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Author(s): Edward Simpson and Stuart Corbridge
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The Geography of Things That May Become Memories: The 2001 Earthquake in Kachchh-Gujarat and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Prememorial Era

Edward Simpson* and Stuart Corbridge†

*Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College, University of London
†Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, and Department of Geography and Environment, University of Texas of Austin

This article explores the politics of reconstruction and the competing memorial practices that emerged after a devastating earthquake in western India during 2001. The material is drawn from extensive ethnographic research and analyses of the politics of rehabilitation in the "prememorial era," the period before an official memorial is erected when the gap between the signified (the earthquake) and the signer (the memorial) is still wide open and meanings and narratives of the disaster are being created, rehearsed, and contested. Many of the reconstruction initiatives undertaken after the disaster are inseparable from the politics of contemporary Hindu nationalism. Consequently, the main sections of the article examine the political nature of memorial practices and ideas about reconstruction in relation to expressions of nationalism and regionalism. Key Words: earthquake, Gujarat, memory, nationalism, regionalism.

On 26 January 2001 a severe earthquake hit the District of Kachchh in the western Indian State of Gujarat (Figure 1). Upwards of 13,000 people lost their lives and entire villages were reduced to rubble. More than 5 percent of the populations of Anjar and Bhachau, small towns in the east of the District, were killed. The ancient royal seat of Bhuj, the local administrative center, was also badly hit. The palaces of the former kings suffered extensive damage, as did many of the temples and mosques that packed the close-knit neighborhoods of the old town. Tens of thousands of ordinary people lost their homes and most of their possessions.

In this article we focus on the rebuilding of Bhuj and its environs in the period from January 2001 to January 2005. We do so not from the perspective of urban planning or the geography of relief efforts, although both of these enter our narrative. Rather, we consider the ways in which the refashioning of landscapes in this part of Kachchh are being haunted by conflicting accounts of what it is to be Kachchhi, Gujarati, or even Indian. In the first half of the article we give a sense of the chaos that followed the earthquake and the turbulent emotions and memories that it set free. In doing so, we contribute to an emerging set of debates on memory and place-making. We argue for an account of memory work that is more fragmentary and less tied to conventional memorial practices than is commonly found in the literature. Our focus here is on the period between the event and its public memorialization—between what might be called the signer and the signified. During this time memorial practices grew out of numerous private and small-scale projects, and embraced artifacts such as photograph albums and the walls of a house, as well as funerary and calendrical rites and other low-key public dramas.

In the second half of the article, we consider how elements of order were slowly and not always coherently imposed on this palimpsest of emotions. Traumatized people continued to find memories in recovered photographs and objects and rebuilt houses, as well as in the new shapes of the neighborhoods in which they lived, or were asked to live. Yet, within a year of the disaster, organized political groups were seeking to rebuild Kachchh in accordance with their wider visions of the district, of Gujarat, and/or of India. Two such visions stand out, neither of which has been wholly consistent.

We first consider the reemergence of discourses of kingship and regionalism. These discourses have sought to emphasize the distinctiveness of Kachchh, and in some measure they have been appropriated by members of the Congress Party. At this time the Congress Party was the main opposition to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in both Gujarat and India.1
The discourse of kingship, as we shall see, is intimately bound up with a reading of the cosmological significance of the royal town of Bhuj and with various land purification rituals. Memories have been invoked of benign kingly rule under the Jadeja Rajputs in the pre-1947 period before the region was folded into Gujarat, which is coded here as the source of Kachchh’s problems. The Congress Party has also sought to reaffirm a more secular vision of India in at least one village, Jawaharnagar. In this case, it chose to emphasize a legacy of tolerance and development that it associated with India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. It also played up the persona of Sonia Gandhi, the wife of Nehru’s murdered grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, and herself the leader of the Congress Party in India through most of this period.

We then consider how the BJP and its partners in the so-called family (Sangh Parivar) of Hindu nationalist organizations—the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, the Worldwide Hindu Council, a leading vehicle for militant Hinduism in the Indian diaspora) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the so-called Brotherhood in Saffron) that has mobilized a disciplined corps of “volunteers” for the project of Hindutva [making India “culturally Hindu’] since its founding in 1925)—have on occasion sought to rebuild Kachchh in ways that disregard more composite accounts of an imagined India. The VHP sponsored the rebuilding of a village for the exclusive use of caste Hindus. Keshav Nagar is approached through a large memorial arch, on the stands of which are posted the names of temple committees in places as distant as New Jersey and Connecticut (Figure 2). Other Hindu nationalists have traded more in forms of Hindu revivalism, as we shall see in the village of Indraprastha. Meanwhile, the Chief Minister of the BJP government of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, returned to Kachchh on the third anniversary of the earthquake to announce plans for an official state memorial, the Purneshwarthu Mandir (Temple of Human Endeavor). His aim was to silence
further debate on the meanings of the earthquake. Modi told his audience in 2004 that “Kachchh is should [now] put the earthquake behind them. The rest of Gujarat has also been affected but has forgotten about it.”

We hope our article has resonance beyond Gujarat. It deals with questions of regionalism and the nationalization of space, as well as with the nature and extent of memory and memorial practices in non-Western settings. It does so, moreover, in a poor region of India that is linked to well-organized communities of Hindu nationalists in the Indian diaspora, including in the United States and the United Kingdom. We also reflect on the nature of democratic politics in Gujarat. Elements in the Sangh Parivar have sought to impose a narrow order on the landscapes of Kachchh, and have refused to entertain the public competitions for memorial spaces that have been held in countries as diverse as Germany, South Africa, and Argentina. Many Kachchhis, for their part, continue to reflect on the meanings of the earthquake of 2001. Neither the physical earthquake nor the “second earthquake” of rehabilitation has yet been forgotten.

Landscape, Place-Making, and Memory

Geographers have long understood that landscapes reflect human impacts on the environment. This insight, after all, was the import of Carl Sauer’s challenge to environmental determinism in the 1920s. In the work of Sauer and his students the study of landscapes “became the study of culture history” (Duncan 1994, 316). That body of work would later inform Paul Wheatley’s extraordinary investigations of the role of religious symbolism in the structuring and design of ancient Chinese cities (Wheatley 1971). It also informed David Sopher’s pioneering work on place and landscape in what he called “the Indian tradition” (Sopher 1986). It is probably fair to suggest, even so, that it was not until the 1980s that human geographers began to read landscapes as texts in a more sustained fashion, or as one means to consider the production of what Denis Cosgrove (following the art critic John Berger) calls “ways of seeing” (Cosgrove 1984, developing Berger 1995 [1972]). Cosgrove insists on the two-way street that is implied by an emphasis on vision. Much like Stephen Daniels (1989) and James Duncan (1990), he maintains that landscapes at once embody a particular way of seeing that is partial (in the sense of representing various class, race, and/or gender interests) and yet that is open to (re)interpretation by others. Landscapes are more fluid than a previous generation of geographers had supposed. They also enter significantly into the formation of the very “ways of seeing” that they were conventionally thought to represent. The making and unmaking of landscapes—of place more generally, and a sense of place—are necessarily bound up with the production of individual and collective senses of identity, and thus of what it means to be human.

