

## **Everyday stories: The people's archive and the rural in 'new' India**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a case study of the People's Archive of Rural India, a multimedia digital archive founded by journalist P. Sainath, which debuted online in December 2014. PARI features photographs, videos, interviews, audio files and articles that seek to illuminate the lives of the over 833 million people who live in rural India. Focusing on the narrative form of the 'story' and the universalizing temporality of the 'everyday', the article asks, 'What is the relationship between PARI's rural India and the "New" India to which it ostensibly belongs? How do PARI's textual and visual mediations work together to produce the rural as a region?'. The article explores the relevance of postcolonial theory for the study of cultural production in the time of 'New' India, while arguing that PARI offers a Janus-faced depiction of the rural as urban India's historically entrenched Other, on the one hand, and as a critical outside to the neo-liberal imagination, on the other.

### **Keywords**

archive

digital media

narrative

everyday stories

rural India

New India

At the time of India's independence in 1947, two of the conventional binaries that structured the Indian public sphere were rural/urban and vernacular/anglophone. It was not possible to apprehend the new nation in the fullness of its diversity and aspiration without attending to each of these terms, singularly and in relation to its other. For India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, a Cambridge-educated member of the metropolitan elite, the articulation of Indian national values and mores required renewed consideration of India's 'countryfolk' (1946: 59). In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru described the instructive experiences he had while travelling 'extensively and intensively' through the towns and villages of nearly every Indian province in the 1920s and 1930s (1946: 58). 'The village and city should approach each other in regard to life's amenities', he wrote, if the national people of India were to have 'a full all-rounded life' (1946: 556).

To adapt Luce Irigaray's formulation in *Ce sexe qui n'en pas un* of a 'sex' that is not one because of its doubleness, intrinsic polyvalence and categorical opacity, Nehru's India was not *one*. Thus, as Sunil Khilnani has argued, the nation required the 'territorial and institutional frame of a state' that could mediate between village and city in order to bring the nation into being (1997: 167). Once subject to the vital syncretism of official nationalism, including the enshrining of English as the language of state, Indians both rural and urban, of both vernacular and anglophone linguistic traditions, could come together as constitutional patriots, if not as homogeneous national subjects. After Nehru's death in 1964, however, the idea of bicultural Indian identity fragmented into what Khilnani

identifies as 'three cultural segments: a small but powerful anglicized metropolitan elite; a loose, huge group of Hindi-speaking urban middle classes and lower classes; and the vernacular regional cultures' (1997: 193). In the remaining decades of the twentieth century, this fracturing of Nehruvian binarism only intensified political efforts to articulate India as 'a single political community' (Khilnani 1997: 5).

This article takes up the provocations of Nehru's vision for an 'all-rounded [Indian] life' and Khilnani's account of post-Nehruvian Indian identity politics by examining the careers of a regional/national binary in the People's Archive of Rural India, a recent public cultural mediation of what, in popular parlance, is known as the 'New India'. Following K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal, I understand regions to be 'interlocked, physical, discursive, or socio-spatial expressions of struggles about place-making' (2003: 21). The region thus points to a spatial relation as opposed to a location; it is a concept to be deployed strategically and not essentially, in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of local, national and global formations.

The concept of the region is particularly salient in the time of a global 'New' India given that the nation's integration into capitalism has been attended by increasing disintegration and secessionism, both at the level of states, like West Bengal, alienated from the shift towards neo-liberalism, and at the level of the individual, whose 'sense of collective responsibility [has been replaced with] the radical individualism of an atomistic, amoral subject' (Kapur 2013: 50). At the time of writing in 2015, it is not only that a Nehruvian biculturalism has fragmented into multiple polities in India, but also that fragmentation has emerged as fundamental to the cultural logics of neo-liberalism. To invoke Akhil Gupta's well-known argument in *Postcolonial Developments*, 'the ascendance of a neoliberal global

economic agenda' calls into question the priority of 'the nation-as-actor' by enacting new relations, correspondences, and felt experiences of the local, global and grassroots, as well as between the regions of the rural and the urban (1998: x).

In the quarter century since the liberalizing reforms of the early 1990s, market forces have ruptured connections between India's various polities of caste, class, religion and language. Urbanization has occurred at a historically unprecedented rate, as the emerging New India seeks to participate in what Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy term 'the art of being global' (2011). The city – in particular 'the global city' (Sassen 1991) that locates the nation on the world stage – has become an important locus of enquiry for both scholars and cultural producers. Thus, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, India's urban centres are increasingly serving as synecdoches for the nation's global form, as well as the primary regions in which non-elite subjects are inducted into worldly 'bodily performances and practices' (McGuire 2013: 122). Films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008) and *Liar's Dice* (Mohandas, 2013) figure the cities of Mumbai and Delhi, respectively, as the loci of India's global transformations. Novels including Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) similarly imagine Delhi and Bangalore (Adiga) and Mumbai (Thayil) as the provenance of India's future. New India's cities, journalists write, are 'places...that [heave] with ambition and entrepreneurship and opportunity' (Kapur 2012: 44). In fact, an entire non-fictional genre of city books has contributed to this imaginative figuration, starting with Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) and culminating in three series commissioned by major Indian publishers: Penguin India's ten city-focused anthologies; Aleph Book Company's half-dozen city 'biographies'; and OUP India's two-volume *The Oxford Anthology of the*

*Modern Indian City* (2013).

