

2

The ‘Retroactive Force of Interiority’ The Conscience of Oral History^{1*}

I picked up the phone to find Ajoyda’s voice on the other side: ‘Kavita, your Ranidi is no more.’ I slumped into a chair in silence. She had passed away five days ago, when I had been on my way to Shillong for a workshop. In fact it was the very day when my car had swirled three 360-degree turns and almost flown off the mountainside. I had thought it was my last day on earth—instead, it turned out to be the day on which she had breathed her last. This was in September 2002, and of all the women who had been in the Tebhaga movement, Rani Dasgupta was the one whom I had begun to care for the most. I went to her memorial service in Abanindranth Sabhagriha in Kolkata. It was a full house. People from all walks of life were there—from a

¹ I take the term ‘retroactive force of interiority’ from Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1969b:245). Interiority, as used here, relates to one’s inner self or mental and emotional being. Its nature is shaped by the rational as well as affective impact of events in intimate, private and public life, and in response to them, It involves an ineffable internal processing of layers of experience and desire, and exists virtually as an internal chamberhouse of echoes, with a selection of them coming into play—and interplay—in specific circumstances. It is neither absolute nor static, but a continually transforming process. As I see it, the quality of interiority underlies self-formation and agency—and thereby history making too.

political party, of which she and her husband Ajoy Dasgupta had been members for half a century; from the Paschimbanga Mahila Samiti in which she had been active to her last day; from the refugee and teachers' movements of the past, and the women's movement in the present; neighbours, ex-students and friends whose lives she had touched; and also her husband's niece, a leader of another political party, reaching out across all political differences to pay her last respects—for that was the kind of love and regard Ranidi elicited. On the way back, I held on to the frame of her black-and-white photograph, staring unblinkingly at her smiling face, still in denial. Five years ago, when my mother had passed away, it was Ranidi who had called me every three days, straining to catch my words with ears that could barely hear. Today, I was straining to hear her. Ajoyda and his niece's voices floated into my ears from the back seat in a steady drone, till it suddenly registered that they were talking about her in the past. Fortunately, I was in the front seat and they did not see the tears that muddied her smile, still resplendent through the glass of the frame.

What was this relationship that had developed between her and me across the past seven years? I had first gone to her, as I had to many other women and men, as an academic on a research project and more so as an activist in search of a collective past of the Indian women's movement that I was convinced was to be found in the Tebhaga movement. Rani Dasgupta of Dinajpur had been a leader of women in the Tebhaga movement. As Rani Mitra then, she had been one of the few single young urban women who had played a prominent role in it. Our friendship in the present had grown across two years of intense conversations, most in her sparse two-room home in a modest old government colony and a few at my apartment in a multistoreyed building of a modern residential area.

She had also come with me to Baroda to speak at a seminar organized by the Indian Association of Women's Studies on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of independence. Travelling together in a cab in Bombay, she had asked me why I had never married and narrated, with a twinkle in her eye, the response she had received from Ajoyda when she had asked him to think of a suitable partner for me. He had retorted: 'Not on your life! The only young

men I know are the ones in politics, and the less said about them these days the better.' A sad reflection, true, considering Ajoyda's perception of the young men, who, of course, could not live up to his sterling principles in these changed times, but the twinkle in Ranidi's eyes had subverted the very content of her question to me and forged one of those many unspeakable bonds we shared.

At the seminar too, she had reached out across language and geography, to befriend another tiny woman from Gujarat—Kesariben, who had taught Kasturba Gandhi how to read and write in prison, and who spoke no Bangla or English, even as Ranidi spoke no Gujarati. Ranidi had also reached out to speak to us across time, conjoining her history of activism in Tebhaga with ours in the women's movement.

How was I to relate to women like her, whom I felt so close to, in writing about them? There was a shared political commitment linking their past to our present and the rich intersubjective bonds of friendship. Would these help me develop richer insights into their lives or would they become obstacles in the way of critical analysis?

Engaging with Otherness, Grasping Difference

When I had first started meeting the activists of the Tebhaga movement, scholar Nripen Bandyopadhyay, who had shared valued insights with me, had asked me: 'Have you thought about how you are going to reach out to them across all the differences of culture and class?' I had told him then about the role that I had effortlessly found myself in—part of a younger generation of women to whom history was being passed down by word of mouth. I had got some of the best 'stories' lounging around on the floors of homes rather than sitting formally on chairs—if there were any—looking up at the woman or man talking, often slipping into the easy interactions of a younger person teasing and bullying older people—like aunts, grandmothers, grandfathers—into telling their stories. Without consciously realizing it, I had slipped into a familiar traditional mode of oral cultures. The implicit hierarchy of the narrator's age, the stature of the interviewee as storyteller imparting counsel (Benjamin 1969a), and the mutual

enjoyment of this exchange helped us circumvent, to a significant degree, the problematic hierarchies of interviewers over interviewees. Hierarchies yes, and—so I'd thought—differences too.

When other scholars too had asked me to think about how I'd negotiate the divides of location and differences of perception between, say, the extremes of my position as urban feminist academic 'subject' and the peasant, or even urban activist, and her history as 'object of enquiry', I had been uncomfortable with the binarism underlying such a positioning of my relationship with the women I interviewed. For I had begun to develop a sense of bonding with many regarding our investment in the women's movement, albeit from very different locations in time and space, and with a few it had also become an emotional, personal friendship. This subject-object binary clearly did not stand, but neither did my assumption that such bonding or friendship naturally overcomes the distances of history and location. Our relationships had to be understood in a place of overlap between these two extremes, of a distanced 'othering' inherent in the former and strong identification implied in the latter. The cultural premium of their age and experience that inflected our oral interactions did help me negotiate the hierarchies of the researcher and researched somewhat, as did friendship the differences. Yet, one had to work hard at grasping the standpoint of the other, beginning with an acknowledgement of a certain otherness in the first place. This, however, was not easy, especially in relation to the urban activists I found myself identifying within personal bonding and shared political perspectives—of my investment in their histories, as well as from their continuing activism in the Paschimbanga Mahila Samiti and mine in the women's movement.