More recently, the study of place-making and landscape has been linked to studies of memorialization and social memory. The idea that memories can be held by social collectivities is generally traced back to work carried out by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s and early 1940s, in the years before his death at Buchenwald concentration camp. In his posthumously published work, La Mémoire Collective, Halbwachs argues that “history begins only at the point where tradition ends, at a moment when social memory is extinguished” (Douglass and Vogler 2003, 18, citing Halbwachs 1992). This observation would later be extended by a group of writers—including, most notably, Yosef Yerushalmi (1986, 5)—who have argued that factual histories of the Shoah can never take the place of a fast-eroding group memory of the camps and the Final Solution. Some traumas are simply too inchoate, incoherent, or painful to be expressed as a simple linear account in scholarly work, or, as we have seen in Bhuj, take us into realms for which we are ill-equipped as social scientists (Figure 3). To the extent that we can and must come to terms with Auschwitz or Hiroshima, for example, it is vital that societies are provided with visceral understandings of the past. This is what the work of memory is required to perform, and, as the French scholar Pierre Nora (1989) has suggested, the task is made harder to the extent that history writing is allowed to take the place of memory-making. In Nora’s view, it is important that we value the efforts at memory-making that state and nonstate actors...
are now embarked upon. What might be called the memory business—museum building, the production of war memorials, books, or films that recount the testimonies of survivors—is a necessary enterprise at a time when traditional mechanisms for the dissemination of memories (grandparent to child in the field, storytelling, epic poems, etc.) are dying out.

Some critics have taken issue with what they see as the unhelpfully conservative and masculinist tenor of the work of Nora (1989) and his colleagues in France. Those works can be read as elegies for a peasant way of life that turns a blind eye to class and gender differences in the French countryside. It also separates the French landscape from the colonial landscapes to which France laid claim and to which the peasant was necessarily linked (on this, see Legg 2005). More pertinently, perhaps, Stephen Hoelscher (2003, 661) argues that, "Displays of memory are not passive containers, but are active vehicles in producing, shaping, and giving meaning to cultural memory and heritage." This point is evident, for example, in the debates that continue to surround the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., following its opening in the early 1980s. Marita Sturken reminds us that Maya Lin's vision for a memorial wall that would "work with the land and not dominate it" was initially denounced by some critics as a "black gash of shame"; it was a resolutely anti-phallic presence that (to borrow from Sturken 1997, 53) for some veterans and national boosters wallowed in the apparent ignominy of death and pictured the war itself as either unnecessary or unjust. In time, though, and not simply because elements within the community of her critics (including Ross Perot and then Secretary of the Interior, James Watt) were able to insist on the installation in 1984 of an accompanying bronze statue of three soldiers by Frederick Hart, the "experience of viewing Lin's work was so powerful for the general public that criticism of its design vanished" (Sturken 1997, 58).4 Even now, this public memory space is continuing to evolve and embody new meanings for its diverse constituency of viewers. Sturken notes that more than 40,000 objects had been left at the wall by 1996, including letters to loved ones, medals, the boots of dead soldiers, and even a Harley Davidson motorcycle. The National Park Service, which is charged with maintaining the memorial, at first "classified these objects as 'lost and found'" (Sturken 1997, 79). Later it was persuaded to collect them as part of an archive of objects that itself has become a significant part of a living memorial.

Such reworkings of memory are also apparent in the struggles of the nationalist community in Ireland, as well as in the testimonies and countermemorial practices of people who have suffered violently at the hands of states in places as diverse as Argentina, Madagascar, and Palestine-Israel (Cole 1998; Feitlowitz 1998; Szymovics 1998). It is important to understand, too, that countermemorial practices—attempts to refuse, modify or subvert the efforts of more powerful (usually state) actors to fix memories and thus history—have taken shape in ways that sometimes challenge our understanding of the nature of social memory and memorialization. In Dublin, then, as Nuala Johnson (2003) has recently shown, one can certainly find public memorials that celebrate the heroes of the nationalist uprising of April 1916. The postcolonial state in Ireland has also given thought to where the most important of these monuments will be erected. As Andres Huyssen (2003) reminds us, however, people walk past memorials of this type in cities like London, Paris, and (perhaps) Dublin without giving them a second glance. Huyssen is fond of quoting the novelist Robert Musil's observation that "nothing may be as invisible as a monument" (Huyssen 2003, 109).

But this is not the case in Catholic west Belfast where members of the nationalist community are daily reminded of the struggles of Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the murals that adorn many end-of-terrace buildings. We can reasonably assume, too, that future generations of high school students in New York State will share a new social memory about Britain's role in producing famine in Ireland. Governor Pataki signed a bill in 1998 that requires high school students to study the Great Famine. They have to learn the lesson that "the Great Hunger was . . . a deliberate attempt by the British to deny the Irish people the food they needed to survive" (quoted by Douglass and Vogler 2003, 24).

In his superlative account of How Societies Remember, Paul Connerton (1989) insists that memories are embodied, finally, in bodily practices (in how we eat or read, wait in line perhaps, or acknowledge the status of others), and that the loss of bodies, and of representations of the body and family, are bound to entail a profound loss of memory (as was the case in Kachchh). One of the strengths of the countermemorial movement has been its resolute opposition to the fading of memories, or to their banalization. The testimony of Rigoberta Menchi (1984), while hardly unchallenged, has done much to keep alive memories of the suffering of the indigenous peasantry in Guatemala at the hands of the military in the 1970s (see also Douglass 2003). The "disappearances" that were produced by the Argentinean regime in the years 1976–1983 are likewise being kept in the public eye by the extraordinary and challenging El Parque de la Memoria that was begun in Buenos Aires in 2001. This followed the still more extraordinary campaign of bearing
witness by the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Arditti 1999; and see Bosco 2006).

Arguably, the most significant achievement in this regard has been secured by a “post-1968” group of public intellectuals, performance artists, and members of the avant garde in Germany (Young 2000). They have used a wide and sometimes disturbing range of countermemorial practices to provoke a public debate on that country’s past and present as “a society of perpetrators” responsible for the Holocaust of the Jews, the Sinti, and the Roma (Till 2005, 122). Karen Till, herself the author of an excellent book on the building of the New Berlin, records the sense of shock she felt when confronted for the first time with some of the memorializing practices that took shape in Berlin in the 1990s. Walking in the Bavarian Quarter of the city in 1994 she noticed a street sign that read, “Jewish veterinarians may not open practices. April 3, 1936. General employment ban, January 17, 1939.” Another sign nearby read, “Aryan and non-Aryan children are forbidden to play together. 1938” (Till 2005, 155). In both cases, as Till notes, the signs refer to dates in the 1930s but were being displayed in the 1990s in the present tense. “By looking at a sequence of signs [designed by the conceptual artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnick], residents experience a progression of everyday exclusions that led to the systematic persecution, social exclusion, and ultimately murder of social groups in their own neighborhood and country” (Till 2005, 158).