The multimedia People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), which debuted in December 2014 as a digital platform for collaborative, multimedia, non-profit reporting on rural India, situates its interventions against these backdrops of neo-liberal fragmentation and urban representational privilege. As PARI founder, journalist and social critic Palagummi (P.) Sainath writes, New India is 'steadily [shedding] its own links' with the world of rural India. In order to counter this self-willed dispossession, and to trouble myopic representations of India's emergent globality, PARI features photographs, videos, interviews, audio files and articles that illuminate the lives of the over 833 million people who live in rural India, while, I would argue, effectively producing the motley population as a political collectivity.<sup>1</sup> The archive further serves, in my reading, to translate the identitarian underdevelopment that has long characterized the 'postcolonial condition' of modernity in rural India to the global condition of New India more generally (Gupta 1998: ix).

PARI is an ongoing project: a self-described 'breathing archive' and 'living journal' that will not only be subject to revision and enhancement in the years to come, but that is also party to daily revisions, additions, modifications and growth. In addition to the digital archive available from [ruralindiaonline.org](http://ruralindiaonline.org), PARI maintains an active Twitter account, @PARInetwork, from which articles are disseminated to, at the time of writing, nearly 6000 followers in India and around the world, including historians Ramachandra Guha and Vijay Prashad, novelist Manu Joseph, classical vocalist T. M. Krishna, and the editors of *The Caravan* (2010- ). For these PARI followers, like myself, rural India is no longer a theoretical abstraction, nor a series of contrarian locations in the neo-liberal New Indian landscape, but rather quite literally a number of web addresses online, available for immediate

viewing, re-tweeting, e-mailing and circulation among hundreds of millions of Internet users around the world.

The challenge of assessing PARI, then, is not unlike that faced by ethnographers seeking to describe and analyse living communities without, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's suggestive phrase, pinning them 'to a butterfly board' (1989: 48). PARI, which promises to capture 'the everyday lives of everyday people', is itself differently incarnated every day, if only in that the frontispiece on the homepage changes as new archival materials are posted online. Given this dynamism, and the impossibility of predicting how PARI will look, read and function in days and years to come, my comments in this article are offered in a critical spirit of generosity and as themselves a form of contribution to the archive.

On 23 November 2015, I type PARI's web address into my browser. The first image that appears is one of a group of men in a funeral procession (Figure 1). Leading the group is a tearful figure, his head wrapped in a magenta and white labourer's *pagri*. 'Suicide in pursuit of a passbook: How a young farmer in Andhra Pradesh got caught in a web of loans and gave up' (2015), reads the title of the corresponding article. I am still deciphering the image when it dematerializes; in its place, a pile of green-stemmed red chillies appears, then, seconds later, a non-descript building in a tree-laden dirt compound, identified as a village school in Maharashtra. Farmer suicides; the body's nutritional requirements; a roof over one's head. What is the relationship between these elliptical fragments of PARI's rural India and the nation to which they belong? How do PARI's textual and visual mediations work together to produce the rural as a site with the potential to interrupt the urban-focused New India narrative?

In the following sections, I will examine how PARI produces the regionality of the

rural through the narrative form of the 'story', like that of the young farmer in Andhra Pradesh, and the universalizing temporality of the 'everyday' underlying the selection of quotidian images like those of red chillies and a village school. Throughout this discussion, I will draw on the critical resources of postcolonial theory, the contemporary relevance of which is currently subject to debate in fields ranging from literary theory (Cleary 2012) to sociology (Chibber 2013). My aim in so doing is both to demonstrate the continued salience of postcolonial modes of theorization for contemporary cultural studies of globalization, and to consider the extent to which PARI itself is a postcolonial intervention into the neo-liberal cultural logics of New India.

PARI's 'everyday stories' are intended to address both a national, Indian audience and a global, digital public, while retaining their critical purchase on the local, vernacular and immediate. This attempted dual address results, I will argue, in a Janus-faced posture, in which rural India appears to its world audience as New India's historically entrenched Other, on the one hand, and to its national audience as a prophetic harbinger of New India's future, on the other. To put a finer point on it, PARI, in universalizing the region of the rural, does cast it out of time into the 'never-never land of the anthropological present' (Emigh 2008: 63). By that same token, however, this temporal and spatial outside-India might be understood as the critical externality of New India's neo-liberal imagination; as such, I read it as a promising sign of the nation's future rehabilitation.

At once an investigative, pedagogical and documentary initiative, PARI was launched with an open call for contributions of content, translators, funding and other donations. 'We are losing worlds and voices within rural India of which future generations will know little or nothing', Sainath wrote in an introductory essay. When PARI debuted in December 2014,

Sainath's own writing and that of about a dozen others dominated the site. In the months since, Sainath and his team have continued to create targeted content for the archive, while crowd-sourcing additional contributions from journalists, academics, students, multimedia artists and activists around the world. Importantly, Sainath has been vetting all of PARI's content ('it is not a democracy' [Sainath 2014a]), which is presently licensed under Creative Commons.

