

## Revisiting Nationalist Historiography through the Narrativization of Past Events: Reading Shahid Amin's Reconstruction of *Chauri Chaura*

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There can be no untold stories at all, just as there can be no unknown knowledge.  
There can be only past facts not yet described in a context of narrative form  
Louis Mink

The preoccupation with knowledge/power in historiography and the politics of knowledge creation and its legitimization have always had an uneven and problematic history. This paper highlights the importance of revisiting the past through the narrativization of events, in the context of historiographical studies in India. The struggle between official narrative and the “subjugated narrative,” if one may call it so, has been the area of interest in a number of disciplines, including history, jurisprudence, sociology, anthropology and literary studies, for the past few decades. It has only gained prominence since the recent “narrative turn,” which dates from the late 1960s, and more emphasis has been placed on it since the subaltern studies initiatives from the 1980s onwards. The present study is part of an attempt to explore the narrative web of Indian nationalist historiography, within which a number of stories and subjugated characters are embedded. Through a re-reading of two essays by Shahid Amin which claim to “retrieve” or “redeem” the event of *Chauri Chaura* from the web of official narratives, this paper shows that the ubiquitous presence of the discourses generated by the State or Law or the Samaj (as projected through cultural, traditional, religious laws and value systems) have been instrumental in transforming the participants of history into mere subjects.

The historical narratives, in any discipline, which are available for public consumption, do carry the authoritative mediation of dominant institutions like the State, the Law or civil society. For the same reason these narratives—handed down to posterity—have been invariably accompanied by strategic aporias which were lopsided in their perspective of what was understood as reality. As Romila Thapar puts it, there is now a “growing recognition that the past had to be explained, understood, reinterpreted. . . and that such explanations could also help us understand the present in more focused ways than before” (Thapar 1443). This “critical enquiry,” as it is called by Thapar, calls for a fresh perception of

the ways in which narratives were constructed and legitimized through various authoritative mediations. Historians and sociologists are now realizing the need to move towards the recognition of the possibility of many narratives or histories, rather than a unitary perception of truth and reality. This possibility of plurality in narratives can be identified and explored only when the past gets reconstructed from a different perspective, with greater perceptiveness. Reading, and especially re-reading, an established culture or discourse can be seen “as a struggle to understand and intervene in the structures and processes of active domination and subordination” (Rege 1038), says Sharmila Rege while analyzing the concept of popular culture, which has been defined in terms of “mass-mediated” forms by elite cultures.<sup>1</sup> Re-reading is deemed to be a struggle as the possibility which is embedded within is not always already available but should be extracted with the coercive forces of narrativization. Thus, the facts which are present beneath the shadow of authoritative discourses are pulled away and given an identity of their own through a fresh narrativization of the same incidents or events. Attempts to re-read the histories and re-work through them may not be comprehensive or flawless. At the same time, however, the process of rereading can act as a catalyst to expedite the process of unpacking loaded narratives, which have been carrying the stamp of authority at the cost of many suppressed voices and subsumed identities. Charu Gupta delineates this process as that of “disentangling received knowledge from the apparatus of control” (Gupta 1739) and helpfully adds, “[w]hile it may not be inherently radical or transformative, it provides progressive and different readings” (Gupta 1744).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, while exploring the “people’s narratives” regarding the 1857 revolt,<sup>3</sup> Badri Narayan Tiwari admits, “[t]he historicity of these narratives is questionable but the politics behind the creation and narration of these stories is to dethrone the established heroes of the mainstream narratives” (Tiwari 1737). This paper draws much from the extant methodologies and re-readings which have attempted to reconstruct the past by thoroughly unpacking the dominant narratives.

This study is a re-reading of two essays which make an attempt to retell a twentieth-century event in the nationalist history of India, popularly known as “Chauri Chaura.” “Chauri Chaura” is located in nationalist historiography as an event which provoked suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement, which lasted from September 1920 to February 1922, was a people’s movement of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience led by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. This movement is said to have opened the “Gandhi era” in the Indian Independence movement against British colonial rule. The Non-Cooperation Movement was called off on 4 February 1922 in the Chauri Chaura after violent clashes between the local police and the protestors resulted in the burning down of the police station. Shahid Amin, a historian and sociologist, attempts to rescue the Chauri Chaura event and its protagonists from the hegemonic nationalist narrative in order to restore the actions and voices of subaltern groups. Amin’s book *Event*,

*Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* is regarded as a subversive commentary on the history of an event which has been full of contradictions and ironies. In this paper I look at two essays from the book which were originally published in the Subaltern Studies series—“Approver’s Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura” from *Subaltern Studies V* and “Remembering Chauri Chaura: Notes from Historical Fieldwork” from *Subaltern Studies Reader 1986–1995*. Published in 1987, “Approver’s Testimony” is mainly a contextual reconstruction of the burning of the police station as a historical event, followed by an account of the trial which focuses on the testimony of the “approver,” a participant who acted as the principal prosecution witness; “Remembering Chauri Chaura” (pub. 1996) is based on Amin’s “historical fieldwork,” his collection of accounts of the incident from people in the locality made during three visits in 1988, 1989 and 1991. From the available legal documents and information gathered from surveys, Amin has re-constructed ‘Chauri Chaura’ in the form of a narrative with a beginning, middle and end.

