

Remembering Violence: Media Events, Childhood and the Global

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Memories of the events of childhood and early youth are rarely the subject of research in communication studies. Memories of early media experiences are much less so. Memories are perhaps felt to be too slippery to pin down and to analyse, almost impossible to quantify or to describe precisely. That perhaps explains why the subjective experiences of childhood memories have yet to become the stuff of 'scientific' empirical research, despite contemporary interest in the violence that children are regularly exposed to in films, television, video 'nasties', computer and video games, cartoons, the print media, and in recent years on the Internet and the World Wide Web (cf. Carlsson and von Feilitzen 1998, von Feilitzen and Carlsson 1999, 2000). But research suggests that it is the violence in factual television, especially in news programmes, that children and young people find most disturbing, and even frightening (cf. Hargrave 1993, Ralph et al. 1999). It also appears that violent events in national and international news are remembered for a much longer time than other news, and such memories can be stark, vivid, and precise, though sometimes muddled and exaggerated. These 'constructions' of the memories of media events of childhood and early youth are the subject of the research effort reported here,¹ and in particular those events that are intrinsically violent such as wars, assassinations, deaths, and communal clashes. The primary focus is on the memory of media images of violent events that took place during the respondents' childhood and adolescence.

It was to study the media memories of three generations of the 20th century in different cultures that Professor Ingrid Volkmer of Augsburg University (also a Visiting Scholar at MIT) initiated a two-year international research project entitled 'Global Media Generations 2000'.² The research was to be conducted in ten countries around the world – Australia, India, Japan, Austria, Germany, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and United States – from November 1998 to June 2000. Through a process of common reflection and discussions held in New York in November 1998 researchers from the participating countries concluded that the focus group method would be the most appropriate for the

international comparative study. Three focus groups (with around six respondents each), one for each generation, would be held in each country. Some open-ended questions related to memories of the media events occurring during the childhood periods of the three generations were also agreed upon. Three age-cohorts were selected for the focus group discussions: 70-75 years of age, 40-45 years, and 15-20 years. These age cohorts would be taken to represent the three generations of the 20th century in each of the ten countries.

This article offers an analysis of these three generations' memories of the media events of their childhood, and the global nature of these memories, with particular reference to the situation in India. The basis of the analysis will be transcripts of the focus groups conducted with the three age-cohorts. The main questions that will therefore be addressed in this article are: What kind of memories do the three generations of Indians have of the media events of their childhood, especially of those events that reported violence? What form do these memories take with reference to both national events and international events? What makes an event 'international' or 'global'? Are there any generational differences in the memories of the media events of one's childhood? And how are these 'narratives' of childhood events 'constructed' in terms of the geography, chronology and 'politics of memory'?

Media memories and focus group dynamics

The subject in this study was, thus, the prompted and unprompted memories of the media experiences of childhood and early youth, and as a corollary, of the memories of the national and international events of the same period. Focus group discussions present a dynamic social situation in which a small group of four to six respondents shares and exchanges views on a selected subject. In all, nine men and six women participated in the three Indian focus group discussions. The youth group comprised two boys and three girls, the middle-aged group comprised three men and one woman, and the elderly group four men and two women. The participants were largely from well-educated middle-class families representing different regions and different cultural backgrounds of India. Except for one Muslim man and one Christian woman, the majority of participants belonged to the dominant Hindu religion. The participants were selected purposively as the study was an attempt to explore the relationship between memory of childhood events on one hand and the experience of the media on the other.

The researcher animated the 15-20 and 40-45 age groups himself, the first at his residence in Pune (India) in late August 1999, and the second at his temporary residence in Bahrain in the Gulf in June 1999. The above-70 age group was animated by a research assistant at his residence in Pune (India) in late August 1999. The focus groups with the young and middle-aged two age-cohorts were conducted in English; the third focus group with the elderly was conducted in Marathi, the first language of the respondents.

At no stage of the focus group discussions was there an attempt to veer the discussions to the recalling of violent events, except in the case of international

events where a list of ten events were arbitrarily selected for each period (the 1930s and 40s, the 1960s and 70s, and the 1980s and 90s). Violent events of the respondents' childhood and early youth were not the subject of the research project, but violence as a major theme emerged from the focus group discussions as the respondents talked about their media memories. The researcher was struck by the selection of 'assassinations', 'wars', deaths, communal conflicts, street riots and political events, as the respondents told and retold their childhood experiences.

While there has been much research into the violent content of the media, especially on television and film, hardly any research exists on the 'narratives of remembered violence' among media users. Menon and Bhasin (1998) have analysed women's memories of the real-life violence of the partition of India. But media memories deal with remembered violence of events reported in the mass media; the nature of talk about violence in the media of one's childhood and early youth differs remarkably. Barnhurst and Wartella (1998) have looked at the memories of American university communication students about their childhood experiences of television (and not of violence on television); however, these memories (or 'life-histories') were written down in the form of personal essays. The research focused on the media experiences and the written texts of young people's memories. Uchida (1999) has done a close critical analysis of 'popular memory' in Japanese society since the Meiji Restoration, with particular attention to the Ministry of Education songs for ordinary primary school readers. Schlesinger et al. (1992) have looked at women's discourse about violent scenes in television programmes (such as *Crimewatch* and *East Enders*) and a feature film (*The Accused*) in 14 focus groups conducted in community locations in Britain. The 1993 survey of the Broadcasting Standards Council (of England) tested 'in detail people's attitudes to violent materials in each of news, reconstruction programmes and documentaries' (Hargrave 1993). The research reported in this article is different in focus: memories of violent events, both national and international, which were highlighted by the media during the respondents' childhood and early youth, and as narrated in focus groups held in a home environment.

