

Blackwell Readers in Sociology

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Comparative and Theoretical Approaches



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13 Rioting Across Continental Divides

Beth Roy

Introduction

In 1954 in a small East Pakistani village called Panipur, a cow ate a lentil plant in somebody else's field and a fight ensued. The cow was owned by a Muslim family, the plant by Hindus. Before too many days, a riot grew to enormous proportions and was put down by official force. Four people died, and relations between Hindus and Muslims in Panipur were never quite the same again.

In 1957 in a medium-sized city called Little Rock in the state of Arkansas in the USA, nine black students tried to enroll in a public high school that had always educated only white teenagers. The Nine were turned away by official force, while a crowd of angry white people raged outside. No one died but many were injured in one way or another, and relations between black and white people in Little Rock were never quite the same again.

Despite near-universal assumptions that conflict among people of unlike identities is a natural thing, old as history, destined to exist as long as humanity lives, just below the surface of the obvious swim many questions about these two events. In both places, the communities had lived side by side in apparent amity until the time when crisis hit. People in both places prided themselves on their record of peaceable relations. When a black man was lynched in Little Rock in the 1920s, white upper class women organized an effective anti-lynching movement that accounted for the absence of any lethal violence ever after. Indeed, it was because it was reputed to have good race relations that Little Rock was chosen as a site to start desegregating public schools following a Supreme Court order to that effect three years earlier – the same year the cow ate the plant in Panipur. Similarly, Panipur lay in a region in which Muslims had come forward in the years before the riot during the worst period of communal slaughter to protect Hindus and insist that their fellow religionists abstain from violence. It had been a model of intentional harmony in an era of uncontrolled communal frenzy elsewhere in Bengal.

Why then at those particular moments in time had both places exploded into hostilities? To assume the inevitability of identity-based conflict is to rule out all the most interesting questions. Drawing on research I've conducted over the past decade, I propose in this paper to compare two seemingly dissimilar occurrences in order to harvest insights into how group identities are constructed through acts of history-making, and in turn how the making of history shapes group identities.

I Unlikely Comparisons

In a sense, it was a matter of irrationality as curious as the events I researched that led me to study two such disparate sites as Panipur and Little Rock. What most obviously bound together these two places was my own biography. I grew up in the southern part of the United States, in a place struggling with the same racial issues that exploded in Little Rock. Years later, I lived in West Bengal and, also somewhat by chance, worked across the border in the Panipur region, in what by then had become Bangladesh. On both continents, I puzzled long and hard over animosities among people I both liked and respected. Disbelieving deeply that irrationality exists, I searched for reasons that explained hostilities so resistant to reasoned intervention. As a psychotherapist I have learned that context is everything in making sense of mysteries on a psychological level. Viewed from the perspective of an outsider, feelings and ideas may be incomprehensible, but from the perspective of the individual involved, every emotion and belief makes sense. As a sociologist I apply this theory to social issues, studying oral histories of those involved to make sense of puzzling social conflicts.

It was also a matter of biography that gave me access to the stories of Panipur villagers and white graduates of Central High School in Little Rock. Harboring great bitterness for the ways they felt they'd been misrepresented in previous representations of the Little Rock story, the graduates made a considered decision to talk with me. Because I, too, had graduated from a segregated southern high school in the same time frame, they believed I could tell their story with sympathy. So, too, the villagers in Bangladesh talked with me because I was introduced by development workers they respected, who in turn knew me through a project for which I'd volunteered the year before.

In the end, what both villagers and graduates told me spoke volumes about ambitions and problems in their own lives expressed in the language of social action, formulated in terms of identities. My study of each case delineated meanings in terms specific to that group and that time; to analyze both in the same breath is a tricky proposition, but nonetheless productive. Let us look at some dissimilarities and congruencies as focal points for a meaningful comparison.

Some contrasts are obvious:

- In Panipur, the Hindus and Muslims who fought were social equals in many respects. The Hindus involved were members of a lowly tribe called Namasudra; both communities consisted of poor farmers with many similar complaints of oppression at the hands of caste-Hindu landlords, most of whom had left for India after partition. Indeed, the Namasudras consciously opted to remain in Pakistan because they viewed their class alliance with the Muslim tillers as more advantageous to them than any gains they might reap from migration. Said Sunil, a Namasudra farmer, "Many of us believed then, 'Let the caste Hindus go, but those of us who are peasants, whether Hindus or Muslims, can live together as brothers.'" In Little Rock, however, there were vast social, economic, and political distinctions between the white and black people who came to blows. The whites who protested desegregation at Central High School were greatly

privileged in contrast to the black students seeking entry, although many of them were disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* other whites.