### Contextualizing the production of the text

Amin’s work on Chauri Chaura is significant as it is one of the pioneer works in historiographical studies in India, which adopted the narrative technique to contextualize and retell an event recorded in official history from a different vantage point. It is also seen as a major challenge to nationalist historiography, and we need to understand how. At one level Amin’s analyses draw attention to the imbrications of elite and subaltern politics in the context of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The analysis of peasant insurgency in colonial India and of subaltern participation in nationalist politics by the historians of ‘subaltern studies’ has amounted to a strong critique of bourgeois-nationalist politics and of the postcolonial state. Through a reconstruction of the Chauri Chaura event, Amin is trying to show how the powerful strand of anti-colonial politics, launched independently of bourgeois-nationalist leaders, had been denied its place in established historiography. It also highlights how the two domains of elite and subaltern politics come together in the nationalist movement, with the latter almost always overshadowed by the former. The focus of the present work is not on the event Chauri Chaura per se but on the ways in which its construction has informed the contemporary understanding of the nationalist movement and even the idea of the nation. In the last few decades, especially since the 1980s, much attention has been drawn to the disjunctions in the telling of nationalist history; the Subaltern Studies school in particular has devoted considerable scholarship to explore these. To understand the context of the text and its production, one needs to first understand the politics of representation embedded in nationalist historiography. It would be difficult to provide a

comprehensive definition for what constitutes the nationalist historiography which has also come to be projected as the dominant and most authoritative version of the nation's history. It would not be wrong to say that Subaltern Studies emerged as an intervention to interrogate certain unchallenged notions that had gone into the founding principles of the nation.

Nationalist historiography, which narrated the nation into being, has been re-read, critiqued and re-written in an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of narratives and to foreground the marginalized and the forgotten. This nationalist historiography has been viewed as elitist, false and insensitive to regional variations (Aloysius 6), thereby opening up new debates to help reconstruct the past and render new insights into the blind spots. In the last few decades the critical debates on nationalist historiography have led to the breakdown of the boundaries of disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, law and anthropology. The subjugation of knowledge is employed and is visible at various levels in different realms of scholarship, especially in the body of scholarship that enables the understanding of the marginalized and the historically forgotten sections of society. These interdisciplinary approaches have enabled the production of new forms of knowledge which were earlier lost in the monolith of rigid disciplines and canons. They point out that the discrepancies and disjunctions exist not only at the macro level, where the nation's history was involved, but also at the micro level where the lives and identities of individuals or groups were also involved. The process of re-reading splintered the consensus of nationalist history and foregrounded the lives of peasants, women and lower castes who had been almost totally out of the frame of representation in nationalist/socio-cultural history. These re-readings "help us capture what is at stake in the practices of self or agency and of narrative that emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire, and nation" (Tharu and Lalita xvii).

The selected essays as well as related readings seem to suggest the presence of marginalized sections of society, thereby disrupting the natural flow of day-to-day lives. In the wake of these incidents, which were often violent in nature, such as rape or unnatural death or brutal massacres, the forgotten sections of the society, like Dalits and peasants, were brought into the mainstream and, through the interference of law, became subjects of discourse in both academe and the public sphere. Analysis of these re-readings helped lay bare the "conditions under which knowledge is constructed and represented" (Mookherjee 1). Unlike the dominant/official history writing, which tries to impose a closure, thereby denying the historicity of history, the re-telling of history subverts the notion of closure and emphasizes that it is the dominant discourse which generates or determines socio-political events.

The Subaltern Studies project began as an intervention in the debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history and participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of Orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge

(Chakrabarty 1). It interrogated the idea of the nation by foregrounding the histories from below as ‘the nation-idea’; as Aditya Nigam puts it, the nation was marked by “a relentless drive to homogenize all its internal constituents into a singular pace dictated by the demands of the national progress” (Nigam 2). The practice of re-reading the nation’s history from the subaltern studies’ perspective emerged from specific events in Indian history which had a marginalized or forgotten narrative. Here, the process of re-reading interrogated the colonial and nationalist historiography and suggested alternative ways of reading and re-writing history.

Recent trends in historiography have focused on the narrativist approach to liberate events from the burden of singular narratives. In attempting to bridge the gap between political, official history and oral testimonies, major events in recent history were recovered from official archives through a re-reading of the past. The works of Veena Das (*Mirrors of Violence, Critical Events*); Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*); Emma Tarlo (*Unsettling Memories*); Shahid Amin (*Event, Metaphor, Memory*); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (*Borders and Boundaries*); Kavita Daiya (*Violent Belongings*); Gyan Pandey and Ranajit Guha (“Chandra’s Death”); and Anupama Rao (“Understanding Sirasgaon”, “The Death of a Kotwal”), etc., deal with events which splintered the consensus of dominant discourses at national and local levels. Here, events of national importance such as Partition or Emergency, and local village incidents such as Chandra’s death or Dalit atrocity, have been brought together under a common scrutiny though they fall under different categories in terms of their gravity and implications. However, the methods of analysis—reconstructing narratives and contexts, identifying agency—are similar, and the official narration of both categories of events tells us about the contexts and discursive spheres which produced certain kinds of narratives.