The continuing debates in Germany about how the country should come to terms with its Nazi past (and past in the present) have also been notable for their transparency and commitment to informed public discussion. A large part of the work of memory has been performed in and through the many public competitions that have preceded the construction of a particular memory site (Nolan 2004). It is through these discussions, perhaps as much as through the later observation of memorials, signs, and exhibitions, that memory is embodied, dispersed, and to large degree made collective. A measure of open debate has also accompanied plans for the rebuilding of Ground Zero in New York City, although here, as in Kachchh, the cause of the “disaster” is almost always treated as an external event. 1

Locating Memory in India

We should not suppose, however, that the democratization of place-making activities that we witness today in Berlin is apparent in quite the same ways in contemporary Gujarat. Public memorials are not uncommon in India, but it is interesting to note how many of them were erected by the British when they were the colonial power. Visitors to the capital city, New Delhi, might be surprised to find so few memorials to Gandhi, Nehru, and other heroes of the Freedom Movement, although they will find faded photographs of the two men (along perhaps with the Prime Minister of the day) in the Block and District offices of the Indian state (Corbridge et al. 2005). This is not to say that struggles over the production of memories or place in India are unimportant. Like most countries, India has an anthem and a flag, both of which have been committed to memory by many of its citizens. Members of ex-untouchable communities in Uttar Pradesh have also worked hard to furnish public squares with statues or pictures of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Depressed Classes in India from the 1920s to his death in 1957 (Pai 2002). What is truly remarkable about the period since 1980, however, when the Bharatiya Jana Sangh was reinvented as the BJP, is the progress that the Sangh Parivar has made in advancing an understanding of India as Hindustan, or as the remembered land of the Hindus (Corbridge and Harriss 2000).

In the 1980s, the focal point of the Sangh Parivar’s campaign to reimagine India as Hindustan (Bharat in Hindi) was the city of Ayodhya in eastern Uttar Pradesh. A mosque built in this city by the Muslim Emperor Babar in the sixteenth century is believed by militant Hindus to have displaced a temple to Lord Rama, the God-king hero of the Ramayana, at the very site of his birth (Basu 2001). In December 1992, kar sevaks (volunteers) of the VHP broke through locked gates and a police cordon and demolished the mosque over the course of two days. Hindu-Muslim rioting then broke out in towns across north India (Brass 2003). In the 1990s the BJP came to power in some northern States, including Gujarat, and finally took charge in New Delhi itself. The Sangh Parivar then turned its attention to the content of the geography and history books used by India’s schoolchildren. In an unconscious echo of Pataki, and yet in this case in opposition to the considered views of most reputable historians, the Sangh Parivar wanted the geo-history of India to be rewritten in ways that would emphasize the eternal occupation of Bharat by social groups subscribing to a version of what we now call Hinduism (for details, see Dalrymple 2005). Members of other social groups could then be represented as aliens or intruders. Some could even be seen as fifth columnists, given that Akhand Bharat (“undivided India”) had been torn asunder and made to share a border with “Muslim” Pakistan, and later Bangladesh (Krishna 1999).

Finally, for our purposes at least, the Sangh Parivar has been especially attentive to the importance of place-making activities in the State of Gujarat. Gujarat is one of India’s most prosperous states, and the BJP has made
significant inroads among members of its urban middle classes, most of whom are higher-caste Hindus. It also enjoys significant funding from the large population of Gujaratis living and working abroad. These include Patels and other Hindu communities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. For all its successes, however, the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat has continued to have problems with the question of “caste”—of whether and how to court the votes of low-caste Hindus and ex-un touchables (Shah 1998). It has also failed to make as much progress in Kachchh as in some other parts of the State. The earthquake of 2001, as we shall see, offered it an opportunity, which it has worked hard to grasp, to shape the built environment in this part of Gujarat and with it the memories and worldviews of many of its residents.

In the next section we offer some inevitably chaotic accounts of the ways in which residents of Bhuj experienced and struggled to make sense of the 2001 earthquake. Here and later in the article we draw on fieldwork carried out mainly in the northwest sections of Bhuj from February 2001 to January 2005. This fieldwork, which was soon extended to many of the villages that surround Bhuj, and indeed to the provincial towns of Anjar and Bhachau, largely took the form of unstructured interviews with residents and more extended discussions with some of their political leaders. It also involved lengthy conversations with local journalists, as well as time spent walking the city and working through back issues of newspapers published in Kachchh and elsewhere in Gujarat.

Our data show how early recollections of the earthquake, and subsequent experiences of grief and loss, were highly personalized. Nevertheless, there were also a number of recurring themes; it was almost as if the townsfolk had colluded informally to produce a set of stock phrases to cover for their disparate experiences of trauma, and these phrases and themes are mainly what we reproduce here. The picture that emerges is of a liminal state, an entropic time when phantasmagorical aberrations of normality were etched as deeply on urban landscapes as they were on the minds of those who survived. The chaos and downright peculiarity of some of these narratives stand in stark contrast to the philosophically and spatially ordered rituals of rehabilitation described in the sections that follow. What people say they remember of events, and what they or others later do to commemorate events, are not always the same.

A Retrospective Anatomy of Disaster

In India, 26 January is Republic Day, a national holiday. The celebrations of 2001 marked the fifty-first anniversary of the promulgation of the Indian Constitution, and flag hoisting ceremonies were underway throughout the country. In Bhuj, Suresh Mehta, then Minister-in-Charge for Kachchh, was waiting in the Government Rest House for the celebrations to commence. Fifty kilometers away, in Anjar, a procession of schoolchildren was making its way joyfully through the town. At 8:46 a.m., an earthquake measuring between 6.8 and 7.9 on the Richter scale struck the region.

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. Most of the damage to life and property was concentrated in central and eastern zones of the District. Before the earthquake, Bhuj, the modern administrative center and an ancient seat of kingly rule, was a bustling commercial town famous for its well-preserved architecture and craft traditions (Figures 4, 5, and 6). On the morning of the disaster, Suresh Mehta was in the town. Realizing what was happening, he sheltered in a doorway as he had been told to do since he was a child in the event of an earthquake. After the shocks had subsided, he made his way by car and later on foot to hoist the national tricolor, as was his duty. He recalled how the air was full of dust, the town was wrecked (Figures 7 and 8), and how fallen buildings impeded his passage; but he was one of the lucky ones. More than 2,000 people died in Bhuj, or about 1.72 percent of the town’s population. In the eastern part of the District, meanwhile, 184 of the school children parading in Anjar were killed, along with 3,708 other people. The official death toll for nearby Bhachau reached 7,054 people.

Shiva’s dance of destruction, as the earthquake popularly became known, was variously likened to the sound of “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. Helplessness is what most people recall of this time. A journalist for the Indian Express newspaper recalled trying to find someone in charge. Wandering around Bhuj he found that the local hospital had collapsed. The head of a stranger was protruding from the rubble crying for help. The journalist was unable to assist him and moved on in a state of shock. The memory of the stranger’s face remains with him and sometimes manifests itself in confused rage.

The day after the earthquake, Kachchh Mitra (KM), the best-selling local newspaper, shifted production to its publishing group’s offices in Rajkot. The issue it produced on the 29 January led with the telling understatement, “Gujarat, including Kachchh, has experienced a major earthquake: further shocks expected.” We shall
return later to this rhetorical separation of Kachchh from Gujarat. A few days later, however, as lines of communication were slowly restored and the extent of the tragedy became clear, the tone of the coverage began to change. Of Bhuj, it notes: “the town, like a ghost, is beginning to stink” (KM 31 January 2001). A front-page editorial asks “Why is the God of Death [Yamraj or Kal Devta] so annoyed with Kachchh? Why after two years of drought has Kachchh given its children death instead of water?” The editorial ends with the plea, “Amid the ruins of our thoughts we are reduced to nothing, we are living for today; we should live the religion of humanity, work together and pray for the souls of those who have lost their lives” (KM 31 January 2001). People recall the pages of death notices that were soon to fill the newspaper. Death became a public spectacle as the deceased and dying were placed on the ground for scrutiny and identification. A surprising number of people told us of hasty field amputations performed by emergency rescue crews to free victims from the rubble. Many lives were saved, others were lost in especially tragic circumstances. Eighteen members of a family from Bombay had come to Kachchh to attend a marriage party; they were all killed when the apartment block they were staying in collapsed.

