

VEENA DAS

Life and Words

VIOLENCE AND THE
DESCENT INTO THE ORDINARY

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Foreword by Stanley Cavell

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The Event and the Everyday

IT SO HAPPENS THAT FOR MANY YEARS NOW I have been engaged in thinking and writing about violence and asking what kind of work anthropology does in shaping the object we have come to call violence. I have a picture of this book as some kind of map (or a fragment of one) of the distance that I have traveled since I first realized how much of my intellectual biography was tied up with questions around violence: my journey is not about going forward, but rather about turning back, about collecting words and thoughts that I think of as having forged connections between me and my interlocutors in the field. Two major events have anchored my ethnographic and anthropological reflections, but the book is not *about* these events in the sense that a historian or a psychoanalyst might construe them.¹ Rather, it narrates the lives of particular persons and communities who were deeply embedded in these events, and it describes the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary. My attention is captured in this book by both the larger possibilities of phenomena and the singularity of lives.

I was educated into asking these kinds of questions by those who, in anthropological parlance, are my informants—except that the book is a response to them—and so if one has a picture of an informant as one who informs about some prethought questions, then this was not the relation I bore with them. The burden of the book is not to render their trauma visible

or knowable in the way in which much fine work on war veterans or victims of major catastrophes has made familiar. I briefly visit those debates, but my concern is with the slippery relation between the collective and the individual, between genre and individual emplotment of stories. Thus, I asked such questions as: What is it to inhabit a world? How does one make the world one's own? How does one account for the appearance of the subject? What is it to lose one's world? What is the relation between possibility and actuality or between actuality and eventuality, as one tries to find a medium to portray the relation between the critical events that shaped large historical questions and everyday life? Since the two events I address—that of the Partition of India in 1947 and the assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi in 1984—span a period in which the nation-state was established firmly in India as the frame of reference within which forms of community found expression, the story of lives enmeshed in violence is part of the story of the nation. The two concepts that are knotted together in various ways in the chapters of the book are the concepts of the voice and the everyday. I have learned to engage these concepts from the writings of two philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. On another register, the book, then, is about how these concepts may be received in anthropology for those who want to think of these matters.²

It would be obvious that the questions I ask did not simply come my way in the course of my work among urban Punjabi families (intensively in 1973 and 1974 and then intermittently until 1980) who had migrated to India as refugees from various parts of the Punjab during the traumatic riots of the Partition in 1947. Nor were the questions posed quite in this way by the survivors of the riots against the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, among whom I worked for more than a year. I had to learn to recognize these questions as somehow mine, animating my life and work: they were not there because of some textbook formulations on these issues.

In repeated attempts to write a book on the subject of violence, I felt that every time I succeeded in saying something, I was left with a sense of malaise, a disappointment with what I had said. Given that there is a certain air of obviousness with which notions of the everyday and of voice are often spoken of in anthropological writing, I have been amazed at how difficult I found it to speak of these matters. Thus, what I present here is not a piecemeal improvement on what I have written earlier or a filling up of some details that were missing. Rather, having presented a large part of my ethnography in the form of papers, I feel that I want to see my ethnographic practices, my models of reading and writing if you will, as responding to the

pressure of questions on voice and the ordinary, or better, the voice in the everyday. As the disastrous violence against Muslims in Gujarat in March 2002 makes clear, the events of collective violence continue to shape the intertwining of experiences of community and state and continue to become more lethal, especially for minorities in India, though the development of increasingly critical practices to counter this is also important to note. I need to find the right distance or the right scale at which this picture might be sketched.