- While Namasudras and Muslims distinguished themselves by all sorts of cultural practices, ranging from modes of religious worship to dress to details of diet, they nonetheless shared an ethnic and racial commonality. Historically, each group probably derived from subaltern Bengali peoples (there is some question about the origins of Bengali Muslims, some scholars contending they were poor peasants who converted, others arguing that they were descendants of immigrants from Islamic lands.) In Little Rock, both whites and blacks at some point in their histories had arrived from other places, but by significantly different routes. White Arkansans descended from yeoman settlers making their way across the American continent in the 18th and 19th centuries and choosing for a variety of reasons to stop in that particular territory. Black Arkansans were the offspring of slaves, unwilling migrants to the new world who had won freedom but not liberty less than a hundred years before. Racially distinct (although frequent rape of black women by white slave owners accounted for a fair degree of genetic intertwining) and culturally different, the two groups interacted prototypically as servant to employer, not as economic actors with articulated class interests in common.
- Both occurrences I studied happened in a time of important change on a national level. But the specific contention involved was initiated and took place very differently. In Panipur, the immediate dispute was ordinary; cows ate neighbors' plants all the time. The conflagration appeared to be impulsive and spontaneous, although my study of it revealed that a good deal more consideration had gone into it than first met the eye. In Little Rock, the confrontation grew from many years of thoughtful action, both legal and political. African-American activists viewed school desegregation as only one step among many intended to advanced racial equity. They carefully prepared the ground for change, building a body of legal decisions on which the Supreme Court's order to desegregate schools was based. The selection of Little Rock as a site for desegregation and the publicity surrounding its achievement happened with intention, through political negotiation, according to plan. Similarly, the resistance to desegregation was engineered and encouraged through acts of rhetoric, community-level organizing, and political and economic coercion. There was little impulsive or spontaneous about events in Little Rock.

Despite these differences, Panipur and Little Rock have similarities that make their comparison fruitful:

- In both places, ordinary people, folks who did not normally see themselves as capable of influencing history, acted in ways that had historical impact.
- In both places, the state played an active role in complex interaction with the citizenry.
- In both places, the act of acting changed not only relationships between the identity groups involved, but the identities themselves. Moreover, those changes revealed interconnections among different identities, linking race, class, gender, and community in ways that made understandable the power and tenacity of each.

- Perhaps most striking, in both places ordinary people first described themselves as swept passively along by powerful forces not of their own making. But as their stories unfolded in detail, it became apparent that in fact they had made choices to act as they did, and those decisions made sense in the context in which they lived at the time.

2 Action and Intentionality

It is this last observation that opens up the theoretical territory I wish to explore. Why people made the choices they did became clear to me as I talked at length with them about the particular moments of crisis in the broader context of their life-stories. The unraveling of those puzzles is the subject of my two studies, *Some Trouble with Cows* and *Bitters in the Honey*. In brief, particular public behaviors expressed distinct problems of class and aspects of gender. Rather than elaborate these meanings further here, what I will address in this paper is *how* people made their choices. While every individual to whom I spoke told a story of his or her thinking and feeling at the time, I was very conscious of how interactions among individuals, and particularly how the modes of talk through which they communicated with each other, gave social significance to their individual decisions.

That the Bangladeshi Muslims made decisions as a community was clear in everybody's narrative. They met together and decided to stop tolerating minor village frictions which had been an irritating but acceptable part of life until that moment. As a community, they asserted a new set of rights and possibilities by declining traditional routes to peacemaking, taking stands which only a few years before would have been unthinkable. Golam, the Muslim man whose cow ate the plant, described how conscious that process was:

That evening, we Mussalmans held a meeting. We thought we could not go on living like this. They often threatened us, they threatened to beat us.

So, too, in Little Rock, the fracas was occasioned by thoughtful strategies of the black community to change accepted norms of their rights and possibilities. In both these cases, a particular group acted assertively to challenge a perceived injustice.

The other group, however, resisted that change. The Namasudras in Panipur acted in self-defense, believing themselves to be in jeopardy at the hands of the Muslims. Said Sunil, the Namasudra farmer:

Some people came and said, "They have damaged our crop. Moreover, they are saying provocative things. They're preparing themselves to beat us. What are we to do now?" The guardian sort of people among us said, "Don't do anything in advance. But be prepared to protect yourselves."

"The Mussalmans hit them and tore them up and burned their houses. How could they sit and tolerate it?" commented a Muslim villager sympathetically.

In Little Rock, white people often insisted they did *not* feel threatened by school desegregation. But neither did they welcome it. Said Jane, a white woman studying at Central High:

At best [they wanted to] ignore [it]. I can't remember anyone saying, "I can't wait to be nice to black kids coming to school." That was never discussed. . . . I remember words like law and order. They would use those phrases: "Are you going to be a law and order kind of person?"