Amin’s work is the empirical study of a single episode in Indian history, followed by the discussion of a number of theoretical and methodological concerns. Amin analyzes the judicial and national records interpreting this event as part of the official narrative, and also conducts fieldwork in that region to explore the meaning of Chauri Chaura for the contemporary relatives of those involved. As Amin puts it, “the interest of my story lies in the entanglement of a local affair with the affairs of Indian nationalism – as ideology, as practice, as history” (Amin 1996: 11). Though the essays explicitly explore the dichotomy between official narrative and local memory, Amin’s aim is not merely to expose the discrepancy. Amin elaborates that,

for me it was not a question of counterposing local remembrance against authorized accounts; the process by which historians gain access to pasts is richly problematic, as is the relationship between memory and record, and the possibilities of arriving at a more nuanced narrative, a thicker description, seem enhanced by putting the problems on display (Amin, “Remembering...” 181)

The essays are about reading between the silences in the trial which never recorded the voices of the peasant-accused—while AT finds its way through the documents of the trial, “Remembering Chauri Chaura” records the familial narration. Before exploring how Chauri Chaura gets retold through the unearthing of public and personal narratives, it is important to briefly look at the narrative turn in history which has gained impetus since the 1960s.

### The Narrative Turn in Historiography

Because the emphasis of this paper is on the narrative approach towards the representation of events and how past events have been narrativised in historiography, it would be appropriate to begin with the status ascribed to narrative within professional studies. Etymological studies claim that the term *narrative* derives from the Greek verb *gnarus* (meaning to know), the signifier associated with the passing on of knowledge (McQuillan 2). Interestingly recent trends in historiographical and sociological studies also point to the study of the past which informs the present as a system of knowledge rather than as a mere chronological description of the past. Structuralist theorists such as Roland Barthes argued explicitly for a cross-disciplinary approach to the analysis of stories—an approach in which stories can be viewed as supporting a variety of cognitive and communicative activities, from spontaneous conversations and courtroom testimony to visual art, dance, and mythic and literary traditions. In the following decades, by the 1950s and the 1960s, strong arguments against the attack on the narrative conception of history were launched by the historian J.H. Hexter and the philosopher Louis Mink.<sup>4</sup> However, there was not much dialogue between the philosophy of history and narrative theory until the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* in 1970. Hayden White, an advocate of narrativization in historiography, has explored the relationship between narrative and historical representation thus coaxing fellow scholars as well as readers to reconsider traditionally accepted distinctions between literary and historical discourse.<sup>5</sup>

This multidisciplinary approach to the narrative element captured the attention of scholars by the end of the 1970s. Margaret Somers categorically stated, “Social scientists must assume that social reality itself has a narrative structure and that we must attempt to recapture those narratives by narrative means” (qtd Sewell 484).<sup>6</sup> However, many continued to be skeptical about the scientific objectivity of the narrative approach. The skeptics treated narrative as inherently fictitious and imaginative, as that which lacked any trace of reality or real life. Real events were not readily available to be narrativised in a coherent manner without ambiguities regarding their structure and order. Hence Genette and Levonas, trying to solve this difficulty, pointed out, “[i]f the narrative

is rigorously faithful to historical events, the historian-narrator must be very sensitive to the changing of orders when he goes from the narrative work of telling the completed acts to the mechanical transcription of the spoken words” (Genette and Levonas 4). The event had to be translated into meaningful signifiers. The trajectory of narration was rather different from that of description. Genette tried to explain how narrative language was seen as different from descriptive language, that the most significant difference between the two may possibly be that the narration, by the temporal succession of its discourse, restores the equally temporal succession of the events, while the description must successively modulate the representation of objects simultaneously juxtaposed in space.

Thapar even justifies the element of speculation and imagination which may come into play during the critical analysis of a historical narrative:

Even where the explanation requires a small leap of the imagination, the leap takes off from critical enquiry. This is the historian’s contribution to knowledge but it is also an essential process in human sciences. And in making this contribution the historian is aware that other evidence may surface, fresh generalisations may emerge and knowledge be further advanced. (Thapar 1447)

Engaging with these ambiguities associated with narrativization, Jay Clayton points out that skepticism against the narrative approach and its authenticity stems from its “association with unauthorized forms of knowledge” such as folklores, myths, legends and oral histories or “the less privileged written genres—diaries, letters, criminal confessions, slave narratives” (Clayton 378-9). He supports his argument with Michel Foucault’s observation that narrative is one of the “naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault qtd Clayton 378). Clayton takes his argument a little further and points out that most engagements with minority writing constitute a “rich mixture of traditional narrative forms and contemporary political concerns” (Clayton 379).