RELATIONS

Marilyn Strathern has eloquently addressed questions of scale and complexity within the discipline of social anthropology. As she says, "Social anthropologists route connections through persons. They attend to the relations of logic, of cause and effect, of class and category that people make between things; it also means that they attend to the relations of social life, to the roles and behavior through which people connect themselves to one another. And habitually they bring these two domains of knowledge together, as when they talk about the relation between culture and society." Further, on the tradition of social anthropology in Britain, she adds, "And the enunciation of rules was understood as the moment at which people became articulate about relationships. . . . Social structure inhered in relationships relevant to people's acts and intentions. . . . This model could be *enacted* over and again in fieldwork. The tradition of fieldwork meant that anthropologists learnt about systems by entering into relationships with those whose social life they were studying. Like Saem, the apprentice gained knowledge in the course of interaction."³

Relationships appear crucial to Strathern because they are both the objects of study and the means through which anthropologists arrive at an understanding of both abstract and concrete patterns of sociality. Once we comprehend how concrete relations and abstract relations are connected, we begin to see questions of scale and complexity in a very different light. Thus, small-scale societies are not simply those in which face-to-face relations make it easier to grasp social relations in their totality, nor are complex societies those in which there is an absence of face-to-face relations. Indeed, Strathern gives many examples of the complexity of so-called simple societies and calls upon notions of tacit knowledge to show how concrete relations are implicated in the production of new forms of sociality corresponding to dramatic changes in technology.

I take two important formulations from Strathern's attention to relations. First, that concrete relations that we establish in living with others are like shadows of the more abstract questions—that is, we learn about the nature of the world in the process of such living. Second, that we cannot assign a scale to patterns of sociality independent of perspective. Indeed, to be able to establish a perspective is to enlarge the field of our vision. The question, then, is not that of part-whole relations but of establishing the horizon within which we may place the constituent objects of a description in their relation to each other and in relation to the eye with which they are seen.⁴ One might also express this in terms of the relation between the subject and the world. (I would like to note here for later discussion that I see the problems of uncertainty, doubt, and skepticism as embedded in the concreteness of relations—if I come to doubt such things as my relations to my parents, the fidelity of our love, or the loyalty of my children, these are doubts that put my world in jeopardy. They are like shadows of the more abstract philosophical doubts about the reality of the world.) For the moment, I return to some initial formulations on the question of the subject and the world.

Let us take Wittgenstein's statement that "the subject does not belong to the world; rather it is the limit of the world."⁵ In interpreting this statement several scholars have suggested that the relation of the subject to the world is like that of the eye to the visual field—the eye is not itself in the visual field that it defines. Without going into a sustained defense of my interpretation at this point, I suggest that in thinking of the subject as constituting the limit of the world, Wittgenstein is proposing that the experience of being a subject is the experience of a limit. The world is not invented by me (as the cliché goes), but then how do I make the world mine? How am I, as a subject, implicated in experience, for I take it that there is no pre-given subject to whom experience happens or on whom experience can be predicated? It is Wittgenstein's thought that the subject is the *condition* of experience.⁶ Given that he considers the human form of life as one complicated enough to have language, the question might also be put as one of taking responsibility for language.⁷ If the subject is also the boundary of the world, there is clearly no particular point in the course of my life that I can locate as the point at which my subjectivity emerges. Hence it is Wittgenstein's thought that the subject is never closed or done with. Being able to draw a boundary itself raises the issue of the experience of limit. Then how should we see the violence of the events that frame the ethnography—should we regard the violence as that

which exceeded the boundaries of the world, as it was known? These are complicated pictures of what it is to make and remake a world, bringing into question the pictures of totalities, parts, fragments, and boundaries that we may have. These pictures are tied up with questions of what it is to write an ethnography of violence—one that is not seen as bearing an objective witness to the events as much as trying to locate the subject through the experience of such limits.