Yet, shared political perspectives, despite creating a sense of shared subjectivity at a point in history, can actually signify radically different trajectories and diverse meanings for people differently located. The implications of the difference, across my location and history, and those of Rani Dasgupta and all the Tebhaga activists, were driven home as the significance of her initial refusal to talk to me about her personal experiences in Tebhaga gradually dawned upon me. She, and most other women leaders, when asked if the

CP had been patriarchal in its functioning, had replied 'Of course'. But each of them had also hastened to add that she personally had never felt discriminated against on grounds of gender. This paradox remained a big question mark for a long time till the dawning of a certain understanding regarding her earlier refusal to focus on herself. Recognizing this refusal as a retroactive force from the Tebhaga days and exploring its reason and import yielded critical insights.

Rani Dasgupta had been absolutely unwilling to narrate her personal experiences of the movement as one of the rare single young women who had taken on leadership of the struggle. She had willingly elaborated an extremely illuminating account of women's political activism in general; but regarding 'indulging' in personal accounts of experience in a collective struggle, her stand was that it amounted to self-aggrandizement—it was only the history of the movement that deserved attention. In fact, she had even wagged her finger threateningly at her husband, Ajoy Dasgupta, and said, 'I have told him that if he ever joins electoral politics I will divorce him!' This privileging of her collective sense of self at the cost of the individual, I realized later, actually defined the epistemic limitations of her approach in terms of developing a feminist understanding of the movement. Shaped by the demands of a collective, non-gendered, euphoric subjectivity, she and the other Tebhaga women were resistant to the modes of being and knowing of an individual gendered subject, and to acknowledging the personal on equal standing with the political. This pre-empted the very possibility of making the linkages between the personal and the political that are the basis of feminist analysis. Consequently, the women were epistemically incapable of developing feminist perspectives on the patriarchal practices within the movement.

One of the central features of all narratives, and especially oral ones, I began to understand, is that the narrator's sense of self and relation to society become bases for the epistemic process. These determine what is considered to be valid as knowledge and what the possibilities of representing or challenging a specific reality may be. Thus, while narrative imposes a structure on experience, how experience is first structured as knowledge is determined by the

narrator's specific sense of self in a particular context.² What one can know or not know depends to a great extent on how one perceives oneself and perceives one's relation to society. The epistemic process itself is limited or enabled by the relationship between self and society.

Fortunately, Rani Dasgupta changed her mind and did eventually narrate her story. The fact that she did so at her husband's insistence that it was her 'duty', otherwise the history of women in the Tebhaga movement would be lost to posterity and the contemporary women's movement, also attests to the egalitarianism that had characterized the 1940s and continued to lend stature to some of the CP men. An ethos of equality and gender-sensitive men, a party that was patriarchal, and a collective disposition that pre-empted any critique of the collective that was the party—all these contradictory impulses settled in together to reveal a palimpsest of the decade layered with contradictions of gender. I eventually recorded her narrative across a period of over two years—she yielded enough to lend her personal history to textualization, but the retroactive force of history that had preempted a feminist critique prevailed.

So I came to understand why Rani Dasgupta—and other women like her—were unable to develop a feminist critique of patriarchy. But the more important point I wish to make here is about the flip side of the situation, about my own ability, or rather inability, to grasp the significance of these women's narratives, about the limitations of one marked by a culture not of a collective, but of contemporary urban individualism. If the privileging of a collective self and consciousness can impose such limitations on the epistemic process, and on one's understanding and critique of history, as I realized was happening with her, then, in the reverse case, what were the epistemic limitations at work in my own privileging of an individual sense of self over the collective? This is a grey area that we, as academics and scholars, rarely admit and have not yet begun to explore. At this point I can only raise certain questions: Did I, who generally privileges notions of the individual self, have adequate access to the realities of those whose identities are inextricably linked

² This is not to straitjacket human beings into rigid oppositional categories of collective or individual subjects, but to recognize that the privileging of the collective or individual self in a particular context shapes the relevant epistemic processes.

to that of a collective in struggle? What were my limits of knowing and how could I even recognize them? It was this humbling reality that made me realize that an epistemic chasm divided me from the women I had begun to relate to as friends, with whom I shared certain political perspectives; and it was a chasm across which I had to build bridges of understanding.

On the other hand, when one came up against silences, contradictions and incomprehensible actions, the sense of 'otherness' became only too evident and demanded other ways of exploring the activists' making of meaning. Such was the case with urban women like Ila Mitra, the legendary leader of Tebhaga in Nachole (now in Bangladesh), with whom too I had spent hours in intimate conversation in Kolkata, and with peasant women such as Anima Biswas, a dynamic leader of Narail (also in Bangladesh now), who had retired into virtual oblivion and complete silence by the time I looked her up in Barasat, a suburban town of Kolkata. Their otherness became crystal clear to me as the contradictions and silences came in the way of our communication with each other. Then the question really loomed large: How does one write the scripts of a 'lost' history? Of a collective and critical history of women that was never written, only carried in the memories of thousands of activists? While oral narratives prove to be a critical source of history, they involve not just representations but also the silences of memory, as well as its multiple contradictions across the layering of time. How may these be plumbed?

The Prism of Subjectivity

Oral narratives, I began to see, communicate also through the dynamics of their recollection—of joy or nostalgia, of hesitation or self-contradictions, of pain or disillusionment, of gesture and tone, and also of silence. For these spoke to me as much as the content of the narratives did. I began to see how the significance of the narratives gradually filtered across to me through the *subjectivity* of the speakers, which, if read closely and across different accounts, spells out the varied hues of power, politics, patriarchy and militancy,

as well as sexuality, agency and intoxication. The dynamics of human subjectivity, thus, became a focal point of this oral history. The term 'subjectivity', as I use it here, refers to the historically and socially constituted subject, and not as an abstraction but as the *embodied* female subject of history, hence also constituted materially.³ Further, this subject of history is not just subject to, and thus constituted by, the forces of history, but also one capable of agency, a thinking, knowing, affective subject, that in turn shapes history. Thus, subjectivity also 'connotes the area of symbolic activity that includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects... [and] forms of awareness such as the sense of identity and consciousness of oneself' (Passerini 1998:54). In this, it also relates centrally to the dynamics of interiority that responds to affect.

