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Public History in India: Towards a People's Past

Indira Chowdhury and Srijan Mandal

Public history, as it is practised in India, defies easy attempts at classification. This is partially because hardly anything that would be recognized as public history is identified as such. Despite its ever-increasing acceptance outside India as a discipline and a practice distinct from history, it has yet to gain any currency within India. Any attempts to identify works that are self-consciously public history in the Indian context are not likely to yield much fruit. Nor will borrowing any of its many definitions from the West and trying to find works that adhere to it in India. Instead, this chapter will try to highlight the myriad forms that public engagements with the past have taken place in India.

In India, there exist practices that actively engage with the past. Sometimes these are seen as resources that historians might use. But more often they are viewed as resources that belong not to history but to anthropology and folklore. This may have to do with the mechanisms that established history as an academic discipline in India. Many practices that engage actively with the past use songs, performances and puppetry. The records kept at pilgrimage sites or genealogical tables preserved in memory by communities such as the *Manganiyar* in Rajasthan are consulted by people to understand family history.[1] The tradition of the *Kavaad*, or the story-telling box that uses a wooden box that opens out to reveal the story, very often incorporates genealogy.

There have been a few attempts in recent years to engage with and document these practices through film. Filmmaker Nina Sabnani has used indigenous aesthetics and forms of story-telling to depict a community's engagement with the Partition and the wars between India and Pakistan in her animated film *The Stitches Speak* (2009).[2] Sabnani brings together older traditions of engagements with the past with new ways of presenting the past. But this has not been engaged with by historians except as a resource or a source of information. A robust public history program is needed to engage with such modes of representation of the past. At the Centre for Public History in Bengaluru – which is the only institution in India to anchor two master's programs in oral history and in public history and heritage interpretation – we make an attempt to do so. We shall discuss this later in our chapter. But these resources are often ignored by mainstream university departments as not being proper resources for the academic discipline of history which was introduced during the colonial period.

History – or 'the academic discipline that we research, teach, and study in universities … that was invented in Western Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century'[3] – did not become a subject of postgraduate study until 1919, when the University of Calcutta established a department for the study of medieval and modern history. Other universities followed suit over the next two decades.[4] Thus until about a century ago there were no Indian historians formally trained in the discipline, at least not in a university. Yet, by the time history became a subject of postgraduate study, it had already been around and flourishing for a few decades as history had developed in the public sphere in the hands of amateurs amid a public 'hunger for history', a phrase that the famous Indian author Rabindranath Tagore had used in 1899 to describe his times.[5]

These amateurs debated the ways that the past can be studied in a 'scientific' manner, an approach that had become available to them through the agency of colonialism and the colonial attempts to 'scientifically' study the precolonial Indian past. However, they were not satisfied to merely study the past 'scientifically'. They also wanted to publicize it 'among ordinary people in accordance with scientific methods', otherwise history would be little more than 'mere argumentation among the learned'. In other words, 'they thought of the historian as a custodian of the nation's or the people's memories'.[6] This conception of the historian as custodian has continued to this day. Accordingly, the public role that historians have sought for themselves is that of adjudicating 'disputes relating to the past [that] arise in the domain of popular culture'.[7] However, this role has not been offered to

them by the public; most attempts by historians to assume it for themselves has made little difference in the outcome of public disputes about the past. Despite that, historians continue to try to find a place for themselves in the wars over history that engulf the country from time to time.

Publics and their pasts

It could thus be said that public history in India is as old as the discipline of history itself. But it came into prominence in 1990 when the faculty of the Centre for Historical Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi published a pamphlet refuting the claims that were being made about the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi dispute over the site of Rama's birthplace.[8] The pamphlet presented historical evidence to refute the communal beliefs that were being treated as history and used in the perpetuation of communal politics. In the following year, an edited volume that expanded upon the pamphlet and provided contextual depth was published.[9] While this unprecedented intervention did garner some attention, it failed to affect public perception of the Babri Masjid, which was ultimately torn down by hundreds of kar sevaks – Sangh Parivar activists – on 6 December 1992.

The most prominent historical voice to emerge in the debate was that of Romila Thapar. This was not the first time Thapar had found herself fighting against the political abuse of history in the public sphere. In the late 1970s, she and some of her colleagues had to defend the textbooks that they had written for the National Council of Educational Research and Training in the 1960s. That was because the same activists had taken exception to their historical interpretation and, with Prime Minister Morarji Desai's blessing, sought to stop their use.[10] The battle over textbooks was reignited in the early years of this century when the Sangh Parivar was back in power through its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Yet again, Thapar and her colleagues had to defend the discipline of history from the political distortions that were sought to be imposed upon it.[11] In other words, Thapar has been playing the role of a public historian for over half a century without ever identifying as a public historian.