Five days after the earthquake, corpses were still littering the ground in the old court area. The army sealed off the old town to prevent further looting and the spread of disease. Some people heard that bodies were
lying unclaimed in the rubble of temples in the village of Dudhai (later to become Indraprastha) up to a week after the disaster. There were heart attacks and suicides, and deranged people blind with grief wandered hopelessly through the rubble. The police fired shots over the heads of the crowd that gathered to protest the unfair distribution of relief materials. Angry men gathered to discuss what action they might take against the contractors whose buildings had collapsed. The contractors fled town. Within a week of the disaster people recall talking about the collapse of the damaged heritage buildings, which gave Bhuj its identity and pride (asmita). These included the cremation memorials for the former kings of Kachchh, the royal palaces, and the town’s ancient gates, walls, and temples; it was widely agreed that multistory culture, and cement and concrete jungles, were not part of the “true” history of Kachchh. From the beginning, then, in the crise révélatrice of the disaster and before the intervention of foreign agencies, development banks, and well-meaning people with university degrees, there was talk of heritage, identity, and what had been lost.9

Everyone can remember where they were and what they were doing on that ill-fated morning. They can recall the smells, sounds, and images of the days following the disaster. These were terrifying times when no one could be sure of exactly what had happened and what might happen next. People also called to mind images of a disrupted landscape and things not as they normally were. Trees and metal cupboards were said to stand upright amid the ruins, the treasured possessions within remaining unscathed (Figure 9). One man recalled how he had seen a ceiling fan protruding horizontally from what had been the ceiling of an apartment block.

Astrologers and seismologists predicted further tremors. Some of the former were arrested for rumor mongering, which is a violation of the Indian Penal Code. The state transport service started to operate free bus services into, and throughout, the district. It is said this policy brought unknown and frightening faces into Kachchh in search of booty. In Bhuj, a convicted murderer walked

Figure 7. Destruction of the Jubilee Hospital in Bhuj. The metal bedstead falling with the rubble became an iconographic image of the disaster and the ruin formed the backdrop for one of Bill Clinton’s press conferences during his visit in 2001.

Figure 8. Damaged statues salvaged from the temple of Jesal and Toral, Anjar. Tradition has it that if the tombs of the two mythical lovers touch it will bring about the destruction of Kachchh.

Figure 9. In the tradition of vernacular architecture, cupboards and niches were built into the walls for the storage of personal possessions. The extra strength and flexibility brought to the structure by these features often meant these sections survived the earthquake even if the rest of the structure collapsed. Thus, rather eerily, and along with trees, it was often the most intimate parts of people’s houses that survived the disaster.
free from a mental hospital when the building collapsed; he was seen helping the injured to safety. In Rapar, another prisoner escaped from jail to help with the rescue operations and saved the life of a police inspector’s wife. A Sikh furniture dealer from Maharashtra was also seen wandering in the rubble with a board that said something along the lines of: “Dear people of Bhuj do not be chased away by fear. Chase away fear and earthquakes, love your homeland, love your motherland and do not desert her.” Some said he was inspired by God, others said he had witnessed the devastation of the Latur earthquake in Maharashtra in 1993. A few suggested he was deranged. Idols were shifted from temples and placed in the safe custody of the police. Photocopying centers and other businesses advertised free services. Departures for haj for local Muslims were postponed. There was a flurry of visits by high-profile politicians. President Bill Clinton would later make a visit. The government opened its coffers and distributed money in the form of emergency cash doles to all, regardless of their need or status. The postal service was unable to deliver letters addressed to people who no longer lived at houses that no longer stood. A temple in which the names of Ram had been publicly chanted day and night for eighteen years closed its doors. Personal and social memories were disrupted, if not entirely lost from view.

Elsewhere, fresh water was seen to burst forth from the land and salt water emerged from a cemetery in the village of Faradi in the south of Kachchh. There was speculation that the Indus River had once again changed its course away from Pakistan to irrigate the parched soil of western India. It was rumored that the sea had retreated at the coast and that large quantities of dead fish were appearing on the beaches. Many recall K. K. Shastri of the VHP saying that the presence of sweet water in the soils of Kachchh was a sign that the mythical Saraswati River had resurfaced after four to five thousand years of pursuing a subterranean course.

These accounts suggest that the parameters of daily life had been dramatically altered, the boundaries of reasonable expectation removed. As the months wore on, concern shifted to temporary shelter, to the implications of lost documents relating to property and finance, and to the lack of coordinated government relief and reconstruction efforts. Later, it was planning considerations, policies for rubble clearance, levels of compensation, and complicated questions about the rights of tenants and apartment owners that preoccupied many people. Later still, questions arose about the building of new housing and roads and about the shape and even “tone” of the new towns and villages that would have to be built. Some people also spoke about their fear of high levels of future taxation. They worried that the government would try to claw back its emergency tax breaks, or would seek to cover its high levels of borrowing from the large international lenders. By this time, agencies such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and many international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had set up camp in the area. Bhuj became a “disaster boom economy.” New traumas hit some of the beleaguered as money, bulldozers, lifting equipment, and town plans flowed into Kachchh. New memories also began to be formed and circulated. Kindnesses were noted, along with an acute sense of frustration or powerlessness.

A particular phrase or form of remembrance also began to circulate at this time. In the aftermath of the Latur earthquake, many bodies were inappropriately placed in mass graves. This practice caused considerable retrospective consternation, especially among the organizations of Hindu nationalism. In Kachchh, local cadres of the RSS were well-prepared and seemingly paid close attention to the correct cremation of the dead. It is hard to say whether the RSS left such an impression on people because they were one of the first groups to make their presence felt in Bhuj or because the cremation services they administered—often to unnamed dead—were so important to those who survived. However, a great many people recalled the mass shraadh (rites performed for the dead) held in the first week of February 2001 on the ground outside the main offices of the RSS; many also remembered struggling to gather the necessary ghee (clarified butter) and tulsi (Indian basil). Also present at the event were a number of local leaders of the BJP who took the opportunity to say that rebuilding Kachchh would be a “fitting tribute to those who had lost their lives.” A number of people who were there remembered this turn of phrase, but rather more remembered the words of the speaker who said that, “Kachchh [had] rocked its people to death as a mother might rock her child to sleep.”

This phrase was recounted to us an astonishing number of times over the course of our research, sometimes as a way of remembering the rites for the dead and sometimes as a general discursive strategy for talking about the earthquake and the intimate relationship between the people and the land. Without the extensive resources of Morin (1971), who deployed a team of sociologists to trace the origins of a particular rumor in Orléans (France), we are reasonably confident that this phrase was initially reproduced in Kachchh Mitra’s original coverage of the shraadh ceremony. Both from the press, then, and from simple attendance at the ceremony, the metaphor grew in stature and became a popular way of talking about the earthquake. We shall return to its origin and significance shortly.
Kingship, Region, and the Moral Order

We now want to contrast the disorder of our disaster narratives with an emerging order of rituals associated with rehabilitation. It is important to note that the Sangh Parivar took an early lead in organizing and seeking to control this new ritual order. Although we discuss its efforts only at the end of the article (to reflect its attempts to close off public debate), the work of the BJP, VHP, and RSS in Kachchh-Gujarat provides a backdrop for much of what we discuss here. We should also note that the Congress Party and many secular NGOs were active in organizing relief efforts and in sponsoring the rebuilding of particular village communities. The photograph reproduced here as Figure 10 was taken in January 2004 in the village of Jawaharnagar. A number of plaques at the entrance to this village detail how Jawaharlal Nehru had it rebuilt after the earthquake of 1956. They also tell how the name of its patron had replaced its former name, Zuran, how it had again been destroyed in 2001, and how it had since been adopted by Sonia Gandhi and the Congress Party in New Delhi. A large monument to the thirty or so people who died in the most recent tragedy dominates the centre of the new village. The white marble plinth mimics the traditional benches of older Kachchhi villages. Built in the shade of a number of trees, the monument is inscribed with the names of the dead and is protected by railings painted the colors of the Indian tricolor. Villagers told us it had been built at the request of Sonia Gandhi herself. It turned out to be a popular spot to sit and while away the hours. Congress politicians come to the village on the anniversary day to garland the monument.