Predicated, then, on the workings of agency, cognition and interiority, as well as the socially, historically constituted subject, subjectivity also proves to be a useful lens of analysis for establishing the relations between the cognitive dimensions of the personal and the political significations of the collective. As such, it 'embraces not only the *epistemological* dimension but also that concerned with the nature and significance of the *political*' (*ibid.*, emphasis added). The subjectivity of the speakers provides access to both epistemological and political standpoints, specially in the accounts of women activists, because their narrative subjectivities are layered with their perspectives of how they understand history as it unfolds for them in their politicized realities, and how politics is in turn textured by their standpoints and agency. Subjective articulations also express the collective significance of the political realm in these narratives by representing ways in which subjectivities are transformed by, and also transform, political movements.

The aim, then, is to read the narratives for an understanding of how the subject is constituted, and the collective, rather than as reflections of party positions, or of ideologies, or of misplaced surrender to or trust in the party. This is an important aspect of

³ In this sense, focus on the subject is as an 'effect' of power and disciplines, after Foucault, and as being ideologically interpellated in the Althusserian sense. I do not include in my analyses the notion of the psychoanalytically constructed subject—the focus here is on the socially constructed subject.

reading recall, and this is also why subjectivity serves as a critical prism for the analysis of oral narratives, for it transcends the narrower, more bounded, limits of identity. Identity functions in the nature of a limited and temporary fixing for an individual of a specific mode of subjectivity; it is constituted by a certain degree of identification or self-recognition by the subject, an assumption of what one is; and it restricts the multiple possibilities of subjectivity intrinsic to a social field, limiting a subject to a restricted sense of who she/he is in relation to notions of belonging determined by a specific set of values or ideology. Subjectivity, on the other hand, constitutes a field much wider than identity and is also the ground of repressed desires, unself-conscious identifications premised on unacknowledged needs and wishes, as well as modes of interpellation by social and political forces that may well be outside the spheres of cognition, yet shape the subject in significant ways. All of these find their way into narratives in ways unintended, spoken or unspoken, in gesture, look, tone or even pregnant silences.

Since subjectivity includes the interplay of unintended responses to history too, its workings involve a dynamic dialogism capable of revealing the emergence of new visions and practices, as well as tensions and negotiations, both of the time and in the time of recall. The study of oral narratives also becomes crucial for feminist scholarship because it is in narration that the desire for the imaginary, the possible, contests with the demands of the actual, the 'real'. Further, women's lives are also shaped by the tension between different notions of identity—between the idea of a feminine identity (what women 'ought' to be normatively) and that of a feminist imperative (what women need and desire), paralleling the contest between the possible and the actual. This rich gendered dialogism in their oral narratives provides vital access to the standpoint of women, constituted by them as female subjects located in hierarchies of gender, class, caste, ethnicity and community; yet, it also enables access to the nature and significance of their subjective liberation, as well as of the limits of such liberation—both clearly areas not adequately taken account of in history writing.

This duality of the lens of the subject/subjective that constitutes subjectivity thus facilitates discussion of both subjectification and

liberation. It is significant that Foucault too, in his later years, extended his notion of the subject to one also constituted by liberation—in a 1984 interview, he emphasized:

I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very sceptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, *through practices of liberation*. (1988:50, emphasis added)

That the subject can be constituted by liberation too opens up the possibility of conceptualizing a free subject. It is this dynamics of liberation, not just of the collective but also of the individual within—and maybe also sometimes against—the collective that I wish to tap in order to grasp the nature of both—the liberatory as well limiting nature of the movement and the woman activist's gendered negotiation with this tension.

Thus, rather than following the locus of an already determined set of values, which I had assumed underlined our shared politics in the contemporary context, I learnt to pay attention to each person's standpoint from her location, the point from which her values were constructed or interpreted. These locations were, of course, multiple, for the subject of Tebhaga women's standpoint was multiple and heterogeneous, with individual subjects at times even at a tangent to others in the collective. The category 'Tebhaga woman' was far from uniform, ranging from the Adivasi Santal and Oraon, and the lower-caste Namasudra peasant women to the upper-caste urban women. Thus, the standpoint of each of them was not always in consonance with that of the others in the struggle together and depended on her social location within the collective.

Such solidarities as the Tebhaga women forged across trenchant divides transcended the ultimately debilitating privileging of difference, of 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics' that are still the focus of much current debate. In the context of contemporary Dalit feminism, Sharmila Rege has forcefully argued that that the issues underlined by the new Dalit women's movement go beyond a privileging of the 'difference' of Dalit women to call for a revolutionary

epistemological shift to a Dalit feminist standpoint, one that must be shared by non-Dalits too:

The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women, we recognise, may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. (1998:45)

The actual transformation of subjectivities across social hierarchies is, however, an exercise requiring much self-reflexivity. As V. Geetha (2008:5) asserts, in engagements regarding caste that involve both Dalits and non-Dalits, 'Caste invariably ends up as a "dalit" concern—it is never really seen as having to do with caste Hindu privilege, with what non-dalits are.' Even as non-Dalits today educate themselves into taking on Dalit feminist standpoints, just as upper-caste/-class urban women had questioned their complicity in hierarchies of social privilege and extended themselves to taking on the standpoints of Tebhaga women.

The concerns of these current debates about averting a narrow identity politics and unlearning upper-caste/-class privilege to forge comradeship across difference had already been put to the test—and successfully so—by the Tebahaga women in the late 1940s. Even as they were carefully attentive to the standpoint of situated identities, they forged a richly democratic activism, averting isolationist and conflictual identity politics. In fact, contemporary feminist movements have much to learn from the Tebhaga women's exemplification of the ways in which solidarities may be forged across social divides. The latter's modes of sharing, and the trials and tribulations through which urban and rural, Hindu and Muslim, and upper-caste, lower-caste and Adivasi women came together, as recalled by women like Manikuntala Sen, Rani Dasgupta, Bina Guha, Bimala Majhi, Ila Mitra and others, that I discuss in Chapter 4 on *antarikata*, reveal the workings of complex analytical, affective and intersubjective processes that may be lost to lived history, but are fortunately still available to us in their narratives .

The Tebhaga women's liberatory project was also the subject of other such projects of caste, class, gender and sexuality, all of which construct each other. This further opened up the Tebhaga women's standpoint to various emancipatory challenges and transformations, as a result of which, as I show in the discussions of Dinajpur women and also in the chapter on antarikata, they also began to harness egalitarian leftist and anti-imperialist ideologies in the project of empowering themselves and gaining acceptance of their gendered demands, as well as activism and leadership.