While some white people took to the streets outside the school and violently threatened the black students, for many others, the majority of white students inside the school, for instance, resistance took the form of inaction, of technical obedience to a disagreeable law. Passivity was an effective political act for two reasons: first, the mobs outside and a significant minority of students inside who harassed and tormented the Nine formed a coercive context which cast neutrality in a hostile light, and, second, the historic context of racial inequity was so profoundly normalized that doing nothing intrinsically supported the *status quo ante*. Another white student, a man named Wesley, told me:

Young people today, in my own family, my nephews, have asked me, "Well, what did you think about segregation?" And the answer is, I didn't think about it. It was just the way it always was, and it was like, we don't think about it being Sunday morning when it's Sunday morning.

When one group of people *asserts* its rights or campaigns for improvements in its lot, other groups can respond in a limited number of ways. They can *resist*, and resistance can take active forms, often couched in terms of self-defense as in Panipur, or passive ones as in Little Rock. They can *accommodate* change, shifting slightly to allow it to happen on the smallest scale possible. Finally, a group which has not initiated change can nonetheless *cooperate* with it, embracing one group's progress as a shared opportunity for furthering common objectives or joining disparate goals in alliance. Why and how one group opts for a particular response and another a different one is a crucial question for social theorists and activists.

All these relationships to change involve discourse with others. What is said and not said, who is and is not included in the conversation, how communication is constructed, all shape the social meaning of what happens. By comparing the stories of Panipur and Little Rock, I seek deeper understandings of how these interactions, some ordinary, some dramatic, shaped collective action and with it the meaning of social identity.

3 History and Change: Talking Law and Order

Mofizuddin, a lively Muslim gray-beard with wisdom, humor, and passion twinkling behind Coke-hottle eyeglasses, reflected on the Panipur riot thirty years after the event:

These cows and plants are symbols. After Partition, the minority community didn't take it well. There was Hindu-Muslim tension... There's a song, "Azad Pakistan," it says there is anger in us, even if we don't express it. That's internal talk, not something you speak about openly... In our *rastriya* [state], now it's Bangladesh, we all have to stay like Bangladeshis. In the British time, we had to obey the British laws. In the Pakistani time, we had to abide by those laws. There was no point in being angry. We felt it, but we didn't express our anger. Why couldn't they now accept our rules?

In describing the stance "we" took in response to alien rule, Mofizuddin echoed the philosophy of the white students of Central High who talked about "law and order." But he added an important emotional point: while their behavior was obedient, their feelings were angry. Not to express that anger was a strategic decision born of Mofizuddin's recognition of futility. There was "no point" in expressing it – *then*.

But *now* it was different. When Mofizuddin concluded by questioning why *they* couldn't *now* accept *our* rules, the *now* to which he referred was actually three decades past. "They" could equally have been caste Hindus or West Pakistanis. Often enough in the past, Namasudras and Muslims had formed alliances to contest particular issues, and the definitions of *them* and *us* had been based on class or politics, not communal identities. Indeed, when speaking of the state, of any one of three different states – British, Pakistani, Bangladeshi – Mofizuddin did include both Hindus and Muslims in his *we*. Yet suddenly at the end of his thoughtful statement, he distinguished a Namasudra *them* from a Muslim *us*. Why?

In the context of the changes of state he listed, all of them occurring within his lifetime, it makes sense that Mofizuddin's construction of his identity as a Muslim might be strengthened by the creation of Bangladesh. In the British time, all "Indians" were oppressed by rule of the "other." So, too, during the Pakistani era, when West dominated East, Bengalis were victimized as a group. In each of these cases, Mofizuddin's reference point in delineating *us* and *them* was more likely to have been political than religious, or even cultural. He referred to who had to obey whose rules. Now, with the advent of home rule, what Mofizuddin was therefore articulating was a sense of his own newfound identity with the state, based on his Muslim-ness as distinguished from his Hindu neighbors' absence of such a claim.

But the *now* to which Mofizuddin referred was symbolically, not temporally, now. He spoke of a moment which in actuality occurred when it was Pakistan, not Bangladesh. That was the moment when the riot took place, and in the context of Mofizuddin's eloquent statement to me, what he expressed was a moment back then when he and his fellows chose one identity over others. The definition of *us* became not peasant (as Sunil had defined it), not Bengali (as national political leadership defined it a few years later), but Muslim. That he made that particular choice was, I suspected, very purposeful, for Mofizuddin was a purposeful sort of fellow. Indeed, in the *now* we shared at that moment, I listened closely for his purpose in making the statement he had just made.

4 Passive Resistance in Little Rock

What that purpose might be is clarified by a contrast between Mofizzudin's evocation of law and order and that of the white Little Rock students. As the year of crisis began at Central High School, the editor of the student paper, Jane, wrote an editorial urging her peers to "act right" over the months to come. Her essay was given widespread national media coverage and was considered extraordinarily courageous by adult on-lookers all over the country:

You are being watched! Today the world is watching you, the students of Central High. They want to know what your reactions, behavior, and impulses will be concerning a matter now before us. After all, as we see it, it settles now to a matter of interpretation of law and order.