Our purpose here, however, is not to linger on the direct rehabilitation efforts of the Congress Party. What is perhaps of more significance is that the party in Kachchh had been losing ground to the BJP before the earthquake. It now found it convenient to move closer to a discourse on Kachchh that emphasized the region's distinctive royal (albeit Hindu) heritage. At times, too, elements in the Party began to link this discourse to a more oppositional form of politics that called for the separation of Kachchh from Gujarat. Although never fully formed or even consistent, this form of politics emerged from two sets of memorial practice that followed the earthquake.

Kingship, Urban Form, and Land Purification Rituals

The destruction of parts of the historic, royal city of Bhuj provoked discussion on the meanings of the town and people's sense of pride in it. By 2001, the town of Bhuj was already a mixture of what local people called “traditional” (the old, kingly city, with its fine walls, palaces, cremation grounds, and distinct neighborhoods) and “modern” (the commercial concrete city that had grown up around it). As we have seen, many people associated the high death toll with the development of shoddy high-rise buildings by unscrupulous contractors. Some of these buildings reached to eight floors or more, and many violated pre-earthquake planning regulations.

Not all residents of Bhuj wanted the city to be rebuilt in exclusively royal terms, or to reproduce a previous pattern of caste and religious neighborhoods, as this vision had little to offer Muslim or low-caste families. There also were economic pressures for the expansion of the town to the south and west. Nevertheless, Bhuj is far from being a nondescript or historically insignificant settlement. Kachchh was one of 565 semi-independent kingdoms in India prior to Independence and Jadeja Rajputs had ruled over the territory from the sixteenth century. Political power was dispersed across the kingdom to smaller Jadeja fiefdoms that formed ritual and political microcosms of the central Jadeja lineages. The authority of the rulers and their representatives came together at the royal court assembly (Darbar) in Bhuj. At the head of the Darbar sat the King, whose duty it was to protect his kingdom and subjects by guaranteeing their safety, prosperity, and well-being.

The town of Bhuj was thus “read” by many Kachchhis as a series of mutually resembling and interconnected, but also hierarchically distinguished and ranked, components in which architectural features are associated with particular moral populations. The formal decline of kingship as a form of rule had not changed this. The destruction of the town was then akin to the destruction of the social order, and was lamentable for the same

Figure 10. The memorial to the dead at the center of Jawaharnagar village.
reason. By the same token, the rebuilding of parts of Bhuj—and other towns and villages—necessitated the holding of land purification ceremonies, and these too prompted fresh reflections on the origin myths of the town and of Kachchh as a whole. These rituals link the prosperity of a location to the propitiation of the temporal and spiritual powers that look after it. In this case, the Jadeja Rajput rulers and their principal deity, Ashapura Mata (Hope-Giving Mother), preserve the integrity of the kingdom. The goddess is a lineage goddess, a tutelary goddess, a royal deity, and a State deity. She is seen as the source and representative of power (shakti) in the kingdom and is commonly linked to the earth as soil and territory. The goddess is also identified specifically with the lands of Kachchh and with its rulers, who are literally regarded as the sons of her soil (recall how earlier we mentioned the memorable phrase: “the earthquake was like a mother rocking her children to sleep”).

In February 2003, a group of about fifty people who had elected to stay in the old town gathered to ritually prepare the Soniwad locality for reconstruction (Figure 11). The event was held to stage two public rituals for the neighborhood: purification of the land (bhumi puja) and worship of the stake (kili puja). These and other rituals (Figure 12) are intended to bring comfort and prosperity to those inhabiting the land. The main, but unarticulated, purpose of purifying the land appears to be the placation of those hundreds of people who had met premature and unnatural deaths in the neighborhood. The events in Soniwad ended with the symbolic insertion of a metal stake (kili) into the earth. The location for this act had been determined in advance by community leaders and the presiding Brahman, with a little help from a cartographer who was working on new development plans for the area. Together, they had made a map showing the boundaries of Soniwad. Key to plotting the parameters of the area was the location of temples, including the temple for the tutelary deity of the royal family and other temples with a history of royal patronage. They had drawn lines from these peripheral locations to determine the exact centre of the neighborhood. This system, the Brahman said, was derived from vastu shastra, the ancient science of structure. The Brahman had isolated key sites in the urban landscape, some of which had collapsed but others of which remained intact, on or around the ward boundary and had triangulated the centermost point. The spot where the kili stood, the brahmsthana kendra (central place of creation), was to be marked by a ceremonial house (puja kilimu smargh or kendrathan) for future community activity. The main purpose of the ritual activity in Soniwad was to establish a clearly defined territory, embellished

Figure 11. Residents of Soniwad performing the ritual of the “stake” (kili) to stabilize the earth (see Note 12) before reconstruction of their neighborhood commences.

Figure 12. Members of a women’s welfare association come together to conduct a ritual in Bhuj to purify the land on which they planned to reconstruct their association’s offices.
with royal and Brahmanical traditions, that could be traced to a particular location and periodically brought to life as a symbol of the neighborhood.

**Anniversary Practices**

Rituals of reconstruction are significant in all post-disaster situations. In this case, however, they rehearse ancient Hindu ideas about territory, origins, and power. The mnemonic devices of destruction and creation become one; the location of the rituals in Soniwad mark both death and rebirth at the core of the new community. These rituals refashion space and the related social order under the authority of the king. We believe that, secondly, they have been added to by a series of earthquake anniversary practices that have also made the space for a discourse of regionalism.

The coincidence of the Kachchh disaster with Republic Day makes our case study somewhat atypical because a preexisting national holiday, marked by the state, has historical resonance through its association with independence, with the formation of the constitution, and with “Indian nationalism.” One outcome of this coincidence, however, is that earthquake anniversary commemorations and Republic Day events have been brought together in Kachchh, and the day has become a potent one for protests against elected representatives of the state.

Mourning, prayer, and protest marked the first anniversary in 2002. The BJP-led government of Gujarat organized Hindu religious ceremonies throughout the state in government schools and village-level councils during which verses from the Vedas were recited in order to appease mother earth (dharti mata puja or dharti puja). This practice violated a High Court order that stated that schools could not be compelled to hold Hindu rites; it outraged secular, Christian, and Muslim groups. Throughout Kachchh, families organized prayer services on the sites of their old houses, many by now razed by bulldozers. Many sent their friends mobile phone text messages that ironically wished them a happy birthday: the first anniversary of their new lives. The local newspaper was double its normal thickness to accommodate the hundreds of death notices. In Anjar, land purification rites were conducted to ready parts of the town for new construction.