Unearthing the plurality of narratives and exploding the assumption of a unitary narrative would definitely be met with resistance and hurdles and hence may seem chaotic. Ranajit Guha points out, “[i]f the small voice of history gets a hearing at all in some revised account . . . it will do so only by interrupting the telling of the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot” (qtd Ballantyne 97). Notably, only the narrative form effectively allows as well as supports the text’s engagement with contemporary socio-political concerns. This, rather sudden engagement with the narrative approach across disciplines can be read along with the emergence of minority literature, subaltern studies, feminist literature, African American literature and Dalit Studies. Narrativization is particularly attractive and appealing to iconoclasts, says Clayton, as narrative has so far been “scorned by the official culture” (Clayton 379). In Toni Morrison’s words, “People *crave* narration . . . That’s the way they learn things. That’s the way human beings organize

their human knowledge—fairy tales, myths. All narration” (qtd Clayton 378). Clayton maintains that through narrative it is possible to positively explore and analyse the disciplinary modes of power which find their articulation in minority discourses especially. Amin’s account of Chauri Chaura communicates to the reader on behalf of the silenced peasant’s voices which were criminalized and appropriated by the voices of law and nation. It also provides an insight into the plurality of explanations and the presence of multiple contexts in which the event can be located – even outside the nationalist historiography. Individual responses to the event and its repercussions could be read along with the mainstream nationalist historiography. Amin succeeds radically in showing that the local population saw as a personal disaster what the national leadership saw as a political mistake. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to reconstruct a ‘subaltern event’ through re-narrativization in order to liberate the event from the ‘scorn’ of the dominant culture.

### The Nature of the Event

In the process of textualising history, the selection of events and people to be recorded and their priorities were dependent on the dominant ideological devices of each period. Only ‘important’ events were recorded and this importance was never arbitrary but was informed by various socio-political forces which defined the systems in society. One of the ways in which certain events acquired distinctive status was through the repercussions they had in contemporary society and posterity, that is, how they changed ways of life and thought. History, as it has been narrated and textualised, is a series of such recorded events which influenced/changed the life of a nation/community/individual.

The event discussed in this paper is a happening which can be pinned down to a specific moment or period in time. For example, Chauri Chaura as it has been understood in nationalist historiography ‘happened’ during a given period of time or a specific day, about which there are no contentions. This also means that there are events which cannot be pinned down to a single moment in history such as Partition or the formation of the Constituent Assembly, the Holocaust, or the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Events of similar stature and gravity can be designated as “critical events” which directly influence the making of any society.<sup>8</sup> Some events in modern history such as the World Wars, Independence movements, the unification of nations, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, etc., have been cited as major events which marked a shift from existing to new systems of thought and functioning which was totally unforeseen. There are also “emergent events” as well which “acquire social significance by ‘sticking out’ from the flow of time” (Chatterji 429). According to Roma Chatterji, emergent events such as the 1984 Punjab riots or the 1993 Mumbai riots have the ability to organize time into a past and a future. The event of



Chauri Chaura is not momentous in nature, but it has not been considered as instrumental in changing the country's history either. (Chauri Chaura did change the course of nationalist history by being instrumental in calling off the Non-Cooperation Movement, but the event per se was not recorded as momentous; it was the halt in the Non-Cooperation Movement which was recorded). Regardless of the gravity of the event, narrativization and re-narrativization contribute to the production of a different knowledge which can be useful in 'understanding life in time.' Before we embark on the analysis of the essays, with a central emphasis on the narrativization and construction of events, it would be appropriate to note that the narrative approach is just one of the methods that can be used to access the past and re-tell past experiences.

### Reading Chauri Chaura: "Rescuing" the Event

Shahid Amin begins his essay "Remembering Chauri Chaura" by describing the event which happened on 4 February 1922, when a crowd of peasants burned a police station at Chauri Chaura, a small town in northern India, resulting in the killing of twenty-three policemen. The event was recorded and remembered as the ugly episode that forced Gandhi to call off the Non-Cooperation Movement. Though the volunteers who initiated the "crime" had obvious political motivation as well as connections, their deeds violated the pledge of nonviolence and hence had to be disassociated from the nationalist movement. Chauri Chaura was first constructed in Indian nationalist discourse as a condemnable event that should be forgotten; yet its "commemorative setting" within the master narrative accounting for the ending of one phase of the national struggle and for the opening of another phase only helped to reinforce memory of the event. Chauri Chaura is referred to in "Remembering Chauri Chaura" as an "unforgettable event" which actually was forgotten in the nationalist history. Amin accordingly states that "the problem demands a certain recognition in its own terms" (Amin 1986: 167) rather than an invocation once in a while just "to explain the termination of one phase of the Freedom Struggle" (Amin 1996: 179). Borrowing the terminologies used in nationalist historiography and popular history, in AT Amin introduces the event as a "crime," "riot" and "an unforgettable event," and in "Remembering Chauri Chaura" as a "well-known riot" which is "rooted in paradox."