Will you be stubborn, obstinate, or refuse to listen to both sides of the question? Will your knowledge of science help you determine your action or will you let customs, superstition, or tradition determine the decision for you?

Jane posited obedience to the law as a moral virtue. Characteristic of the times, she joined that notion to the superiority of science over tradition. That she needed to invoke some alternative to custom was necessitated by the fact that the law to which she urged obedience was one challenging the traditional order of things. When the Supreme Court declared that segregated schools violated the national mandate to provide education of equal quality to all students of whatever race, they challenged an order of racial separation that was deeply structured into hierarchic relations in the South. Joined in ways not altogether evident to the racial hierarchy was also a mystified order of class stratification, and more subtly an arrangement of gender relations as well. To have welcomed the nine black students into Central High would have been to accept something far more profound than a simple co-existence of youngsters of different races in common classrooms.

Many of Jane's classmates did believe they could accept the latter without consenting to more fundamental change. "There was plenty of room for all of us there," declared Helen. "Now, I'm not trying to be Goody Two-Shoes, think about it. The school was big enough to accommodate everybody, so who cares?" The generous sentiment that the school was big enough for everyone was problematized just a bit by Helen's declaration, "Who cares?" Outside the school raged mobs of people who cared very much. Helen's way of dealing with that protest was to go round-about: "I didn't see if there was commotion going on up here, I didn't see it," she said. "Cause I came in the side door, went to my locker, did my thing." Nonetheless, inside the school, daily acts of harassment of the black teenagers by other white students constituted effective resistance to the change taking place. The Nine were tripped in the halls, surreptitiously attacked in their classrooms, tormented in the locker rooms, teased and humiliated in the lunchroom. "Going in the side door" in that context was a political act; to look the other way was to collude with the resistance.

But Helen didn't see it that way. She typified her fellow graduates when she told me she agreed to be interviewed in order to set the record straight. She had done exactly what Jane urged, had abided by the law and kept personal order, and yet she felt herself to have been misrepresented by history, vilified and demonized by false association with those "others" of her own race who acted badly. She had been watched by the world and, despite her own decorum, she had been judged wanting because of the bad behavior of others of her racial identity group. Her statements to me, like Mofizuddin's, served to justify her behavior and declare her innocence in the court of history.

Helen's attitude contained a particular view of history and relationship to the state which contrasted with Mofizuddin's perspective. Helen believed herself to be accommodating history, tolerating social change and thereby containing its consequences. I asked Helen what her parents would have thought had she brought a black friend home with her, and she replied with energy, "Well, I wouldn't have even thought about it. I would not have invited them into my home." Other women of Helen's group told me they, too, accepted the presence of the Nine in "their" school, but problems arose when one of the Nine, a feisty girl named Minnijean, walked the corridors proudly, as if she belonged there. Desegregation was all right, but true integration? Never! Helen and her peers therefore sought to obey the new law but defend the old order.

Mofizuddin, on the other hand, had tolerated an old order by abiding by the laws of the British. But when people took power some of whom shared with him religious identity, he recognized a new opportunity. By an old and familiar act, obedience to the law, he declared a new order. In the past both he and his Namasudra neighbors shared oppression, but now the ways parted, and he acted to secure privileges for himself and his group at the expense of the Hindus. Indeed, what he called for was Hindu acquiescence to *his* order. Where Helen sought to bend to winds of change but not break, Mofizuddin tried to ride the winds of change to his own ascendancy. Helen was part of a dominant group protecting that position from challengers. Mofizuddin was redefining his position in society by nuances of behavior in order to assert his superior rights *vis-à-vis* the Hindus.

Law is the embodiment of state power. How was it that in the same act, pledging allegiance to the law, Helen and Mofizuddin could accomplish opposite aims? Indeed, what law was it they were obeying? The laws of the new Pakistani state did not condone rioting, and in fact when the state did intervene, they squashed the melee and imposed equal punishment on Hindus and Muslims. On a literal level, then, Mofizuddin was rebelling, not obeying the state whose laws he exhorted Hindus to obey. His statement was, thus, more metaphoric than factual. But the spirit of the statement was true. He was imposing a new order, if not a new law, on the village polity.

So, too, in Helen's case, her evocation of law and order chose a particular segment of the state to which to ally herself. Desegregation embodied many kinds of conflict between different levels of state authority. The federal government, in the form of the Supreme Court, mandated that schools be integrated. The federal executive, however, in the person of the president, Dwight Eisenhower, did not personally support racial integration and quietly balked at implementing the court's order. The head of the state of Arkansas, Governor Orval Faubus, on the

other hand, was a man who claimed to have no problem with integration. But for political reasons, he allied himself with people who did, using the armed force available to him, the non-professional National Guard, ostensibly to protect public safety, but actually to bar the black students from the school. Only when matters reached crisis point did the president send federal troops to Little Rock, breaking a stalemate so that the nine black youths could attend classes but doing nothing to promote change at the level of the human heart.