Remembering childhood events – the older generation

Thus, six Marathi-speaking residents of the city of Pune participated in the focus group discussion conducted for the elderly group (aged 70 and above).³ Four men and two women from the high-caste Maharashtrian Brahmin community took part. Among the men, two were graduates who had worked in the field of education, one an engineer, and the fourth a high school-educated clerk in a government department. One of the women participants was a graduate who had worked as a Labour Officer in the State Government, and the other a housewife, educated up to high school. The majority of the participants were in their early or late seventies.

The participants in the focus group discussion were all members of a homogenous socio-cultural class/caste in the western Indian state of Maharashtra.

This class has historically been a privileged section of society. This was the class that pioneered the education movement in Maharashtra in the late 18th and early 19th century. This was also the class that was involved in the social reform movement during the same period. This same class/caste has therefore dominated the cultural scene of Maharashtra for several decades. This 'elite' class and its culture – often termed Brahmani or 'Puneri' culture – continues to dominate even today. Several of the leading personalities in literature, theatre, arts, education, and religious and social reform movements emerged from this very class. The decades-long hegemony of the class was challenged successfully several times during the last century, though this challenge was raised in the areas of politics and economics rather than in the area of culture.

The media environment in the 1930s and 1940s

It is against this background that the childhood memories of the six participants need to be seen and read. The formative years of the participants coincided with that period (the thirties and forties) when the Brahmanical culture was dominant and unchallenged in western India. The most influential newspapers of the time were run and edited by scholars who belonged to the same social class (cf. Kumar 2000, pp. 61-69, for a brief history of the Indian press).

The participants in the focus group discussion said that they were listeners to radio broadcasts in their childhood and early adolescence, though not very regular listeners. This was primarily because their families could not afford to own radio sets. Indeed, five out of the six participants bought their first radio sets only in the 1960s (when they were all in their thirties). There were few radio sets prior to the sixties, but almost all neighbourhoods used to have at least one set (cf. Kumar 2000). So, listening to the radio 'used to be a social experience'. Thus for the majority of participants, listening to the radio was 'a special occasion', associated most of the time with some important political event, such as the end of World War II, Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, or the riots that followed it. For most of the focus group participants, listening to the radio was always a social experience wherein about ten persons gathered around the set to listen together to the news and other programmes. In fact, most of their media experiences were social in character, always in a group – with the family or with neighbours.

The newspapers the participants said they read regularly during their childhood and early youth were local Marathi dailies, but two of the men said that they also read English newspapers like the *Times of India* and the *Bombay Chronicle*. The families of all the six participants used to subscribe to at least one newspaper. 'There used to be many newspapers and we read them either at home, in school or at neighbours' homes', said one participant.

Apart from the mass media such as radio and the press, the participants spoke of their exposure to traditional mass media such as public speeches, religious prayer gatherings such as 'keertans', and religious-social events like Ganesh festival. Several well-known public speakers frequently mentioned in the focus group discussions were also from the same class. The participants

dwelt at length on their memories of public lectures they attended. The great orators they mentioned included N.C. Kelkar, Raosaheb and Achyut Patwardhan, Acharya Atre, and Savarkar. The discussion is replete with references to such public speeches. One woman participant said:

Being women, we had a lot of limitations in accessing information through the mass media. Public lectures and 'keertans' filled that vacuum.

Traditional media like 'bhajans' (group singing) and 'keertans' (religious gatherings) were employed at that time to disseminate political messages. Those leaders who employed such methods of popular education came to be known as 'rashtriya kirtankars' (or national prayer-leaders) (cf. Kumar 2000, pp. 253-266, for an account of the major folk/traditional media in India). Public lectures were an effective instrument for political education. As one of the participants put it: 'Public lectures used to be held in small towns like Ahmednagar.' One participant recalled having listened to public lectures given by the Patwardhan brothers, Madan Mohan Malviya, Subhaschandra Bose and Manavendranath Roy. He declared that these public speeches contributed much to his political education. He added that these speeches used to be of greater interest to them than films.

A vital feature of the participants' media experience was that it was 'mediated' by significant others like grandparents, parents, siblings and other members of the joint/extended family. In most cases, the terms and conditions of their media exposure were determined by the elders in a joint family, the men folk in particular. The participants recalled their fathers taking them to the neighbours' homes to listen to the radio. As young members of the family, it was their duty to read the newspapers aloud for the benefit of all the other members of the family. So, while one read the newspapers, others 'heard' the news. This tradition of reading the news aloud for the benefit of the family was continued when the participants started their own families. One participant said that much of the credit for the general knowledge and awareness of his own son (now a practicing doctor) should be traced to this tradition:

We used to believe the newspapers cent-per-cent during those days. Today, we are not sure about any of the newspapers. They have lost their authenticity. They have been sold to the capitalist forces.

