Introduction

In a remote village somewhere in South Asia, someone's cow ate someone else's crop. Within two days, tens of thousands of men were ranged against each other, armed, hostile, righteous.

Who those men were, how they chose sides, the symbolic choreography of their fight, were all particular to that village. But an inclination to confrontation is widespread. Social conflict is a durable fact of life throughout the world, from the back alleys of Belfast to the urban canyons of New York City, from the dusty pathways of Israeli settlements to the public squares of Lithuania.

The need to understand why some groups of people define others as Other, how enemies are made, why conflicts often turn so brutal, is not politely academic. As, I suspect, with most enduring questions of scholarship, the personal and the political merge urgently in these questions. Born an American Jew during the Holocaust, reared on the Korean War and the McCarthy hearings, come to adulthood in a segregated southwestern city during the first throes of the civil rights movement, I, like most citizens of this century, experienced conflict as an assumed part of life. Perhaps it was no accident that I chose mediation as a career, nor that I came to wonder more and more, as the years of helping people resolve conflict rolled on, about the nature of animosity.

So much enmity appears in the modern world that it is tempting to ascribe it to human nature and let it go at that. But I could not work as a mediator if I truly believed that conflict emerges from some dark, inescapable side of the human psyche. To help people solve problems, I must believe in the existence of solvable prob-

lems, and, sure enough, that belief has led to the identification and resolution of many conflicts over the years.

But do lessons learned in practice with individuals and small groups apply to conflicts among much larger—and perhaps more resistant—masses of people? Had my colleagues and I learned anything, I wondered, over the years of practice that had theoretical significance on the level of collectivities, and, if so, how could we turn theories into tools for understanding, and perhaps helping to solve, those intractable struggles?

Before I became a mediator in the United States, I lived in India, and there I encountered a dramatic example of community conflict, the longtime struggle between Hindus and Muslims that culminated, in 1947, in the radical reorganization of the subcontinent.* I determined to start my project there.

Communalism (as such friction between communities is labeled in South Asia) has been studied and theorized abundantly, for obvious reasons. Ethnic, racial, religious, and other sorts of community conflicts interlace so much of modern history with thick lines of intransigence that their understanding is a high priority for peacemakers and politicians alike. In India, communalism runs like a pulsating vein through the body politic of modern times. Every account from whatever perspective, whether nationalist, colonialist, or popular, must contend with questions of community conflict. Too often such "disturbances" are dismissed as aberrations of human nature. But to do so is to relinquish any possible response beyond brute repression, and that response has again and again proven inadequate. More to the point, tensions between Hindus and Muslims have taken many forms in different places and at different moments, suggesting causes and dynamics that beckon to be understood in specific terms rather than universals.

If we avoid the temptation to lump together every instance of strife between communities inhabiting common borders—those

*To Western consciousness, the word *India* defines an area coincident with the British Empire in the region. In fact, that Empire has now become half a dozen more or less independent nations. My study is set in what today is Bangladesh. At the time of the events I describe it was Pakistan, a nation that had come into being only a few years before with the Independence of India. When writing of the area as a whole, I try to use the more precise designations *South Asia* or *the subcontinent*. I beg the reader's indulgence for my occasional lapses into the colloquial *India* to mean the region rather than the current nation-state.

sorts of conflicts called communal, nationalist, ethnic, and so on—then we can begin to ask a set of questions that are otherwise meaningless. What were the motivations of people who at one moment lived peacefully side by side, yet at another came to blows? What was happening to induce animosity, and what happened at the moment of conflict that decided them to mobilize and fight? What events, both in the large frame of their lives as occupants of a land experiencing historic changes and in the small frame of their day-to-day world, combined to inspire their acts of contentiousness? In particular, how did they comprehend and interpret those experiences, and translate them, both as individuals and as communities, into the dramas they enacted?

It is this space between the most private of experiences and the most public of actions that especially interests me in my study of community friction.[1] When I consider stories of village communalism, I want to know how people saw their world, how they placed their own desires within it, and how their sense of political possibility was influenced by distant winds of change. It has become common to assert that the most intimate domestic behaviors are in fact socially constructed. Collective experience is translated into psychological reality through a web of ideas internalized as invisible assumptions about the world. To unravel the psychological realities of collective behavior, I believe we must look to shared areas of understanding and social location. For instance, group actions are formulated from the experience of identity, that is, the complex construction of an individual's location in the community and her ties with others. Similarly, the will to action is born of detailed ideologies that often are experienced as common sense or unexamined assumptions about rights and powers. Both identity and ideology-making draw deeply at the well of community memories, those shared histories constructed through storytelling that serve to define memberships within groups and relations among them, and that bound the formulation of protest.