Helen could, therefore, opt for behavioral order within the letter of the law without wholeheartedly participating in a new social order. She could remain a faithful citizen and resist change. In some measure, she could do that because the immediate authority, the Governor of the state, was a person with whom she identified. He, too, was a native of Arkansas; he, too, considered himself to be open minded yet fundamentally pragmatic; and he, too, chose behaviors that furthered his own interests without regard to a larger good.

Both Helen and Mofizuddin thus based their responses to historic change on their identity – racial and political in Helen's case, communal in Mofizuddin's. In both cases, that act was based on their understanding of where power lay, for they took issue with a group whose access to power was even more compromised than their own. In neither case did they challenge those whose privilege in society might truly interfere with their well-being. The enemy they identified was, stripped of religious or racial characteristics, a person much like themselves, an ordinary soul eking out an existence, seeking at most a little betterment but not dominance. How did a given community define itself such that its gaze was deflected from upper levels of the social pyramid to that social level closest to its own?

5 Constructing Power: Inside Talk

"There's a song, 'Azad Pakistan'," Mofizuddin said, "it says there is anger in us, even if we don't express it. That's internal talk, not something you speak about openly." The second part of Mofizuddin's statement to me described the political use of silence.

Perhaps the most dramatic behavioral change by the Panipur Muslims was speaking openly through the act of rioting. Internal talk – careful choices about what is said to whom – both define community and indicate choices of political action. To talk internally is to select listeners; the criteria for selection speak eloquently of where people locate themselves in society. Internal talk defines inner and outer worlds, allies and enemies, peers and oppressors. To take that talk public is an act intended to make change in the world. The anthropologist James C. Scott writes of "hidden transcripts," those stories people exchange among themselves but not in public. Differences between private and public talk map power relations; secrecy and subterfuge are acts of resistance or rebellion done by people lacking more overt resources for pursuing their political objectives. Both the peasants of Panipur and the citizens of Little Rock told vivid stories of strategic choices about when to talk privately or publicly, and therefore about their definitions of those realms.

On a public level, the Muslim chairman of Panipur Union, Altaf-uddin, and informal village authorities called *matabbars* were making moves to reconcile the fight before it got out of hand. Golam was instructed by Altaf to convene a meeting: "I was asked to invite . . . people to a meeting to be held at Panipur High School. They were to sit in that meeting at the high school the next afternoon and settle the dispute." The *matabbars* appeared and talked in conciliatory ways. But privately:

our *matabbars* decided that there would be no *nishputi* [compromise]. They often made compromises, but then again there would be a fight. So there was no need to compromise. They spoke this way after the meeting, not in Altaf's presence.

Terrified he'd be held responsible for the whole thing, Golam went back to Altaf to warn him of the *matabbars*' intentions:

I went back . . . alone, to hear what he would say. I was very young, and I thought about it a lot, and worried about what would happen to me in the future. He told me there was no need for me to worry. It was necessary to teach them a lesson. Otherwise they would not stop. They would reap the paddy that grew on a *char* [sand-bar] and use it to feed their cows.

The chairman's double-dealing was confirmed by others. "Altaf was the leader here," said a Hindu who participated in the riot. "He led the first group of fighters to the field."

"Altaf told me," I replied, "that he tried to make peace."

"The chairman?" said my interviewee, surprised. "No, no. . . . I witnessed the whole thing. I saw Altaf carrying a gun."

Subterfuge and duplicity are both everyday acts of power management and crucial elements of rebellion. The Muslims were deciding to do something that broke with tradition. "I was very surprised," said Sunil, the Namasudra farmer who'd stayed in Pakistan because he saw his best advantage to lie in alliance with other peasants of whichever community. "How can it be? I thought. They damaged our crops, and when we protest there is this reaction. It was totally counter to the social rules." Publicly they said that which conformed to the social rules, while privately they determined to establish a new set of rules. It makes sense they would resort to duplicity to do so, assuming as they did that physical force was required to establish an order in which they could with impunity protest those grievances that had so long been the stuff of "inside talk."