The Chief Minister (re)inaugurated a monument first erected by the 237th Engineer Regiment, apparently in the absence of anything more substantial (Figure 13). He also took the opportunity of announcing an insurance package for all school children in memory of the children who had died in Anjar. The visit of Chief Minister Modi sparked widespread protest in the town against the "unfair" treatment of some claims for compensation and alleged favoritism in the distribution of resources. One protest leader said: “All the talk is of the administration of the disaster, when we should be focusing on the disaster of the administration.” Similar protests were organized in Bhachau, led by the newly formed Social Unity Centre and the Tenants’ Interest Protection Committee. The town largely observed a self-imposed closure.

In Bhuj, the Laughter Club, recently formed to promote well-being through mirth and exercise, along with other socially-inspired organizations, held a meeting in the center of the town. In other areas, the Bhagavad Gita was recited and blood donation camps were organized. The Congress Party organized a silent rally to protest against corruption in the administration. In an attempt to outwit its critics, the BJP-led state government took out full-page advertisements in local newspapers informing the readership “we are progressing, houses are being built, and we have overcome our setbacks.”

The anniversary was also marked by more serious political claims. Kundalal Dholakia, a former (Congress) Speaker of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly,
announced in a public statement that the rituals organized by Chief Minister Modi’s government to pacify the earth were akin to the actions of a quack who has wrongly diagnosed the disease of the patient. Another one-time heavyweight of the local political scene, Hirji Kotak, said, as he had often done, that the rehabilitation work should have been taken over by the central government. The women’s and youth divisions of the local Congress Parties organized the staging of satirical plays on corruption and the problems of town planning.

In Bhuj, a group of concerned citizens erected a marble inscription in a steel frame on the main road coming into the town. It reads:

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 weekly 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 plaque, and the political speeches that marked its installation, planted further seeds of dissent in Bhuj. Inevitably, given the scale of destruction left by the earthquake, the bureaucratic machinery of the government 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; other claims 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 Gujarat.

Kachchh and Gujarat

This call for Kachchh to be independent from Gujarat was voiced in two ways but was inspired by one set of concerns. Some people, somewhat wildly, called for Kachchh to be left to govern itself as a state within the Indian Federation or, more implausibly, as a totally independent entity. Their argument, largely inspired by nostalgia for royalty, was simple: the outsiders governing and reconstructing the area had no clue about local conditions or the sensitivities of the population; they were ignorant of the nuances of local culture; and through their ham-fisted efforts “Kachchhi identity” was being destroyed. The government’s reconstruction efforts came to be described as “the second earthquake” because of the disruption, injustice, and misery they brought to the land. The general point of protest was that, despite the wealth of natural resources in the district, the state government was claiming the revenue and not returning it equitably to its source. The geographical spread of routine government spending in India is mainly determined by population numbers. Notwithstanding, then, the huge geographical area of Kachchh, the low population density ensures that the District receives low levels of public spending and investment. In part as a consequence, Kachchh has a reputation for being a “backward” part of the state that lacks many basic amenities, facilities, and attractions.

The second call for independence from Gujarat was also prompted by a sense that “Gujarat” was neglecting the interests of Kachchh. These claimants, mostly experienced political veterans, argued that the state government was dominated by certain caste, religious, and political interests that did not reflect the concerns of the population in Kachchh. They too held that the state government was ineffective, to the point that its failings could no longer be tolerated. Instead of separation, however, this group called for governance from the center, directly from New Delhi, and for Kachchh to thus be re-formed as a union territory rather than as a separate state with an independent government. The ruling party took these claims quite seriously. Protests started shortly after the earthquake and, by the time the prime minister and home minister of India visited Kachchh in June 2001, the ruling party felt obliged to make statements acknowledging that the people of Kachchh felt discriminated against—even though the dream of independence would come to nothing.

Between the second and third anniversaries of the earthquake, a number of books and pamphlets appeared that discussed the damage to the arts and cultural history of the District. At least four films were released that juxtaposed images of “traditional” rural life in Kachchh before the earthquake with the ruins of the towns after the earthquake. Each film was dedicated to the dead. A film made by a self-professed local poet identified a preexisting carving on a monument to a former ruler as the deity of earthquakes (bukamp dev). At about the same time, the local branch of the Rotary Club then announced a competition to design a memorial. The competition came to nothing, though, when Chief Minister Modi took over the memorial business, and
announced his plan in January 2004 for the Parusharththu Mandir.

By this time, the BJP State government was on the back foot and looking to make up ground it had lost since 2001. In this section and the previous one we have tried to give a sense of the debates about reconstruction and social identity that swirled around Kachchh in these years. There is a danger when we see public memorials that we tidy up the myriad and often inconsistent ways in which people try to make sense of an “event” before the construction of “the” memorial. Even when historians look back on the debates that attended the process of memorial construction—on the location and iconography of the memorial, let’s say—they are often forced to rely on written sources. Their accounts cannot help but compress the messy and inconsistent acts of remembrance or re-invention that occurred in the prememorial era.

This is not to say, however, that certain forces were not working hard in Gujarat from the time of the earthquake to dominate the most public forms of memorialization and rebuilding work. Even before the dust had settled in Kachchh, and long before official plans were drawn up for the rebuilding of Bhuj, the Sangh Parivar moved forcefully to ensure that its own vision of India as Hindustan would be imprinted on at least parts of the landscape of Kachchh (Simpson 2004).

The Sangh Parivar: Kachchh, Gujarat, and Hindustan

The BJP, of course, as one member of the Sangh Parivar, was bound to be active in rebuilding work. It was at the time the presiding government in both Gujarat and India and many of its leading lights played an active role in transferring funds, ideas, and technologies to the earthquake-hit areas. Much of the work it supervised was well carried out, and by January 2004 very considerable progress had been made in the reconstruction of Bhuj, in particular, and much of that progress was untouched by ideas of religious nationalism.

As has been widely noted, however, the Sangh Parivar operates in different keys (Jaffrelot 1996, 1998). The fact that the BJP might chart a fairly moderate course for much of the time does not mean that other parts of the movement follow meekly in its wake. In October 2002, many of the leading lights of the VHP in Gujarat made their ways to Kachchh to attend one of the first inauguration ceremonies of a “post-earthquake village.” The site for the ceremony was allegedly as close to the epicenter of the earthquake as was possible, near the old village of Lodai. The village offered commanding views over the vast salt flats that lead to the border with Pakistan. The VHP had claimed the site when it was announced that public-private partnerships could help rebuild the damaged villages of Kachchh. Whether or not the VHP was in competition with the Congress Party to claim this site, or with various aid agencies (including Catholic Relief), is still not clear. What is clear is that the VHP took care to rebuild Lodai as Keshav Nagar, or Krishna’s city. Entry to Keshav Nagar is by means of a large archway upon the arms of which are inscribed the names of the temple committees in the United States that collected funds for the rehabilitation effort (see again Figure 2).

Having thus converted a traumatic space into a quasi-sacral space, the VHP ensured that its international secretary, Pravin Togadia, would be on hand for the inauguration proceedings. He used the occasion to make a hard-hitting election speech that underlined the broader significance of the project. Sharing a stage with several prominent ministers of the BJP government, Togadia urged the assembly to vote in the upcoming (December 2002) Gujarat State Assembly elections on the basis of religion and not caste, so that the “offspring of Mushaf,” the President of Pakistan, would not come to power. Referring to the communal “clashes” that had rocked Gujarat in the spring of 2002, in which more than 1,000 Muslims had died, he continued: “First, the puppies of Gujarat made noises and started barking. When it was felt this noise would not do, dogs from all over the country started coming here. . . . Then we heard that a dog from Italy also made the rounds here.”

