

NARRATIVE RECONCILIATION AS RIGHTS BASED PEACED  
PRAXIS: CUSTODIAL TORTURE, TESTIMONIAL THERAPY, AND  
OVERCOMING MARGINALIZATION

*Jeremy Rinker*

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This paper looks at how marginalized communities utilize discursive practices to contest against an unresponsive state malfeasance and hegemonic bureaucracy to ensure basic rights and state services for the marginalized. Focusing on the People's Vigilance Committee for Human Rights (PVCHR), a member-based human rights movement in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, the paper aims to tell the unique story of PVCHR's work to combat custodial torture through an innovative method called "testimonial therapy." The testimonial therapy process is aimed at producing both legal testimony and cathartic release of suffering among torture survivors. In underscoring the importance of attention to narrative practices, the paper, while not overlooking narrative's risks, focuses on the practical opportunities that narrative practices create for peacebuilders.

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"No one ever thinks a story that is wholly original to that person, and no one ever thinks a story alone."

—Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 2010<sup>1</sup>

"I make no attempt to define stories. The emphasis is on watching them act, not seeking their essence."

—Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 2010<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Arthur Frank's short epigraphs above illustrate two important facts about story: first, it is a social process, and second, this social process has some degree of both interdependent and independent agency. That stories are collective, and that they themselves "act" may seem obvious, but too often these understandings of stories are overlooked by those seeking to understand social violence. Too often a common conception of stories as mythic and, therefore, inaccurate or subjective expressions, suppresses the powers of stories as social constructions and distinct social actors in and of themselves. These two ways of thinking about stories are crucial to the argument of this paper; they form a backbone to the narrative<sup>3</sup> about stories that I want to challenge. Following Frank, the distinction between story and narrative, though used interchangeably in colloquial language, is best understood by arguing that stories generate broader narratives. While stories have a storyteller, narratives are established via multiple storytellers. Further, contrary to the common belief that stories are individual creations devoid of any narrative agency, this paper argues that stories have profound impact on peacebuilding from below and on the future-oriented and collective goal of the reconciliation of both past violence and ongoing conflict. As intentional social practices, storytelling and testimony develop the means to battle both past and present violence and injustice. If mindfully used, stories can build both an accounting of, and resilience to, human rights abuses. Still, despite the important role that human rights activists play as critical actors in broader peacebuilding processes, they rarely harness the full opportunities that story affords. For those concerned with peace and social change, the power of storytelling to produce social change, what Frank would call "letting stories breathe,"<sup>4</sup> is a critical resource to unmask and manage.

Humans live through story.<sup>5</sup> As listeners, tellers, and actors in stories we tell our past lives, but we also socially construct our present and future aspirations and realities. Stories do not simply articulate what people have experienced; they also work to condition our beliefs and behaviours and "position"<sup>6</sup> us in a yet realized future. For Frank, the stories we "hitch a ride on"<sup>7</sup> are often "unchosen choices"<sup>8</sup> that call for what Frank terms a "socio-narratology."<sup>9</sup> The stories we tell build a wider collective narrative and, at the same time, are conditioned by this narrative. The uncertainty of stories holds power for change and transformation, but how we harness this power often remains an untapped mystery. This paper is about how we can

excavate stories by noticing the future-going possibilities of a story's life and appreciating story's creative power to build pro-social narratives. More specifically, the work looks at how marginalized communities utilize discursive practices, namely storytelling and community organizing, to contest against an unresponsive local and state malfeasance and hegemonic bureaucracy to ensure basic rights and state services for the marginalized. In pursuing this work, I am, to paraphrase Frank, less concerned about what stories are than about what enables them to produce their transformative social effects. In living through story, we give narratives meaning. This paper aims to help us understand the emotional and social resonance of stories of past violence and the important value of such stories as agents of change.

In following an Indian human rights organization's use of what they call "testimonial therapy" to create a "self suffering story,"<sup>10</sup> this paper explores the complex interconnections between marginalization, narration, and reconciliation; between stories and narrative change; and between narrative change and social change. As Jill Lapore has written, "the problem with stories, which is that they personalize, . . . [is] also their power."<sup>11</sup> In taking stories seriously, as a way of knowing, one realizes that stories open a number of questions that numbers alone cannot address. How does the legacy of past emotional and psychological trauma impact the present? How do stories work to create pro-social emplotments<sup>12</sup> for the socially underprivileged in a society? How does one harness these pro-social emplotments to create "justpeace?"<sup>13</sup> Finally, how do stories create and change the "political opportunity structures"<sup>14</sup> of social change actors over time? In answering these questions, the inseparability of the social processes of marginalization, narration, and reconciliation becomes increasingly apparent. Further, one must become familiar and comfortable with the stories of those with experiences quite different from one's own, as well as with epistemologies that privilege narrative storytelling. This paper argues that attention to narrative structure is of critical importance in this process. Narrative, as "a representation that arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents,"<sup>15</sup> has the power to control both present storytelling and future discourse about a subject. Therefore, understanding narrative structure represents a key aspect of ensuring that the power of story is controlled by the storytellers themselves.