Chauri Chaura was already defined as a "riot" when the investigations and the trials began and there was never a chance to define or defend it otherwise. However, the issue at hand is not whether it was riotous in nature, but rather, the nature of the narration of the event which had made it impossible for Chauri Chaura to remain within the prestigious nationalist history. An event which has been in many ways almost dismissed as "a riot" or "an unfortunate incident" in the otherwise

“peaceful” nationalist movement rooted in the Gandhian tenets had to be re-examined through the narratives involved in the construction of the event. Amin’s essays draw our attention to the attempts by the state, and by the leaders of the nationalist movement, to impose a single understanding of the events at Chauri Chaura. Chauri Chaura had become “an event without a pre-history” in the annals of nationalist historiography. The narrative construction of Chauri Chaura acquires more significance as it has been recorded in mainstream history as “an event without prehistory, quarantined inside the borders of a consequentialist past” (Amin: 1996, 179). The actual Chauri Chaura got erased over the construction of a momentous Event—namely Independence. Chauri Chaura was not supposed to gain entry into the nationalist narrative, and hence the event per se was not accorded an identity or importance. It was considered a “riot” or was mentioned only in relation to the failure of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Amin sees this as a “desire to immunize Indian nationalism from the violence of Chauri Chaura” (Amin 1987: 166). Beginning with a brief account of the riot and its aftermath, Amin traces the protean figure of Chauri Chaura that appears in nationalist prose and colonial court records, as well as in the memory of the volunteers’ living relatives. AT examines the way the prosecution shaped the case to argue that this event was a criminal, and not a political, act. Central to that strategy was the use of “approver,” a participant in the event who later testifies for the government. The story constructed by the prosecution acquires prominence, with its selection of particular starting and ending points and its focus on certain actors, causes, and outcomes. “Remembering Chauri Chaura” which can be read as the continuation of “Approver’s Testimony”, offers a rich and compelling picture of individual lives caught up in “a moment of excess,” and of a local event caught up in the history of the nation.

Chauri Chaura seems to suggest that peasants mostly get into the historical record and become at least silent participants in the official discourse only when they stir up trouble as they did in Chauri Chaura. Crimes, insurrections, riots, and other such extraordinary forms of resistance are what draw them to the attention of those in power. In his introduction to *Event, Metaphor and Memory*, Amin says, “[p]easants do not write, they are written about . . . their speech . . . is not normally recorded for posterity, it is wrenched from them in courtrooms and inquisitorial trials” (1). Amin also identifies contradictory constructions of the events by local nationalists and, later, by the relatives of the participants as well. Amin’s multiple sources of information converge not to produce a simple explanation of why “Chauri Chaura” happened, but rather, to display the complexity of the event, its metaphorical power as a two-sided image of criminality and patriotism, and its persistence in local and familial memory even after it is “largely forgotten in nationalist lore” (Amin 1987: 176).

## Memory as a Point of Access

Amin has already suggested that there is an unrecorded past which is caught up in the records and he sets out to cull them out rather forcefully. The local memory which narrates Chauri Chaura with a distinctly different tone throws open the possibility for the emergence of innumerable narratives and in some ways even mocks the recorded, reliable event which nationalist history, judiciary and political history claims to be “the truth.” “In local memory, the event—‘this burning of the thana’—does not result from a cause; it is part of a story, a narrative activated by the local volunteers” (Amin 1998: 211). In another instance, Amin says that Chauri Chaura “is not just about the event of 1922. It is equally about the iniquitous recognition of the ‘freedom fighters’” (Amin 1998: 227). The payment of pensions to the families of “rioters” had also altered the local memory drastically. “The successful insertion of that infamous event into the life of the nation has both freed and framed familial memories” (Amin 1998: 227), notes Amin. At the outset of “Remembering Chauri Chaura,” Amin points out that though the Chauri Chaura event was powerful enough to bring history to a temporary halt, the “incensed public that burnt the police station” never got a place in history. The desire to immunize Indian Nationalism from the violence of Chauri Chaura had overpowered all the available narratives of the event. Hence, rather than relying on the extensive judicial archive on the Chauri Chaura trials, Amin turns to the “memory” and “remembrance” of the people which often offer a different narrative than affidavits and testimonies. It is possible to explore the “event” per se only by approaching it through a narrative form, because events are never accessible outside the process of their narration. According to Daniel Hoffman, “they are not meaningful independent of the way they are remembered, recounted, or mediated by existing narratives” (Hoffman 5). This statement infers that the meaning can change depending on the way the events are remembered, recounted or mediated.