PARI features photographs and videos by/of, interviews and audio files by/with, and articles by/about the over 800 million people who live and labour outside India's major metropolises. Those awkward prepositional conjunctions are deliberate, for one of PARI's founding aims is to contest established practices of content ownership in corporate journalism. For example, the videos produced for PARI are first credited to those whose lives they depict. The fourteen-minute film, 'Baked Earth', covers a day in the life of Buddhadeb Kumbhakar, a potter in West Bengal who crafts terracotta horses. The credits read like this: 'Story and Narration: Buddhadeb Kumbhakar. Camera and Direction: Kavita Carneiro. Editor: Akshara Prabhakar. Translation and Subtitling: Ipsita Basu. Series Editor: Deepa Bhatia. Producer for PARI: P. Sainath'. In this way, PARI affirms that the practice of living is as much a creative art as reporting, film-making or editing.

At the time of writing, PARI is divided into 27 sections, including 'Things we do' and 'Things we make'.<sup>2</sup> By using the first-person-plural pronoun, 'we', Sainath and his team of volunteers seek to emphasize the fact that the rural Indians represented in/by PARI are speaking for themselves: after all, this is the 'People's' Archive, and not that of professional content producers. Read ungenerously, categories like 'Things we make' seem condescendingly reminiscent of grade-school show-and-tell; they risk homogenizing and

ventriloquizing rural Indians as a monolithic ‘we’. Read more generously, however, such categorical deployments of ‘we’ appear as a contemporary instantiation of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak memorably called a ‘*strategic* use of positivist essentialism’ ([1985] 1988: 281, original emphasis), Stuart Hall later termed a ‘necessary fiction’ (1988: 200), and Paul Gilroy named ‘anti-anti-essentialism’ (1993: 99). In order to assert the political interest of a documentary archive like PARI (and, relatedly, to encourage contributions) the archive must both produce and address the constituency it seeks to represent – which warrants the strategic fiction of an anti-anti-essentialist ‘we’.<sup>3</sup>

If PARI’s ‘we’ can be read as a deliberate and even defiant assertion of rural communal identity in the face of national disintegration, then the tagline to which I referred earlier (‘the everyday lives of everyday people’) cements and extends this rhetorical performance with its indications of the archive’s simultaneous universalization of its constituency (‘everyday people’) and the temporal regime in which their lives are made legible (‘everyday’). In the next two sections, I address each of these issues in turn, with an interest in uncovering the critical limits and possibilities of PARI’s development of the region of the rural against the fragmented national polity of New India.

### **The ‘Everyday’ story**

Who can speak, and in whose voice? One legacy of Postcolonial Studies has been the field’s critique of ventriloquism: the art of throwing one’s voice so that it sounds like it is coming from another speaking subject. Spivak memorably asked whether the subaltern ‘can speak’ – not only for herself, but at all – saying, ‘The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade’ (1999: 255). For Trinh, the problem was

how to speak without ‘point[ing] to an object as if it [were] distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place’ (Trinh and Chen 1992: 87). These critiques importantly distinguished between the violences of speaking *as*, speaking *for*, and *making* speak (euphemistically termed ‘giving voice’), while stressing, in Trinh’s terms, the generative possibility of ‘speaking *nearby*’ instead (1992: 87). But they also introduced a profound epistemic anxiety into the critical discourse on representational politics in and beyond India. The question became not only ‘can the subaltern speak’, but can anyone – artist, critic or journalist – speak for anyone but oneself?

In a section of ‘Publishing guidelines’, Sainath and his team urge journalists, scholars and other potential contributors to bracket such qualms and assume the mantle of storyteller:

What PARI journalists and writers do falls into the art of storytelling...The writer is something of a fly on the wall. At times that isn’t entirely possible, but strive for that. In the video films, the film-maker is invisible. If there are questions the film-maker asks that get recorded on the film, try editing them out so what the viewer sees is the subject of the film doing the narration wholly and solely. We do not want people to go out into the interior and then declaim with their own emotions rather than the stories people have to tell them. Again, you have to bring coherence and perspective to that narrative, but always remember it’s their story. (2014)

The publishing guidelines seem, on the one hand, oddly innocent of what is conventionally understood as the observer’s paradox. It is hard enough to be a fly on the wall when one is

interviewing, photographing or videotaping people accustomed to recording technologies and the presence of outsiders. In many of the rural communities PARI depicts, neither form of habituation applies. As anthropologists have long argued, it takes months, sometimes even years, of relational involvement and co-presence in order to be fully accepted into a community:

[E]thnographers want to make sure that the 'data' they get in the field is what they would see if they weren't even there to look. We want access to what is sincerely performed, not self-consciously enacted for our own benefit...[This] entails getting people to trust you enough to escort you to their backstage. (Jackson 2009)

A freelance journalist or other less embedded writer stands little chance of garnering such backstage access, never mind earning the kind of 'invisibility' to which PARI's guidelines refer.