To foreground the important agency of storytelling, this paper is

intentionally organized around what William Labov has called the “full-formed narrative.”<sup>16</sup> Latching onto narrative structure exposes the wider meanings and impacts of story. As Labov says, “Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, ‘So what?’ Every good narrator is continually warding off this question.”<sup>17</sup> Structuring this essay as a story about a story models the power and complexity of storytelling’s ability to create constructive social change through attention to the micro-processes of narrative shift. As a fully formed model of narrative structure, this paper, through its very structure, argues for the importance of narrative testimony in social change. One does not tell stories about torture for simple entertainment—they are a call to question normative order and, thus, are agents of social change. However, this change must find resonance with a diverse array of social actors if constructive social change is to take root. Labov’s narrative structure exposes how fully formed narratives cycle through “complex chainings and embeddings of these elements: orientation . . . complicating action . . . evaluation . . . result or resolution . . . and coda.”<sup>18</sup> These six locatable elements provide a clear methodological framework for both any socially impactful story and for the narrative implications that form the broader argument implicit in this paper. In a sense, drawing attention to structure does what a narrative does to a story—it acts as a flexible backdrop for both meaning creation and measuring social change. Briefly, Labov’s narrative structure, which can be more easily identified by asking a series of analytical questions, is outlined below:

1. *Abstract (A)*: What is the story about?
2. *Orientation (O)*: Who, When, Where?
3. *Complicating Action (CA)*: What happened and then what happened?
4. *Evaluation (E)*: So what? How or why is this interesting?
5. *Result or resolution (R)*: What finally happened?
6. *Coda (C)*: That is it—the narrative is complete and the speaker brings the listener back to the present situation. No question is necessary here as this ending is usually evident—the good story teller focuses listeners in such a way that the coda literally brings them out of an almost dream-like state.<sup>19</sup>

Invoking this simple narrative structure provides an analytical framework or map for all work on story. One must map the structure of stories in

order to understand the critical and pragmatic peacebuilding opportunities stories open in broader narratives. The remainder of this paper takes us from orientation onward through the story of the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights' testimonial therapy project and reminds us that, beyond myth or abstraction, "stories set the very terms of strategic action."<sup>20</sup>

#### ORIENTATION: PLACE OF SETTING

As if story itself does not involve enough ambiguity and paradox, the setting of the story I want to tell takes place amidst the deep social and historical paradoxes of an ancient city. While representations of this city abound, the unique paradoxes of this place form the core of our story. Banaras, also known as Varanasi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, sits on the banks of the Ganges river in Northern India and is seat to both Hindu orthodoxy and the celebrated religious syncretism of important pluralistic sages like Kabir and Tulsidas. That Banaras is a historically complicated place is not in question. As Pankaj Mishra says in describing the 1980s Banaras of his acclaimed novel *The Romantics*, "the past does live on, in people as well as cities."<sup>21</sup> How this past is remembered and narrated impacts present and future life in Banaras. At least since Mark Twain's now famous description of Banaras as "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend,"<sup>22</sup> Western images have marked Banaras as the centre of orientalist wonder and exotic mysticism. What complicates this view of Banaras is the paradoxical reality of both modern violent communal tension and peaceful religious association.<sup>23</sup> That these two competing metanarratives about place coexist in one space demands careful attention to justice, identity, and memory. Stories are the fodder that orients us towards such critical attention, and a place like Banaras exposes the complex ways in which justice, identity, and memory are imbedded and overlap with each other. Further, the deeply historical paradoxes of a place like Banaras, though seemingly benign, are indeed critical to understanding the processes of narrative change. Such historical paradox is critical orientation to the positive peace outcomes inherent in the broader narratives of Banaras.

Banaras is a diverse and stratified place. Though one may assume it is largely Hindu, roughly a quarter of the population of modern Banaras is Muslim.<sup>24</sup> Many live in metaphorical and real "mini-Pakistans"<sup>25</sup> or Muslim ghettos within the city. Outside the city the situation is different. Low-caste labourers till the land of wealthy landlords in the villages that surround

Banaras. These Muslim ghettos and rural labourers make up the core of the poorest and most underdeveloped region of emerging and “shining”<sup>26</sup> India. Despite the rapid development of the Indian subcontinent, which is coming, ever so slowly, to Banaras, these suburban areas remain overlooked pockets of underdevelopment. Many of these low-caste villagers join the workforce as bonded labourers in the many brick kilns that dot the rural landscape outside the city. Within these marginalized areas of the city and its suburbs, fear, violence, and poverty have been the norm for decades, if not centuries. Beyond the regular child deaths due to starvation in these rural environs of Banaras, the constant harassment by the wealthy landed high-castes and their well-bribed and controlled local police force leaves little space for mass development or uplift. While the gap between wealthy and poor continues to rise, and Banaras city continues to develop, the relative rank of Uttar Pradesh in terms of human development has stagnated near the bottom of all Indian states and provinces.<sup>27</sup> This place, a milieu of ancient lifestyles, poor villagers, and rapidly modernizing growth of economically “liberalized” India, provides the setting for powerful corruption and abuse. Torture and excessive police force coupled with the marginalized peoples’ fear of violence leads to indifference to change and hierarchical inequality. Torture and organized violence has become a means of elite control and maintenance of the status quo in Banaras.