Even as urban women learnt to educate themselves and unlearn their privileges of class and caste in lived history, to stand with the Tebhaga peasant women, I too, across significant divides not just of location but also time, began attempting to build epistemic bridges of comprehension, the nature of which I hope will emerge in the following pages and chapters of this history.

The meanings of each event for the activists, as may be expected, were not always easily available to me. For, in the work of oral history, 'knowledge is not simply a factual given, it is a genuine *advent*, an event' (Laub 1992:62, emphasis added). It involved a process of arriving at, or facilitating, the emergence of particular kinds of knowledge, of finding oneself trapped in epistemological pitfalls and then learning to work one's way out of them. This process of grasping their meanings thus involved conscious intersubjective reflection, of working one's way into other modes of being and knowing. In a way, engaging with another subject's orality is like being in a relationship across a period of time and gradually uncovering layers of meaning—replete with contradictions, sometimes forever baffling and sometimes fostering intellectual and human understanding of an other.

At the level of engaging with a range of women and a multiplicity of identities that constitutes a collective, such work also amounts to what Passerini (1996:xi–xiii) has termed 'the study of the history of subjectivity ... the impact of social and cultural change'. The subjectivity of the women accessible in these oral narratives in turn also bears critical import for a theoretical reassessment of what constitutes history itself. The epistemic privilege of hitherto marginalized women derives from their specific gendered locations

and roles in historical struggle.⁴ Further, such narratives are 'necessarily embedded in wider explanatory theories of history' (Mohanty 2003:235). Thus, their alternative visions relate not only to an understanding of the specific movement in question, but may also pose challenges to established practices of historiography. The central point about oral history, then, is not about the epistemological challenge of otherness, though that certainly needs to be tackled, but about coming to terms with and engaging with difference, with the perspectives that may interrupt the flow of given narratives. In doing so, the omitted stories may allow us to rethink the historical itself and through it the political. One's interest in the subject is not merely to have it conform with one's own sense of the political, but also to restore to the larger picture, as part of one's legitimate history, the significance of the multiple perspectives, as well as of the hitherto unspeakable, that history has elided so far.⁵

History, Memory, Intersubjectivity

History seemed not to have a place for such narratives and for the dynamics of narration. Its rupture with the lived pasts of the activists had made it too remote from the past that still continued to shape their memories and lives. Its objective approaches failed to grasp the significance of their experiences and standpoints. Its privileging of factual veracity crushed the very impact of events that transformed the subjectivity of a people and fuelled historical transformation. And its preoccupation with temporal continuities, and relations between periods, left one defeated in the attempt to grasp the import of a movement that in itself had marked a break between the lived realities of the past and the obsession of a present rapidly moving into the future (Nora 1989:8–9). History also had no time for the languages of gesture, tone and silences, for the contradictions and

⁴ Mohanty also cautions that the claims of epistemic privilege need to be evaluated, as any social and historical explanation should be, and for this task he relies on 'such a conception of reason as both evaluative and empirically grounded... universal in scope, but necessarily context sensitive' (2003 251).

⁵ This was evolved in conversation with V. Geetha.

the stories underlying 'false recollections' and distortions. There was evidence of complex negotiations with lived history that history writing could not accommodate.

In 1997, in Kolkata, Ila Mitra had read to me from Maleka Begum's biography of her, her own testimony of grim sexual torture in East Pakistani state prisons that she had delivered in court in the early 1950s. Maleka Begum, when I met her shortly after that in Dhaka, had looked at me with surprise and asked me twice over: 'Did Iladi say it was *her* testimony when she read it out?' For when Maleka Begum had shown it to her a few years ago, four decades after its delivery, Ila Mitra had looked mystified and asked, 'Is this really my testimony?' History writing, with its privileging of objectivity, would spare no time for such distortions of memory and the stories of repression they may have to tell. And it would be quite unthinkable that history would have any room for the guilty giggles or furtive looks with which peasant women in Narail talked about their 'enjoyment' of the cross-gender solidarity in the fields of politics, or for the secretive tone in which an urban woman in north Bengal recounted the romances in the CP. The fact that these guilty, furtive and secretive modes of communication were actually a telling comment on the conservative gender politics of the 1990s when I was interviewing the women in these villages would be lost to history. What the activists were sharing were their memories of the past as they had lived it and as it had continued to inform the present. Yet, contemporary modes of history writing did not allow any significant way of grappling with the meaning the past carried for the activists. In fact, history, with its focus on dispassionate analysis, had no room for the very memories through which I was accessing their rich grasp of a lived past. Pierre Nora's eloquent assertion of the distance between memory and history kept echoing back to me right through my attempts to grasp the import of these narratives. Whether this distance between memory and history has indeed, as Nora (1989:2) maintains, reached a 'breaking point' now or been mitigated by the turn to memory in scholarship in recent decades may be debatable, but not his claim that, 'At the heart of history is a criticism destructive of spontaneous memory.... Memory is always suspect in the eyes of history, whose true mission is to demolish it,

to repress it. History divests the lived past of its legitimacy' (ibid.:3). The lived past had become a 'foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985) to history; yet, why did it seem so critical, especially for the kind of feminist work I was doing, to salvage it? This question persisted; it haunted me through the years of this work and shaped it.

What was it about the past, then, that was being divested of its legitimacy and why was it so important? What these narratives deliver to us in the present are the actual processes of meaning making, the impact of historical events that mobilized masses of women into action, the gendered processes of empowerment and equally gendered trajectories of disillusionment. And all these had been played out in the rich dialectics of *interiority and politics* that their memories carried, subjectively, into the present.

Ila Mitra refused to renounce her politics to buy freedom from devastating sexual torture and came back to the fields of politics even after a prolonged nervous breakdown because of a bitter jaded, the persistence, or even stubbornness, of the past, which was the memory of the Santals' dream of freedom and the lives they had sacrificed for her, their leader. Urvashi Butalia's account 'The Persistence of Memory' (2001) too reinforces the mobilizing force of memory. In this, Bir Bahadur Singh, a survivor of partition violence of Muslims against Sikhs and Hindus, continues to be plagued by the memory of his family's unforgiving rejection of the offer of protection from close friends from his home village of Saintha during the violence of Thoa Khalsa just because they were Muslims. It is the persistence of his memory that compels him to go back across the Indo-Pakistan border on a journey of reconciliation more than fifty years later. The connection between memory and the present is that the sense of lived history continues to inflect and inform the present in a sense of continuity, and thus motivates or animates the present.