On the other hand, PARI's aspiration to serve as impartial observer and neutral recorder of rural Indian 'everyday' lives may be a more ethical approach to the documentation of the other than, say, the sensational exploitation and romanticization of poverty involved in urban 'slumming' narratives (Seaton 2012). By asking contributors not to 'declaim with their own emotions', PARI also seeks to avoid the 'banalized self-reflexivity' of travel writing, which, in Graham Huggan's account, has traditionally served as 'a medium for personal opinion masquerading as considered sociopolitical analysis' (2009: 24). If the anthropologist stakes the epistemological force of his social-scientific claims on the duration of time spent in the company of his informants, then the travel writer stakes his

(comparatively disingenuous) claim to ‘considered’ analysis on the simple fact of his transient presence. PARI’s journalistic content makes no such claim to scientism or analytical force, though it does claim purchase on the ‘real’.

Perhaps, then, more than anthropology or travel writing, PARI’s storytelling mandate approaches the formal conventions of oral history – a genre that has seen renewed interest after the awarding of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature to oral historian Svetlana Alexievich. Oral history is ‘a work of relationships...between the past and the present... between the interviewer and the interviewee, and between the oral form of the narrative and the written or audio-visual form of the historian’s product’ (Portelli 2009: 21). Works of oral history offer the illusion of the writer’s abnegated autonomy, his or her attempted abandonment of authorial voice to the becoming of a medium for the Other. To that end, the genre is alive to the critical possibilities of ventriloquial performance that postcolonial theory has traditionally foreclosed.

With this in mind, let us return to PARI’s invocation of the figure of the storyteller, who is, here, both the journalist-writer producing content for the archive and the rural Indian with a story ‘to tell’. Pheng Cheah has recently argued, following Hannah Arendt, that ‘[the world] is formed by the telling of stories’, stories that must be understood as ‘a source of meaningfulness that illuminates human existence’ (2014: 325). For Cheah, this understanding of storytelling enables a new conception of world literature’s normativity that avoids reducing literature to a superstructural or epiphenomenal expression of existent world systems and global spatial relations. For this argument, the important consequence of Cheah’s transposition of ‘literature’ and ‘story’ is that it allows us to read texts like the virtual archive, which may have been previously deemed non-literary, as

involved in the vital labour of opening up, or worlding, the world, what Cheah calls '[remaking] the world as a hospitable place, that is, a place that is *open* to the emergence of peoples that globalization deprives of world' (2014: 326, original emphasis). In a similar vein, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal argue that stories are a mechanism through which to address 'multiple vocalities, multiple points of production, and the more intimate and unpredictable processes through which development as practice has outcomes we too easily attribute to development as rhetoric or discourse' (2003: 48). Likewise, they argue, the story sidesteps the narrative's commitment to 'linear development' (2003: 49).

As an archive committed to the documentation, preservation and investigation of rural India, PARI is specifically focused on telling the stories of those whom Cheah terms world-deprived people. But its commitment to dispassionate, fly-on-the-wall storytelling means that many writers do not attempt to elaborate the 'hidden structure[s]' underlying rural poverty and underdevelopment, or, by that same token, the development schemes, tangled NGO politics, failures of state planning or broad-based social prejudices that infect (and infect) both rural and urban lives.<sup>4</sup> The question, then, is to what extent PARI's stories can remake the world of rural India or establish the conditions for its future hospitality. What sacrifices are entailed by PARI's refusal to more explicitly mediate the rural Indian stories it tells? By that same token, what is enabled by PARI's adoption of an oral history-like methodology that employs a seeming lack of mediation as a rhetorical effect? In the remainder of this section, I will offer brief readings of three of PARI's featured articles, which differently produce and query the production of the rural by telling stories of rural Indian lives.

Journalist Abhishek Saha's 'Kynja's Day at the Aanganwadi' (2014) is an instructive case of both the possibilities and pitfalls of 'fly-on-the-wall' storytelling as method. The photo essay about 5-year-old Kynja Babha is by PARI's own account an exemplary illustration of minimalist storytelling: '[it] consists of two or three line captions, no more. A middle school student...could read that essay and understand it. It's so powerful'. Kynja is a beautiful child, who, in the lead photo, looks up at the camera with a slight smile on her face (Figure 2). The photographs of her, clad in a torn dress, eagerly reciting a rhyme for her teacher and hungrily sitting for her mid-day meal, are alternately heart-wrenching and awe-inspiring to the reader-viewer comfortably ensconced before a computer screen. Kynja is, like all children, radiant with promise, but as a child from an officially designated 'Below Poverty Line' family it is unclear how and to what extent that promise will be fulfilled.

For the most part, Saha sticks to reporting facts: Kynja's school bag contains her slate and steel plate; Kynja works rapidly in a corner of the classroom, writing Khasi numbers and alphabets on her slate. And yet, in the very first line of the story, Saha betrays both his outsider stance and that of his addressee: 'Kynja Babha is a five-year-old girl in the faraway village of Khrang in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya'. 'Faraway' from where? The spatial qualifier only makes sense in the context of some commonly agreed-upon conception of 'here'. Given the ranging, international public addressed by the digital archive, 'here' becomes anywhere that is not 'there': i.e. the faraway village in the region of rural India. This language also returns us to that of PARI's own publishing guidelines: 'We do not want people to go out into the interior...' Here, as in Saha's article and Manabi's (discussed below), the rural is being figured as an abstract spatial relation – someplace far

away, the interior outside – as opposed to a specific location, in keeping with Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal’s conception of the region.