There is a second reason why the Muslims of Panipur did not sit down to negotiate change verbally and cooperatively, and that is that they had not in the moment of action articulated their objectives. When speaking with me, they suggested the talk within the community back then was all about ceasing to tolerate that with which they had put up for so long. Only later, I suspected, did Mofizuddin formulate his reflections in terms of rules of state they had obeyed in the past and cows and plants as symbols. At the time, they were focused on another level of protest: against face-to-face wrongs done them by their Hindu peers. Imbedded

in their assumption that the moment had come to protest openly and to refuse to compromise was another assumption: that the state was now "theirs," which is to say that a state in which Muslims, people "like" themselves, were in power would support, or at least condone, their changing the social rules at the village level. In other words, they did that which seemed possible in a context in which power had shifted, a different sort of power, not that wielded between neighbors, but the rules writ large to which Mofizuddin referred. In between these two levels of power there had been a third, caste Hindu landlords, and it, too, had also dramatically altered when the Hindus migrated to India. The landlords had been the visible personification of state power, not because they were themselves in control of the state (for they, too, were neither British nor Pakistani but Bengali), but because the villagers understood quite well that the state protected and buttressed those economic relations they lived every day.

Thus, protest took the form of confrontation with those who were most accessible, because the conditions of life had changed enough to make that a promising thing to do. Only later did some Muslims like Mofizuddin formulate the connections. In general, however, the Muslim villagers flowed into the new relations their riot had constructed without awareness of what had changed. Again and again, Muslims told me everything was fine between the communities now. They felt no animosity, wished their neighbors no ill, respected their rights, participated in their rituals, were content to coexist in the village.

But the Namasudras' story was quite different. Having lost power, they gave voice quite explicitly to the change that had resulted from the riot. After the riot, Sunil told me, the government officers "tried to make a reconciliation, tried to make us join hands."

"Was it a true reconciliation?" I asked.

"We were forced to reconcile," Sunil replied, putting his finger directly on the contradiction. "But in our hearts we have never reconciled. We still have the apprehension that it could happen again in future."

As I listened to this statement, I knew I was once again hearing "inside talk." Muslims who heard statements like Sunil's were universally surprised. They experienced relations between the communities as entirely harmonious. Their superior power was not visible to them, especially since many Namasudras like Sunil himself had prospered economically in the years since the riot. In their hearts, the Panipur Muslims felt no ill-will; how could it be, then, that their Hindu neighbors lived in fear?

6 Inside Talk in Little Rock

This phenomenon of power in its most subtle forms influencing perceptions of safety and therefore constructing power relations on the transactional level of talk is very familiar. People who experience themselves as vulnerable pay close attention to nuances in which their opportunities for advancement, chances for expression, ability to prevail in a conflict are reflected. A vivid representation of this phenomenon was given me by an elderly African-American minister in Little Rock. I visited him in his tidy home where he sat comfortably ensconced in a

well-worn arm chair, surrounded by books and piles of magazines, spinning out story after story of his life and times. After awhile, I commented on the many forms of quiet protest I heard imbedded in his tales of segregation. While on the surface black people complied with the apartheid rules, in many, many little ways they subverted them. Rev. Young replied, "Oh, yeah. They do what you call complain down at the big gate."

"Down at the big gate?" I questioned.

"Now that's an expression that came out of a story," he went on.

One Negro said [to another], "I cussed that old boy [the white boss] out."

Says [the second man], "You did?"

"Yeah, cussed him out."

"What did he do?"

"He didn't do nothin', I cussed him out."

So [the second man] decided he's going to cuss him out, too. [But] that boy [the boss] beat him up. Went back, told his friend, "I thought you said that old boy didn't do anything. When I cussed him out, he beat me up."

"Where did you cuss him?"

"I cussed him to his face."

"I did better than that. I cussed him down at the big gate."

So always been protests down at the big gate, where they couldn't hear what you said. Down at the big gate, that kind of cussing going on, where you're grinnin' when you ain't tickled and scratchin' where you don't itch.

Rev. Young's description from the black point of view brilliantly reflects the sort of calculation of power and risk socially vulnerable people do all the time. If you know the "old boy" is going to beat you for speaking your mind, you don't stay silent; you speak up where you can't be heard. Rev. Young understood equally well the consequences of that choice:

[When the Supreme Court ordered desegregation] then all these white politicians, they'd get up and make statements, "We're getting along all right. If these outside agitators didn't come in here, well, everything all right." They thought the Negro wasn't protesting out loud, because they were protesting down at the big gate. They thought they were satisfied, happy with the way it was. They ain't never been satisfied or happy with the way they were treated.

But you ought to go and listen to them down at the big gate. When they get up there in front of you, they smile and scratch whether or not they itching. Grin when they not tickled. That what you call Uncle Tomming, that's a method of survival. Surviving in the situation. So they mistook that for their being satisfied, but they weren't satisfied.

Tolerating intolerable conditions is made easier by "inside talk" or complaining in safe quarters. At the same time, "inside talk" creates a sense of solidarity among fellow sufferers, defines groups capable of taking concerted action when at last conditions are right, and keeps alive a spirit of dignified resistance to oppression.