However, her attempts and those of others to adjudicate public disputes about the past or promote historical method have recently met with resistance from an altogether different quarter: the *Dalit Bahujan Samaj* – society of the oppressed and the majority. For them, 'the past has been an integral and constitutive element of identity assertion and also a medium

for coping with the oppressive present'.[12] The discipline of history, the feeling goes, is not equipped to do that, and public history derived from this conception of the discipline is irrelevant to such an enterprise. Here, an 'alternative history' is sought to be created 'as a form of dissent' through 'the use of dissenting cultural resources like myths, legends, local heroes and histories'.[13] The purpose of such a history is Dalit mobilization for political power that is sought through raising Dalit consciousness.[14]

So, whether it is the caste Hindu public or the Dalit-Bahujan public, the past serves a political purpose in the present and, as such, must be projected in a manner that serves that public's political purposes. For such a task, of course, neither the discipline of history nor the public role of adjudicator that a professional historian may want to assume is equal, which is why historians tend to be so marginal in public contestations about the past.

Colonial curiosities and the postcolonial museum

Museums present one way of engaging the public with the past. Calcutta, the first capital of British India, was home to Asia's first museum. The Museum of the Asiatic Society began in 1814 and had a very diverse collection. As in other colonies, museums in India were seen as part of the machinery of civilization through which colonial subjects could understand and access their past through a scientific lens. The museum, one of the earliest tools of public history, had a slightly different educational agenda in the colonies. Through the objects on display, colonial subjects, who occupied a lower position on the evolutionary ladder, could view their own glorious past which contrasted sharply with their worn-out and depleted present.[15] The early history of the museum shows how the collection of archaeological, botanical and zoological objects was organically linked to the expeditions undertaken, wars fought and excavations conducted. The museum soon expanded and became what we now know as the Indian Museum in Kolkata. It also moved to its present premises, an imposing neoclassical building designed by Walter Granville, in 1878.

If the colonial state saw museums as places to display the geographical boundaries of the empire, the coming of Indian Independence in 1947 brought with it new dilemmas. The Indian Museum became one of the sites where 'the drama of decolonization was played out with all its contradictions

Figure 6.1 Indian Museum, Kolkata, c. 1990. Photo Indira Chowdhury.

and paradoxes'.[16] Since Indian Independence came with the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan, old artefacts and objects of historical significance were redistributed between the two countries. Between 1947 and 1948, an exhibition of Indian art with selections from museum artefacts as well as works by contemporary artists was put up in Burlington House, London, as part of the Royal Academy Exhibition of Indian Art. When the artefacts returned to India, they were displayed at the Raj Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India, which until 1947 was the Viceregal Palace. This exhibition was not very successful in London but it was 'destined to have a far more significant afterlife in Delhi' as the artefacts borrowed from various museums went on to form the core collection of what came to be the National Museum.[17]

This celebratory moment resulted in a conflict between the older Indian Museum and the newly assembled National Museum. The Indian Museum refused to part with some of its artefacts. The oldest and the largest museum in India was not identified as the National Museum but recognized as an institution of national importance. The creation of the National Museum in the capital became 'an act of great symbolic importance after independence', and the new museum was seen as celebrating the 'ancient culture of the young state'.[18] The creation of the new museum thus signalled the creation of a new narrative of the state. It was this narrative that was replicated in

different museums and showcased especially for schoolchildren who visited regularly. Museums thus became pedagogic sites for the new citizens to understand their past.

Reimagining museums in India

The desert museum of Rajasthan

Reflecting on public history more than three decades ago, Ronald J. Grele had argued that the term itself calls for a redefinition of the role of the historian, as public history 'conjures up images of a new group of historical workers interpreting the past of heretofore ignored classes of people'.[19]

The Arna Jharna, or the Desert Museum of Rajasthan, run by the Rupayan Sansthan, attempts a similar redefinition of the role of the historian by reimagining the museum as a space where the link between land and livelihood, cropping patterns and cultural ethos, material culture and tools can be investigated and examined by the visitors. Envisioned by Rupayan's founding director, Komal Kothari, Arna Jharna presents his idea of Rajasthan as being divided into three cropping zones – the

Figure 6.2 Display of brooms used outdoors at Arna Jharna Museum. Photo Indira Chowdhury.