In ‘Living on ravaged land’ (2015), writer Manabi narrates the journey towards the adivasi village of Garia in West Bengal as a journey through inscrutable spaces. On the Grand Trunk road from Tarapith rail station ‘[y]ou cannot see anything through the dust’. Then, in Lipidi village, conversation takes place in a ‘dark’ house, in candlelight. Chotu Munda lives in a small hut precariously hanging over the edge of a quarry. Even the women Manabi meets are described as ‘dark and beautiful’. Rather than situate the ‘ravaged land’ of the Mallarpur stone belt in proximity to surrounding areas of comparative lightness, the story of impoverished stone crushers rests in an isolated region of darkness. Along with the article on Kynja Babha, Manabi’s account of the stone crushers is an example of PARI’s supposedly unvarnished storytelling mode. What I am pointing to, however, is the inevitable susceptibility of unmediated storytelling to the mediations of regional assignment, whether assignment of a village as ‘faraway’ or a quarry as an area of ‘darkness’.

By contrast, Ashish Kothari’s ‘Revisiting the legend of Niyamgiri’ (2015) violates PARI’s injunction against authorial self-reflexivity and self-involvement, broadly defined, and in so doing reveals the heightened criticality and world-making potential of greater authorial mediation. Kothari’s article – the title of which itself reveals the significance of the author’s standpoint as a ‘return’ visitor – begins with his reflection on the stories he has heard about Niyamgiri, where the Dongria Kondh tribals famously thwarted the mining schemes of the Vendanta multinational corporation. Kothari notes that, although he had never been to Niyamgiri before the visit described in the article, Niyamgiri was very much

alive for him as ‘the stuff of legends’. He then offers a specific account of some of the questions he posed to the Dongria Kondh (‘They had rejected mining, but were they rejecting the notion of development itself?...Were there differing views within the community?’) and a summary of responses gleaned from tribal leaders including Laddo Sikaka and Dadhi Pusika. The article concludes with a note about its own ineluctable incompleteness:

There is no way that with a limited set of interactions, we could do justice to the complex questions we had set out to ask. But we got sufficient glimpses to convince us that Niyamgiri, both as a place and as a narrative, needs to be revisited...The David versus Goliath narrative is powerful, and will sustain and inspire, but it is not complete.

Kothari’s article flouts PARI’s ‘invisible’ storytelling mandate, but it also importantly calls into question the force and efficacy of the story itself. There is no ambiguity as to who is speaking, as both questions posed and answers given are indicated throughout the article (‘Why, then, did they change from the traditional thatch roofs? “Because the government was giving us the metal roofs”’).

The most significant aspect of the article is its refusal to assign the Dongria Kondh to the ‘darkness’ of some ‘faraway’ rural region. Rather, by highlighting the ways in which stories travel through ‘global media’ from rural India to the metropolises and beyond, both producing ideas of the rural and demanding their ‘revisitation’, Kothari reminds readers that PARI too is a global media outlet. Despite its avowal of impartial storytelling, the

archive is a highly mediated technology that strives to bring the region of the rural 'home' for international and India-based audiences – which means that PARI is not just telling 'their stories', it is telling 'our' story too.

### **The temporality of the 'Everyday'**

In addition to voice, the question of temporality has been of signal importance to postcolonial theory, which addresses, without foreclosing, a set of relations to and forms of knowledge of colonialism's afterlives. Two of the most well-known of such engagements are Johannes Fabian's argument regarding 'the denial of coevalness' and Dipesh Chakrabarty's formulation of 'History 2'. In this section, I turn from the question of PARI's telling the stories of 'everyday people' to thinking about the time and form of their 'everyday lives': lives that are and are not coeval with those of their online viewers both in and outside India; lives that may or may not offer up alternative histories and futures to capital's normative time.

For Fabian, anthropology's aim of accessing the contemporary has traditionally involved strategic assertions and denials of the co-temporaneity of those others being hailed into the subject position of native informants. But contemporaneity (or coevalness) is not a pre-existing condition in the human encounter that anthropologists have chosen to ignore; rather, it is a condition of 'shared Time' that must be actively created (1983: 31). This means that the denial of coevalness is not simply a form of misrecognition; rather, it is the willed refusal to create the conditions for the sharing of time, for the sharing of an experience of creation and destruction, of time as 'alter-ation, the becoming of alterity' (Bender and Wellbery 1991: 6).

Alterity, or 'the creative time of otherness' (Bender and Wellbery 1991: 6), is also at the heart of the intervention in *Provincializing Europe*, in which, against historicist frames of intelligibility that locate 'the general in the particular' (2000: 23), Chakrabarty relocates the particular in the general. One of the ways he does this is by drawing a distinction between History 1, 'the universal logic of capitalist development' (Majumdar 2010: 48) and History 2: the particular, local, interruptive pasts that are also capital's antecedents and yet not part of its 'life-process' (Chakrabarty 2000: 64). The past is not dead, Chakrabarty writes; we can choose to inhabit the plurality of the now and treat the past, which is as plural and fragmentary as the present, 'as though it were a pool of resources' (2000: 246). In positing an outside to the time of capital, Chakrabarty offers an optimistic conception of human lives lived in excess of abstract labour and of a history worth uncovering in pursuit of better, more equitable, and livable presents and futures for all. By that same token, however, his argument risks advocating an instrumentalist understanding of the past and of the subaltern subjects located within it.