On the other hand, the sense of surprise of those in relative ascendancy when change hits is genuine, not only because they have failed to notice oppression from which they benefit, but also because they have been insulated from expressions of distress by the oppressed. Thought of from this perspective, it makes more sense that many of the white students at Central High would first seek to accommodate the presence of black students. Not perceiving how profound the victimization had been, they also failed to understand how deep school desegregation would cut. That insight was, paradoxically, first made apparent not by black activists but by white resisters rioting outside the schoolhouse. When people of their own racial identity rose up in an effort to prevent the change the students were willing to tolerate, the latter first disassociated themselves from the mob, making distinctions of identity based primarily on class. Describing the mob Dale, a white alumnus, said, "There was a bunch of rednecks out in front of the school." He then went on to define what he meant by the expression:

A redneck was the farmer who, you know, followed behind the mule, watching the rows. And that's how it came about, because you got sunburned back there. I think it's kind of a connotation of, you mentioned the caste system yesterday? I think it's a connotation of probably experiences in life and people who were closer to rural America and didn't have the broadness of experience... They were the guys that chewed tobacco and cut wood for a living out there, probably somewhere out on my grandfather's farm. That was my impression of the people out there, as being significantly from the vast unwashed and I wasn't.

When the name of a girl who'd been a segregationist leader inside the school came up in conversation with Helen and her friend Betsy, the latter said, "Now I didn't know her, [but] I remember she was so pretty and so cute. But they were what we considered white trash, really." Betsy and Dale spoke coded designations for lower class white people, and in the very process of naming them as they did disassociated themselves.

Whiteness in America is a contradictory phenomenon. So hegemonic is white dominance that whiteness does not seem a category at all, no less an identity. To be white is to be "normal"; to be anything else is to be "other." Yet allegiances based on a defense of white privilege abound, expressed by all but a very small minority of ideologically racist people in highly disguised forms – so disguised that they appear to the people talking not to be talk at all.

"If you don't talk about some things you're better off," Maddie told me. An old woman whose daughter had attended Central High in the year of crisis, Maddie was outrageous and outspoken.

"Why are you better off?" I pressed, naively.

She laughed uproariously. "You need to learn something, see."

“Teach me,” I prompted.

“You need to learn something,” she repeated, her lesson to me couched in her refusal to elaborate. “No, some things are just better not discussed.”

Many people insisted they had not discussed the desegregation of Central High, a claim I had trouble taking at face value. As a standard part of my interview with white Central High graduates from Little Rock, I asked what kinds of conversations were going on at home, with friends, and elsewhere. Many people replied there were none. I began to understand that statement was a misperception – and an interesting one – when Jane, the editorial writer who was sympathetic to desegregation, gave me a more elaborate answer:

Well, I don't remember any white kid ever defending blacks in that sense like, “They really should be here,” or, “They have a right for education. Never, okay.

What you did hear was – and I would say this was a majority of the middle class white kids – a feeling like, “Well, the most important thing we want to do is finish our high school, and this is something that eventually the South has got to deal with. And we really wish it were slower.” There was a lot of that feeling like, “We're not ready yet.” “Why should we be the first high school?” Discussion like that. Like, “What can we do to make sure we can continue having football games?” because that was so important, or dance on Friday nights.

What they were talking about, according to Jane, was defending normalcy rather than supporting or resisting social change, and therefore they did not believe they were talking about social change at all. But among the white Central High students who accommodated desegregation without truly accepting it, there were ways and means to enforce the very restricted boundaries of acceptance. While they talked around the issue of desegregation, the co-eds of Central High were indirectly exchanging opinions, values, and directions about how to behave, sometimes without speaking a word. “One of the things that happened at Central had to do with a *very* close friend of mine,” Joyce told me. She was a year younger than Helen and Jane and the daughter of folks from Kansas, a state north of Arkansas. Joyce went on to tell me the story of her friend:

She and I were just like sisters. We spent the night at each other's house. We walked to school together. We studied together. We went to church together. I would go home with them for chicken dinner after church on Sunday. She'd come home with me. I mean we were very, very, very close.

I remember one time – have you had a chance to go by Central? Of course people have seen it in pictures and everything. Well, if you recall, the front of the school that faces on Park Street has stairs that go down, and there used to be a fishpond down there that was full of water and had goldfish in it and so forth. And I remember one day, my friend (her name was Lydia) and another friend of ours, a mutual friend Joanna, the three of us were walking down those stairs and I was between Joanna and Lydia.

And I don't even remember what brought the conversation to a start or anything, but I made the comment that I just, using the language of the day, I said, "Well, I don't see what's wrong with going to school with colored kids." And Lydia and Joanna both, and Lydia predominantly, got behind me and physically shoved me all the way down the stairs and right to the edge of the fishpond and I honest-to-god thought at that moment they were going to shove me into that fishpond. And they stopped right there.

