

“Memory Work and its Importance for Sri Lanka”

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Memory is pivotal to restorative justice and the process of dealing with the past. Memorializing is one certain path to uncover the past and fortify efforts towards closure. “Memory work” is irretrievably linked to “transitional justice”, a comparatively contemporary field that addresses and deals with massive human rights violations. Transitional justice encompasses three forms of grappling with injustice: retributive, restorative and reparative. The Durban Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, stressed emphatically “that remembering the crimes or wrongs of the past, wherever and whenever they occurred, unequivocally condemning its racist tragedies and telling the truth about history are essential elements for international reconciliation and the creation of societies based on justice, equality and solidarity.”¹ Memory work also refers to wider multiple “processes and activities that are the responsibility of all sectors of a polity and society.”² This aspect of our consciously lived experience is what I choose to work on in Sri Lanka, which has a large Buddhist majority. Buddha taught that “Hatred does not cease through hatred, but through love alone they cease.”

Memorializing is essential for restorative justice. I am guided by Martha Minow, who observes: “in contrast to legal prosecution, restorative justice seeks to repair the injustice, to make up for it, and to effect corrective changes in the record, in relationships, and in future behaviour. It emphasizes the humanity of both offenders and victims. It seeks repair of social connections and peace rather than retribution against the offenders. Building connections and enhancing communication between perpetrators and those they victimized, and forging ties across the community, take precedence over punishment or law enforcement. Reliving memory helps the collective unconscious of our society to regret, repent and avoid traumatic events that undermined morality, violated norms of behaviour and abandoned social responsibility.”³

Archives, according to Schwartz and Cook (2002), “are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is exchanged, examined and established.”⁴ Hence, the kind of memory work I wish to be involved in is related to empowering communities through memory, archives and records. The past is exposed and made accessible for open discussion with transparency and a search for accountability. The archival records assembled will serve not as a repository of mere data but as a living mechanism that provokes collective memory - how we saw ourselves as individuals, groups and a society in the hope that retrospective honest appraisal will mark the mileposts for a collective future.

¹ Available at <<http://www.un.org/WCAR/durban.pdf>>. Accessed on 23, 12, 2016.

² Chandre Gould and Verne Harris, “Memory for Justice,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014.

³ Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon, 1998): 91-92.

⁴ Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory, *Archival Science* 2: 1-19.

Sri Lanka is passing through a phase of hesitant reconciliation after a 30-year civil war, which was followed by a harsh period of triumphalism that further alienated a vanquished minority. It is still trapped in a time warp in which past events are denied by some and asserted by others. The new government that assumed office promising good governance and national reconciliation has enacted legislative remedies that still need meaningful application on the ground. Sri Lanka is yet to create a space that allows perpetrators and victims, winners and losers, to reckon with their grievances.

The new administration has the dual task of achieving national reconciliation and political consolidation of its electoral base that is challenged by a formidable coalition bent on provoking xenophobic hysteria among the island's majority Sinhala Buddhists.

My current archival work is a direct consequence of my participation in the Mandela Dialogues this year. I am convinced that the advantages accruing from this work can help transform societies from the uneasy absence of physical conflict to a true and resilient peace and a plural social order that restores individual human dignity to all. In Sri Lankan society, there is a dominant tendency to suppress memory, to move on and 'to put the past behind us. Through the memory paradigm, I will endeavour to overcome this obstacle by promoting a "never again" mind frame in the collective unconscious of civil society.

My participation in the Mandela Dialogues made me reflect deeply on the need for memory work in a conflict-torn country where the fissures remain despite the absence of armed conflict. If we had memorialized the 1983 pogrom of the Tamil minority, it would have served to jolt the memory of the majority to pay heed to the roots of the conflict. My family must be one of the rare Muslim families to have been affected, and evicted, in 1983. It is not as if to say that the Muslims were not targets in subsequent years ...

Today, I know that racial prejudice and racial profiling requires sustenance. What is disturbing is the dismissive attitude of many to deflect the issues by making out that the pogrom of 1983 was an isolated aberration of a few miscreants. It is indeed absolutely imperative that we archive the horrors of the pogrom - that alone will help the majority to confront a terrible past instead of relying on the rhetoric of stamping out separatist terrorism.

The Mandela Dialogues process meant a lot to me also in terms of understanding the pros and cons of memory work and the deeper meaning of a healing process that involves memory work. What it means for people to be heard, to be allowed to tell their stories, to have someone listen to them. Creating such safe space is important for sustaining peace.

This experience gave me deep insights into how important it is to create safe space. How important it is to have space for trauma to be expressed and for taking small steps towards creating space for new friendships, for changing our attitudes, engaging our families, making space for women to share their traumas. Space to explore the roles and stories of mothers and the younger generation of activists. Space to consider how the new generation suffers from the consequences of the many layers of violence it has

internalized. The experience also helped me to study events from the point of view of the victims, the oppressed, the dispossessed. And to ask where I belong.

This process brought to me personally lessons in patience and perseverance - not to expect speedy results, but to wait assuredly for the better. As much as it immensely inspired me, it also challenged me. The deep sharing exercises brought close to me a network of beautiful human beings from all over the world, doing meaningful transitional justice and memory work. They helped peel off layers, showed our vulnerability and taught us the fundamentals of a long journey ahead to fuel and unload our burdens and traumas, together as a collective, independent of the Mandela Dialogues organisers' goals. It was an immensely fulfilling experience, with the promise of future work together at home and globally.

Thoughts and insights gained through participation in the Mandela Dialogues have also encouraged me to enliven my deep-seated memories of a past that we do not wish to revisit but are bold enough to remember. I have already started a blog memorializing the 1983 pogrom in Sri Lanka to tap into the collective memories of all ethnic communities and to work against a recurrence of such a violent episode in the future. I am in the process of running the blog, inviting contributions of memorabilia from those living in Sri Lanka and outside the country to carry it out as a movement that holds the potential for gathering steam in the process where people who were affected and their generations can link up in solidarity and build future resilient communities against violence.

About the author:

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