The Hindu powerful elites of the city maintain control and authority over the Muslim and low-castes of Banaras society in a number of ways. Social norms related to power distance<sup>28</sup> circumscribe relationships between and across elite and marginal social boundaries, and justification for these boundaries is centuries old. These “backward classes,” the actual officially “de-politicized” term used by the Indian government to describe these Muslims and low-caste “have nots” of society, have little access to the means to challenge the powerful. On the other hand, the powerful are often unaware of their privilege and take their social position for granted. This is the ideal setting for marginalization and abuse of those deemed low on the social hierarchy. In this setting, the stories people publically tell work to maintain the social status quo in complex and opaque ways. However, counter-narratives of grave injustice, what I call “injustice narratives,”<sup>29</sup> have an insurgent effect on this status quo. The public telling of injustice narratives renders the opaque social arrangements of marginalization and oppression visible and provides opportunities to contest and challenge the asymmetric system.

But as soon as injustice narratives begin to challenge the status quo, who is the oppressor and who is the victim becomes contested terrain. This paper argues that one can begin to explore this contestation through the qualitative analysis of narrative structure and epistemology. Such are the partisan complexities that Badri Narayan brings out in his discussion of the politics of communalism among Musahars, a large low-caste group in abundance outside of Banaras. Narayan writes, “It is thus evident that the communities are themselves working on the project of using their own myths for developing themselves, but the same myths and the same community spaces are being exploited by the political forces to serve their own interests.”<sup>30</sup>

The most outward expression of elite control comes through the direct violence of the most public means of control: the police. While such a statement does not aim to mask the complexities of structural violence inherent in Banaras, it does aim to draw attention to the role of the police force, and specifically custodial torture, in maintaining elite control. Stories of this modern practice can also develop a means of resistance. Through re-inscribing the narrative of control, and the act of publically naming it, activists can use the stories of torture to challenge elite marginalization and rewrite their place in the social life of Banaras. In short, stories of past trauma and suffering, often assumed to control “victims,” can work to build positive futures for “survivors” through humanizing and memorializing harms, and can reflect the power, identity, and justice dynamics of a society like that found in Banaras. Torture and organized violence is the most powerful and present locus for the past trauma and present suffering of Banaras’ marginalized. It is towards understanding this complicating event that our story now turns.

#### COMPLICATING EVENT: CUSTODIAL TORTURE AND TESTOMONIAL THERAPY

It is through custodial torture that the state and its beneficiaries most clearly enact their power. Punishing the undesirable “others” reinforces the power, identity, and sense of justice for the Hindu elite and exposes the elite’s naked power. Activist testimonies about custodial torture provide a deep reservoir of data to develop the connection between post-colonial violence and ongoing narratives of marginalization. In arguing for a definition of torture that can be used in cross-cultural historical analysis, Christopher Einof argues that motive and morality must be left out of the comparative

study of torture.<sup>31</sup> Despite the benefits for comparative analysis, such a rigid stipulation does not help explain torture's historical roots in social control or the practice's forward-going traumatic political and developmental effects on society. Torture as re-inscribing a psychological fear of the "other" compresses the space for acceptance and reconciliation within both tortured and torturer. Torture thus calcifies the identity borders of society and makes crossing them all the more dangerous. Impossible to describe as amoral, apolitical, or ahistorical, the practice of custodial torture speaks volumes to the powerless. In speaking an elite line of control, torture and organized violence reifies both colonial history and modern day partitions that are understood upon the backdrop of communal storylines about 1947's long Partition. Simultaneously, torture conjures a colonial memory and mindset and forms an ongoing experience of control of the marginalized. Thus, torture forms a critical complicating event in marginal stories and becomes a key tributary of the lives of the dispossessed and their community.

In following Einof's definition of custodial torture as "an act in which severe physical pain is intentionally inflicted on a person by a public official while that person is under the custody or control of that official where there has not been, or not yet been, a formal finding of guilt,"<sup>32</sup> one must be careful not to limit the study of torture only to behaviours. Behaviours themselves have meaning and residual effect; critical research obviously attempts to uncover the full political and social-psychological effects of behaviours such as torture. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that these after-effects of torture work to subtly control the marginalized and maintain the majority elite's hegemonic control. Torture reaffirms control by connecting recent individual trauma with past collective trauma. Torture also re-inscribes fear in society. As one torture survivor explains, "Seeing the police, my youngest son shakes in fear and says, 'Do not go there, Police is there.'"<sup>33</sup> The fear and trauma that torture instills feeds caste and communal identities and solidifies the perceived need for these constructed dichotomies. Until this fear and trauma has a social space of outlet, the colonial mentalities of divide and rule and collective punishment will continue to reinforce communal identity divides and reconciliation will remain a distant dream in a complex social milieu like Banaras.

The current use of torture in the Indian context can clearly be seen as a vestige of the colonial legacy of control because torture's lasting social and psychological effects evidently act to re-inscribe and maintain borders



and exclusions. This fact is, indeed, supported by Einof's claim that certain "general patterns"<sup>34</sup> arise in the cross-cultural practice of torture. The first of Einof's four general patterns is instructive here. Einof writes, "Torture is most commonly used against people who are not full members of a society, such as slaves, foreigners, prisoners of war, and members of racial, ethnic, and religious outsider groups."<sup>35</sup> Such a pattern easily applies to both low-castes and Muslims in the context of Banaras. Never being accepted as true Banaris—citizens of Banaras—these groups remain marginalized and excluded from Banaras culture as well as its economic growth and development. Failure to meet basic human needs is an important cause of protracted social conflict.<sup>36</sup> Custodial torture, as complicating event, simultaneously reinforces the status quo and maintains a sense of resistance and resilience.