FRAGMENTS, BOUNDARIES, LIMITS

A body of critical theories has emerged in recent years marked by the “rhetoric of mourning.” Eric Santner characterizes it thus:

By the “rhetoric of mourning,” I mean the recurrence, in so many post-modern theoretical discourses, of a metaphysics of loss and impoverishment. The appeal in these discourses to notions of shattering, rupture, mutilation, fragmentation, to images of fissures, wounds, rifts, gaps and abysses, is familiar enough. These discourses, primarily post-structuralist in inspiration, appear committed to the vigilant and radical critique of what are taken to be narcissisms and nostalgias central to the project of modernity—namely, Enlightenment faith in progress—and the Western tradition more generally. These discourses propose a kind of perpetual leave-taking from fantasies of plenitude, purity, centrality, unity and mastery. Such fantasies and their various narrative performances, whether cast in the rhetoric of totalization or of liberation, are in turn seen as the primary sources of violence in history.⁸

The idea I use of a fragment shares in Santner’s sense of loss and impoverishment but is not directly related to a critique of the Western Enlightenment project. My sense is to think of the fragment here as different from a part or various parts that may be assembled together to make up a picture of totality. Unlike a sketch that may be executed on a different scale from the final picture one draws, or that may lack all the details of the picture but still contain the imagination of the whole, the *fragment* marks the impossibility of such an imagination. Instead, fragments allude to a particular way of inhabiting the world, say, in a gesture of mourning. I have in mind a picture of destruction, such as that sketched by Stanley Cavell in his writings on philosophy, literature, and film. Cavell takes up Wittgenstein’s famous comment—of his investigations destroying everything that is great and important, “leaving behind only bits of stone and

rubble”—and suggests that the color that is lent to this abstract conceptual moment is of a particular hue. In his words: “Could its color have been evoked as the destruction of a forest by logging equipment, or of a field of flowers by the gathering for a summer concert or by the march of an army? Not, I think if the idea is that we are going to have to pick up the pieces and find out how and whether to go on, that is go on living in this very place of devastation, as of something over.”⁹ What it is to pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation? This is what animates the description of lives and texts in this book.

VOICE AND THE EVERYDAY

The repression of voice and hence of confession, of autobiography, in philosophy is an abiding theme of Cavell’s work. He sees Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with philosophy as leading words back from the purified metaphysical voice to that of the ordinary, as a project of recovering the human voice, a voice he sees philosophy as having banished (which is not to say that it is a *humanistic* project, as if the notion of the human was transparent). Thus Cavell’s account of voice is not that of speech or utterance but as that which might animate words, give them life, so to say. Cavell sees the banishing of the human voice in the register of the philosophical as a suspicion of all that is ordinary, as the fantasy of some kind of purified medium outside of language that was available to us.¹⁰ Words, when they lead lives outside the ordinary, become emptied of experience, lose touch with life—in Wittgenstein, it is the scene of language having gone on a holiday. These are the scenes evoked in the theatrical staging of doubt (surely you cannot have *this* pain), and if skeptical doubt was to be expressed only in such theatricality, then one might be right to suspect that skepticism expresses unnatural doubts. But for Wittgenstein, as Cavell rightly reminds us, the possibility of skepticism is embedded in the ordinary—hence, says Cavell, *Philosophical Investigations* is written in response to skepticism but not as a refutation of it, for the argument with skepticism is one that we are not allowed to either win or lose. I read this as saying that the question is not about knowing (at least in the picture of knowing that much of modern philosophy has propagated with its underlying assumption about being able to *solve* the problem of what it is to know), but of acknowledging. My acknowledgment of the other is not something that I can do once and then be done with it. The suspicion of the ordinary seems to me to be rooted in the fact that relationships require

a repeated attention to the most ordinary of objects and events, but our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it.

In the register of literature, Cavell asks whether Shakespearean tragedies might not be a response to (what philosophy identifies as) skepticism: “Yet, might it not well haunt us, as philosophers, that in *King Lear* doubt as to a loving daughter’s expressions of love, or in *Othello* doubt cast as jealousy and terror of a wife’s satisfaction, or in *Macbeth* doubt manifested as a question about the stability of a wife’s humanity (in connection with witches), leads to a man’s repudiation or annihilation of the world that is linked with a loss of the power of or the conviction in speech?”¹¹ As I have suggested elsewhere, this theme of annihilation of the world, or of finding oneself within the scene of world-annihilating doubt, is not necessarily tied to big events—I then located the unknowability of the world and hence of oneself in it in the *ordinary*—for instance, in interactions around witchcraft accusations among the Azande that interrupt the ordinary but are still part of the everyday, or in the pervasive sense that the real could not be authorized in the narratives of health and illness in my ongoing studies of low-income neighborhoods in Delhi.¹² I argued that in these cases we get an intuition of the human as if one of the aspects under which a person could be seen was as a victim of language—as if words could reveal more about us than we are aware of ourselves.