These are dimensions of the past, even counsel (see Benjamin 1969a), that face complete elision if approached exclusively through the lens of a history that distances itself from both memory and subjectivity. Yet, they stare one in the face, resound in the ear, when one lends oneself to these narratives of the Tebhaga women and men. Of what worth could this engagement be if devoid of the complex processes of struggle and change waged in the intimate

realms of self? Could one really understand these pervasive historical transformations that involved the participation of women in politics right across Bengal on such an unprecedented scale if one were to disregard the internal revolutions of subjectivity, which were not just catalysed by but in turn also catalysed these very transformations into being? Memory was pivotal to the narration of these pasts and to their very significance; it could not but be pivotal to the writing of them too.

Yet, I was also invested in retrieving a history of the Tebhaga women—did engagement with subjectivity and memory necessarily jeopardize historical credibility? Nora (1989:3) distinguishes between memory and history as follows:

1. memory as a continuous yet dialectical process, and history as the mode by which ‘modern societies organize a past they are condemned to forget because they are driven by change’;
2. the former as extending from the past into the present and directing the future, and the latter as constituted by a definite break with the past; and
3. memory being that of a specific collective yet of the individual too, but history, characterized by a problematic universalism and a professionalism, as that which affirms its own logic rather than that of the past.

Yet, while memory does throw up critical challenges for history, can a sincere historical engagement with the past not open itself up to the logic of other times too and circumvent the problems inherent in a generalized universalism, especially if it is sensitive to the sense of the lived pasts that rooted memories hold in store for us? The supposed ‘chasm’ between history and memory can be bridged, and should, for neither can do without the other in understanding how the past speaks to the present. The more complex problem here is of grasping the specific ways of relating to the past. For if one does understand the impossibility of grasping any sense of an ‘authentic’ past, and also one’s inability to grasp it in terms of its exact organicity for the narrators of memory, then one cannot but agree with Benjamin (1969b:255) that: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.”” How, then, can we

understand our investment in our past given such an approach? The answer can be found only in the specific possibilities, maybe even the lost possibilities, to which the memory of the past can lead us.

The biggest challenge was to find ways of understanding the narratives of violence and trauma of the armed struggle launched in 1948 and of the consequent reprisals of the state. I had come upon a rich body of Holocaust scholarship (Friedlander 1984; Laub 1992; Koch 1997; Young 1997) on memory and history that continued to echo in my thinking about these issues, in seemingly unrelated, uncomprehensible yet persistent ways, across a couple of years. The context was so different—the horror of the genocide and the modes of torture, the unspeakability of it all, as well as the compulsion to speak of it, the fear of forgetting and the impossibility of doing so, the struggle to establish the historical veracity of the events in the face of denials and of accusations about the fallibility of memory—none of these seemed to be directly relevant. Tebhaga had thrown up other questions regarding memory. I was trying to understand an event not even known to younger members or neighbours of some of the activist families, struggling to coax memory into the open from people who had opted out of the public gaze, asking questions about matters that had long been silenced by the CP, given their changed stance on a number of issues. Finally, I was simply interested in how people lived the struggle: what did it mean to be a woman or a man in those times, to forge powerful comradeships across social divides in the shared endurance of hardships? And how were the dreams of utopic comradeship cruelly shattered? Neither public memory, nor official history, nor left historiography has asked these questions; and neither has the women's movement wanted to reckon with women whose presence in public life and public work were motivated by considerations that are not ours. I was, therefore, at a loss as to how to deal with them, till it dawned on me that the relevance of all Holocaust scholars' work lay for me in the modes in which they foregrounded their own relation to the survivor's memory, forged new standards for the writing of repressed histories, and resisted ideological closure; equally, the modes in which they plumbed the narratives of survivors, for the unspoken, or even the unspeakable pasts, from the point of view of representation. These finally enabled

me to reach out to that which had been rendered unspeakable, yet had continued to simmer in precarious unease under the surface of a largely triumphalist left narrative of Tebhaga.⁶

Finally, I found my ground in more ways than one. The first was in relation to the role of the activist's memory and my own role—this was in Friedlander's insistence on integrating the survivor's memory and the historian's voice, leading, 'not to an abandonment of historical standards but to a deepening of them' (Young 1997:51). Survivors' memories are not just important but indispensable to a historical understanding of their time because 'it is their voices that reveal what was known and what could be known.... Theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality' (Friedlander 1997:2, cited in Young 1997:50–51). While all of the reality of Tebhaga was not horrifying, some of it definitely was; and the sense of it being a 'new' experience was certainly pervasive.

Second, Friedlander's insistence on the 'restoration of the historian's reasons for writing such history to the historical record' (Young 1997:50), as well as his perception of the historian's task as one that could 'serve to disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure' (Friedlander 1992:53, cited in Young 1997:50) were also centrally relevant to my own investment in this past as a feminist. The fact that my own subjectivity has been at work in these attempts to grasp meaning, in constant interrogation and in wariness of ideological closure, was foregrounded again, taking me back to Laub's understanding, discussed in the previous section, of knowledge in oral history being not a given, but an advent, to be arrived at. I realized that this engagement had to involve a process of conscious intersubjective reflection. This oral history, then, began to map the contours of an intersubjective process across women's concerns of the 1940s and my feminist concerns of the present.

⁶ I would like to emphasize that I draw upon Holocaust scholarship here for understanding the role of representation and memory in oral history. It is certainly not to indicate any correspondence between two such disparate histories as that of the Holocaust and the Tebhaga movement.

Narrative, Aesthetics and History:
The 'Poetic Truth' of Oral Narratives

The other significance of Holocaust scholarship for this work, as I have indicated, was in relation to its engagement with the survivor's narrative as a mode of *representation* that provided access to the complexities of a conflicted past. From the framing and structuring of the narratives and narrative voice, from the intertwining of voices and the dialogic character of the narratives, from the ellipsis, pauses and contradictions, from the context of the narrator as 'storyteller' and her role in offering 'counsel' (Benjamin 1969a), from careful cross-readings of narratives as well as silences, and above all, from the workings of the *aesthetic* impact of events on the subjects of history and from a hermeneutic reading of the narratives for the significance they had to impart. While the insights of historiographers and, of course, oral historians were critical, the work of making meaning became, primarily, a mode of exploratory intersubjective work in literary readings of the narratives.