Throughout the essay “Approver’s Testimony” Amin analyses how the testimony of the approver is constructed and constituted and how it functions as *material* for judgment which later gets accepted as the official pronouncement on the event. Soon after the event, the police had compiled a list of the volunteers and began a relentless hunt to track the “rioters” down. As the nationalist leaders had disowned the event—even Gandhi appealed to the volunteers to surrender to the law—it was rather easy to track them down. As the trial progressed, most of the 225 accused began to even deny their status as “volunteers,” arguing that they never knew that they were filling out forms or paying subscriptions in order to become volunteers or that it was just a formality that they had fulfilled out of compulsion. In this context, the testimony of Mir Shikari, the approver gains significance.

Mir Shikari, the approver, is a twenty-seven-year-old cultivator and hideseller from Chotki Dumri. According to legal discourse, “an approver should be examined first and not after all the witnesses who are supposed to corroborate his evidence are examined” (Amin 1987: 168). Shikari was accordingly arrested on 16 March and he made his “confession” before the Deputy Collector. Later in the course of the trial he provided his testimony quite extensively, with graphic details of the people as well as the incidents. Amin draws our attention to how Shikari was used as an instrument in the judicial process—how the Prosecution converts the renegade into an approver. Amin quotes Paul Ricoeur: “Testimony signifies something other than a simple narration of things seen” (Amin 1987: 172). The appropriation of Mir Shikari and his testimony has larger implications than Shikari’s desperation to save his own life. Shikari just happens to be a tool through which the colonial government gets to easily manipulate and appropriate the event; to make things easier, the nationalist leaders were not under any pressure to claim the event as their own either. The responses of the other accused were varied and interesting; while some claimed that Shikari had some old enmity with them and was trying to frame them, some others like Abdullah were poignant in pointing out, “Shikari knows me from before. He has turned an approver and if he did not name a number of accused persons, how could he get off” (Amin 1987: 189). Though apparently it comes across as “blame,” it is quite clear that the judiciary has appropriated the approver’s testimony. Though there are law books which warn Judges to be careful about the testimonies provided by accomplices, in Chauri Chaura the context of the relationship between the Approver’s Testimony and the judgment is fixed by the politics of the trial.

At the same time, Amin attributes the failure to produce an independent narrative of this event to the power of judicial and nationalist discourse. Though he tries to extract the peasant voices through interviews and surveys, Amin notes that their narratives are also never entirely independent of the discourses of the state and nation. In his own words, “the subalterns make their own memories, but not as they please” (Amin 1998: 187). Even in the familial recall of the event, the echoes of the judicial pronouncements could be heard. At the same time, for the nation-state to reorder its past or invent a new narrative was not too difficult. Later, when the “criminals” were acknowledged as “martyrs,” the state had only to translate the punishments into pensions, recalls Amin.

### Contextualising the Event

Locating the context of any event is important in order to make the narrative meaningful. It is the event and its context which fix the nature of the narrative, its relevance and its significance in any milieu. The attributes of an event may differ according to the “function” that it serves

in each narrative. According to Roland Barthes, “the meaning of an event is to ask how it contributed to the whole story” (qtd in Carr 12). As David Carr puts it, “we cannot refer to events as such but only to events under a description” (Carr 10). Events acquire meaning and existence only when within the context of various narratives—ranging from oral traditions through photography to movies. In Ferber’s words, “narratives do not transparently reflect experience; they give meaning to it. Experience does not exist outside of narrative contexts” (Ferber 342).

According to Hayden White,

Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning. (White qtd Norman 121)

In his essay, “The Individuation of Events” Donald Davidson clarifies that “we have grown used to speaking of actions (presumably a species of events) ‘under a description’” (Davidson 163).

Primarily, Amin tries to give a pre-history to the Chauri Chaura event. As Davidson puts it, “[w]e characterize causal laws as asserting that every event of one sort is followed by an event of another sort” (Davidson 163). The pre-history or the “before” of the event is important for narrative coherence as well. Every event has a prehistory attached to it, without which the event may lose its meaning and may get placed in a different context. It may not be entirely possible to lay out an event with a neat beginning, middle and end, properly contextualized with finite conclusions. Claire Morris explains that even if one did not live through an event, so as to experience its beginning and end, the “proper subsegment” which one experiences or lives through can be designated as an event. That is to say “all parts of events are events” (Morris 4). At the same time, the narration which begins *in media res*, without providing the prehistory of event, challenges the historicity of the event. In nationalist historiography, the narration of Chauri Chaura begins in medias res and thus does not state precisely what transpired at the site that culminated in the event.

The “before” of the event, which has been excluded from the trials as well as history, is reconstructed by Amin, starting from the designation of “volunteers” by Gandhi. Amin records, “[t]he clash with the police had its roots in the local volunteers’ attempt, a few days before the Chauri Chaura ‘riot,’ both to stop trade in these articles and to enforce a ‘just price’ for meat and fish in the nearby Mundera Bazaar” (Amin 1996: 13). By describing the event in graphic details, and by paying attention to all its nuances, Amin tries to define Chauri Chaura for what it is, unlike the nationalist history for which Chauri Chaura is not an event but the cause for calling off a major event.