The intimacy between skepticism and the ordinary is revealed in the present work on several sites, as in the panic rumors that circulate and produce the picture of the other as the phantasmal from whom all human subjectivity has been evacuated, or when violence, in the register of the literary, is seen as transfiguring life into something else, call it a form of death, or of making oneself, as it were, into a ghost. But my engagement with the survivors of riots also showed me that life was recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary. There was, I argue, a mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary so that I end up by thinking of the event as always attached to the ordinary as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways.

I tend to think that while critical and traumatic events of the kind I describe were not simply constituted by forms of the social, they were not wholly its other either. And thus, I find myself attracted to the idea that boundaries between the ordinary and the eventful are drawn in terms of the failure of the grammar of the ordinary, by which I mean that what is

put into question is how we ever learned what kind of object something like grief, or love, is. This failure of grammar or what we may also call the end of criteria is what I see as the experience of world-annihilating violence—the figure of a brother not being able to decipher whether love consisted in killing one’s sister to save her from another kind of violence from the crowd, or handing her over for protection to someone whose motives one could not fully fathom; or a mother’s failure to know that her child was safer with her out in the open, in sight of a murderous crowd, rather than hidden in a house with his father.

My interest in this book is not in describing these moments of horror but rather in describing what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships. My wonder and terror is that it is from such fragile and intimate moments that a shared language had to be built and with no assurance that there were secure conventions on which such a language, in fact, could be founded. A possible vicissitude of such fatal moments is that one could become voiceless—not in the sense that one does not have words—but that these words become frozen, numb, without life.¹³ Thus there were men and women who spoke, and if asked, they told stories about the violence they had seen or endured on their bodies. My thought was that perhaps they had speech but not voice. Sometimes these were words imbued with a spectral quality, or they might have been uttered by a person with whom I was in a face-to-face encounter, and yet I felt they were animated by some other voice. Contrarily, I describe those who chose to be mute, who withdrew their voice to protect it. Thus, just as I think of the event as attached to the everyday, I think of the everyday itself as eventful.

As the above examples suggest, voice is not identical to speech; nor does it stand in opposition to writing. Voice, as I understand it, is not the same as an utterance, nor is writing only graphic—thus I cannot tie voice to presence and writing to absence as suggested by Jacques Derrida. However, what I find useful in Derrida’s powerful analysis of signature is the possibility that words might become untethered from their origin.¹⁴ I try to widen this notion, however, so that we can see not only the new possibilities it offers but also its threats. For example, we may fail to recognize the signature of the utterance we are hearing even in a face-to-face encounter when words are animated by some other voice. This is akin to the possibility of forgery that might put the authoritativeness of a written document into question. Thus, I explore the sense of danger in relation to both oral and written utterances on such sites as rumor or in institutions

such as the state that can disengage themselves from their own promise of justice by taking the possibility of signature as forgery and by turning it against those who are suspect in its eyes: the very idea that Derrida finds so attractive as a critique of both presence and intentionality here becomes a tactic of the state to avoid responsibility.

