures.

Priority was given to the speedy rehabilitation of the Sinhala-dominated southern regions (with newly-built houses far exceeding those destroyed in Hambantota, President Rajapakse's constituency), rather than the Tamil and Muslim-dominated northern and eastern regions. As in Gujarat, government ministers vied with each other to 'twin' the patronage they extended to new housing settlements (funded by international and local NGOs as well as local business enterprises) with the erection of tsunami memorials along the main coastal road. Many such memorials are now locally known by the names of politicians. The most infamous one, for example, near the site where a train carrying over 1,500 people was swept off the track, is now locally referred to as the 'Fernandopulle Memorial' after the minister who oversaw its construction. A collective representing those who perished in this train however has erected a counter-memorial³ next to the Fernandopulle Memorial, and where around 300 bodies lie in a mass grave, declaring that these deaths were not merely due to the tsunami but also to 'those in authority neglecting their responsibility' (Fig. 7). This flimsy memorial however, has to be constantly rebuilt as the collective has been unable to erect a permanent structure due to the owner of this land being engaged in a dispute with the state regarding compensation for unlawfully using his land as a grave site.

The badly battered train, of which the Fernandopulle Memorial now stands as a tragic mnemonic given the graphic depiction of its derailment in the large mural

which is a central part of this memorial (Fig. 8), had also become an impromptu memorial soon after the tsunami. Thousands – both local and foreign – flocked to it and it quickly became a



Figure 8

money-spinner for some locals who had begun to sell entrance tickets, concessions, souvenirs etc. Others took to begging from the visitors. When it became a site of contention between those who wished it to be made into a



Figure 9

permanent memorial/museum *in situ* and others who wished it taken away as it was leading to further fissures within their village, the state moved the carriages promising to turn it into a museum; it now lies rusting and forgotten in a disused rail yard at the Hikkaduwa Station.

The villagers who heatedly fought over the train largely ignore the Fernandopulle Memorial (it is rumoured that some smashed all the light fittings on the very day it was opened) as well as a rather *ad hoc* photo gallery/museum which has been set up by a Dutch activist, across the road from it. Many villagers have now re-located to new settlements inland and others who remain prefer to memorialize their dead as they see fit – a group of ten families is sponsoring an illuminated, pin-wheel behind a seated Buddha statue encased in glass, in turn a tsunami-commemorative construction by a local monk with funds donated by a Taiwanese monastery; a school teacher has hung mourning flags on the ruins of his ancestral home in order to memorialise his wife and son: ‘It’s a symbol of my grief as well as of my anger at the government which has been so neglectful’ (personal communication, May 2007). These now-ragged, black and white flags soon also became symbols of his defiance of an order for their removal, made by local government officials, prior to the arrival of President Rajapakse to inaugurate the Fernandopulle Memorial located opposite his property, in December 2006.



Figure 10

This teacher was also scathing about a 54 foot Buddha statue (Fig. 10), constructed by a politically powerful local monk under the patronage of the Ministry of Buddha Sasana with funding from a Japanese monastery, built further down the road from him. The 55 million rupees spent on it should have been used to materially resuscitate the tsunami-affected – rather than seeking to effect their mental rehabilitation, as mentioned in the Japanese Prelate's message on the plaque at the site – was his view. Interestingly, the plaque containing a message from President Rajapakse, proclaims this statue to symbolise the 'Buddhist temples destroyed by the tsunami and World Heritage Buddha statues destroyed by terrorists.' The latter is a reference to the Bamiyan Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan and supposedly replicated by this statue.

This dynamic interplay between the state and a critical citizenry is absent in the north and east, particularly in areas populated by the Tamil minority. In Batticaloa district, for example, the populace not only has to contend with the militarised face of the state but also the LTTE and its competing breakaway factions. Resourcefulness in the face of isolation and vulnerability is exemplified in the tsunami memorialisations; fishermen's cooperatives, sports clubs and village committees have taken the lead. The series of simple, columnar memorials, poignant reminders of decimated coastal communities, extending from Thiruchendur to Navalady, are the result of such collective community efforts

(Fig. 11). Their verticality is striking and not replicated elsewhere along the coast, though one cannot discount possible resonances with a LTTE memorial to 186 villagers who were massacred by government forces in 1990 at Sathurukondan, a village just to the north of Batticaloa. These memorials are now frequently reduced to ghostly sentinels at night due to community coffers no longer being able to afford the astronomical electricity bills. In contrast, the Buddha statue beside the southern coastal road is illuminated at the state's expense.



Figure 11

Despite the tsunami affecting people of all religions, ethnicities, classes and regions, there are no plans to erect a national memorial that could articulate a shared language of loss and bereavement. This, of course, is hardly surprising given the state's pro-Sinhala/Buddhist/southern policies, not only in terms of post-tsunami reconstruction and memorialisation but also when it comes to memorialising other extraordinary events of violence – a national 'Shrine to the Innocents' memorialises deaths and 'disappearances' during the Southern youth uprising but no national memorial commemorates civilians killed during the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 or the current Civil War now extending over two decades.