Why, how, and by whom is the past to be made to serve the present as a resource? Whose past? And whose present? Chakrabarty's evocative but ultimately opaque definition of subalterneity as 'that which constantly, from within the narrative of capital, reminds us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the capacity to labor' (2000: 94–95) establishes the subaltern as the name for a figure who eludes location and specification. In Pheng Cheah's words, subaltern

consciousness...exceeds and cannot be comprehended within the enclosure of disciplinary knowledge-production and intellectual activism because the traces of

such a subject have been obliterated by the epistemic violence of colonial subject making through the codification of indigenous law and education. (2010: 181)

When the traces of such a subject have been obliterated, when there is no consciousness to comprehend, never mind recuperate or to which to give voice, does the subaltern as subject even exist? Or is it rather that the minute one names or visualizes the subaltern one has fixed that subject as the non-subaltern within the enclosure of disciplinary knowledge production?

The categorical indeterminacy of the subaltern – a category that Chakrabarty identifies as just one of many rhetorical displacements of Marx's proletariat (2011: 17) – is one issue that Vivek Chibber takes on in his recent sociological critique of postcolonial theory, in which he charges that Subaltern Studies exoticizes the figure of the subaltern and revives Orientalist discourses by insisting that 'Eastern agents operate with an entirely different political psychology than do Western agents' (2013: 288). Chibber takes issue with Chakrabarty's argument for History 2's interruptive potential in large part because he cannot conceive of a subaltern agent whose personal and collective history poses a genuine threat to capital's life processes. In the New India, given the proliferation of global communication technologies through which virtually all men, women and children can now 'speak' and be 'seen', who or what is subaltern? Whose life and way of being in the world is potentially inimical to capitalist reproduction?

Enter PARI, whose representation of rural Indian everydayness intersects these discourses on temporality's operation as a power relation and subaltern interruptions of the time of capital by also mobilizing – and, I will suggest, frustrating – an identitarian

definition of everydayness that closes in on the commonplace, or, in anthropological parlance, the 'ordinary'. I first noticed this double movement in October 2014, when I heard Sainath's keynote lecture at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin. There, he told stories about rural Indian women who walk miles, barefoot and in insufferable heat, to capture small quantities of water from drying wells, and about toddy tappers who scale perilous coconut trees so many times a day that it amounts to twice the height of the Empire State Building. 'That', he said emphatically to the audience of American academics, 'is their everyday life'.

In describing these daily, ordinary routines, what Sainath actually emphasized were their *extraordinary* aspects – extraordinary, that is, from the perspective of his metropolitan, English-speaking audience members, none of whom had scaled a coconut tree, and some of whom had never even seen one. In effect, then, and as I noted in a related article, what was notably 'everyday' about PARI's rural India was specifically that which did *not* transpire every day elsewhere in India, never mind the rest of the world (Srinivasan 2015).

Numerous PARI articles similarly recount the extra/ordinary aspects of everyday life in rural India from a non-rural, and sometimes non-Indian, perspective. Consider the opening of Shalini Singh's 'No Free Kicks in Meerut': 'The cost of the beer three friends can knock back watching a World Cup match at a South Delhi pub is what Ishwari's family of 17 makes in a month...' (2014). Who are these three friends, and what is the purpose of this contrast if not to hail the reader into a sense of affiliation with the beer-drinking, World Cup-watching South Delhi-ites, as opposed to the football stitchers of Kherkhi village, like Ishwari?

M. N. Parth's 'Life in the Company of Coal' (2015) establishes the contrast between 'another day' in Chilika Daad and a day in the life of PARI's assumed reader-viewer in its opening lines: 'Under normal circumstances, someone who has endured the trauma of displacement twice would shudder to think of another such prospect'. Normal circumstances for whom? The article then goes on to discuss life in Chilika Daad village in the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh, where villagers typically have electricity for about eight hours per day:

Singrauli region is promoted as India's energy capital that lights up cities and provides power to industries. In this context, the paradox is striking. Chilika Daad gave an impression of midnight at 8 PM...However, that did not stop Shukla's wife from offering us refreshing tea and snacks. Her movements indicated that it was *just another day in Chilika Daad*. (emphasis added)

In rhetorical moments like this one, the temporal signification of this repeating 'another day' meets and cuts against the identitarian sense of the 'everyday' to which I referred above – i.e., the 'everyday' as 'commonplace' and 'ordinary' – by simultaneously reinforcing the universality of the temporal rhythms of the everyday and the viewer's alienation from the realities of rural Indian life. Put differently, PARI offers the 'everyday' as a sphere of potentially shared time, in Fabian's terms, while also suggesting the existence of heterotemporal lives and worlds that are, if not exactly resistant to capital, at least not 'stop[ped]' or fully consumed by it.