It is not only violence experienced on one's body in these cases but also the sense that one's access to context is lost that constitutes a sense of being violated. The fragility of the social becomes embedded in a temporality of anticipation since one ceases to trust that context is in place. The affect produced on the registers of the virtual and the potential, of fear that is real but not necessarily actualized in events, comes to constitute the ecology of fear in everyday life. Potentiality here does not have the sense of something that is waiting at the door of reality to make an appearance as it were, but rather as that which is already present.¹⁵ The ethnographic task here is to describe how feelings of skepticism come to be embedded within a frayed everyday life so that guarantees of belonging to larger entities such as communities or state are not capable of erasing the hurts or providing means of repairing this sense of being betrayed by the everyday. It will become clear that the sense in which I use the term "community" is not as something already given or primordial (and hence opposed to the state). Rather, community is constituted through agreements and hence can also be torn apart by the refusal to acknowledge some part of the community (e.g., women or minorities) as an integral part of it. This refusal might take the form of voices not heard, or it might reveal itself through a proliferation of words that drown out silences that are too difficult to bear. Thus while voice may give life to frozen words, turned into the plural it can also be lethal as in the case of words floating around in panic rumors without being tethered to a signature.

VIOLENCE IN THE WEAVE OF LIFE

In the years 1973 and 1974 I was engaged in the study of a network of urban Punjabi families with a view to understanding their kinship system.¹⁶ The core of this kinship network was located in Delhi and consisted of ten families who had fled from Lahore at the time of the Partition. Other families in this network were scattered in several cities including Amritsar, Bombay, Calcutta, Ferozepur, Jullundher, Ludhiana, and Simla. In the initial stages of my fieldwork I started by collecting kinship terminologies, making genealogies, recording gift transactions, and tracing the marriage

alliances. I was very interested then in the politics of kinship and accordingly attended closely to disputations during weddings and funerals, and to the narratives of relationships that were obsessively discussed and debated. I was even then struck by the fact that the structure of domestic groups did not approximate the typical phases of the developmental cycle that were so dear to the analysts of family and kinship.¹⁷ The most interesting variation was in the number of children who moved between different kinds of relatives in different phases of their lives.

The displacement of the Partition had made it difficult for some of the families to sustain their children because of either the death of a parent or the destitution of the family. Informal adoptions and provision of foster care for short periods, as well as flow of material help in the form of gifts, were essential components of the strategies of survival. The Partition had created significant differences of wealth and income within the network of kinship. Some families in this network had business interests outside of the Punjab that saved them from complete economic devastation. The operation of the “axiom of kinship amity” meant that the more fortunate relatives who had homes on the Indian side of the border gave shelter to those who had escaped from Pakistan.¹⁸ This included help with finding jobs, loans, and shelter for children who had lost a parent. Yet the other side of these kinship relations was the constant allusions to betrayal of trust, infidelities, and the failure to live up to the high moral ideals of kinship solidarity. The manner in which such disappointments in one’s relationships were staged, the performance of accusations, and the delicate encoding of references to past favors granted and relationships betrayed made up the aesthetic of kinship. It was not that there was any taboo on the mention of the Partition or that no reference was ever made to the homes that were left behind. Yet violence endured or betrayals of which I was slowly to be made aware seemed to be always on the edges of conversation. These were not spoken in the mode of public performances.

I shall argue in the course of my discussion in the chapters that follow that while the narratives one could glean from state documents used words freely, in the lives of communities the manner in which the violence of the Partition was folded was *shown* (sometimes with words) rather than *narrated*. Words were spoken, but they worked like gestures to show this violence—to draw boundaries between what could be proclaimed as a betrayal, however delicately, and what could only be molded into a silence. The memories of the Partition were then not in the nature of something gone

underground, repressed, hidden away, that would have to be excavated. In a way, these memories were very much on the surface. Yet there were fences created around them: the very language that bore these memories had a certain foreign tinge to it as if the Punjabi or Hindi in which it was spoken was some kind of translation from some other unknown language. For the moment, I leave this idea here as a possible way of conceptualizing what many have spoken of as an inner language (as distinct from a private language).