## Intervention of Law

The intervention of the law had given a criminal rather than a political construction to Chauri Chaura. As the then High Court Judge later recalled, “[f]rom one point of view, undoubtedly, the peasants who stormed Chaura police station were simply rebels against the established Government” (Amin 1987: 199). The event was situated in colonial India and was seen as an “uprising” of “wretched peasants” against the “established government.” Interestingly, though the colonial government saw the event as a form of resistance, the nationalist movement did not acknowledge the event as a form of protest generated by the struggle for freedom. Thus, caught in such an unusual circumstance where there was “no rival authority to which they could appeal for countenance or support” (Amin 1987: 179), the “rioters” had no choice but to remain as mute witnesses when they and their actions were being appropriated by both the colonial government as well as the nationalist historiography. In 1922, the event failed to be recognized as a political act, and even now the main players and the actual event are subsumed by the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement that immediately followed. Apart from debating the genuineness of the narrative made available to us, what is more important is the fact that an event gets narrativised in the way in which the State or the Judiciary or any voice of authority wants it to be.

The peasants’ confrontation with the police was clearly a violent encounter, but the peasants were supporters of Gandhian nationalism, which advocated a nonviolent struggle. To complicate matters further, the national discourse later offered a sympathetic view of the peasants, depicting them as an example of the maladies inherent in the colonial situation that left the peasants no alternative course of action other than to riot. This appropriation of the event’s nature and the role of the actors, dictated by state-forces, ultimately is an invasion into the private spaces of memory and conscience. Amin’s analyses and critiques, based on the collective as well as personal memory of Chauri Chaura, do not offer an infallible account. The event was mediated and appropriated by the intervention of law and nationalism before it was recorded in history books and narratives. In an analysis of Holocaust representations and memory, Matthew Biro points out that in many instances, when the narratives are mediated by the authoritative agencies, “memory potentially destroys the event by putting a substitute in the place of the actual experience” (Biro 114).<sup>9</sup>

Amin’s work does not directly engage with issues of narrativization or historiography, but it does act as a pointer in understanding history as a narrative and opens up the possibility of creating a plurality of narratives. The politics of narration gets exposed only when the event is contextualized and located with a before and an after, rather than leaving it disowned in the nationalist lore as a sporadic instance of unsolicited criminal activity. The point here is to neither condemn the nationalist

leaders nor eulogise the protestors, but to foreground an alternate telling and narrative of the event. Amin's account of Chauri Chaura communicates to the reader on behalf of the silenced peasant's voices, which were criminalized and appropriated by the voices of Law and Nation. It also provides an insight into the plurality of explanations and the presence of multiple contexts in which the event can be located—even outside the nationalist historiography. The individual responses to the event and its repercussions are read along with the mainstream nationalist historiography.

More than resolving any debates about the historiography of Chauri Chaura, Amin has tried to explore and exemplify the various issues related to the narrativization of Chauri Chaura in nationalist as well as contemporary history. A few observations which Roma Chatterjee highlights as the advantages of narrative approach can be held true for Amin's analysis of the Chauri Chaura narrative as well.<sup>10</sup> According to Chatterjee, the narrative approach: a) foregrounds the eventfulness of life and allows an exploration of the multiple registers of subjectivity and social practice without losing the aspect of generalization; b) allows the conceptual plane to be coextensive with the plane of experience; and c) allows the researcher to develop a dialogue between her discipline and her field while allowing the reader and the "subject" to reintroduce the register of the everyday (Chatterji 430-432). Upendra Baxi, in his essay "The State's Emissary" points out how even in the reconstruction of Chauri Chaura the voice of the subaltern remains silent. In his critique of Amin's reconstruction of Chauri Chaura, he allows the Approver Mir Shikari to directly address his creator. Through the persona of Mir Shikari, Baxi says

"The first time I emerge in history as a set of the colonial law; the second time, I emerge as a text of subaltern jurisprudence ... I do not emerge with any redescription of my esteem in the subalternist discourse either. I became ... the twice born, twice-disapproved approver." (Baxi, 260-1)

This powerful voice of dissent against the reconstructed narrative shows that rescuing the event and characters from the clutches of authoritative hegemony is not an easy task. The event, which has already been narrativised, does not lend itself easily to other narrations by shedding its earlier stigma. Nevertheless, one need not dismiss Amin's efforts altogether either, as he has put forward a number of alternatives ahead to rescue the event and has not in any way shut the door for further analyses and critiques.