Media events of the 1930s and 1940s

The 1930s and 1940s were perhaps the most turbulent period in Indian and world history. The world events of the period included World War II, the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fall of the British Empire, and the spread of Communism. For India, too, these two decades were equally turbulent: the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and his movement of Non-Violence against the British regime, the Salt March, the partition of the Indian sub-continent and its aftermath, and the assassination of Gandhi. Besides, there were several national and local movements and events, which electrified the nation. The freedom struggle left few untouched or unmoved. The period wit-

nessed the rise and spread of several political ideologies in India, from rabid fundamentalism to radical humanism. These took on different colours in different regions of the land. In Maharashtra, this spectrum of political ideologies was marked on the extreme right by fundamentalist organisations like the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) led by K.B. Hedgewar, and on the left by Dange and his Communist Party. So politically charged was the nation during the 1930s and 40s that even religious celebrations like the Ganeshotsav took on political connotations. Political events were therefore recollected very vividly by the focus group participants.

Their 'public memory' thus revolved round media and politics. Political events and personalities were reported vigorously in the media of the period. Indeed, political news dominated the press as much as it does even now, more than fifty years after Independence. Even the regional media have a strong political orientation. This perhaps explains why the references to political events and their reporting in the media dominated the focus group discussions rather than the events related to the social, cultural and economic conditions of the country.

Mahatma Gandhi's assassination

At the very beginning of the focus group discussion, one of the men participants narrated his experience of reading the editorials in the *Daily Agrani* (Daily Frontier), a paper run by Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi. In the focus group participant's view,

Agrani used to carry detailed articles on the Hindu-Muslim riots in different parts of the India after Independence. The coverage of Naokhali riots were especially inflammatory. I used to stay in Ahmednagar at that time and the situation there was very tense.

He recalled the details of the page layout of the *Lokshakti* (a Marathi daily), which carried the news about the bomb explosion during a prayer meeting led by Gandhi, and later his assassination on 30th January 1948. The man participant also remembered the tense situation in his hometown when Gandhi was arrested during the 'Quit India' movement. He recalled how pamphlets were widely distributed and very frequently. Indeed, as many historians would vouch for, pamphlets were low-cost and vital media used by nationalist leaders to spread the struggle for freedom throughout the country.

Several memories of the group were associated with Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. There was a definite touchiness/sensitivity about these memories. This is perhaps because the Brahmins of Maharashtra had to face the wrath of the public, since Nathuram Godse, the Mahatma's assassin, was a Maharashtrian Brahmin. The participants talked about their experiences of the anti-Brahmin riots in the State following Gandhi's assassination.

'International' events

The majority of the focus group participants could recollect 'international' events of the 1940s (that is, when they were all in their early youth), but only after some prompting from the animator. They knew about the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the end of World War II, but could not associate any media memory with the events. (The schedule of ten 'international events' was drawn up rather arbitrarily by the group of ten researchers in a brainstorming session, with no particular attention to media coverage of these events. Indeed, there were no set criteria for an event to be termed 'international'.)

Only one participant could remember seven out of the ten 'international' events listed in the schedule. He said that he remembered the Berlin Olympics, but the memory of that event was etched in his mind because of its Indian context:

Hitler refused to shake hands with Dhyani Chand and told him: You are just a colonel there (in India); if you were a German I would have made you a General.

In sum, this group of the elders of the city of Pune talked freely about their recollections of the media of their childhood and youth. There are no references to television in the recollections; references to the cinema are few and far between. Going to the cinema was possibly associated with feelings of guilt among the higher castes, while television came into their lives only in the early 1980s when the participants were over the age of fifty. While access to the radio was extremely limited, access to newspapers was fairly widespread. And it was a common practice for newspapers to be read aloud in most homes so that literate and illiterate, young and old, were kept abreast of happenings in the country and in the world.

However, far more vital than the modern mass media for the participants were the traditional media such as public speeches, 'bhajans', 'keertans', the theatre, and pamphlets. All the participants stressed that these low-cost and familiar media were the main sources of their political information. These provided them a 'political education' during the 1930s and 1940s. And unlike the 15-20 year old group, which lambasted the media, this group was supportive and appreciative of reporting of national events in the English and Marathi newspapers of the thirties and forties.

These focus group participants recalled national events such as the freedom struggle movement, the Non-Violence movement of Mahatma Gandhi, without much prompting. However, they could remember international events such as World War II, the Berlin Olympics, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and so on, only after some prompting from the animator. Besides, while their memories of national events were narrated in a vivid manner, those related to international events were often unclear and vague, and even distorted (as when they insisted that it was Edward VIII, and not Edward VII who had abdicated the throne of England). Of course, there were also some significant local events, which did not find a single mention in the discussion. These related to events

such as protests and agitations which sought to challenge the Brahminical orthodoxy.

The middle generation – the radio generation

Two married men and a married couple made up the focus group of the second age cohort, 40-45 years of age. The couple was Hindu while one of the married men was Muslim, and the other a Christian. The couple and the Muslim hailed from Karnataka, the Christian from Kerala. All four were well-educated and worked as trainers in a professional engineering and management institute.