It is important for me to mark one important feature of my fieldwork. I was engaged in the study of kinship among urban families in the context of everyday life. Immersed in the daily life of the women of the households, defined by the temporal rhythms of cooking and eating food, cleaning the house, bathing the children, engaging in the usual conversations in the afternoons when housework was completed—it was easy to be seduced by the idea that the family was encompassed only in the larger generational rhythms of marriages, births, rearing of children, ordinary illnesses, infirmities of old age, and death.¹⁹ The violence of the Partition seemed to have disappeared into a distant past. Even among the children in the families, there was little knowledge of what their parents had gone through during the Partition. Still, within the period of my fieldwork there were dangers—past events of which one had only vague suspicions could suddenly present themselves without any notice. For instance, I witnessed a woman on her death bed saying that her last wish was that her shroud should not come from her brother's house. This refusing of a powerful ritual connection—namely, that the natal family of a married woman acknowledge their connection to the daughter of a house at the moment of her death—hinted at the powerful hold of some past betrayal that had never been explicitly spoken. Yet in the ritual staging of the funeral other relatives persuaded her adult children to disregard her utterance: as the elders said, one could be claimed by all kinds of ghostly forces at the moment of death. The feeling that everyday life as a site of the ordinary buried in itself the violence that provided a certain force within which relationships moved was to become strengthened in my mind as I came to know these families.²⁰ Yet with one exception I never in fact asked anyone for their stories about the Partition. It is not that if asked people could not tell you a story, but simply that the words had the frozen slide quality to them, which showed their burned and numbed relation to life. I hope that in the descriptions that follow in the book, the nature of this silence will show itself.

WOUNDS

Unlike my relation with the displaced families, in which violence was always on the edges, my experience of working with the survivors of the riots in 1984 was of a different nature. The assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, by her Sikh bodyguards was followed by brutal violence against Sikh residents of the resettlement colonies in Delhi. The description of these riots, which received considerable attention in both scholarly and activist writing, will follow in the subsequent chapters. What I want to describe here is the sense that the suddenness of the violence and the imperative force with which I was drawn into the world of the survivors had none of the quality of the slow rhythms with which the violence of the Partition unfolded before me. The violence of the 1984 riots was something *visible* in the colonies in which it had been perpetrated although it was not *acknowledged* in the official pronouncements on the aftermath of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. The quality of its visibility is best described in my earlier work. Allow me to loop back to my own words on the visual impressions that my first visit to the colony made on me:

On our first visit to the area we were taken around by a self-styled social worker who attached himself to us and who we later learned was assigned by the local big men to shadow all strangers and keep them informed of events in the colony. We had been able to shake this man off on one pretext or other and had then been shown around by Vakil Singh, who had lost two sons in the carnage. We saw blood splattered on the walls, bullet holes, heaps of ashes in which one could still find bits of hair or skull and bone. But what we encountered in the women was mainly fear. Their men had been killed before their eyes. Their children had been spared but had been threatened with dire consequences if they spoke about the murderers. Yet a sullen resistance formed of anger, fear, and grief was beginning to take shape. They felt surrounded by the murderers, who had established a "camp" in the colony and were ostensibly doing "relief work" to impress the press and social organizations that had come to report the carnage.

My sense that the violence was visible, yet somehow obscured from our view, as if the eye was a camera lens that was being made to focus on a pre-arranged scenery, and as if what we were witnessing was something that had just vanished from view—this was recorded in a diary entry, thus: "As I talked to the women, three or four very old women were wandering around the street in a kind of convoy, each holding the edge of the other's *dupatta* (veil).

Like spirits, they stood in front of each house—mute—but seeing things that were invisible to us. The laments for the dead would not come to their lips. There they stood, before broken doors and scorched walls—unseeing eyes—calling the names of those who had died just two days ago.”