A Comparative Conclusion

How are we to explain such clear differences in the memorialising practices of the two countries? Can we simply put such differences down to the nature and degree of impact of the disaster? Because greater percentages of villagers died in Sri Lanka than in Gujarat, is the need to memorialise and remember greater? Or, should we seek our explanation in the cultural imperatives of two quite different societies? Two societies with quite different ways of affecting visible collective public action? We could argue that there are fewer memorials in Gujarat because of a dominance of Brahmanical Hindu ideals about the erasure of individual identity at the point of death (Fig. 6 casts some doubt on this interpretation of popular Hinduism). Yet, Hindus in Sri Lanka have been as assiduous as Buddhists in erecting memorials. A wave is an easier thing to graphically depict than an earthquake. But is this the only explanation as to why there are no memorials with graphic imagery in Gujarat? Or, should we turn again to a cultural explanation regarding different traditions of representation? Buddhist temple mural styles and iconography is clearly a historical precedent here. Is the state so much stronger in Gujarat or civil society so much weaker, than in Sri Lanka, that only the state can erect memorials in Gujarat? We could perhaps also argue that in India, historically, people have had more recourse to the state than in Sri Lanka, where minority communities have long stopped expecting the state to be a care-taker.

Then we come to the thorny question of memorials and religious identity. With the exception of the first anniversary of the earthquake in Gujarat, which was marked by the state with explicitly Hindu rituals to appease angry earth deities, when compared to Sri Lanka, the memorialising practices of both the Government of Gujarat and other state governments that funded reconstruction work are, in many respects, remarkably 'secular' (for the want of a better word). Given the reputation of the government in Gujarat for Hindu nationalism this is somewhat surprising. We could argue that this was a reflection of the ideals and traditions of Indian democratic secularism in action (for a similar argument in terms of 'museum-ising' post-Independence, see Mathur and Singh 2007). Alternatively, we could also,

and, equally convincingly, argue that the secular tinge to the memorials in Gujarat is an echo of the memorial practices and aesthetics of the colonial state; the British were after all the chief memorialisers in India, at least during recent centuries. But they were similarly industrious memorialisers in Sri Lanka. So, maybe a more productive angle would be to assume that statecraft in Sri Lanka, given the recent turbulent history of the country, is popularly legitimised among its supporters by the symbols of Buddhism and therefore memorials simply reflect this. Similarly, we might argue that absence of Muslim monuments to the dead in both countries is a result of religiously sanctioned restrictions on visual and iconic representation.

However, all this notwithstanding, at the beginning of this paper we argued that memorials were not simply about memory or culture. We hope it is clear in the way we have provided a series of tentative and conflicting answers to our own initial comparative questions that we do not utterly discount either memory or culture as a mode of explanation for the existence or non-existence of memorials. Yet, it seems that two or more conflicting and contradictory reasons can readily be given to explain the existence of a phenomenon. This suggests to us that a straightforward reliance on ideas about either memory or culture is inadequate in and of itself to explain the presence or absence of memorials. We hope it is clear that serendipity and compromise also play significant and determining roles in all aspects of the memorial business, and that these processes often over-ride the concerns of memory and culture.

Aside from the elementary fact that both disasters prompted the creation of memorials, there is another strong similarity between the two locations. In both instances, memorials have been used to consolidate and publicise political protest against the state, while the state has used memorials in an attempt to impose its authority. Memorials have thus become a medium of communication; they are nodal points of contestation articulated in the language of loss and bereavement. Rather than bringing people together, as some writers on the subject have suggested (see Winter 1995: 50–3 for example), memorials have frequently exacerbated old conflicts and encouraged new social cleavages. In southern Sri

Lanka, many tsunami memorials have been constructed by the state without the consultation or participation of the bereaved. In such a context, that is, where states seek to be the sole arbiter of meaning, a re-working of Yves Helois' formulation that war memorials are exercises in 'biopolitics' seems particularly apt. Helois (*pace* Foucault) argues that war memorials are sites of symbolic exchange: death is both deconstructed – horror, trauma and individuality is buried – and reinvested with meaning as an abstraction, a collective sacrifice – *a nos morts*; the collective spirit is now embodied in the state (quoted in Winter 1995: 94). Tiger Hill in Gujarat is particularly instructive in this regard as it seamlessly folds the memorialisation of the earthquake into the memorialisation of the battle for Kashmir. In a similar, but different register, the Sri Lankan state has built a Buddha statue which not only seeks to recuperate tsunami-destroyed Buddhist temples within the country (no similar measures are mobilized for the loss of Hindu, Christian and Muslim places of worship) but makes claims on a wider Buddhist universe while simultaneously providing an indictment of 'terrorism,' by invoking Bamiyan.

Other memorials discussed here however seem more to be forms of cultural compromise that have emerged haphazardly out of conflict and dispute as well as agreement. As such, memorials can only be thought of as beacons of cultural meaning because their construction reflects processes of negotiation and perhaps prevalent ideas of visual and ritual aesthetics.

It is also worth recalling that the location of memorials also often simply reflects the regulative capacities of national planning regimes. The material we have presented demonstrates that memorials, as manifestations of compromise often without local precedent, are creative and extraordinary acts that may routinise and synthesise similarly extraordinary events and atypical collective emotions and will.

Endnotes

¹ See Inglis (1992) for a simple yet effective demonstration of this point; our thoughts have also been influenced in various ways by the discussions of Gillis (1994), Gordon (2001), Landzelius (2003), Mayo (1988), Michalski (1998), Roth (1995), Sherman (2000), Winter (1998), and Young (1992, 1993, 2000).

² Here we have in mind work such as that of Jeffrey Olick (2003), which questions fundamental assumptions about the naturalness of memory, Edward Casey's (2000) phenomenological study on the 'polymorphic mansions of memory', as well as Paul Connerton (1989) on how societies remember.

³ We use the term 'counter-memorial' in order to differentiate the nexus of meanings it consolidates from those embedded in the term 'counter-monument' which has been so excellently extrapolated by James E. Young (1992, 1993) with reference to a particular strand of counter-monumentalizing and memorializing practices in post-Nazi Germany.

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