On Preserving Our Pasts

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The emerging interest in our past prompts unsettling questions and issues throwing up controversies. How we handle them will mark our maturity as a civilisation.

"A society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past. " said E H Carr (in *What is History?)*. It is also true that only when society discovers a belief in its capacity to progress does it begin to conern itself with its progress in the past. Not surprisingly, this realisation of the past across the country, is variously manifested depending on the intersecting layers of politics, power and self-interest. It may be seen in the vociferous demand to retain the yellow lighting on Marine Drive and preserve it well-deserved epithet of the 'Queen's Necklace' even as vast and historic areas that once housed the city's textile mills and the associated labour housing are systematically transformed into malls and night clubs and theatres. Witenss also the new enthusiasm for setting up museums in many cities.

It is also seen in the genre of recent books, written by young scholars and writers, attempting to fill the gaps and discovering voices in the deliberate silences of the past that is just beginning to make its mark. There is indeed an awareness more evident now than it was say, two decades ago, of the need to read the past and preserve it material evidence

Welcome though that this curiosity is, it is already throwing up unsettling questions and issues and controversies. Which past do we preserve? Whose versions do we immortalise in our museums? Whose voices do we memorialise? What do we recover? What are our rights and limits as interlocutors of the past, especially when some of this recovery may change our present.

Walking down the streets of older cities like Madras, Bombay or Calcutta the colonial past overwhelms and there are stories to be discovered in the archives they house. One wonders why Mumbai, one India's oldest metros, a city that was the hub of India's early industrialization and public politics has not seen fit to establish a museum of the city, detailing and preserving its urban growth trajectory. Or for that matter, the rich history of the city's medical institutions that played a pioneering role in creating models and templates for medical practice, surgery and research is nowhere to be seen. The stories around the setting up of the Haffkine Institute, the political context of establishing the women's hospital, and the social history of setting up the King Edward Memorial Hospital and the GS Medical College are being gradually lost in the

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memories of men and women who will be gone and in the pages of badly preserved archival records.

Raghu Karnad in the introduction to his remarkable book, *Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War* says "People have two deaths: the first at the end of their lives, when they go away, and the second at the end of the memory of their lives, when all who remember are gone." And his' is a story of recovery of a past that he did not even know existed. A story that grips you as it unravels a personal narrative of three men negotiating the Second World War, and of the enormous sleight of hand that has all but made a substantial slice of history vanish.

Indeed events too have two, no, three deaths. One, when they are erased from the memories of those who witnessed it, sometimes deliberately, sometimes through a process of living and the accumulation of new memories. A second time when they are erased from the memories those who have heard of it, read about it and have experienced it only second hand.

But there is a third obliteration, when they are deliberately written out of people's memories, written out by twisting them out of shape, by coralling their importance and minimising their enormity, and worst of all, corrupting them beyond recognition. That is the final depart. To consciously prevent this from happening is to fight a rearguard action every day at every level. The other day, I casually threw out a reckless question to a group of NextGen colleagues: Where were you when the Mumbai blasts happened? There was a total silence for a minute. Then, one of them said, I was one year old.

That startled me not so much because it defined the generation gap but because it spotlit an essential truth about history-making in people's imagination. Take for instance the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster. Thirty years after, most people, especially the young, think of it as an industrial blast that released a toxic gas that killed hundreds. It is not even recognised as the world's worst industrial disaster. Because that is how the state and the might of corporate India have written its history through media and through their actions.

In fact, the blast left behind a gruesome and sad legacy---not only of death and suffering bridging a generation; but also of an establishment that deliberately shut down the flow of vital information to those who were treating the survivors, of a government that set about choking complaining voices and sealing the event in a time capsule to be buried with the toxic waste.

To hold on to the real stories of Bhopal disaster a museum is under way. But whether it will succeed in displaying the nuanced stories of ordinary people, of extraordinary lives of sustained effort to bring justice and succour to the survivors, of the sudden muteness of India's research establishment and its medical fraternity is a moot question.

Even as we build museums and write books, it becomes imperative that we capture the voices of those who experienced an event or participated in them. In a generation's lifetime India has witnessed the upsurge of people's movements and civil society actions leading to a revitalisation of democracy in practice. These have had wide ranging impact: in perception, practice and in the very contouring of conceptual and theoretical knowledge.

Partisanal unidirectional history writing or representations are an inadequate means of preserving these events and movements for genreations. It is necessary for us to look back on our past, immediate and distant, in multiple ways—texts, visuals and audials and each time find new meanings. These need to be personalised; to be constructed in layers that show the intersections and clashes and the failures. Controversies will abound and clashes of perspectives will emerge at every turn. But it is here that we need to display a high degree of maturity and tolerance as a community, society and as a nation and preserve the rich multidimensionality of our past.