

Shahid Amin

Popular Remembrance and Historians' History



Born in 1950 in Deoria, India. Studied History at Delhi University, 1962-72. From 1973-76, Rhodes Scholar at Balliol College Oxford; D. Phil. in History, Oxford (1978). Junior Research Fellow, Trinity College, Oxford (1979-82); Reader in History, (1990-91), Fellow, Shelby Cullom Davis Center, Princeton University, (1991-92). Publications: *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur: an Inquiry into Peasant Production for Capitalist Enterprise in Colonial India* (1984); ed., *A Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life* (1989), and several articles in the series titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian Society and History*. — Address: Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007, India.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the intention of finishing a book and to begin work on another. Before my departure I was able to submit a manuscript called *Chauri Chaura, 1922-1990: Event, Metaphor, Memory* to the press and do a fair amount of research on my second project which deals with popular "fabrications" of Muslim Warrior Saints in north India.

The book studies one dramatic occurrence — the anti-police riot of 4 February 1922 in Chauri Chaura, a small market town of northern India. Here an avowedly Gandhian crowd of peasants burnt down a police station to the cruel cry of "Victory to Mahatma Gandhi"! Gandhi, of course, called his all-India movement of non-cooperation with the British to a halt because of this "crime" committed by wayward followers. Since then Chauri Chaura, a place name, has stood for all manner of untrammelled peasant violence in opposition to disciplined non-violent, anti-colonial movements in India. The riot is crucial to the telling of the story of India's "Struggle to Freedom"; its significance lies in its consequence — i. e., the way Gandhi reacted to it.

In common with much recent work on early modern Europe, I have concentrated on this extra-ordinary event to tell the history of ordinary people as actors. The book investigates the popular face of Gandhian

nationalism, exploring the tensions between the "message" of Gandhi and its popular reception; it analyses the way the event was judged as "crime" in the court room, and it seeks to highlight the manner in which local and familial memory, though impacted by nationalist and judicial accounts, attempts to break free of officially documented narratives. In the process I try to illustrate some of the problems and possibilities of doing "historical fieldwork".

My second project on which I spent considerable time at the Kolleg had to do with the broader issue of the forging and practice of sectarian solidarities — "Communalism" as it is peculiarly called in India. The crucial question here formed was the uneasy relationship that exists between popular remembrance and historians history. I was particularly interested in the ways in which generalised readings of Hindu/Mussalman pasts are fabricated in accounts other than the overtly historical. My special interest was on the popular accounts of Muslim Warrior Saints in India (circa 11-14th century). The idea was to focus on the process by which fictive but persuasive accounts of these *Ghazis* are elaborated in the villages of India, such that these sagas can give rise to syncretic cults, eliciting devotion from Hindus and Muslims alike. This then was a case of remembrance of past conflict cementing social ties in the present!

For both projects I received excellent support from the Wissenschaftskolleg library. I was pleasantly surprised by the wealth of material on colonial India in Berlin and the facility and speed with which the library was able to procure it. There are many memories of my stay at the Kolleg that I shall cherish. The "serious" table-tennis with Axel Müller-Groeling, the cutting humour and the powerful volleyball serve of Robert Schulmann, the infectious enthusiasm of Eörs Szathmáry and the charm of Peter Hammerstein: only at the Wissenschaftskolleg could an "Indian" historian play ball, as it were, with theoretical physicists, mathematical biologists and one of the editors of the Collected Works of Einstein! The food was good, the red wine even better, and the facilities for the "House Fellows" excellent. But better still — and I say this at the risk of sounding a trifling infelicitous — was the Bibliothek across the road.