Adventures in Methodology

To learn something of life on the level of internal experience (internal both to the individual and to the community), I determined to study cases of communalism through face-to-face encounters with

participants. For my study I chose a northeastern area of the South Asian subcontinent called Bengal, specifically, the portion that is modern-day Bangladesh.* (I'll say more later about how and why I happened to choose that precise spot.)

Hindu-Muslim "communal disturbances" (an expression that illustrates the inimitable British knack for understatement) first became noteworthy elsewhere in India during the nineteenth century, but they came later to Bengal, starting in 1907 and spreading throughout the century.[2] All these incidents involved hostilities between peoples of the two communities, but there were actually very important differences among them. Some sprang from political disagreements, others from economic protest or neighborly disputes, still others from a host of creative causes. All drew in some fashion on people's identities as Muslims or Hindus, yet most were sparked by some clearly defined problem to which religion was not intrinsic.

The mystery that engaged me was why these struggles became defined as communal. Recent discussions have historicized the very definitions of *communalism*, calling attention to the role of British colonialists in conceptualizing and imposing a monolithic definition upon very complex happenings.[3] Was that label indeed an imposition by outsiders? If the concept of communalism was a construct of the British policy of divide and rule, why, I wondered, did it work? Why did the people involved allow their troubles to be divisively defined in terms of Hindus and Muslims, considering the multiplicity of issues involved? Or did they? Were all these struggles about so many different things formulated by the fighters themselves as hostilities between the communities, and, if so, how did that come to be?

Having selected an area of study, I searched the archival record to catalog instances described as communal.[4] From that list I selected six localities: three appeared frequently in the historical record as sites of contention (Kishoreganj, Gopalganj, and Jamalpur), and three were noteworthy for the absence of mention (Faridpur, Madaripur, and Sariatpur), because I thought it was as

*The history of the creation of Bangladesh in the wash of colonialism and international politics is complex. A brief chronology is given in Appendix A, and I discuss the details as they are relevant to what follows.

important to know why communities remained peaceful as why they came to blows.

I went next to visit those locations and began interviewing people, starting with the elderly, moving on to conversations with the young about the stories they had heard, asking people about relations between the communities in their towns and villages. Very soon it became apparent that I had made a mistake; I had assumed those localities not identified as contentious in official reports had been peaceful. While interviewing, I came by chance upon an event totally absent from any written record I had found: a riot in an out-of-the-way place. It had been blacked out of the press and recorded, if at all, only in governmental files currently inaccessible.[5] I was thus offered the serendipitous opportunity to construct a history of an event solely from firsthand accounts. Although I went on to interview people in each of my selected sites, this riot became the focus of my study. The lack of a paper trail, which might have been a serious handicap, was in fact a blessing, for I was thoroughly constrained to do what my theory dictated: to build a history out of the subjective versions of those who participated in it.

Why was that a useful thing to do? After all, subjective accounts are just that: piecemeal approaches to a shared reality. Some thinkers argue that you cannot know "what really happened" by listening to the distorted memories of the players, many of whom in any case are now dead or dwelling in the hazy mists of old age. Instead, you must employ more objective reflections of events—documents or indices of material consequence.

It is true that the stories I heard in that Bangladeshi village were not about "what happened" (itself a questionable concept). What I heard was how people *saw* what happened, or, rather, how people *remembered* what they saw, or, rather, how they *talked* about what they remembered, or, rather, how they talked *to me* about what they remembered—or, rather, what I *heard* people say to me about what they remembered.

I was well aware that what I learned from my informants engaged my own history at every step of the process and was transformed in that interaction. "There is a relation between angles and attitudes. Where I look from is tied up with how I see."[6] Perhaps those angles are a problem. We could talk about them in terms of

distortions and biases and blind spots. But we can equally embrace them as the point of the exercise. After a lifetime of engagement with other people's stories, with a strong sense of gratitude for the ways I have been shaped by those I supposedly influenced, I have come to suspect that all human understanding takes the form of conversation. I have a hard time believing in the myth of the lone thinker receiving enlightenment in grand isolation.

In this view, the "problems" of memory distortion, selective telling, and biased hearing become sources of understanding. What sticks in people's memories, what they choose to say and when they choose to remain silent, how they distort what they know to be their experience, and, overarching all, what I notice and what I overlook are all intensely informative. The selection of truths-to-tell constitutes a story within a story, or, more accurately, the context for the story itself.[7] By looking at forms of discourse as well as content, we can learn much about individuals' relationships to institutions, about their experience of economic and political changes, about conflicts of tradition they are experiencing as social transformation takes place, for all these dynamics interweave in the manner of expression characterizing a story.