Added to the obvious colonial foundations of custodial torture is an obvious lack of a well-trained, decentralized, locally empowered, and adequately paid Indian police force.<sup>37</sup> Still, colonialism and lack of training do not fully explain the depth or scope of the problem of custodial torture.

From 2001 to 2010, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) recorded 14,231 custodial deaths. These deaths reflect only a fraction of the problem with torture and custodial deaths in India. Not all the cases of deaths in police and prison custody are reported to the NHRC.<sup>38</sup>

While statistics only generally point to the long psychological legacies of trauma, they do reveal something more measurable. During this same period (2001-10), only Maharashtra with 250 deaths topped Uttar Pradesh's 174 custodial deaths in police custody. Further, Uttar Pradesh topped the list with 2,171 deaths in judicial custody.<sup>39</sup> Thus, people awaiting charges were more likely to die not knowing the charges against them in Uttar Pradesh than anywhere else in India. Clearly, a friend's description of Banaras as "feudal"<sup>40</sup> is not far from the truth when one sees Uttar Pradesh, India's most populated State, outstripping all other States in such indicators of human rights abuse. One could further make the logical argument that the North East region ranks the worst for police torture in all of India.<sup>41</sup> Though such statistics only scratch the surface of the problem of police torture in India, they give clear evidence of the regional and identity-based power dynamics at play in the use of torture. The class-based and caste-ist hierarchy undergirding present-day Banaras—the centre of the least developed region of India—has clearly adopted custodial torture as a tactic of control.<sup>42</sup> In Banaras, custodial torture statistics provide a macro image of a "culture of

impunity”<sup>43</sup> around those who use force to maintain control.

Challenging elite control and force in Banaras can be a dangerous activity. Human rights leaders in the city often express fear and anger over real and perceived intimidation.<sup>44</sup> With the aim of empowering local human rights workers in and around Banaras, the People’s Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR) uses the power of storytelling to challenge the elite discourse about caste, ethnicity, and difference in Indian society. PVCHR’s work aims to reconstruct the grammar of the marginalized so as to awaken an awareness of privilege in the powerful. PVCHR’s indigenous process of testimonial therapy not only develops marginalized resistance to dominant hegemony but also develops a legal and emotional testimony of the experiences of modern torture survivors by state agents. PVCHR, a member-based human rights movement, began in 1996 in Banaras. In working with women, children, Dalits, adavasi (tribal communities), and Muslims, PVCHR works to ensure human rights and build grassroots advocacy for human rights issues in the surrounding villages of Banaras. Currently working at the grassroots level in over 120 villages in Uttar Pradesh, the PVCHR has a developed network of activists across India who are working to create “people friendly” villages<sup>45</sup> aimed at opening space for the marginalized to work for, and talk of, positive social change. Since 2009, PVCHR has been partnering with a Danish organization to devise a unique approach to “the widespread use of torture in police custody,”<sup>46</sup> which they call testimonial therapy. This procedure of creating the “self-suffering story”<sup>47</sup> works to produce both legal testimony and subjective, emotional, and cathartic release of suffering, which culminates with a ceremony of public sharing. This narrative process not only empowers rural human rights activists, giving them voice and agency in a system that allows them little, but it also unmask the suffering in the lives of marginal “anti-national others” in Indian society. Testimonial therapy brings injustice narratives into the public discourse and opens an important space for grievance to be heard.

PVCHR activist testimonies provide a rich reservoir of narrative data to develop the connection between telling and making change, and such data moves our story through Labov’s elemental chaining of evaluation and towards resolution. The testimonials that the PVCHR’s staff help to develop provide the means to analyze the role that narrative conflict intervention may play in reconciling competing interests, traumatic memory, and collaborative futures. As stated in PVCHR’s own documents, “The point of departure

for our campaigning and political lobbying is always the meticulous analysis of the individual case.”<sup>48</sup> Such a particularized individual case approach decentres the dominant discourse of communal “othering” and raises the voice of individual victims to the fore. The transactional empowerment that the telling of past and present violence creates provides links to a future desire for nonviolent outcomes and helps activists envision futures as survivors. Recreating the stories of torture helps identify how parties are employed in social marginalization, and the testimonies collected open an analytical window that not only exposes evaluation but moves us towards resolution.