The medium the four participants had greatest access to in their childhood and early youth was the radio, not television. Television entered their lives only in the mid-eighties when they were well above the age of 25 or so. Radio was indeed the most important medium and also the most liked (cf. Kumar 1999, for an account of the development of radio and television in India). Their memories of the media during their childhood are also related to newspapers and magazines. The names of newspapers and magazines they had read as children and young men came back to them, though several titles had become defunct. For instance, they remembered reading *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (now defunct), a publication of the Times of India Group, and *Sport and Pastime* (also defunct), a sports publication of the Hindu Group in Madras. Only one of the participants, Shoba,⁴ recalled that there were any restrictions or controls on their reading, or on their listening to the radio. (This contrasts with the experience of the 15-20 year old generation, which resented the control of parents in what they read). Shoba recalled:

I don't think I had so much freedom to listen to radio or watch TV. There were a lot of restrictions. Timing, what to watch and what not to watch. My father was more like a military officer; everything had to be done at that particular time.

As mentioned previously, the social nature of media experience was also emphasized by the 70-75 year old group.

The four participants of the middle generation could recall the following national events from the period 1965-75: the Indo-Pakistan War in 1971, the pre-Emergency years, the split of the Congress Party, the National Elections in Kerala, Cricket tests, the Jayaprakash Narayan movement in Bihar and Gujarat, and the Emergency regime of Indira Gandhi (1975-77). The participants recalled, often without much prompting from the animator, these events which were widely reported on radio and in the press. But it is noteworthy that radio was experienced primarily as a medium of entertainment while the press was perceived as a provider of political information.

The Indo-Pakistan War (1965)

The sole Muslim participant in the focus group recalled in particular one programme on All India Radio between 10.30 and 11.30, which catered to the needs of the prisoners of war, especially those who had been taken away to Pakistan:

This was one programme I used to listen to with great interest. Everyday I used to listen to that.

He vaguely remembered the 1965 war with Pakistan:

I think during my childhood days it was radio that played a major role. Not until 1968 I was actually exposed to other media. I was pretty young, though I have a very vague memory of the 1965 war. I was at that time maybe five years old. So I don't really remember those things. My father... he was a government servant. I don't have very good memories of the 1965 war.

Indira Gandhi and the Emergency

John, another participant, recalled the Emergency regime (1975-77) of Indira Gandhi and the role of the media at the time:

One strong memory about media events strikes my mind now... during July 1975, when the internal emergency clamped by Mrs. Gandhi. I still remember that very strongly, because then I was a college student... I was in the final year of my studies, we were very active in collecting information about what is happening in the country. At that time, both the radio as well as the press, newspapers, and everything that was possible. And this was a time when media got so much importance because even people who were not that much really interested in media events, they were interested in reading magazines, newspapers, because that was a terror period in our country. At least that was the feeling I had.

Khan also recalled the JP (Jayaprakash) Movement that preceded the Emergency:

JP (Jayaprakash Narayan) Movement I had heard about, I was only nine at that time. I was too young to follow... What had happened in 1977 (the internal emergency) I was following... that was the time Indira Gandhi was humbled and the Janata Party came to power, and Morarji (Desai) became the Prime Minister. Actually, it was a government of wise people, but could not pull on for a long period of time.

International events

The international events the participants recalled without any prompting, included the Cyprus crisis, man's first landing on the moon, the Vietnam War and the liberation of Bangladesh. Some prompting brought back memories of the Watergate crisis in Washington, and the Cultural Revolution in China. However, memories of the events and the media reports related to the rise of the Palestine

Liberation Movement, Woodstock, the OPEC crisis, the Prague Spring and the 1968 Student Revolution, were very faint and vague.

Khan: International events? Especially I remember Vietnam. Watergate, of course, but not much, but then I had followed it up later on the BBC, when they telecast it just before the Clinton scandal; they had carried a series of shows on TV, as to how Watergate took place, how he was trying to bug all information of all opposition members, and then finally how he had been asked to resign. This I followed up much later, but not when it did.

Uday: No, international news I was not interested in anything much, other than science development, technological revolution. I hate all wars. But since it (Vietnam) concerned all of us, I was following it up to some extent.

John summed up his memories of Vietnam in just one word: 'Napalm'. The television image of the naked girl running across the screen was seared into the focus group participants' memories. (Focus groups conducted in other countries in the project, too, associated the Vietnam War with this media image, though the participants could not say with any certainty that the picture was that of the girl running towards the camera or away from it.)

The main source of Khan's memories of international events was newspapers and magazines. He had access to magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and later *India Today* ('my favourite magazine'). He recalled these two international events without any prompting:

Especially, I was keenly following two international events: one was the Cyprus crisis, the other was the Vietnam War which was going on during those days. We were especially following the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge... We used to read the local newspapers (in Kannada and English), reports especially about the 1970-71 Vietnam War, and the way these people used to drive out all these anti-Khmer Rouge. Then there was an event in my college – to have a kind of mock-United Nations. So that time I took part in it. The issue discussed: the whole thing surrounding the Cyprus crisis. That was one event which really, clearly (is) vivid in my memory.

He also remembered after some prompting the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the OPEC crisis but hardly anything about the 1968 student Revolution in Europe and elsewhere:

Yes, the Soviet invasion and especially I remember, I was not born when in 1956 the Hungarian invasion took place, but I had read about it in *Time* and *Newsweek*. They had... the Soviet tanks had rolled into the streets of Budapest, then the way they had suppressed the... Then of course I was reading the novel of Saul Bellow, who was himself a Hungarian I think. So he had – his novel which got him the Nobel Prize, if I don't remember wrongly, I think... the Dean in December. In that he says how he was annoyed by the Soviet presence, how they suppressed human rights and all the things. Then, of course, now I remember in 1984 Nobel Prize literature winner: Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Animator: Any memories of the OPEC crisis?