Where friends agreed, little was said. When Joyce spoke a minority viewpoint, however mildly, her friends quashed the heresy without a word. Their message was contained in the spirit or emotional feeling of the transaction, conveying the intensity with which they disagreed with Joyce, a disagreement so profound it, too, went without saying.

"I don't remember whether the lesson came to me immediately," Joyce reflected as she told me the story:

I think some kernel of it did, but it has grown over the years to the point that I realize that if you take a stand, if you believe in something that is not popularly accepted, if something like that is in your mind, then you either do one of two things: you either keep your mouth shut, or you be prepared to stand your ground. Because something's gonna happen. And that was a real shocking lesson to me, that even people you consider friends would take something like that so personally and focus so much anger on someone very close to them. That's the lesson I got from that.

What did you do?

I think I kept my mouth shut for the rest of the school year with my friends.

Joyce did not keep her mouth shut forever; she became an activist and an outspoken social critic. But at the time she was effectively silenced, her unpopular beliefs becoming "internal talk," and in the process strengthening her resolve to speak out when she had attained more security for doing so.

Coercion to keep silent melds into colluding not to speak. Both serve to impede social change. Both convey messages that control the behaviors of those who would protest the social order. Both place individuals in social groups and craft collective behaviors that support or resist particular laws and orders.

"Inside talk" thus has a purpose. It teaches realities of power, who can expect what protection, who enjoys which rights. It also defines the local world in contrast to the outside.

Conclusion: Identifying Power, Negotiating Well-being

"These cows and plants are symbols," said Mofizuddin, and indeed they symbolized many things: normalcy and its redefinition in the context of changing social orders; community and its realignment with changing state power; identity and its

uses in constructing effective collective action. Contained within the story of the cows and plants was a narrative about change. Bengali Muslims asserted their reformulated identity in recognition of a presumed alliance with other Muslims now holding state power. African-American activists seized upon post-war conditions to win a Supreme Court ruling against school segregation that nurtured a movement to dismantle Jim Crow laws and customs in the South, and de facto segregation in the North. In both cases, other groups of citizens took positions, for different reasons, that resisted the sought-after changes. In East Pakistan, the Namasudras handled their surprise at the loss of what they had perceived to be an alliance with fellow *krishaks* by organizing to defend themselves against physical predations. In Little Rock, the white students in the school either joined an organized campaign of harassment against the black students, or through acts of social coldness passively allied themselves with the active resistance.

In each drama, the state was a presence both symbolically, through evocations of law and order, and protestations of obedience, and materially, by the exercise of armed force to keep the nine black students out of the schoolhouse and by quelling the riot in Panipur by a rain of bullets. How the state intervened, however, was different in the two cases. In Panipur, it pretended to a neutrality it did not in fact have, because its identity with the Muslims, as perceived by both communities, turned literal neutrality, or a failure to punish Muslims more than Namasudras, into partisanship. In Little Rock, different levels of state authority battled each other, allying now with one civil force, now with another. But as in Panipur, groups of citizens read nuanced lessons about their identity and power in particular acts of officialdom.

In both Panipur and Little Rock, too, the dramas of change involved significant transformations of "inside talk" into public declarations. African-American activists used the courts to confront the "old boy" squarely inside the big gate. In doing so, they relied on more protection from the rule of law than, in the event, occurred. But once launched, they went on to "cuss the old boy out" vocally and effectively in very public forms. Where talk retreated to the big gate, however, was among the white students. In resistance to the changes afoot, they resorted to rules of propriety and studiously did *not* talk about certain things, thereby seeking to reinforce a social order built on things not said. "Inside" talk for them thereby became a strategy for reconfirming a southern social order in which white people dominated.

For the Panipuri Namasudras, however, talk retreated decisively to outside the big gate, so much so that their Muslim neighbors had no idea thirty-five years later that all was not well between the two groups. For Sunil and his fellow Namasudras, their identity as Namasudras, an identity which in 1947 had become subordinate to their interests as *krishaks*, now became primary. Through acts of inside talk, that identity was called upon for mutual protection.

While those cows and plants symbolized all these dynamics and more, what they did not symbolize was collaborative social action. None of the citizens involved in Panipur or Little Rock were people of great means; all of them had need to struggle if they were to attain economic well-being. All of them had genuine conflicts of interest with people of higher class status. In the compelling dynamics of conflict with each other, however, all sense of that commonality, of a set of

shared interests, was lost and remained lost in part because of the tacit agreement within each community to suppress open talk. The Muslims in Panipur established slight advantages for their group; the white people of Helen's class in Little Rock preserved racial privileges for theirs. But neither group secured true well-being. That project required a unity among communities that was retarded, not advanced, by the fight over cows and plants, by the passive resistance of white youths to embracing students of a different race.