#### EVALUATION: NARRATIVE RECONCILIATION AS A WALK THROUGH HISTORY—WHY WHAT HAPPENS MATTERS

First developed in India by Lenin Raghuvanshi and Shabana Khan from the PVCHR,<sup>49</sup> in collaboration with Inger Agger of The Rehabilitation and Research Center for Victims of Torture (RCT-Denmark),<sup>50</sup> the testimonial therapy process is performed over four sessions, where, in various stages, the torture victim shares and processes suffering. The culmination of the process is the delivery of the testimony in the form of a public ceremony, called an honour ceremony, in the village.<sup>51</sup> This public culmination, during which testimonial narrative is read into a public space, is both emotional and cathartic. While a US Fulbright Fellow in Banaras, I was privileged to be invited to one of these long evening honour ceremonies. The ceremony process is a village event in which everyone from the village comes out in support. Performances of skits, music, and dance are interspersed with awareness raising about rights and rights abuse. A community meal is served at the end of the main event, the testimonial reading. This reading, often done by the torture survivor but sometimes by a close friend or family member, is offered in a caring and supportive atmosphere. The cultural and community building aspects of these ceremonies are as central to PVCHR’s work as the testimony itself. Experience and trust in this process works towards PVCHR’s ultimate vision of building “people friendly” villages in which there is “no violation of civil rights granted to a citizen by the state.”<sup>52</sup> As the culmination of a months-long process of narrative therapy, writing, rewriting, and finalizing the torture survivor’s story, the public testimony becomes a central organizing event for the community. As such, the honour ceremony represents a narrative climax in the suffering of individual survivor and community.

The story does not end with the conclusion of the public ceremony. The life of the story continues in verbal retelling in the community. The celebratory nature of the public ceremony leads to fond memories and acts as a means to memorialize tragedy as something more positive for the community. Some of these stories also live on in a written publication of the story in PVCHR's magazine, *Giving Voice to the Voiceless*, if the torture survivor and his/her family so chooses. Below is a brief re-creation of one such exemplar public testimonial taken from PVCHR's periodical. I have followed it with a brief case analysis which links the therapeutic relevance and social impact of the narrative to ideas of conflict transformation and social change. In terms of narrative structure, the honour ceremony is the link between complicating action, evaluation, and resolution, though in the telling, these elements of such a traumatic story become inseparable. To overcome the asymmetric power imbalances between the elite and the marginal, such narrative interventions as represented in the honour ceremony are needed on a much larger scale. To address the lingering legacy of the structural, cultural, and direct violence which is re-inscribed through torture, the space and structures for narrative sharing and dialogue need to be created. Without such an ability to hear the stories of past marginalization and abuse, future attempts at peacebuilding and reconciliation are forestalled. Asha's story below lets other stories and broader discourse about marginalization breathe.

Though the dynamic of communal relations is always shifting, reflecting on particular traumatic events is critical for marshalling these dynamics towards positive outcomes. In this regard, the approach to historical justice of Joseph Montville<sup>53</sup> provides valuable resources for a place like Banaras and its context of custodial torture where the potential for violence is ever present. In the words of Montville, "From the perspective of psychologically sensitive conflict resolution interventions, the challenge in dealing with victimhood psychology is that of reviving the mourning process, which has been suspended as a result of traumatic experience and helping it move toward completion."<sup>54</sup>

While reviving trauma may seem counter-intuitive, it is just such historical analysis that, if not acknowledged, becomes displaced as future violence. What Joseph Montville calls "a walk through history"<sup>55</sup> allows those traumatized by past violence to interrogate and acknowledge the historical roots of this trauma. Anti-racism and oppression educators have long realized the need for acknowledgement and have attempted to address,

not suppress, past violence as a means to building not only knowledge of suffering but privileged allies ready to spread that knowledge: “What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice.”<sup>56</sup> It is in the persistence of violence as a social practice, exhibited in a phenomenon like custodial torture, that marginality is maintained and constructed. Only through telling and reflecting on these traumatic stories can conflict transformation begin.

PVCHR’s testimonial therapy may be aimed at building “critical consciousness”<sup>57</sup> among the oppressed, but it has the added benefit of educating the privileged to take action. In building personal self-esteem of past victims, it also builds collective self-esteem of traditionally marginalized communities. Of the 361 survivors involved in PVCHR/RCT’s project on testimonial therapy, 89 percent of them are from scheduled caste backgrounds.<sup>58</sup> The public stories fashioned from the experiences of these testimonial therapy participants form the vanguard of a slow walk-cum-march through history. The broad psychological effects of these testimonies develop the seedbed of future collective reconciliation. Just as collective punishment acts to silence marginal communities, collective retelling works to unbuckle the dominant discourse of past atrocity and unfetter a long-marginalized and overlooked community voice. This is the “so what”<sup>59</sup> of stories of torture and organized violence like Asha’s below—stories matter and their retelling does have an impact on the social healing needed for conflict transformation and reconciliation. Though the caste calculus remains the “final denominator”<sup>60</sup> for all social interaction in and around Banaras, the stories of the marginalized provide a means to build allies, self-confidence, and community change. While such accounting is a critical tool for modern day human rights advocacy, the accounting of past trauma remains a too little tapped instrument in attempts at creating lasting social transformation of past injustices. Asha’s story is each of our stories.