Given the interventions of history and the vicissitudes of memory, it is in any case difficult to make *direct* use of oral narratives for *explicitly* revealing facts and events. Two insights of oral history played a central role in this context. One is that a critical significance of orality is to be found in the recognition of the *symbolic* character of representations, and even distortions and 'false memory', rather than in the simply direct or even reflective significations (this recognition is what Laub [1992:62] would call the advent of knowledge of the event). The other is in relation to the impact of the events represented 'in the recognition of their potential influence on forms of actual behaviour' (Passerini 1989:191). It is here that the epistemological bridging becomes crucial—in learning to recognize how events impacted people, what their *aesthetic* response was that mobilized them into certain kinds of action, and what it was that made them consequently shape their own history in the ways they did. The tragedy is that more often than not we remain limited to our own epistemological standpoints and become mere chroniclers of our pasts as seen from our point of view—not the least for the demands of factual veracity made on oral history.

A central challenge for the analyses of oral narratives, then, lies in the recognition of the influence that the narrated events may have had on forms of actual behaviour. As Young (1997:55) asserts, historians often miss crucial data when they ignore or devalue testimony as ‘historically inaccurate’, for such historians ‘also ignore the very reasons the witnesses and survivors, as well as victims, responded to the events as they did. Ultimately, to ignore this is to ignore the highly contingent reasons why events actually unfolded as they did.’ Oral narratives need to be read in terms of a search for ‘the truth of possibility’ rather than the ‘truth of material events’ (Portelli 1998:38). This ‘truth of possibility’ is what constitutes the ‘poetic truth’ of the recall of memory in oral history, and secures its ground in the face of charges of factual inaccuracy. For the charges may certainly be valid in the logic of scientific precision, but are misplaced in relation to the lived understanding of the past that memories, both collective and individual, can yield. Take the case of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s famous poem, ‘Jhansi ki Rani’ (The Queen of Jhansi), with its refrain ‘*Bundele harbolon ke munh, hamne suni kahani thi*’.⁷ The historical relevance of the poem lies not in the verifiability of the factual details of the heroic anti-imperialist leadership of the queen that is narrated in the poem; it derives from the fact that the Bundelis *perceived* her to have led a war of independence against the British in 1857, which in turn contributed to the mobilization of the nationalist movement in the 1940s. *How* the Rani of Jhansi is commemorated in public memory is far more important than whether she really jumped onto a horse and injured General Walker. An understanding of this also facilitates an understanding of the link in public memory between the First War of Independence in 1857 and the nationalist movement in the 1940s, a period that was rife with retellings of this legend.

Thus, factual accuracy is not the central premise of oral history. As Portelli too established in *The Death of Luigi Trasulli* (1991), it is not the factual accuracy of memory but the nature and meaning of memory that becomes significant in oral recollections of the past. It is the ‘poetic truth’ of events to which oral history lays claim. So rather than focusing on the accuracy of dates and facts, I stress

⁷ Literally translated this would be: ‘From the mouths of Harbols of Bundel, we’d heard this story.’

the importance of broadening the notions of historical validity and credibility to grasp this poetic truth of historical and political events for those very actors who shape history—for it is the significance of these events in people's lives that inspires their consequent actions that in turn shape future histories. It does not matter whether the Rani of Jhansi had really been a brave anti-imperialist fighter; the reason why this legend played an inspirational role in the nationalist struggle in India was that she was perceived to be such in public memory. This signals the aesthetic potential of events, past or present, to influence behaviour in the present. Oral history tries to retrieve the 'why' and the 'how' of such mobilization in relation to the meaning the event carries for people, why they are moved or affected by it, and how they act as a result of this aesthetic affect. Aesthetic response, thus, becomes a crux of historical transformation. So the aesthetic potential of events comprises the affective impact of events that mobilizes history, as well as the affective response to these transformations that in turn mobilizes future histories. Together, they constitute the poetic truth of events, which is also a historical truth of affective mobilization, bearing an explanation of a process of historical transformation. This, of course, may not be the only explanation of human transformation, but it is certainly one without which any understanding of personal or collective transformation would be radically deficient. Therefore, poetic truth is central to a comprehensive understanding of historical human transformation.

What such engagement with oral narratives involves, then, is the move from a factual 'knowing' of events to an analytical 'understanding' of them, that is, from the generally epistemological to the more specifically hermeneutic (Koch 1997:395). One draws upon hermeneutics to engage with how the knowledge of events is understood, and the specific potential of this understanding to shape future acts and commitments. Koch clarifies the difference between these approaches in relation to the Holocaust, in terms of its import for our understanding of history. On an epistemological level, she observes that:

This skepticism [about knowledge] applies not so much to the existence of facts as to our own ability to grasp them.... On this level there is no special need to prove the evidence of the Holocaust

insofar as we regard it as a fact along with other facts.... On this level it is a fact we are convinced to be true, and not a metaphor. (ibid.)

On a hermeneutic level, she asserts that:

Whatever knowledge we have in terms of facts that we believe to be true remains 'dead' as long as we fail to make use of it to interpret, communicate and mediate those facts. The real 'life' of knowledge, which goes beyond mere factual information, in this sense then is that which enables us to understand or explain meaning, intentions, personal acts, emotions and reasons. (ibid.)

A central reason for the entry of hundreds of urban women into the Tebhaga movement relates to the 'life' of one such fact. Almost every urban woman I spoke to pointed to the Bengal famine of 1943 as a turning point in her life. This was a time when thousands of starving peasants were flooding the towns and cities of Bengal in search of nourishment. The cry of '*Ektu phyan de ma*' (give me some rice water, mother) was heard on every street, and emaciated peasants would turn up outside kitchen windows in the hope of some phyan. Often women cited having seen men, women or children dying from starvation. The deep impact of this was what all the urban women referred to as the reason for first joining the langarkhanas as volunteers for distributing food, and then joining study groups and meetings to understand the politics behind such devastating hunger in a time of plenty, for it was a famine caused by 'man-made' scarcity, not by natural drought. And it was the memory of such distress and injustice that propelled them into political activism and dreams of a just future. Thus, the famine remains 'dead' as a fact in relation to urban women, until we interpret its meaning for those who were affected by its impact and whose future acts were shaped by it. Poetic truth steers clear of dead facts and gives us access to the mobilizing forces of history in the very realms of interiority. Such a poetic truth of history is premised on subjectivity in the sense of the affective, aesthetic response to events; yet, the mobilizing force of history to which it gives us access does not inhabit the shaky ground of individualized subjectivity. For when such poetic truth animates an individual and mobilizes her into historical action, it is an event of an order that has the capacity to animate entire populations. The

factuality of such poetic truth resides in the impact of history on the future, in the concrete mobilization of acts, be they of leadership, resistance or survival.