In freezing these moments of the funeral landscape, I want to convey the idea of how objects and gestures were stranded, strewn about, torn.²¹ The brutal and telescoped violence had blasted out these spaces from their usual normality (which was itself marked by an everyday violence, but which hardly ever made it to the newspapers) and brought them to public attention. Thus, my own “entry” into the field was not marked by any of the slow rituals of initiation through which the anthropologist becomes a part of the everyday life of a community. It was as if a wound had suddenly opened up, slashing through connected tissues. My very presence in the “field” was not that of an anthropologist conducting fieldwork.²² Along with several others, I had undertaken to act in this emergency for the safety of the survivors and to work toward their rehabilitation. These questions, then, were grounded in the question of how the survivors were to rebuild their lives, to pick up the pieces and find out how and whether to go on, that is, to go on living in this very place of devastation, as of something over.

INTERTWINING

Then there is the question of how and why these events are stitched together, considering the important differences between them. The signature of the Partition in both the literary and popular imagination has been the violation of women, mass rapes and mass abductions, their expulsion from homes, the imperative to court heroic deaths, and the recovery operations staged by India and Pakistan. I do not mean to suggest that there was no violation of male bodies during the Partition. Indeed, it would appear that castration (both literal and figurative) of the enemy was an important mode in which the male body was made to stand for the whole community. Nevertheless, in the discourses emanating from the state (as in the Constituent Assembly debates that I analyze in chapter 2), this fact was always elided. The rhetoric strategy of focusing on abducted and raped women to the exclusion of the sexual violation of men allowed the nation to construct itself as a masculine nation.

In contrast, if we consider the riots against the Sikhs in 1984, the dominant themes were those of humiliation of men. Women were not attacked, though there might have been isolated cases of rape.²³ I had suggested in

earlier studies that crowds work with definite ideas of a limit.²⁴ Subsequent studies of communal violence in other areas suggest that in some cases Hindu and Muslim groups consciously try to avoid rape of women of the other community. In other cases, however, rape still evokes the violence of the Partition. For instance, Deepak Mehta and Roma Chatterji quote their informants from Dharavi in Bombay reporting that Hindu mobs violently attacked a group of Muslim women, dragging them away and shouting, "We are taking away your Pakistan."²⁵ In contrast, Sudhir Kakar in his study of communal violence in Hyderabad reports that there was an explicit avoidance of rape because those engaging in violence still imagined a future in which they had to live together again. In his words:

As Mangal Singh remarked "A few days after the riot is over, whatever the bitterness in our hearts and however cold our voices are initially, Akbar Pehlwan still has to call me and say, 'Mangal Bhai, what do we do about that disputed land in Begampet,' and I still have to answer, 'Let's get together on that one, Akbar Bhai, and solve the problem peacefully.'" Rape makes such interaction impossible and turns Hindu-Muslim animosity into implacable hatred.²⁶

This is an attractive interpretative move, but it assumes that we know what it means to be living together again. In the case of the Partition, the boundaries drawn around people were national boundaries, were relatively difficult to cross, and were materialized into such symbols of nationhood as border posts, passports, travel permits; the boundaries that come to be drawn around those engaged in collective violence against each other but who continue to inhabit the same space are more subtle.²⁷ They have to be deciphered in the still waters when life seems quiescent as well as at the more dramatic moments of a crisis, for the boundaries may be drawn between communities, between localities, between members of the family, and even between different regions of the self. It is also the case that stories about violence that circulate during riots include the theme of rape regardless of actual incidences. This does not mean, of course, that the difference between the two situations is insignificant. It does show, though, that in the regions of the imaginary, violence creates divisions and connections that point to the tremendous dangers that human beings pose to each other. How these dangers are mastered, domesticated, lived through is the theme of several of the chapters that follow. Human beings,

however, not only pose dangers to each other, they also hold hope for each other. By addressing the theme of social suffering, I try to show in my depiction of ordinary lives that the answer to these dangers is not some kind of an ascent into the transcendent but a descent into everyday life. I think of the delicate task of repairing the torn spider's web, evoked by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, as my metaphor for the engagement with suffering and healing that ordinary life reveals.