#### RESOLUTION: THE STORY WITHIN STORY—THE TELLING MATTERS AS ATROCITIES DO STILL HAPPEN IN MODERN INDIA

Asha Mushahar<sup>61</sup> is a forty year-old labourer and black market hawker living in Varanasi (Banaras) District, Uttar Pradesh. In 2010, Asha narrated a story of torture and harassment to PVCHR field staff that underscores the

embedded nature of caste and communal legacies of violence, as well as the constructed identity such legacies support. Threatened by police to register his small shop, Asha went with a local Gram Panchayat (local counsel) leader to the local police station to see what could be done to get the police off his back. After being told to wait for hours, the police finally took him in the back of the station, “planted a knife,”<sup>62</sup> and accused him of using it for a recent burglary. He was “booked under public nuisance”<sup>63</sup> and locked up for the night. Although Asha had suffered harassment by the police since the age of fourteen, he had never been treated like this; such treatment forms the abstract for the torture testimony Asha tells. Prior to this incident, he still had some trust that the police and authorities would treat him with dignity. After taking a loan to cover the 6,000 rupee bail (around US\$150), Asha attempted to move from his basti and operate his hand cart selling goods in a different section of Banaras. Despite this attempt at reorientation, again the police found him and broke into his house in the middle of the night to arrest him on another burglary charge. Beaten incessantly upon arrest, Asha, his father, and his uncle were all locked up this time. Despite their injuries, they received no first aid. They suffered torture and abuse for three years in jail before their case was finally dismissed. In describing the fear and torment of beatings during his custody, the deprivation of food, and the hard labour he endured while in jail—the complicating action in his story—Asha appears almost emotionless. He says simply, “it seemed that what crime we have committed was being born a ‘Mushahar.’”<sup>64</sup> Notice how Asha equates the injustice he endures directly with his identity and community and not with ill-training or unjust practices of the local police. The clear and immediate recourse to communal analysis is not surprising in multicultural and divided Banaras. Further, from a narrative perspective, the imbricated nature of the complicating action and Asha’s evaluations is normal. Asha’s brief account of his plight reveals the deeply embedded nature of communal identities and reminds one of the real costs of crossing the line of control. His early assertion of rights and attempt to equal power with the help of local leadership was clearly seen as an affront to existent systems of control and authority.

After his release and loss of three years of his life and livelihood, there was little room for recompense. With little accountability and long odds against change or reparations, Asha felt alone and powerless. This is the underlying social consequence and elite intent of torture and abuse—to assert

control and place deviant non-citizens in their place, pliant and unwilling to stand up for their rights. Low in confidence and high in social anxiety, Asha returned to street hawking as a profession but avoided being in public unless necessary for his work and he became less assertive about anything. The legacy of his experiences in Indian jail left him socially anxious and pliable as a subject—he was not one likely to question authority or even discuss change. However, this sense of powerlessness actually propelled Asha towards some resolution. While few organizations fill this activist space for change and reparations as the work is both long-term and dangerous, Asha's connection with the PVCHR opened a path to fill such space.

The role of local testimonial therapy as conflict prevention cannot be understated here—it helps “survivors regain self-esteem and dignity”<sup>65</sup> but it also “creates a democratic structure for the voiceless to enable them access to the constitutional guarantees of modern India.”<sup>66</sup> This local response is critical to change the dominant discourse of oppression and begin to challenge the delegitimizing reality that torture engenders. Like Muslims, the Mushahars have been completely absent from the historical record of Banaras, and testimonial therapy helps these communities regain their historical place and identity. It provides a sense of self and self-esteem that has been taken by years of neglect and violent control. By providing them the space and structure to express their psychological needs and humanity, the testimonial therapy process creates an opportunity to analytically and emotionally address immediate and long-term grievances. Without such space and structure, past psychological needs go unmet and communal conflict continues and has space to spiral and grow. While the immediate consequences of testimonial therapy are not always evident, the long-term impacts are clearer. The self-respect and dignity that long-term attempts at testimonial therapy engender enables engaged citizens to develop voice. This creation of voice itself acts like a narrative coda bringing victims out of their “dream-like”<sup>67</sup> shell and empowering them as survivors.

Asha's story also underscores both the elite use of violence to control and further separate the marginal from the Banarsi centre, and the need to share suffering and injustice to ensure that reconciliation and co-existence are possible. This paradox, when shared publically, becomes a resource for communities to build confidence, grow awareness, and agitate for change. The disclosure of torment and torture allows the community to more openly and publically express that “we know about it.” This public confidence is

strengthened in the retelling of the stories long after the public ceremony is over. This shift in community discourse about their place in society further builds the self-esteem of past victims of torture and makes their shift to survivors faster and smoother. The outcome of the testimonial therapy process, though not complete resolution, does move the community towards reconciliation and healing through awakening and identity awareness. This is true even if few elites participate or take notice. As John Paul and Angela Lederach remind us, “individual and social healing do not follow and are rarely experienced along ‘lines’ of phase-based progression.”<sup>68</sup> Asha’s story illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of movement towards reconciliation and healing, even if Banaras’s marginalized have a long way to go to reach a state of resolution.