True, we cannot learn everything. Not every question is best answered by an oral-history approach. If you want to know what social and economic conditions are associated with protest and rebellion, for instance, you might well compare examples from varied places and moments in history rather than listening to the stories of ordinary folk.[8] But the questions that most interest me—why people live harmoniously together at one time and at another do not, or, more fundamentally, how people decide to form groups and act to change their world—can be well illuminated by asking the players. If the realm of inquiry is, as I've said, the intersection between individual and collective experience, then the perceptions of the individuals who compose that collectivity are very important.

The division between structural forces and psychological ones is, to me, a false one. How are we to comprehend a Bangladeshi farmer's understanding of his times if we do not hear his story in the context of a material, structural reality? No individual's psychology is divorced from the real conditions of her life, and those conditions are historical. Whereas a developmental Freudian view

contends that individual psychology is formed in early childhood, I believe that people are responsive to change throughout life—not, to be sure, in some simple and linear way, but richly, complexly, informatively. Material conditions are inherent in every formulation of personal conflict, in ordinary people's grievances and quarrels and decisions to protest or to stay quiet. To lend a keen ear to the specifics of each incident of community conflict, then, leads us back to the general, but in another way and on another level. We cannot generalize reasons for each individual's actions, but by studying a given individual's personal story we can understand generalized relationships between individual and society, between personal decisions and public forces. Those abstract relationships are useful, not to explain why people have done what they did, but to raise a different set of questions. Rather than asking, for instance, what lapse of controls allowed aggression to emerge? we are led to ask, what goals did these people formulate at that historic moment, in response to what external events, and how did they come to mold their strategies in the form of community conflict?

To make such delineations requires considerable interpretation, and here again the position of the analyzer enters in. My own position was an odd one. When I began the study, I trusted that it would be informative, but I also expected that most of my information would be, at best, secondhand. What, after all, would induce people who had come to blows with each other to tell me about it? In earlier, more casual conversations with people of the region, I had often been told hearsay tales. But everyone always insisted that *he* took no part in combat; he personally would never do such a thing. I knew something similar would be likely to happen in my own world if I were interviewing people about incidents of racial tension, or anti-Semitism, or any of the other common forms of intergroup hostility. People feel frightened to confess contentious activities, or they are ashamed or ambivalent. People are intuitive and likely to pick up my biases against such means of working out differences, and they understandably protect themselves from censure, through the simple expedient of secrecy.[9] It is a supreme act of trust and respect to talk openly about these things.

But my experience interviewing in Bengal was a very different

matter. Sometimes I met the expected reticence. As often, though, people lavished on me their stories with openness and goodwill. Why they did so may have had less to do with me than with their need to tell their stories, to reflect upon and continuously reconstruct their own histories.

Honesty was also aided by the company I kept. In 1988, the year before my study, Bangladesh had endured terrible floods. Because I had lived across the border in Indian West Bengal for some years long before and as a consequence have a fair command of the Bengali language, I volunteered to help the relief effort if I could. To tell the truth, I thought it unlikely that anyone would accept my offer. As I was quick to confess, I could do little that was useful; I had few skills that would help repair damaged homes or heal damaged bodies.

To my surprise and eventual delight, I was wrong. A highly respected organization working in the rural hinterland of Bangladesh needed a literary person, ideally someone with a sociological perspective and experience in organizational consulting, to help them remedy a serious lack of documentation for their program. So overwhelmed had they been for two years in saving lives from floods that they had allowed their budgeting and planning and report-writing to fall far behind. Some of their funders were upset, and they were prepared to pay my fare to help their Bangladeshi colleagues clean their paper house. I went, worked harder than I ever had in my life, made friends, and was inspired and astonished by the capacities of these village-level workers, by their ingenuity and perseverance and optimism in the face of enormous odds.

When I returned, eighteen months later, to conduct my own research, which by then was refocused in Bangladesh, I found my friends there fully prepared to return the favor. Three of the sites I had selected to study fell within the work area of the organization; the other three were some distance away. The staff, however, was drawn from all over Bangladesh, so each of the sites either was the birthplace of a staff member or hosted an affiliated organization. All these people introduced me, helped to arrange interviews, spread the word that I was trustworthy. And so people talked with me. Over and over, someone would say, "You'll be careful how you

use this, won't you? I'm only telling you because I've known and trusted So-and-so for years."*

This, then, is a study of discord facilitated by an act of cooperation. Never was an altruistic impulse more fully rewarded. What follows is a joint effort, one that has indebted me to all my hosts and facilitators, as well as to the women and men who shared their histories and their ideas so openly and so warmly with me.

*All names in the account that follows, including that of the village, are pseudonyms, an attempt to preserve some measure of anonymity.