FORMS OF LIFE, AGAIN

Let us consider how far Wittgenstein's idea of form of life will take us in thinking about these two events and the lives entangled in these together. Wittgenstein takes language to be the mark of human sociality: hence human forms of life are defined by the fact that they are forms created *by* and *for* those who are in possession of language even as the natural is absorbed within these "social" forms. When anthropologists have evoked the idea of forms of life, it has often been to suggest the importance of thick description, local knowledge, or what it is to learn a rule.²⁸ For Cavell such conventional views of the idea of form of life eclipse the spiritual struggle of his investigations. In his words:

The idea [of forms of life] is, I believe, typically taken to emphasize the social nature of human language and conduct, as if Wittgenstein's mission is to rebuke philosophy for concentrating too much on isolated individuals, or for emphasizing the inner at the expense of the outer, in accounting for such matters as meaning, or states of consciousness, or following a rule etc. . . . A conventionalized sense of form of life will support a conventionalized or contractual sense of agreement. But there is another sense of form of life that will contest this.²⁹

What Cavell finds wanting in this conventional view of forms of life is that it not only obscures the mutual absorption of the natural and the social but also emphasizes *form* at the expense of *life*. Now, life is the object of theorizing in powerful ways in the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, who are both interested in the processes by which management of life becomes an affair of the state, thus inaugurating the biopolitical state: I analyze some of the implications of this in chapter 10. But what interests me most in Cavell's writing is the idea that the vertical sense of the form of life suggests the limit of what or who is recognized as human

within a social form and provides the conditions of the use of criteria as applied to others. Thus the criteria of pain do not apply to that which does not exhibit signs of being a form of *life*—we do not ask whether a tape recorder that can be turned on to play a shriek is feeling the pain.³⁰ The distinction between the horizontal and the vertical axes of forms of life takes us at least to the point at which we can appreciate not only the security provided by belonging to a community with shared agreements but also the dangers that human beings pose to each other. These dangers relate to not only disputations over *forms* but also disputations over what constitutes *life*. The blurring between what is human and what is not human shades into the blurring over what is life and what is not life.

Seen from the perspective of Agamben it is the fact that a biopolitical state can strip someone to what is bare or naked life that produces bodies that are killable with impunity.³¹ In Cavell, one glimpses the dangers as if stitched into everyday life when one withholds recognition from the other, not simply on the grounds that she is not part of one's own community but that she is not part of life itself. This is not a question of a reasoned denial but of a denial of accepting the separateness of the other as a flesh and blood creature. Sometimes this announces itself in Cavell's writing in the fear of natality, and the thought that violence may be linked not only to handing out death but also in the refusal to allow another to be born.

The weaving together of both ethnographies of violence as I have done in this book, as if each were shot through with the colors of the other, points to the way in which everyday life absorbs the traumatic collective violence that creates boundaries between nations and between ethnic and religious groups. The difference is that the very fact of my presence near the scene of violence in the case of the 1984 riots, and my relative distance in time from the violence of the Partition, made the relation between spoken words and voices different. The work of time, not its representation, is at issue, for in each case the question of what it is to inherit the legacy of such violence has been different.

THE DARKNESS OF THIS TIME

In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, "It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another—but, of course, it is not likely." George Bearn writes that the destructive moment of the *Investigations* threatens the fabric of our daily lives, so it is more

destructive than the textbook skepticism of the philosopher or the café skeptic.³² If in life, said Wittgenstein, we are surrounded by death, so too in the health of our understanding we are surrounded by madness. Rather than a forceful exclusion of this voice of madness, Wittgenstein returns us to the everyday by a gesture of waiting: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: This is simply what I do.”³³ In this picture of the turned spade as indicative of a turned pen, we have the picture of what the act of writing may be in the darkness of this time. For me the love of anthropology has turned out to be an affair in which when I reach bedrock I do not break through the resistance of the other, but in this gesture of waiting I allow the knowledge of the other to mark me.³⁴ In this sense this book is also an autobiography.