Khan: OPEC crisis? Of course, it was there in 1975, after the Egyptian war which had failed. Then of course it was the Saudi Prince – King Feisal I think. He made one open statement: cut all supply of the western countries, especially Japan, US and then the crisis of oil prices which went up 38-39 dollars. This is the thing I remember about that.

Animator: Any memories of the 1968 student revolution?

Khan: I had heard about it.

The younger generation – the TV generation

The third age cohort was represented by two boys and three girls; they were all undergraduate students in colleges of the Pune University. One of the boys was from New Delhi, the second from Calcutta. Two of the girls were from Calcutta and the third from Jamshedpur. They were from middle-class families. The Delhi boy was from a Panjabi/Sikh family, while the boy and the two girls from Calcutta were from Hindu families; the Jamshedpur girl was from a Roman Catholic family.

All five participants had good access to the mass media right from their early years. Television and the press were the media they apparently spent most time with. They were aware of the major national and international events of the 1980s and 1990s, and the source of their information was invariably the media, though word-of-mouth, too, played a vital role. Of the three age cohorts studied, this was the most critical of the media, especially the press and television. It was also the group that talked (often angrily) about the negative role of the media in fomenting violence and fundamentalism. It was the group that readily recollected incidents/events of violence at the national and international levels.

The major national events the youth group could remember and were eager to talk about were: Indira Gandhi's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and its aftermath, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in national politics, the Kargil skirmish, and the killing of Christian missionaries in Bihar. The majority of events remembered – all without much prompting from the animator – were intrinsically violent in nature, and largely associated with the political and the religious life of the nation. Further, they were events that were highlighted by the mass media. It is possible that the main source of such knowledge was the mass media, though other sources like the family and the peer group were influential sources, too.

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination: memories of the 'human bomb'

How did they come to know about these events in the first place? After a brief warming-up session in which the events were listed by the participants, the discussion focused in the beginning on their memories of the assassination of

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the hands of a suicide bomber near Madras. The assassination took place when the five participants were around ten years old. 'DD⁵ flashed the news at 11.00 p.m.', declared Dev, though the others in the group contested this; they insisted that the news was flashed at 10.40 p.m. But Meeta remembered that she got the news from her mother the same night:

I remember I was sleeping at the time. My mother came and told me that Rajiv Gandhi is dead. She had seen some people in a sort of procession. I remember for one whole week all TV programmes were stopped. I remember the cremation. Another thing I remember that my father had a magazine... that magazine my father showed to my mother. But we were not allowed to see that magazine. My father had kept it in the almirah. We were very curious what was in that magazine. One day my mother was away, I opened the almirah. It said: Children should not be shown this magazine. Because there were lots of violent scenes. Many pictures were there, but I guess it did not affect me much because I was already hooked into Hindi movies.

Yashwant, too, associated the news of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination with the same issue of the magazine, *Outlook*:

My father and mother never used to show it to me, and hid it somewhere. My brother and I said we had to see what was in the magazine. My mother and father go out and we climb up the cupboard... take it out somehow. I realize I just conked off. My brother asked me what happened. I said, 'Kuch nahi hua' (Nothing at all has happened). Then I started crying. Then I realized something bad must have happened. I knew about human bombs, because I had always read about suicide bombers of Japan, but this human bomb and the state in which it left the bomber and the bombed was not expected by me.

The other members of the group were also shocked. Dev of New Delhi put it this way:

A gentleman, a lady screamed: Rajiv is dead, Rajiv is dead. My dad was shocked, my mom was shocked. Of course we were also shocked. But we were shocked the next morning. It just gave a shock.

He, too, remembered the 'human bomb' aspect of the news story:

He was blown out by the LTTE – a lady put a bomb on herself, a human bomb; we were introduced to the concept of explosives.

Nabo of Calcutta remembered that she was in Class V at the time, and that she did not go to school that morning:

It was quite early in the morning when I got up and I heard my neighbours. They were making a lot of noise... Some people came to my house and they said 'Rajiv Gandhi is dead'. Oh my God, how did this happen? It was like a stunning surprise. I never used to watch the news first and foremost. That news was very shocking to me.

She also recalled that it was a Tuesday, and that she wouldn't be able to watch *Chitrabaar* (a popular film-based TV program) on Wednesday... 'we were quite frustrated'. But the focus group participants said they were all happy that schools would be closed and they would have a holiday. Yashwant summed up the feeling thus:

The first thing that came to my mind when Rajiv Gandhi died: Thank God school is closed. We can play our guts out...

The aftermath: communal tensions

At least two of the group recalled that in the aftermath of the assassination some tension was present in the community, and that some trouble or riots were expected. This was possibly because of what happened in New Delhi in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi six years earlier. Dev, the Panjabi/Sikh from New Delhi, recalled:

There was a big scare that bombings would take place there... Delhi being a very crowded place.