millet zone, the wheat zone and the sorghum zone with distinctive environments, food items, tools as well as different cultural practices. All exhibitions at the museum are arrived at through this process of focussing on the zone and understanding environment, food, material culture and traditions. The first exhibition project on brooms was undertaken by the museum and directed by writer, academic and cultural critic Rustom Bharucha who had earlier published *Rajasthan: An Oral History* based on extensive interviews with Komal Kothari. The broom exhibition with 350 brooms, classified according to use and place of origin, focuses on the environment and natural resources, modes of production, lives of the broom-makers who belong to marginalized caste groups, myths, beliefs and symbolic dimensions of the broom and the economy of the broom.[20] As Rustom Bharucha puts it, the museum is thus able to focus on unheard histories: 'Our social function as a museum is in terms of making the inaudible audible; making the invisible visible … we are serious about calling attention to their practice and predicament.'[21]

Remember Bhopal Museum

The Remember Bhopal Museum, proclaimed as 'the first museum of the world's worst industrial disaster', is unique in the annals of public history in India in being a 'survivor-led effort', 'collectively curated by a community of survivors and activists'.[22] In that sense, it is truly a manifestation of a people's past – a past that is not only *of* a people, but also *by* those people.

The museum was inaugurated in December 2014, on the thirtieth anniversary of the Bhopal Gas Disaster of 3 December 1984, when forty tons of the lethal methyl isocyanate had escaped into the air, killing about 15,000–20,000 people and leaving half a million more exposed to its harmful effects. It is an act of resistance, standing as an impassioned indictment of corporate crime, of state apathy and of the survivors' resilient struggle against both. It is also a sharp condemnation of the government's idea of creating a memorial at the factory site.[23]

The museum accepts no government or corporate funding, surviving instead through small donations from individuals and contributions from environmental activist groups in India and abroad.[24] Its galleries are accordingly curated to evoke in the audience's mind a range of emotions – from horror to anger to despair, all achieved through the deft use of images, voices, objects and text. Alongside the images in each room is a bank of

Figure 6.3 One of the galleries at the Remember Bhopal Museum. Photo Indira Chowdhury.

wall phones, each containing the haunting voices of those who survived and those who continue to fight a seemingly losing battle against corporate crime to this day. The use of oral history alongside objects and photographs come together to give meaning to the everyday objects of ordinary people that are also on display in each gallery. Contextualized thus, something as commonplace as a child's clothing takes on a tragic meaning, as does the stethoscope of a doctor. They are all representative of the havoc that the leaked gas wreaked on the residents of Bhopal.

By thus challenging the monopoly of the state in memorializing the past, the Remember Bhopal Museum has managed to not only commemorate a movement for justice, but also continue it through the four walls of a museum.

The Partition Museum

Half a million people killed, 75,000 women violated and 10 million refugees created:[25] these are some of the staggering, yet ultimately sanitized, statistics of the retributive genocide that followed the partition of British India. Yet,

for almost seventy years after this cataclysmic event, 'no memorial, no designated space, no commemoration of any kind'[26] had been established to mark the momentous migration that accompanied the birth of these two nations. The Partition Museum was formally inaugurated on 17 August 2017, the seventieth anniversary of the announcement of the Radcliffe Award, which demarcated the border between India and Pakistan.

Oral history interviews play a central role in the museum. Carefully chosen excerpts from these interviews are played through headphones on LED screens. Accompanying many of these interviews are personal objects – for instance, a letter, a suitcase, a piece of clothing – that are either referenced in the excerpts or are relevant to the person's memory of partition.

Despite the traumatic events that it depicts, the museum has made a curatorial choice to not dwell on barbarities that people committed in the name of avenging their co-religionists in the aftermath of partition. Instead, it has chosen to highlight acts of compassion, of courage, of even joy like a wedding; ordinary acts that became extraordinary by virtue of the circumstances in which they occurred. The feeling that the exhibits leave one with is of hope – that even in those dark times, there were some who survived the ordeal with their humanity intact. In keeping with this theme, the museum ends with the tree of hope. From it hangs messages from visitors of their impression of the museum. The gallery has also uplifting stories of how survivors of partition, without a penny in their pocket, became successful in this new country that they now had to call home. Through such curatorial decisions, the Partition Museum has chosen to commemorate the truth of partition, to be sure, but have also tried to pave a path towards reconciliation.

As the editors of this volume have pointed out, 'the nation state certainly underwrote the evolution of history with a public purpose through massive investments in cultural institutions and universities'.[27] All the museums discussed here are public engagements that are very different in scope and character from the traditional museums in India, holding up for interrogation the idea of the past and how it should be represented.