Togadia’s final, canine reference was aimed at Sonia Gandhi, then the leader of the Congress Party in New Delhi. She had toured the area following the violent events of February to June 2002. More generally, Togadia told the assembled villagers and press that the problems of India, and of Gujarat and Keshav Nagar, came from three sources, all of whom he described as Ghaznis (a reference to Mohammed of Ghazni, one of the first so-called Turkish conquerors of western India and the supposed destroyer of a famous Shiv temple at Somnath in the eleventh century). First were the Jehadi Ghaznis, a loose collection of Muslim converts from Hinduism, Pakistan itself, and Osama bin Laden. Second were the secular Ghaznis who allowed Muslims to breed too rapidly and thus drain the country’s resources. As a party mainly of and for the upper middle classes, the BJP in Gujarat has often taken aim at the public sector, which it sees as a problematic legacy of previous Congress (read “secular”) governments. And third were the political Ghaznis, a group that overlapped with the secular Ghaznis, in which Sonia Gandhi and the Congress again loomed large. For each of the evil Ghaznis,
Togadia had a preferred “solution.” The jehadis, he said, were to be hanged, the secular Hindus were to be ostracized, and the political Ghazis were to be driven from power.

The Hindutva philosophy underlying Togadia’s claims explicitly rejects the composite culture that grew from the Freedom Movement. Close to Keshav Nagar, however, what at first glance is the same Hindutva agenda is inflected in a subtly different manner. In Keshav Nagar the Muslims and Harijans (scheduled castes) who previously lived in the village of Lodai had not been allowed to settle within the gates of the new community. Keshav Nagar is built around a temple dedicated to Ram and Krishna, and the populist nationalism of Togadia perfectly expressed its exclusionary design. Muslim and Harijan households had been provided with plainly inferior accommodation by a Catholic relief organization, which stepped in once it was clear that the VHP’s plans for Keshav Nagar were geared only to caste Hindus.

In the village of Indraprastha, however, built north of the main road heading east from Bhuj, what was inscribed in the landscape was an elite nationalism that traded as much on the sentiments of Hindu revivalism as on communal xenophobia. Developed by Sahib Singh Verma, a staunch BJP man and former Chief Minister of Delhi, Indraprastha was built as a model village complete with schools, a college, a technical education centre, and a handicraft park. At the heart of the project is a Special Study center, a library of nationalist and Vedic literature written mostly in Hindi and English. The name of the village is meant to call to mind the magnificent capital city of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata (the city of the god Indra), as well as of ancient Delhi, several of whose leading street names (Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazaar) are prominently on display. In Indraprastha, too, quarters have been built away from the road for Harijans and Muslims, although the better “colonies” closer to the main road are reserved for the higher castes (Figure 14).

On the outskirts of the new village of Indraprastha is a monument to the dead built on top of a small hillock, called “Tiger Hill.” On a plaque set into the foundations of a pole for the national flag, the formal monument lists the names of those villagers who perished in the earthquake. The hillock has been planted with sweet smelling flowers and, power and water permitting, a fountain cascades down an artificial watercourse. The significance of this monument is that it establishes a direct connection between those who died and their sacrifice for the nation. The bloody, partially televised, battle for Tiger Hill, adjacent to the Srinagar-Leh highway in Kashmir, was a turning point in the border skirmishes between India and Pakistan in 1999. Soon after the Indian army captured the peak, the press was full of images of the tricolor planted in the scrubby soils of the summit. The Indian soldiers who lost their lives became the most celebrated of martyrs.

These two villages are among the most striking that one encounters in postearthquake Kachchh. Both are meant to function synecdochically, as microcosmic advertisements for Hindustan. The fact that they differ in their treatments of Muslims and low castes is significant—the Hindutva agenda is strongly Brahmanical, but the BJP cannot hope to win power in Gujarat without broadening its mandate—but perhaps not as significant.

Figure 14. Houses farthest from the road in the village of Indraprastha. Note how the new residents have erected temporary shelters for themselves and keep their livestock in the new and somewhat inappropriate permanent housing.
as the messages that each place sends to those who visit or come to know of it. A huge amount of effort and money has gone into the making of Keshav Nagar and Indraprastha. From this effort has come a very significant reworking of the physical and symbolic landscapes of part of Kachchh.

This effort, moreover, as we indicated in the introduction to the article, was then meant to be topped off by Chief Minister Modi’s announcement in January 2004 of his plans for the “Temple of Human Endeavor” (Purusharthnu Mandir) and an accompanying plantation of 13,000 trees to represent the dead. When Modi declared that “Kachchhis should put the earthquake behind them,” he was being very precise. The Purusharthnu Mandir was meant to silence alternative readings of the earthquake and its significance. His advisors had also done their homework. The site selected for the memorial, a historic part of Bhuj that for decades was occupied by the military, includes the temple to the foundation deities of the town, constructed to propitiate the subterranean serpent (see Note 12). Kingship and Brahmanism were acknowledged, but not regionalism or a sense of being Kachchhi. Many of his principal supporters too, including wealthy members of the BJP-supporting diaspora, were by now building American-style jumbo-houses in the first gated communities that were growing up to the south and west of the old town of Bhuj. Decorating some of their rooms and courtyards, as can easily be seen, are old doors, friezes, pieces of furniture, and other art objects that had been removed from the rubble of the old town. We have reason to believe that many looted objects have also made their way to Europe and the United States. In some few cases, we might guess, they have traveled to communities that hailed from Kachchh or Gujarat and that now are intent on folding that region neatly into wider discourses about Hinduism, the nation, or even “globalization.”

**Conclusion: The Political Aesthetics of Memory**

We have tried in this article to show how some collective acts of memory, such as building memorials or performing commemorative rituals, can obliterate or simply ignore the messy array of conflicting memorial practices, and must be seen as acts that reflect the interests of dominant political groups and the nature of the competition among these groups. We have demonstrated how various nationalistic organizations competed to impose their own visions of the nation on rural people as they reconstructed the remote villages of Kachchh. The effects of this competition are apparent in how they chose to distribute (or exclude) certain moral populations, broadly defined by caste and religion, within the new settlements. Notwithstanding the different visions of the nation that have been put on display at Keshav Nagar and Indraprastha (and of course Jawaharnagar), there is an element of violence in the ideologies behind the first two designs that is troubling when we seek to connect accounts of memory and voice to ideas about democracy. Whether and how those who are excluded from this mythologizing order (mainly Muslims and Harijans) are able to sustain an archive of alternative stories about the earthquake and its aftermath is not something that we have been able to investigate so far, although we hope to do so in time.17

When we turned our attention to Bhuj, we saw that many forms of individual recollection—even widely shared forms of recollection—have come to play little or no part in the now-established postearthquake rituals of rehabilitation or commemoration. At the same time, however, we saw that ideas about sovereignty, hierarchy, and governance that are specific to Kachchh are so widely shared among local Hindus that a proto-independence movement gained enough momentum to challenge the authority of the government of Gujarat. It has been observed that postdisaster environments commonly exacerbate social trends that were waxing prior to the disaster (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002). It follows that the starting points for many of the debates surrounding memorials, authenticity, and legitimacy that have been taking place in Kachchh over the past few years are informed by patterns of social hierarchy, polity, and so forth that long preceded the earthquake. The reanimation of preexisting social patterns has been accompanied by a grooming of the past for images and metaphors to accommodate and mediate expressions of mourning and loss. The earthquake clearly is a break with the past, at least in the terms of personal memory; but, because of the renewed importance of the past in a more general sense, there is now more past in the present than there was before the disaster. The structure and presentation of this nostalgic past, and the ways in which it is projected onto the landscape as memorials of particular kinds, has led to the increasing importance of regional identity.