### CONCLUSIONS: CODA

While astute readers will have noticed that I ordered the telling of Asha’s story to illustrate Labov’s and Michael Toolan’s ordering of narrative structure, I do not want to signal that, even though Asha’s story is complete, the narrative of Asha’s marginalization is somehow resolved simply through the retelling of his story. That such narrative structure exists in the stories of custodial torture in Banaras tells us that resistance to violence and oppression, though extremely difficult in such a place, is indeed possible and ongoing. In the proceeding story of this research, I have only begun to answer how stories drive a process of change; but that they do should not be left to question. While the many complexities of the relationship between story and change requires more research focus and scholarly attention, the power of story is known by activists like those working at the PVCHR. Unfortunately, such attention to story has been overshadowed by focus on quantitative explanation and evidence-based research, and transformative qualitative research has only been more widely embraced since the early 1990s.<sup>69</sup> With the rise of global problems such as the widening of the gap between rich and poor, the need to focus research on oppression and marginalized communities could not be greater. In exposing the complex interconnections between marginalization, narration, and reconciliation, the work of PVCHR sheds light not only on systems of elite oppression of marginal communities but also on the power of story to create social change. By building “memory justice”<sup>70</sup> and what we may call identity justice through challenging existing narratives and discursive relationships, narrative therapy can be a revolutionary means to



societal change for the marginalized.

The historical complexity of Banaras creates many resources for storytelling and change. In developing the agency of local people, PVCHR activists are revealing some of these untapped resources of both historical memory and place. The many competing conceptions of Banaras expose real and hidden unmet psychological needs and yet also conspire to keep these needs little noticed, obscure, and under-addressed. Slowly, the work of human rights movements like PVCHR are taking a central role in public discourse. For discourses of positive peace<sup>71</sup> to take root in the complexity of modern Banaras, sinews of interdependence between ongoing communal violence and historical “chosen trauma”<sup>72</sup> must be excavated and discussed. This “walk through history” as Montville<sup>73</sup> calls it, is critical to building lasting peace in the present. It unmasks trauma’s legacy and reveals social spaces for empathy and future-going reconciliation. Banaras has seen many examples of communal rioting and violent outbreaks, including riots in 1809, 1952, 1972, 1977, and 1991, to name a few.<sup>74</sup> Still, when communal violence does occur in the city, as it did more recently in 2006 and 2010, there is immediate realist recourse to political causes and quantification of grievances. Such analysis, though important, often misses the voices of those most marginalized. To elicit that voice, trauma reduction work, which is in its infancy, must be amplified and expanded.

Stories are collective and we must reclaim them as such if we hope to build peace amidst historical marginalization and asymmetric power. PVCHR’s work of testimonial therapy with torture victims is an exemplar of the work that needs more resources and publicity. Stories of trauma and injustice help the powerful to become aware of their privilege, empower the identities of the voiceless, and develop important allies among the powerful. The role of local testimonial therapy as conflict prevention and transformation cannot be understated. Hearing the stories of “others” can have the social effect of not only empathy but a desire to increased action. Stories themselves act and focusing on their agency as a resource can have transformative social outcomes. Humans talk in stories and stories talk for collectives. If we listen, change, however slowly, will come to those working to overcome oppression and develop reconciliation.

## ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 10.
2. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 21.
3. I intentionally use the word *narrative* here to describe the broader forces at play when people tell stories. As Frank argues “Narratives are the resources from which people construct the stories they tell.” Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 14.
4. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*.
5. See Catherine Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1993), and William Labov, *Language of the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).
6. Fathali Moghaddam, Rom Harre, and Naoim Lee, “Positioning and Conflict: An Introduction,” in *Global Conflict Resolution Through Positioning Analysis*, ed. Fathali Moghaddam, Rom Harre, and Naoim Lee (New York: Springer, 2008), 3-20.
7. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 25.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
9. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 22.
10. People’s Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), *Voice of the Voiceless* 1, no. 1 (November 2010).
11. Jill Lapore, “Richer and Poorer: Accounting for Inequality,” *New Yorker*, 16 March 2015, 30.
12. In describing the idea of emplotment as a “jargonistic term” Frank (2010) writes, “To emplot is to propose a plot that transforms what are still incoherent things-that-are-happening into experience that has meaning.” Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, 136-37.
13. Lisa Schirch, “Ritual Reconciliation: Transforming Identity/Reframing Conflict,” in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), 145-61.

14. Sidney Tarrow, *Power-In-Movement: Social Movement and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
15. Bob Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book* (London: Pinter, 1989), 263.
16. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 363.
17. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 366.
18. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 363.
19. Adapted from Michael Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 148.
20. Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like A Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4.
21. Pankaj Mishra, *The Romantics* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 3.
22. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1897).
23. See Priyankar Upadhyaya, *Communal Peace in India: Lessons from Multicultural Banaras*, Occasional Working Paper, Banaras Hindu University, 2010, and Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2002).
24. Jonathan Perry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33.
25. Vasanthi Raman, *The Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 276-77.
26. In 2004, Grey Worldwide, a Delhi-based advertising firm developed the phrase “India Shining” to market India internationally. It soon was adopted by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) in the 2004 national elections and has been credited by some with the 2014 electoral win of current BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
27. The 2011 India Human Development Report ranks Uttar Pradesh 18th out of 23 states in India, a ranking that is unchanged from the 1999-2000 HDI ranking. See *India Human Development Report 2011: Toward Social Inclusion*, Oxford University Press, [http://www.iamrindia.gov.in/ihdr\\_book.pdf](http://www.iamrindia.gov.in/ihdr_book.pdf).