Here, I want to return to an issue raised in the opening pages of this article: namely,

the 'everyday' as a description of PARI's availability to a global audience, or, its everyday availability to the anonymous everybody of the Internet. When I first began to think about the digital archive as an interface for engagement with rural Indians, I worried that the frame of the everyday was not only condescending to rural Indians, from stone crushers to landless workers, rural artisans to tribal schoolchildren, but locating their lives in an unreal realm outside of and disconnected from the rest of India. The above section on PARI's fly-on-the-wall storytelling should have indicated the extent to which this is in fact the case, and my worry not wholly unwarranted.

That said, after 'revisiting' PARI scores of times over a period of eleven months, I could better appreciate that the 'everyday' was also serving to ironize the routinization of the experience of scarcity for families like Ishwari's and Shukla's. Every day, I was able to access the website from my personal computer; every moment, in fact, I could choose to read or watch, to scroll or click away. Mindful of the nature of my access to the archive, and by that same token the freedom I could exercise in ignoring its call, I read and reread the opening line of Rahul M.'s 'Suicide in pursuit of a passbook' (2015): 'Kodanda Ramireddy was no ordinary farmer'. Over and above a rhetorical sleight of hand predicated on the massification of other farmers or the denial of their coevalness, it is a commentary on the banality of farmer suicide in a rural India encroached upon by the 'New'.

In her work on the politics of temporality in 'Brand India' ('business-bureaucratic'-speak for the 'New' India to which this article refers), Jyotsna Kapur shows, following Henri Lefebvre, that the temporality of the everyday is both cyclical and linear; the former 'alludes to timelessness, that is, time before and after the individual' whereas the latter 'accentuates the finitude of individual life' (2013: 85). On the one hand, the everyday both precedes and

exceeds the individual; on the other hand, the everyday is precisely that which confirms and testifies to the singularity of the individual life. Under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, in which ‘everyone must become an entrepreneur of time control within highly differential relationships to time’ (Sharma 2014: 138), the cyclical nature of time becomes the primary site to which individuals may turn in order to halt the incessant imperative of self-production. To adapt Chakrabarty’s argument, cyclicity is the heterotemporal Other that interrupts the life-process of capital. It is the knowledge that, however ordinary or extraordinary the individual life, it is preceded and followed by lives equally subject to such relative assignment. It is the knowledge that, despite the painful paradox of no electricity in the energy capital, the sun will come up in the morning.

PARI’s ‘Faces’ photo gallery is the archive’s most sustained attempt to present a representative cross-section of the ‘everyday people’ of rural India, and it, too, does so in a way that stresses the cyclicity underlying the singularity of each individual life. ‘Faces’, which at time of writing includes 21 sections organized alphabetically by district-name (‘T’ for Thiruvallur, Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, and Tiruvanamalai; ‘U’ for Udipi; ‘V’ for Vellore, and so on), will eventually include headshots of individuals from all 629 Indian districts (Figure 3). The gallery currently includes men, women and children, of occupations varying from farmer to stone crusher, *nadaaswaram* maker to false-legged horse dancer. Each portrait in ‘Faces’, which is intended to demonstrate rural India’s diversity of complexions and careers, is presented with information about its subject: his or her name, location and occupation. Each is also accompanied by information about its photographer and the specific camera that was used in the making of the photograph: a Sony DSC-P10 in the case of Nikhil Suroshe from Yavatmal District; a Panasonic DMC-TZ30 for P. V. Chinnathambi of Idukki.

The instructions given to contributors specify that they must include all of these details, which serve as a crucial reminder that every image of a rural Indian on display in PARI is ultimately, and, I want to stress, self-reflexively, a product of technological mediation. Each image challenges the reader-viewer to confront the essential artifice of the archive, on three levels: the artifice of the unmediated story, the artifice of the realist capture of everyday life, and the artifice of access to the rural present. Raju Vibhushanan, cultivator of cardamom. Vaidehi Cheguppa, class four student. Adinarayanan Bharathi, kattaikkutu artist. Koj Tami, priest. Gulam Mohammed, tour guide. Against the assignment of rural India to some far faraway, the 'Faces' gallery collects and offers up a face-book of rural Indians to whom the digital viewer might literally give time, if not share it, by staring and clicking, reading and contemplating. Against opaque avowals of subalterneity, the 'Faces' gallery offers smiling and staring rural Indians, quizzical and sullen, joyful and pensive, whose 'ways of being human' are, finally, human and not abstract ways of being.

### **Virtual conclusions**

The above discussion has sought to capture some elements of PARI's discursive production of the region of the rural through the narrative form of the story and the temporality of the everyday. Reading a selection of articles archived at the time of writing in late 2015, I showed that PARI contributors often produce the rural as a 'dark faraway' province in which its subjects are then allochronically located. This 'dark faraway' is itself a 'socio-spatial expression' of regionality: the region of the outside, the region of the Other. By that same token, I argued, PARI's rhetorical focus on the 'everyday' aspects of rural Indian 'everyday' lives serves to ironize the routinization of scarcity and precarity in rural India; to

that end, the archive hails the virtual reader-viewer into its critique of New India's neo-liberal careers.