Postearthquake reconstruction has changed Kachchh irrevocably. Lucrative construction contracts, new roads and infrastructure, and tax breaks for heavy industry have rapidly introduced a semi-industrial form of modernity. Some people have willingly embraced the ensuing benefits; many more, and arguably most of Kachchh itself in relation to Gujarat, have been mar-
ginalized from the new cash-rich economy. Some cling tenaciously to the old ways and locales; others have been forced into new suburban housing societies. In Bhuj, the politics of commemoration reflect this alienation and can be seen in the resurgence of old desires for sovereignty, for well-defined neighborhoods, and for rituals of exclusivity—desires that also challenge the legitimacy of the current state. Although deities can be propitiated to warn off further natural disasters, and the regeneration of life can be acted out in the rituals of reconstruction, it appeared for a time much harder to appease the anger of Modi at the helm of the “second earthquake” under whose license the streets of towns were reoriented and renamed. Many saw both earthquakes as an opportunity to intervene in Kachchh, to modernize or at the very least tutor its inhabitants in the ways of righteousness. The new rituals of the old neighborhoods may well be a form of resistance to the new times that have brought modernity and outsiders to Kachchh, but these are not the rituals of the poor; they are the rituals of a disenfranchised elite who feels its position to be weakening in the face of state intervention and the redistribution, if not exactly democratization, of resources. “Tradition” has found an unlikely bedfellow with the preearthquake elite who have been taken up in the embrace of the land to which their relatives and ways of life were sacrificed. Modi and the BJP had to acknowledge these idioms of protest in the town of Bhuj, if not always in the outlying villages.

For many Hindus, destruction simultaneously signifies creation, and this is reflected in memorial practices that at once recall the past, the present, and the future. It follows that foundation days and land purification rites also mark to some extent the incident of destruction. In this manner, memorials strongly reflect ideas about what kind of society constructs them and less strongly the event they signify. In Kachchh, the individual and social memories of the “lower orders” (including Muslims and Harijans, and large numbers of women) have generally been erased (or perhaps privatized) in favor of ideas emanating from social elites who are largely united on the importance of kingship and hierarchy, but who are divided on the relationship of Kachchh to the nation (India or Hindustan) and the world beyond.

Theodor Adorno famously once argued that “commodification equals forgetting,” by which he meant to invoke the suggestion in the Communist Manifesto that, under the rule of capital, “all that is solid melts into air.” In Kachchh, however, as in many parts of Gujarat and India, this is not quite the case, even where consumerism is visibly on the rise. It would be more accurate to say that large-scale place-making in postearthquake Gujarat is being produced amid a struggle between two elite visions, one of which is animated by considerations of “the [Hindu] nation” and perhaps even globalization, and one of which invokes ideas of regionalism and kingly tradition. The silencing of other memories is a vital part of this contested politics of place-making.

Postscript

In January 2005, on the fourth anniversary of the earthquake, the Bhuj Area Development Authority held a fireworks display in the hill garden where Narendra Modi had delivered his speech to announce the Temple to Human Endeavor. Nothing had yet come of the chief minister’s much-hyped monument. The fireworks display was well attended but there were also audible criticisms of the event—not because people object to the administration taking on the task of cheering up the town, but because some vocal citizens saw the celebrations as disrespectful to those who had died in the December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

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Notes

1. A BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government was in power in New Delhi, the capital of the Republic of India, from before the earthquake until its defeat by the Congress Party and its allies in the April 2004 national elections. It remained in power in the State of Gujarat throughout the period January 2001 to January 2005. The capital of the State is at Gandhinagar, a purpose-built town located to the north of Ahmedabad, the largest city in the State. Prior to Independence and Partition in August 1947, much of the trade (and traffic) of Kachchh had been oriented to Karachi, now in Pakistan (Simpson 2003). More recently,
stronger links have been made to Mumbai (Bombay), Ahmedabad, and New Delhi.
2. In this article we are mainly concerned with competing “elite” views of the region and nation. We hope subsequently to write about the memories and place-making strategies of those who tended to be silent in these narratives, including Muslims and Harijans. The social memories we explore here are also predominantly masculine, although this is not to say that they are not shared by many women.
To date we have not been able to explore in any depth what Urvashi Butalia (2000) has called in the context of another traumatic event—Partition and its aftermath—the “other [female] side of silence.”
4. Perot provided financial support for the public competition that was won by Maya Lin (see also Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985).
5. Attacks, natural disasters, and traumas will generally elicit different forms of memorialization than, say, heroic deeds that are remembered or places that are sanctified (and remembered) because of their links to a deity. Kenneth Foote (2003 [1997]) offers a well-written review of some of the main issues. On trauma and mourning, see also Roth (1995), Neal (2005), and Derrida (2003).
6. In the 2002 State Assembly elections the BJP won two of six seats in Kachchh, down from four in 1999. Congress improved its position accordingly. However, the BJP recovered in the 2004 national (Lok Sabha) elections when it held on to the parliamentary seat of Kachchh with an enhanced majority (1999: BJP 49.91 percent and Congress 48.78 percent; 2004: BJP 48.16 percent and Congress 41.84 percent). On the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, see Varadarajan (2002).
7. A measurement of 6.8 is given in a high-level report by the Government of India (Gupta et al. 2002), 6.9 is the figure suggested by the Indian Meteorological Department, and 7.9 by teleseismic studies in Japan and the United States (Reddy et al., 2001, 31).
8. The decennial census of India, on which this percentage is based, was due to take place in Kachchh during February of 2001. Given the damage caused by the earthquake, the Census enumeration was postponed and carried out in a rather haphazard fashion during March 2002.
9. On anthropology, trauma, and disaster, see Torry (1979) and Oliver-Smith (1996).
11. In July 2001, the current incumbents of the Darbar in Bhuj wrote to the Chairman of the Bhuj Area Development Authority (BHADA). They were concerned that proposed postearthquake town-planning schemes would encroach on the grounds of their palaces. They wrote: “this part of the scheme militates against the very ethos of Bhuj town, demolishes its history dating back to 1549, affects its excellent architecture, and violates its cultural heritage. Bhuj being the capital town of the former princely State of Kutch, it has given lead to other towns and villages in Kutch in these respects and the proposed destruction of the fort wall will adversely affect the whole of Kutch” (Letter from The Darbar Gadh to The Chairman of Bhuj Urban Develop-
that the epicenter of the 2001 earthquake was not close to Lodai or Keshav Nagar but was closer to the village of Bandhadi, near Bhachau. Taking a lead in this respect has been the Jan Sangharsh Morcha, an organization that also filed a Public Interest Litigation in the High Court of Gujarat in 2001 asking for the incorporation of “quake resistant design code in the building regulations of Gujarat” (2001, 23). We are grateful to Kamala Visveswaran for bringing this document to our attention.

18. See the discussion in Huyssean (2003, 21), drawing on Horkheimer et al. (1976) and Marx and Engels (1984). Freud, too, noted the connections between remembering and forgetting (Freud 1965 [1900]).

References