28. See Geert Hofstede, *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010).
29. See Jeremy Rinker, "Justpeace Propsects for Worldview Tolerance: A South Asian Movement's Social Construction of Justice" (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2009). There I define injustice narratives as the stories that people tell about lack of fairness, equality, and justice. I distinguish them from justice narratives, which are not only their opposite, but also of a retrospective rather than a projective quality.
30. Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2009), 156.
31. Christopher Einof, "The Fall and Rise of Torture: A Comparative and Historical Analysis," *Sociological Theory* 25, no. 2 (2007): 101-21.
32. Einof, "The Fall and Rise of Torture," 103.
33. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 2, no. 2 (September 2011).
34. Einof, "The Fall and Rise of Torture," 105.
35. Einof, "The Fall and Rise of Torture," 105.
36. See John Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Provention* (New York: St Martin's, 1990).
37. Since independence the Indian state has dramatically increased its police force. Paul Brass reports that between 1953 and 1983 there was an 87 percent increase in police strength in India. Paul Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 59. Despite the almost equivalent population growth in post-independence India, the majority of the police growth was on the lower levels (i.e., head constables and constables) and this growth was not accompanied by adequate training. Human Rights Watch, *Broken System* (New Delhi: Human Rights Watch Asia, 2009), <http://www.hrw.org/node/84624/section/1>.
38. Asian Centre for Human Rights, *Torture in India 2011* (New Delhi: Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2011), 1, <http://www.achrweb.org>.
39. Asian Centre for Human Rights, *Torture in India 2011*, 2-3.
40. Mr. Paranjape, neighbor in Banaras, in discussion with author, April 2013.

41. The tiny neighboring State of Bihar was second on the list with 1,512 deaths in judicial custody. Asian Centre for Human Rights, *Torture in India* (2011), 2.
42. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that outside of the Banaras region the next highest incidence of custodial torture occurs in the state of Maharashtra—the hotbed of anti-caste agitation. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994) and Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2006), among others, for more on this orientation toward the story of anti-caste revolution and control.
43. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 1, no. 1 (November 2010), 45.
44. Lenin Raghuvanshi, Founder and Director of the PVCHR, interview with author, May 2013.
45. PVCHR's vision of social change is based on the Hindi concept of Jan Mitra (literally "people friendly"). This humanist vision underlies all PVCHR's work for democratic society. For more on this democratic human rights vision and how it informs the organization's mission, see <http://pvchr.asia/vision.php>, accessed August 27, 2015.
46. Lenin Raghuvanshi, Shabanna Khan, and Inger Agger, *Giving Voice: Using Testimonial Therapy Intervention in Psychosocial Community Work for Survivors of Torture and Organized Violence—A Manual for Community Workers and Human Rights Defenders* (Uttar Pradesh, India: PVCHR, 2008), 6.
47. Raghuvanshi, Khan, and Agger, *Giving Voice*, 9.
48. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 1, no. 1 (November 2010), 46.
49. For more information on the inter-institutional approach of PVCHR, see <http://pvchr.asia/>.
50. In 2012 RCT Denmark became Dignity: Danish Institute Against Torture. For more information on their work, see <https://www.dignityinstitute.org/>.
51. Raghuvanshi, Khan, and Agger, *Giving Voice*, 12-16.

52. See <http://pvchr.asia/vision.php>, accessed 27 August 2015.
53. See Joseph Montville, "Reconciliation as Realpolitik: Facing the Burdens of History in Political Conflict Resolution," in *From Conflict Resolution to Peacebuilding*, ed. Ho-Won Jeong (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012) and Joseph Montville, "Justice and the Burdens of History" in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence*, ed. Mohammed Abu Nimer (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2001).
54. Montville, "Justice and The Burdens of History," 133.
55. Montville, "Justice and the Burdens of History," 323.
56. Iris Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 43.
57. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 183.
58. Raghuvanshi, *Justice, Liberty, Equality*, 27.
59. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 148.
60. Lenin Raghuvanshi, *Justice, Liberty, Equality: Dalits in Independent India* (Kolkata: Front Page, 2012), 29.
61. This narrative retelling comes from the written testimony of Asha Mushahar recorded 15 October 2010 that was later published in PVCHR's publication, *Voice of the Voiceless 2*, no. 2 (September 2011): 5-6. Mushahars are on the bottom the local caste system of graded inequality and are among the poorest populations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and neighboring Bihar. The Mushahar name is said to derive from two words meaning "rat catcher" and it is assumed that this name came from the tendency to eat rodents in times of famine. In fact, it is not uncommon today in Varanasi to hear these people described and dehumanized as "mouse eaters" or "rural untouchables." These are the communities that Narayan underscores as resisting through the recreation of oral myths and legends of their community, and how, in turn, these myths have been co-opted by political elites to mobilize mass political support (Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*). Such "hidden transcripts" of the marginalized play an important role in both the resistance of marginalized identities like the Mushahar, and in effective attempts at reconciliation for past wrongs and injustice. James Scott,

*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

62. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 2, no. 2: 5.
63. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 2, no. 2: 5.
64. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 2, no. 2: 6.
65. Raghuvanshi, *Justice, Liberty, Equality*, 59.
66. PVCHR, *Voice of the Voiceless* 1, no. 1: 45.
67. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 148.
68. John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 45.
69. John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 19.
70. James Booth, "The Unforgotten: Memories of Justice," *The American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 788.
71. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 183.
72. Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 48.
73. Montville, "Justice and the Burdens of History," 323.
74. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).