In conclusion, I want to re-pose some of the questions with which this article began, but this time with emphasis on PARI's virtual mediations. If the rural is in fact a region, then where do we locate PARI's regionality in terms of the geography of the Internet? Who or what appears on a computer screen on the other side of the world in the name of the People's Archive of Rural India? My aim is not so much to settle these questions as to propose them as grounds for further enquiry into how the spatial expressions of a virtual archive like PARI relates to, inflects and participates in struggles about place-making that continue to inflect public discourses on the Indian nation state in the time of New India.

In his recent work on the development of digital archives as ethnographic texts, Fabian argues for the heightened presence of the virtual: '...“virtual” originally connotes effectiveness, strength rather than weakness. Consigning documents to a virtual archive makes them more real, not in any ontological sense but in terms of their “practicality” (2008: 5). For Fabian, the storage of ethnographic documents like interview transcripts within virtual archives makes possible ‘a form of ethnography that is not predicated on the absence of the object’ (2008: 10). Moreover, it does not reduce that object to ‘tabulating quantifications’ or prose that ‘withhold[s] from (some may say spare) the reader the events and documents on which it must nevertheless ground its authority’ (2008: 10).

Despite the differing disciplinary context of Fabian's argument, it nevertheless has consequences for my reading of PARI, especially to the extent that it serves as an ‘educational resource’ and collectively written ‘textbook’ about rural India for students and teachers around the world, which is another one of its stated missions.<sup>5</sup> The question again

is one of mediation. PARI makes rural India and rural Indians present to the world every day, present in Fabian's practical sense of being available for uptake, scrutiny and enquiry by viewers sitting anywhere in the world with an Internet connection and time. By that same token, it challenges dominant conceptions of both presence and the present: If the denial of coevalness was a violent relegation of the Other to the past, then PARI's virtual mediations call into question the continued privileging of a New Indian present that is more violent than the history it stands to forget.

As access to the Internet is democratized around the world, and as the 'checkered geographies' (Rowe et al. 2013: 4) of rural and urban India continue to converge, so that it is no longer possible to locate the Third World in the former and the First World in the latter, or to assign one to the realm of developing and the other to developed, PARI's virtual mediations will serve to represent more of the New India to which rural India, however uneasily, belongs. As postcolonial theorists have shown, the regions of the rural and the urban exist not only in spatial but also in temporal relation to one another. This means that the ways in which the urban middle-class subject in India – indeed, the cosmopolitan subject in the world – manages his or her time has the potential to diminish, exhaust, deplete or otherwise constrain the time of his or her rural Indian counterpart (Sharma 2014). What is more, PARI reminds us, each subject has the power to expand, enhance and illuminate the other's experience of time – to return time to the other so that everyday life might also be experienced as *living*.<sup>6</sup>

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Notes

1 For a revealing predecessor, see the *Mass Observation Archive: Recording everyday life in Britain*. The Mass Observation Project was launched in 1981 and is currently housed as a charitable trust at the University of Sussex. Available online from <http://www.massobs.org.uk>.

2 Here is a full list of sections currently organizing PARI's content (at the time of writing in 2015, some sections like 'PARI for schools' contain no content): Things we do; things we make; Farming and its crisis; Faces; Little Takes; The rural in the urban; Women; Adivasis; Dalits; We are; Foot-soldiers of Freedom; Resource conflicts; Small world; Getting there; Musafir; Environment; Sports and Games; Health; Mosaic; VideoZone; Tongues; AudioZone; Visible Work, Invisible Women; One-Offs; PhotoZone; Things we wear; PARI for schools.

3 Robyn Wiegman's work on identity knowledges also provides a critical framework within which to approach PARI's representation of rural India/ns as a political collectivity, or 'we': While the critic may be sceptical about the instability, normativity and exclusivity of a category like 'we', such scepticism is itself premised on the desire for a 'we' that is adequate to the charges of inclusion and representation of rural India and Indians (Wiegman 2012).

4 Here, it is worth noting that P. Sainath's own journalism has in fact exposed the structural conditions underlying the precariousness of rural life in some of India's poorest districts since the liberalizing market reforms and structural adjustments of the early 1990s. In *Everyone Loves a Good Drought* (1996), Sainath matches woeful statistics (85 per cent of 529,000 primary schools have no toilets; 2628 of them have no teachers) with jarring anecdotes (the primary school in Numatti village has only one student: a black goat). Today, he publishes similarly incisive reports, which are attentive to the absurdities of official discourse and policy-making, on his website, [psainath.org](http://psainath.org). For example, one of Sainath's articles, 'The potato song' (2014), now included in PARI, tells the story of a school in the tribal village of Edalippara, where children sing English songs in praise of the potato, despite the fact that nobody in their families speaks English, or has seen a potato.

5 There is by now considerable scholarship on how new media and digital forms complicate the old

Derridean critique of the metaphysics of presence, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article (Hayles 1999). By invoking Fabian's discussion of virtual presence, I do not mean to reinstitute a presence/absence binary, so much as to highlight its tenacity in the real-time reader-viewer's experience of perusing the archive.

6 In *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011), Shannon Jackson writes of the necessity of 'navigating... ambivalence' in order to 'perform our connection to the future now of people whom we may never know' (2011: 247). This article has sought to explore a similar ambivalence, while echoing in closing Jackson's own final distinction between 'life' and 'living'.