Poetic truth grounds the historicity of survival and resistance, but may also be harnessed as justification of hierarchical impositions, strife, vengeance or even devastation. The poetic truth of historical mobilization is not ethically value laden in itself; it only bears an explanation of mobilization on the basis of a perception of an event and its affective impact, and there is every likelihood of a clash of poetic truths occurring in volatile, contested contexts, especially where the social, political or economic stakes are high. And, as indicated earlier in the case of the legend of the Rani of Jhansi, it is often near impossible to prove the factual veracity of a legend, or folk memory, or even a contested event in contemporary public memory—and that is not, in any case, the central focus of oral history.

Yet, factual veracity, its distortion or even complete erasure, does play a role in the kind of oral history under discussion here in relation to understanding the human dynamics underlying historical change due to the impact of experienced events. The representation of 'factual' truth in testimony can be intrinsically contested, conflicting, repressed or even withheld completely; and the search for the reasons for the tensions underlying such dynamics often reveals significant complexities of response to historical events, especially traumatic ones, as will become clear in the later chapters of this book relating to Ila Mitra and her biographer Maleka Begum, and Anima Biswas and her mentor and leader Amal Sen. In such cases especially, cross-reading narratives becomes an indispensable mode of squaring off the discrepancies of memory, and hence of poetic truths too, across different versions of the past; and a foregrounding of the motivations underlying these discrepancies may in turn not only produce more accurate accounts, but also histories more richly layered with the complexities and intrinsic compulsions of the period in question.

In most cases though, the 'truth' that has to be weighed is barely touched by the minor deviations of factual evidence. The analyst Dori Laub discusses the contested terrain of 'truth' in testimony in relation to the inconsistencies of memory, in the context of a survivor relating her memories of an uprising in Auschwitz. In an intensified

moment of passion during their conversation, she had claimed, 'All of a sudden we saw four chimneys going up, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running, it was unbelievable' (Laub 1992:59). Historians claimed the testimony was not accurate because, historically, only one chimney had been blown up, not four, and that 'the limits of the woman's knowledge in effect called into question the validity of her whole testimony' (ibid.:61). Their concern with accuracy did have strong grounds, for as Laub himself acknowledges, 'it was utterly important to remain accurate, lest the revisionists in history discredit everything' (ibid.:60).

For the analyst however, the 'truth' of the account lay not in the empirical fact of the actual number of chimneys. His view was that the woman was testifying

to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of occurrence.... The woman testified to an occurrence that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth. (ibid.)

Laub's concern was, thus, not merely her subjective truth, but also the very historicity of the event, for the woman had testified to resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the '*breakage of the frame of death*' (ibid.:62, emphasis added). This was her way of surviving, of resisting. Attention to her subjective articulations, thus, revealed the epistemological process—how she had grasped the knowledge of the chimney(s) blowing up as an act of resistance that enabled survival. This 'truth', it is important to recognize, was not only a 'subjective truth' for one woman, it highlighted a critical political process that did take place in Auschwitz, as well as the historicity of the event, of the breaking of the frame of the concentration camp.

Factual veracity, that is, the exact number of towers blown up, the exact date on which an event may have taken place, the precise number of people present, or even the specific words spoken or deeds done, is important, especially in the politically contested terrain of multiple contending versions that history is. However, the historian's

emphasis on factual veracity runs the danger of erasing more complex 'truths'—history needs to open up to the oral historian's concern with the historical truth of *transformation*—for what enabled the victims of the concentration camp to regain their agency and find the motivation to stay alive, and finally survive the place is no less than a historical truth.

In the context of Tebhaga, most historians would write off the inconsistencies such as that between the Tebhaga leader Amal Sen's account that the peasant activist Anima Biswas was the one who drew the man she loved into both the movement and marriage, and her version that she joined Tebhaga at her husband's instance. Even Amal Sen would say that her account was 'not true'. The point is not to shelve such inconsistencies in the name of untruth, but to ask why Biswas had narrated a 'distorted' version of the truth, which actually even she seemed to have begun to believe. What did this version of events enable her to do in life? Could it have been a gendered negotiation with the anxieties that impact women under patriarchy?

The affective impact of events on the subjects of history and their aesthetic response to it is the central concern here. The ways in which history affects subjects determines their aesthetic response to it. Such aesthetic responses to events may catalyse revolutionary processes in the realms of interiority; these in turn mobilize populations and give history direction. Such analyses, of aesthetic response to historical events, thus provides access to the transformative forces of culture and history in ways that factual truths may not. Aesthetic responses of this kind then comprise a basic truth of history—one that is much neglected by historiography and deserves recognition as being central to political and cultural transformations. So the affective and aesthetic life of the actors of history must be restored to historiography.

The status of such truth, which may be attached to individual perception, has in fact been a concern of modern aesthetics from the very beginning, as Bowie explains, drawing upon Baumgarten, one of the pioneers of modern aesthetic theory:

Baumgarten values aesthetic truth as the *Wahrscheinliche*, that which *appears* as true, even if it cannot finally be proved to be true, whereas the sciences can only ever claim truth for what is clear and distinct. The problem with the sciences is, then, that they exclude most of

the content of what Edmund Husserl will later term the 'life-world', the untheorised horizon of our everyday experience, from any kind of truth. (1990:6)

Of course, in the context of modernity's circumscribing and limiting of truth to what Bowie (*ibid.*:9) terms a subject's 'capacity for objectifying the world in science', such transforming aesthetic experiences, that are clearly subjective, cannot aspire to being 'true', for scientific rationality allows only distinct objective factuality the status of truth. Yet, the truth of our modes of relating to the world is constituted as much if not more by our everyday experiences, by what is termed above as the 'life world' and 'the untheorized horizon of our everyday experience of the world'. According to Bowie, Baumgarten too saw individual perception in the 'life-world' as an inherent part of the truth of our relationship to the world and, thus, insisted upon including aesthetics as an integral constituent of philosophy (*ibid.*:6). Fortunately, our subjective everyday experiences are not so 'untheorized' anymore; the everyday world has been the focus of much attention as the contested site of materiality and gender upon which standpoints are developed, as has been evident in the work of standpoint sociologists such as Dorothy Smith, and of feminist philosophers from Sandra Harding to Nancy Hartsock for almost three decades now. Given that the everyday world is the locus of these women's accounts, the memories narrativized in orality need to be seen through the combined lens of both subjectivity and aesthetics.