## Conclusion

It would be fitting to remember Amin's own remarks, which reflect the infinite possibilities of a narrative reconstructive reading through which we see the frozen events in history transforming into points of critical

enquiry: “This violent event with its iconic status in the history of the Indian nation and Gandhi’s career, equally affords insights into the ways of nationalist historiography” (Amin 1996: xix). Perhaps for the same reason, the State’s agencies hardly remember “critical events” in the history of modern India. Events of ruptural nature also have a faded memory which has largely been taken away from public discourse. Whether it is Partition, on which “there is no dearth of material” (Butalia 5), or Emergency, which “has been much mythologised but little studied” (Tarlo 2), or Chauri Chaura, which “was quarantined within a consequentialist past” (Amin 1996: 5), the official history elided the nuances of these events. For instance, the magnitude of the violence of Partition and the mass displacements that followed were largely elided by the political designers of modern India. The postcolonial narration of Indian history begins with 1947 and Partition but with little emphasis on the unforeseen violent end or the beginning it originally envisaged. Urvashi Butali points out, “[i]n India there is no institutional memory of Partition: the State has not seen fit to construct any memorials, to mark any particular places—as has been done say, in the case of holocaust memorials or memorials for the Vietnam War” (Butalia 286). Kavita Daiya agrees and says, “[s]een largely as an aberration in modern Indian history, this Partition is little memorialized by the state or by those affected by it” (7). Along similar lines, Emma Tarlo identifies the state’s indifference regarding the memories of Emergency as well. Tarlo observes that certain places in Delhi, like Teen Murti Bhavan and the Safdarjang road—“which might have become sites for remembering the Emergency . . . in the course of history have become sites for forgetting it” (Tarlo 23). One needs to understand events such as Chauri Chaura, which induced a “selective national amnesia” (Amin 1996: xxii) and came to be remembered as an “anti-nationalist riot” (5), in the same epistemological and socio-political context as the event of Emergency.

Amin successfully reconstructed Chauri Chaura both as an event and as a metaphor. This is especially significant in the contemporary era marked by “Mandal and Masjid” which have become markers of socio-political identities and representations. Amin’s work shows that there is a lot to recover in writing an alternative history even when one “fails” in finding the “true alternative story” of Chauri Chaura. By showing how the historical sources themselves are actually “produced,” Amin projects Chauri Chaura as a pointer towards the very understanding of the documented past as the truth. As a counter-narrative of the nation it also highlights the need to pay closer and careful attention to the different voices which may apparently disturb the structural foundations of historiography itself. Amin’s work brings out the transformative potentials and the unique nature of the nationalist period and its politics, which generated its own myths, metaphors and folklores of power and emancipation, rather than simply stimulating the recasting of traditions.



## Notes

1. In “Conceptualising Popular Culture: ‘Lavani’ and ‘Powada’ in Maharashtra,” Sharmila Rege tries to locate the caste-based forms of art within the “popular culture” in an attempt to explore the relative silence of popular culture discourse on caste-based cultural forms like “Lavani.”

2. Charu Gupta’s essay “Dalit Viranganas and Reinvention of 1857” interrogates both conventional and historical writings on the 1857 revolt while focusing on the Dalit re-tellings of the event.

3. In “Reactivating the Past: Dalits and Memories of 1857,” Badri Narayan Tiwari gives an account of the stories and legends related to the Revolt and tries to fashion a new history for the marginalized. Unlike the official history of the 1857 Revolt, which claims that the Dalits never participated in it, Tiwari explores the alternate narratives which glorify the role dalit rebels played in 1857.

4. In his Introduction, David Carr refers to many theorists who regarded the emphasis on narrative as a “too ‘literary’ view of a discipline which sought to be objective and scientific” (Carr 7). In Carr’s words, “[t]he narrativist philosophers of history such as Mink and H. White have been roundly criticised ... for missing the essence of history by favouring its literary presentation over the hard work of discovery, explanation, evaluation of sources etc., which lies behind it. History, say these critics, is not a literary genre but a disciplined inquiry whose goal is knowledge. Narrative is merely the way—indeed only one way—in which its results are ‘written up’ for public consumption (Carr: 1986, 9).

5. See Hayden White’s “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” “The Narrativization of Real Events,” and “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory.”

6. Quoted from Margaret Somers’ essay, “Narrative Action, Narrativity, and Theories of Working-Class Formation: The Case of the English” which deals with the relationship between narrative and class, in a Marxist perspective. She argues that an attempt to understand the nineteenth-century English workers requires an understanding of the narratives in which they emplotted themselves.

7. Aditya Nigam’s famous essay, “A Text Without Author: Locating Constituent Assembly as Event” (2004) looks at the constituent assembly as an “event” in the hope of understanding how different cultures and polyphonic voices came together in the forming of the conjuncture within which the assembly took shape.

8. Veena Das in *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (1995) defines a critical event along the lines of Francois Dastur who defined the French Revolution as an “event par excellence because it instituted a new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation” (Das, 5).

9. Matthew Biro’s essay, “Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust” is a critical debate on the question of how textual, visual, and televisual cultures mediate an individual’s relationship to the past, and thus how cultural representations reshape lived human events. (Biro, 113).

10. Roma Chatterji’s “Voice, Event and Narrative: Towards an Understanding of Everyday Life in Dharavi” explores the phenomenology of life as it occurs in unstable places. She studies the event of narration as it is found in Dharavi, against the backdrop of the 1993 Mumbai riots that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

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