Meeta, a Hindu from Calcutta, was more specific:

The place where I used to stay was a totally Muslim area. It was supposed to be a violent prone area. I was personally never affected because from the age of four when I went to school, no Muslims commented on us. So the death was a news item, not something personal for me. Because Muslim people used to work in our place, they were economically dependent on us. In our school, the (Muslim) drivers were very nice. I mean I never had a bad experience of (people) killing each other. Maybe it was going on in other parts of the country but not in my life.

Indira Gandhi's assassination

Memories of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination naturally led to talk about his mother Indira Gandhi's assassination at the hands of her own Sikh bodyguards six years earlier, in 1984. The participants were far too young (four to five years old) to remember very much. Dev put it in this dramatic manner:

As far as I remember, I have no memories of Indira Gandhi being assassinated just other than... maybe because I am a Panjabi, the sardars (Sikhs) being burnt alive. That was a very bad scene. One scene I remember, in fact, two scenes. A sardar was simply chopped off right in the middle of the road, and secondly, there is an old man 60 years of age, they put a tyre in his neck, put petrol on him, and burnt him off. I saw the man being burnt alive. I was dragged inside. I don't know what state I was in for two-three days. I wasn't sent to school. It was all war going on the road. Manslaughter, total manslaughter, I remember (it is) still very much a part of mind. It was scary.

Demolition of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya

One memory of violence led to another as the group got into the spirit of the focus group discussion. There was no stopping them now: their memories were prodded on by others in the group, and the members were all ears ready to share and even to wallow in the experience. Talk about the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, and the riots that followed in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and other parts of the country, led naturally to the group remembering their introduction to terms like 'Hindu fundamentalism', the names of political parties like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), and the role of the media.

Nabo said she 'didn't remember anything... nothing', and Marie associated Ayodhya with being kept indoors all the time, and with having had the same food day and night in her boarding school. 'We had Maggie's (noodles) for boarders' night', she humorously recalled. She added:

Ayodhya... I came to know of it very late. I remember the people around us. There were a lot of Hindus around us, so they were also against the Muslims. They shouldn't have done that; that shouldn't have happened.

But Dev, Yashwant and Meeta had stronger memories of the aftermath of the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya. Dev recalled that he was studying in a German school in New Delhi at the time:

It was a cosmopolitan society. Religion never mattered: you're a Muslim, a Hindu or whatever. It was just our own world to us. They used to come and tell me: You know who burnt Ayodhya? We used to come home and used to see the 'aunties' (neighbours) talking. Each one had a different version; each one of them had to say something, and perhaps it's not true. It was more of rumours than reality.

Ayodhya and the mass media

The popular film *Bombay* seemed to have brought alive to the respondents the violence associated with the aftermath of the Ayodhya mosque's demolition. Meeta remembered:

I saw the violence and all that. I was never affected by this violence. I felt they were exaggerating. I don't think such things happened.

Yashwant, too, remembered that the film *Bombay* 'exaggerated a little bit', though the Ayodhya incident did not affect him. He recalled that he lived in a Muslim area in Calcutta:

I used to play with Muslim friends, and Muslim maidservants used to come and work at my place... no problem at all... [...] I never saw anything so drastic as killing, murdering, this and that, or burning, that was shown on TV or in the movie *Bombay*.

There was an article he had read at that time, he recalled:

It was so stupid I felt; we were talking about Aurangzeb breaking all the temples at one point of time and then what would happen if the Hindus broke down one masjid. I said that it does not have any basis. What is history? We were talking about history repeats itself and all, but I said these figurative meanings had no sense in this term when you don't talk about breaking down a masjid. It doesn't make any sense in breaking down a Muslim masjid to portray yourself or your party to be something or other...

Meeta, too, recalled that she had read in the papers that 'it was not Babar who actually built it; it was somebody else'. She said that her 'grandmother had gone to that place when the mosque was still there. She said that the mosque was there but that it was nothing, and just next to it a small wooden shed where pooja (worship) used to go on'.

Dev, Meeta and Yahswant flayed the role played by the media in reporting the issue:

Dev: I think more than the issue itself, the media killed it. It was media that was solely responsible for actually making a big thing out of it. Of course, it was a fire that was expected to rise, but I think media (played) a very bad role in it. It actually got people angry.

Meeta: Today the BJP is in a position. It started at that point of time and the media and the other political parties actually helped the BJP what it has become today... Though we may be in the majority we need some security, we need some voice.

The rise of Hindu 'fundamentalism'

The group attributed the rise of Hindu 'fundamentalism' to the media coverage of the BJP and the Ayodhya question:

Yashwant: The birth (of the BJP) was from Ayodhya. The media had put itself... BJP is a saffron party and all. I was talking about the newspapers and TV in general.

Meeta, in particular, believed that the media's negative publicity helped the BJP, that the constant use of terms like 'Hindutva' and 'fundamentalism' to describe the BJP, the Bajrang Dal, the RSS and the Shiv Sena helped the BJP.

International events

The international events were not as readily recalled as the national events. Also, the young teenagers were not as forthcoming (to begin with) in expressing their views on so-called global events. They were unanimous that the death of Princess Diana was certainly not an 'international issue' whereas Mother Teresa's demise merited international media attention. Princess Diana did not have much importance for the boys in the group, but at least one of the three girls was convinced that her work for landmines and also her beauty were enough to give her international attention and to elevate her to an international status. Mrs

Clinton came down to attend her funeral, she argued, and heads of state gave her due recognition. Clearly, their vote was for Mother Teresa (three of the participants were from Calcutta, the city of the Mother). The boy from Delhi, however, voted for Baba Amte, the veteran social worker from western India.