Public history interventions and the Indian academic context

Public history interventions in India, as elsewhere, have often come from outside academia. Although there has been no local history movement in

India, organizations such as the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) have one of the largest networks of heritage activists, artists, art historians, architects and amateur historians. Its members have been intervening in educating the youth and the public about heritage through the Heritage Education and Communication Service, which was established in 1998. INTACH has also been undertaking numerous conservation projects. Although INTACH has never been recognized by academia, it has contributed the largest number of student volunteers to work on heritage sites and has engaged with the historical interpretation of these sites. In 2012, INTACH set up the INTACH Heritage Academy, giving a formal structure to the work it had been doing in training, research and capacity building on heritage.

However, in recent years, there have been several attempts towards building sustainable public history engagements with recent history from within academic spaces. Many of these engagements have focused on community history and attempted to present the voices of those who had not been included in mainstream history until now. From 2013 onwards, the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK) at the Ambedkar University in Delhi created several neighbourhood museums, engaging with local history and local communities within the city. The neighbourhood museums are temporary displays that exhibit collected narratives from marginalized populations. Viewing 'documentation as an act of intervention', CCK raises questions about 'ascribed identities in the city'.[28] It has created three such 'museums' to date – at Shadi Khampur, Nizamuddin and Shadipur Shani Bazar. The 'museums' are set up for a month, some times longer, and use oral history, photographs and material from the community. The museum site, usually a gallery space, becomes a space for dialogue with the community and between disciplines. The neighbourhood museums have been using the process itself as a pedagogic tool through which students can learn to collect and interpret diverse historical resources and curate them meaningfully.

The Centre for Public History (CPH), which began in 2011, is uniquely located within the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. The first centre of its kind in India, CPH attempts through its courses and projects to fill the lacuna that exists between historical research and its communication to a wider audience. Committed to the creation of resources for research, CPH has been involved in creating the archives of contemporary institutions. Deeply committed to dissemination of the archives, CPH has developed the concept of the 'archival book' in which

archival documents, photographs and oral history interviews are compiled and exhibited in ways that make them accessible to the general public. CPH has created archives and archival books for the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (2012), the Institute of Mathematical Sciences (2016) and the bicentenary commemoration volume for the Indian Museum (2017).

The location of CPH within an institute of design has also created opportunities to work closely with designers and visual communicators, exploring different forms of interpretation that set up relationships between photographs, documents and oral narratives and in the process create new ways of doing history. Connecting with audience experience, CPH has been exploring different forms of interpretation through the realm of performance and audio-visual communication. The Bangalore Storyscapes walks, lead at different points by Avehi Menon, Archit Guha, Priyanka Seshadri and Indira Bharadwaj, have used the city walk to engage with different aspects of Bangalore's layered history, deploying memory, archival documents and photographs. The Bangalore Fort project, called 'The Tiger Comes to Town', was a site-specific intervention that attempted to present a critical perspective of the past and reengage local audiences with events from 1791 at the Bangalore Fort – a heritage site that is preserved and protected today by the Archaeological Survey of India. CPH anchors two master's programs in public history and heritage interpretation, and in oral history. Both degrees are awarded by the University of Mysore. At the time of writing, there has been one student for oral history and none for public history indicating that the discipline will take a while to find its academic roots in India.

Conclusion

A practice around the public engagement with the past exists in India. It has been around for decades and has taken a variety of forms, and it appears to be growing throughout the country. Beginning in state-funded institutions such as museums, the practice seems to be slowly but surely emerging from the shadow of the state and its claims about being the sole representative of the public past. In so doing, the conception of the public as a monolithic entity has also been challenged, and along with it the belief that a singular interpretation of the past is sufficient for the public. The acknowledgement of multiple publics within India has brought with it the recognition that each of these publics engage with a different past and, within themselves, even

different versions of the shared past. As such, any effective engagement with the past must take into account the public whose past it is trying to represent and proceed by making them stakeholders in the process of representation.

What has yet to happen in India, however, is recognition of this thriving collection of practices as public history. The need for such recognition may not seem immediately apparent or even important, but recognition brings with it a formalization of practice, a sharing of practice through recognized platforms and the coming together of practitioners under a common banner. That might make it easier to attract funding for projects – something that most public history projects struggle with – which in turn could create more opportunities for employment. An increase in employment opportunities might make the study of public history as a discipline and a practice more attractive and viable for students who are interested in the past but do not necessarily want to become academic historians. And an increase in the number of well-trained professional public historians would mean more partnerships with many more communities in the country who have hitherto not had their past represented, much less represented in a manner that is meaningful to them.

If all these might's and maybe's can be manifested, then the thriving practice of publicly engaging with the past could be transformed into a public history movement that unleashes the democratic potential inherent in public history and makes the past truly of the people, by the people and for the people.

Notes

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