The very structure of the narrative too has the potential to yield critical historical insights that may not be available even through reflective or symbolic readings of a woman's account, as I will show later in relation to Ila Mitra's experience with the Santals. Young's (1997:50–51) observation about our role as oral historians in relation to the survivors of the Holocaust is relevant here to the Tebhaga activists too: 'By recognizing the role their own narratives may have played in their lives, we acknowledge that their ongoing narrative grasp of events was very much a part of the historical reality itself.' As I will show later, the intertwining of the voice of Harek the Santal with her own voice in Ila Mitra's narratives reveals a level of her identification with the Santals that she herself may have

been unaware of, and this has the potential to explain the extreme resilience and refusal of an upper-caste urban woman to betray her Santal comrades. Thus, the very structuring of the narrative may reveal 'the possibility of historical causes and effects otherwise lost in our projection of a hindsight logic onto events' (ibid.). Through close attention to aesthetics and structuring, to the activist's 'narrative grasp' of events, one has a chance of bridging the rupture of history with the lived past; one has a chance of accessing the past in terms of the significance it held for the activists, how they shaped it, and why they did so. Thus, one may be able to find the reasons for the ways in which the past was transformed, hovering in and around the narrators' acts of remembering the past—reasons yet to be accessed so that we may understand not just how 'the realities themselves, as they actually unfolded, owe an essential debt to those who lived and remembered them' (ibid.:51), but also how our realities came to be what they are.

The Retroactive Force of Interiority: Calling History into Question

What is unique about oral history, then, is that it gives us access to expressions of how events are experienced and received *aesthetically*, and how this subjective reception of events in turn *mobilizes* future possibilities, future histories, in ways that the mere objective factual *incidence* of events may not. Oral narratives lead us to these subjective, aesthetic and affective dynamics of interiority that mobilize entire collectives into political action. Consequently, they also allow ways of understanding how the success or failure of such action refuels the dynamics of both interiority, and, in turn, of the narratives too.

This lived dynamics between the workings of interiority and the politics of a collective rarely find place in any other genre or discipline. Neither does any single disciplinary approach enable access to this absolutely basic force of human subjectivity, which combines both the standpoint of subjects and the effective loci of their subjective, aesthetic responses, upon which a movement and a people turns. Literature deals with fictional imaginary, philosophy

with theoretical abstractions, autobiography has the individual—not the collective—as its locus, anthropology focuses on the cognitive nature of socialization, without addressing the experiential dimension of a lived reality, and history has long eschewed both subjectivity and memory. It is left to an integrally interdisciplinary oral history to interweave the approaches of the social sciences and the humanities—to challenge and transform some and harness others—and break new pathways into the workings of human subjectivities that mobilize and sustain movements.

The dynamics of human subjectivity in shaping history, therefore, becomes a focal point of oral history. This attempt to approach the history of the Tebhaga women too is premised upon the fact that narratives are informed by the subjectivity of the speakers. In addition, subjective reality also has its own history and multifaceted relationships with structures of power (Passerini 1998:55). So the questions that can be addressed in readings of narratives that traverse half a lifetime or more, and across the articulations of multiple activists, include those that involve processes of historical change in the realms of interiority. Thus, it is from the relations between interiority and the world of political action that I come to the questions of gendered transformations: through what processes of subjective transformation did women locate themselves in the Tebhaga movement? What were the transformations that they in turn effected and in what ways did this inflect the nature of Tebhaga? And what significance, or even challenges, do these subjective transformations, at both the individual and collective levels, carry for our understanding of women *in* history, and women *and* history today?

Maybe there is, after all, a way of suturing the rupture between history and the lived past, of grasping the repressed, of accessing excluded dimensions of gendered political standpoints. Benjamin, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1969b), observes that class struggle is for 'the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist'. Yet these 'refined and spiritual things', the very stuff of ethical ideals and historical visions, also do make their presence felt in political struggle, not in the form of the spoils that fall to the victors, but in the very dynamics of

the struggle: 'They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude' (ibid.:254). These aspects of struggle may be intangible, yet they persist and may be experienced even decades later in the realms of interiority. They constitute the inner voice of humanity capable of calling history into question, for they 'have retroactive force, and will continually call in question every victory, past and present, of rulers' (ibid.:254–55).

The uniqueness of oral history work is that it enables access to what Benjamin (ibid.:254) calls this the 'retroactive force of interiority'. It is that which is manifest in expression and tone, look and gesture, and even in the silence that continues to underline narratives of activists long after the movement/history in question is past. It is immaterial, impalpable, imperceptible, yet experienced powerfully enough to persist across a lifetime—it is what survives. This force of interiority that challenges the past also assesses the present in the realms of memory and recall. It defies the possible repressions of contemporary politics and acts as midwife for the emergence of historically suppressed perspectives. This retroactive force is the conscience of oral history.

Benjamin's poetic insight speaks thus of this retroactive force of interiority, this much neglected impetus of history: 'As flowers turn towards the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism, the past strives to turn towards the sun which is striving in the sky of history' (ibid.:244). It is in the awareness of 'this most inconspicuous of all transformations' that some of the 'secret heliotropism' of the repressed history of the gendered transformations of the 1940s in Bengal may hopefully be brought to light in our times too. The retroactive force of the Tebhaga women's narratives may yet break through the controlled calm of the official story and turn towards the sun striving in the sky of history. Their remembrances may yet release in the terrain of politics that never saw the light of this sun and realign some dimensions of history.