The Gulf War and Saddam Hussein

Mention of the Gulf War and the more recent NATO attacks on Belgrade demonstrated that the images of television were still fresh in the young people's memories. Saddam Hussein was not necessarily the villain of the piece for these young minds who were high school kids at the time of the Gulf War. The more recent NATO bombardments of Yugoslavia, too, were condemned outright; the focus group participants were cynical about the media hype on the attacks. This excerpt from the discussion illustrates the trend of the views and memories expressed. Memory and opinion are mixed up gloriously here. This exchange also illustrates the 'politics' of memory:

Dev: The Gulf War reminds me of tanks burning and other stuff. Seeing every day the jets firing, the missiles launched, and the petrol on fire, the commodity prices going higher, and all those countries that were dependent for oil on these Gulf countries plus Indians coming back. It was a very bad thing. Saddam really acted like a maniac... for no reason killing his own people.

Marie: All I remember about the Gulf War was that Saddam Hussein could never be found. Looking for him... there were two or three Saddams (laughter all round)... That was very interesting.

Meeta: The only thing I remember is my dad telling me about the Gulf War, the water getting polluted, the birds and animals dying in large numbers...

Nabo: Even I remember the same thing... the birds flying, black water... its effects on nature... I remember.

Meeta: I was in Class IX or X. In the Modern History class, they said that the USA had followed the policy of the policeman, a big stick policy. Then I remember my father telling us: Surely, Saddam has done something wrong, not having the right to go into Kuwait and start destroying everything he gets. USA is practicing the big stick policy.

Yashwant: ...I am a great follower of Hitler and I like him a lot... Saddam Hussein and his racist policy in Iraq; it was absolutely an internal (matter). He had occupied Kuwait that was... the United Nations were against it. Fine. But I don't understand why we say that the Gulf War was between the U S of A and Iraq.

Dev: USA has always done this. It's no more United Nations. It's just US. It is in fact a very strategic position – oil, the black gold.

Meeta: USA has been following this policy. Not only in Kuwait, in South America, everywhere. Panama Canal.

Dev: What China did in Taiwan.

Meeta: Ya, the same thing.

German re-unification

On the re-unification of Germany, Yashwant, an unabashed admirer of Hitler, remembered:

...people were happy that Germany is united, and West Germany will never next *play* (East) Germany. I remember my father, actually my grandfather, told me lots about this. He was already close to Subash Chandra Bose when he was going to Germany. So he was telling me about the Second World War all the time... There was this West Germany and East Germany. Then my grandfather becomes nostalgic and says: One day or the other, India and Pakistan are going to shake hands and become one India again...

Meeta took up the discussion on German re-unification and on Hitler. She said her father, too, was an admirer of Hitler:

He admires Hitler a lot. So when the German teams united, he was very happy. He said: If West Germany wins the World Cup... my father used to identify the whole East Bengal team with Hitler. They're the Hitler... (trails off).

Dev, an alumnus of a German school in New Delhi, chipped in:

The day the Berlin Wall was brought down, there was a grand celebration. We had a great time, you know. In fact, the Germans announced a big campus for us. We had a great campus, but we didn't have a new building, we needed a new building for new courses coming up... Today, if you go and see it, it is a magnificent piece of building with all those photos of Germany. We also got a few students from Germany under the student exchange scheme. They used to come and they used to talk. Actually German kids grew up faster than Asians. We asked them what they had. They said: We had the Berlin Wall. That's all. That was a great incident.

The articulate young people who comprised the group were as forceful in recalling national and international events of the 1980s and 1990s as in expressing their opinions on political matters and on the role of the media in sensational reporting. They took clear positions on events, issues and personalities, and expressed them in strong language. Memories and opinions were often confused in the discussions; they remembered political events as much as they 'politicised' memory. For them the memory of political events was no different from the 'politics' of memory.

Conclusions: Remembering childhood media events

The focus group discussions with three age-cohorts representing three generations of the 20th century raises several interesting questions about the form and substance

of Indian memories of the violent events of childhood and early youth. What, for instance, are the social and cultural conditions that influence such memories and what is the role played by the media? Further, what is the relationship between such memories and knowledge, especially the knowledge of reality? What is the kind of knowledge provided by the media in relation to national and international events? How reliable, valid and significant is such media-based knowledge?

These are some of the philosophical questions that need to be addressed in order to fully appreciate the significance of the research reported here. We are dealing, of course, with personal and subjective experiences of childhood and early youth with particular attention to the mass media, as they are articulated and 'constructed' in a focus group setting. The discourse of such 'talk' about media experiences of childhood deserves close cultural analysis.

Violent events taking place in India were recalled much more vividly and with much greater emotional involvement by the younger generation than by the middle-aged or elderly generation. One could sense anger and even cynicism as the younger generation recalled the events of their childhood and the role played by the media in reporting violent events such as assassinations, wars and Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. This could have been for several reasons. In the first place, it could have been because the media (especially television and the press) were more widespread and more accessible during the childhood of the younger generation than during the childhood of the middle and the elderly generations. The middle-aged cohort, for instance, had no access to television, and the cohort of the elderly had extremely limited access to radio and the press. The older people's main source of information was public meetings, theatre and the folk media. Secondly, the distance from the event (chronology) was not so remote for the 15-20 year-olds. They were recalling media events of just a decade ago while those from the first and second generations had to take their minds back to over six and two decades, respectively. Thirdly, it could have been because many more violent events took place, though it is more likely that fewer violent events actually occurred during the childhood years of the younger age-cohort but were reported more extensively in the press, and on radio and television, at a time when these mass media had witnessed massive expansion.

