

Syllabus: Public History in India – Towards a People's Past

Course Overview

This course explores the evolving field of public history in India. It emphasizes how the past is represented, contested, and engaged with by different publics and communities, focusing on oral traditions, community museums, state institutions, and contemporary heritage initiatives. The course encourages students to understand the pluralities of history-making and critically engage with public memory, identity, and representation.

Learning Outcomes

- Understand the evolution and scope of public history in India.
- Critically analyze public engagements with the past across diverse communities and institutions.
- Explore oral history, folklore, and memory as historical sources.
- Examine the role of museums, archives, and community initiatives in shaping public memory.
- Develop skills to conceptualize and design public history projects.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to Public History

Definitions, global perspectives, and relevance in India.

Week 2: The Discipline of History and Its Colonial Foundations

Colonial legacies in shaping historical knowledge; emergence of history as a discipline in India.

Week 3: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Vernacular Histories

Genealogical traditions, oral performances, storytelling practices like Kavaad, Manganiyar, and pilgrimage records.

Week 4: Oral History and Memory

Oral history methods, memory and identity, The Stitches Speak and similar projects.

Week 5: Public Controversies and Historians' Interventions

Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, Romila Thapar and the historian's public role.

Week 6: Dalit-Bahujan Histories and Counter-Narratives

Alternative histories, caste, community memory, and identity politics.

Week 7: Museums in Colonial and Postcolonial India

Indian Museum, the National Museum, and their roles in constructing national narratives.

Week 8: Reimagining Museums and Community Spaces

Case study: Arna Jharna Desert Museum; local knowledge, tools, and caste-based occupations.

Week 9: Remember Bhopal Museum

Survivor-led curation, resistance, corporate accountability, oral testimonies and ethics.

Week 10: Partition Museum

Partition narratives, memory curation, reconciliation, and healing through public storytelling.

Week 11: Public History Practices and Institutions

INTACH, Ambedkar University's Neighbourhood Museums, Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK).

Week 12: The Centre for Public History (CPH), Bengaluru

Design-led interpretation, storytelling, digital exhibitions, oral history archiving.

Week 13: Developing Public History Projects

Methodology, fieldwork, stakeholder engagement, designing exhibitions and performances.

Week 14: Student Project Presentations

Students present their individual/group public history projects.

Assessment Methods

- Class Participation – 10%
- Weekly Reflections / Reading Responses – 15%
- Oral History Interview and Analysis – 15%
- Museum/Exhibition Critique – 15%
- Final Project (Individual or Group) – 30%
- Final Presentation – 15%

Essential Readings

- Indira Chowdhury & Srijan Mandal, "Public History in India: Towards a People's Past"

- Romila Thapar, 'In Defence of History'
- Rustom Bharucha, Rajasthan: An Oral History
- Urvashi Butalia, The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India
- Badri Narayan, Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India
- Kancha Ilaiah, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative'

Note:

This syllabus is a guideline and may be updated based on institutional and student needs. Students are encouraged to bring their own histories, communities, and narratives into the course space.