These three focus group discussions with nine men and six women of India suggest that recollecting such 'media experiences' in a small focus group has the potential of turning into a cathartic exercise for some participants, but uncomfortable for others. Some experiences, especially national events, are in all three generations more vividly and more accurately remembered than others that are geographically and chronologically distant. For instance, memories of the freedom movement, of the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi are more sharply etched in Indian memory than so-called 'international' events like the Vietnam War, Watergate, the 1968 Student Revolution, or the death of Princess Diana.

In any case, what is it that makes one media event 'international' or global and another merely local or regional or even national? A major factor is the amount of attention given to such events in the mass media, that is, the agenda-

setting function of the mass media. There is extremely seldom, if ever, something intrinsic to an event that renders it naturally 'local', 'regional', 'national' or 'global'. What, for instance, gave the death of Princess Diana or that of Mother Teresa a 'global' character was the continuous 'live' coverage for days together by the transnational networks such as the BBC, CNN, and the transnational news agencies such as Reuters and Associated Press and their television units. Further, Princess Diana and Mother Teresa were already media celebrities much before their tragic deaths; the media, especially cable and satellite television, capitalized on this celebrity status of both. Thus, the global character of an event or even a personality is dependent on the media, and in particular transnational media, which distribute their visual and textual content around the world. A small earthquake, a sex scandal or a minor racial skirmish in the United States or in Britain are reported as 'global' events; in contrast, national elections or workers' strikes in any Asian or African nation, are not reported at all by the transnational news agencies. For events, personalities and scandals taking place in any Asian or African country, to qualify as 'global', they need to have a larger than life dimension, must affect or touch the richer countries in a dramatic manner, must be totally unexpected, and involve large populations and cataclysmic destruction. And, of course, they must make for exciting television pictures.

It is evident then that 'global events' are media 'constructs' as much as the memories of those events are. The phenomenal expansion of the media, especially cable and satellite television during the last decade, has meant that many more events begin to take on a 'global' dimension than was the case earlier when few countries had access to more than a couple of terrestrial channels.

Besides being very selective, memories of childhood media events are affected by distance (both in terms of time and the extent of personal experience) from the events or people remembered. Chronological proximity to the event is a vital variable, but so is the cultural proximity in relation to the event remembered. Besides the 'geography' and the 'chronology' of media memory there is the question of the 'politics' of memory. We do not talk about our memories of events that touch on questions of personal or collective guilt, what we might term 'the politics of memory'. The group of 70-75 year old Pune Brahmins who took part in the focus group discussion did not even once mention the struggle of the dalits (literally, the 'crushed') against Brahmin dominance. Nor did they at any stage refer even indirectly to the partition of India. It was also observed that the 15-20 year-olds did not feel very comfortable talking about the Mandal riots and the demolition of the Babri mosque.

Further, some memories are extremely vivid: participants can recall the exact dates, names, and media images of events. Other memories are very faint and muddled; even prompting does not jog the memory. Media images are, after all, ephemeral and fleeting in nature. Is this possibly related to why some memories are so unclear and hazy and often confused? Apparently, there is more to memory than the images and sound bites of the mass media. Such images and sound bites often get mixed up with the whispers and rumours in the family and the community, as the young generation's talk about the Ayodhya demolition and the aftermath revealed.

A final question that needs to be raised regarding the nature and dynamic of memory in relation to the media is: What is the role of social and cultural events (rather than the media *per se*) in jogging the childhood memories of different generations? Are memories influenced by the culture and the religion we belong to and the times we live in? Are there cultural differences, for instance, in the *way* we remember and recall the violent events of our childhood and early youth? The three focus group discussions reported here suggest that culture, religion, language, age, social class/caste, and above all, personal experience of events, are vital variables that influence *what* we remember and even the very *way* we remember. There is what one might broadly term 'the politics of memory', for we remember most what is of intimate concern to us and to our community, and gloss over the unpleasant and the uncomfortable. The 'globalisation' of news and its control by a handful of media conglomerates (such as Time Warner-AOL, Reuters and Associated Press) has led to round-the-clock distribution of 'global images' of violence. From the perspective of childhood these 'global images' are stark and real (and often disturbing and frightening), and some of them more than others remain buried in the memory long after the child has grown into a young adult. Media images of violence and conflict, it appears, have a much greater chance than other images of remaining with the adult far into middle and old age.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Singapore, July 17-20, 2000.
2. The project was supported by RTL (Radio and Television Luxembourg), Cologne, and UNESCO, Paris.
3. The focus group with the 70-75 year-olds was conducted in Marathi by Vishram Dhole, Lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies, Pune University. This section was written in collaboration with him.
4. The names of all participants in the focus group discussions have been changed. However, suitable pseudonyms (first names only) have been selected so as to reflect the religious and community identities of the participants.
5. Doordarshan, the national network of Indian television.

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