

STATUES AS DEEPLY CONTESTED HERITAGE

Preserving or removing a person's statue must rely on shared judgment of his contribution to collective life

Across the globe, people in large numbers have been seen toppling statues that stood as icons of their past oppression and continuing humiliation. The most recent example is the tearing down in Bristol, U.K., of the statue of Edward Colston, a slave owner. Not long ago, statues of imperial rulers were removed in India too. Once considered heritage, symbols of a past to be celebrated, they are now viewed as best erased from public memory.

Not surprising, because heritage is almost always contested. It is not naturally given but what humans imagine and construct. What we call 'heritage' is not everything we happen to inherit from our ancestors. It necessarily involves a selection of what we presently consider significant in this inheritance. Every society decides what is and isn't heritage. Since every collective decision involves politics, the construction of heritage too is deeply political, a field of power not among ruling elites alone but all people whose concern it is.

The past in the present

Why care for heritage? Because it contributes to and enhances our collective self-understanding. Heritage affirms our collective identity, is a source of pride. It is important also because it is that part of history which is continuously brought to life by artefacts, integrated with our lived collective experience. It is a part of the past that we live and with which we live. And because it directly touches identity, it evokes strong feelings.

Heritage construction involves ethics too. It is the valued past of societies: intangible, preserved say, in narratives, music or performances but also tangible, materially embodied in monuments and statues. Not a value-neutral term, 'heritage' is saturated with ethical evaluation, a judgment of what is worth remembering and preserving. Conversely, it pushes some features of our history into the background, fit for forgetting or dispassionate historical reflection. Integral to the construction of heritage then is an assessment of what must be remembered and forgotten, what calls for respect and celebration and what is a 'stain' remembered only to be prevented in future, an object of recurring regret that it happened at all, mourned publicly. Raj Ghat is not only a place where we remember Gandhi but also where we mourn his assassination by one of his own countrymen. Heritage is a way of addressing and rectifying past wrongs. The Holocaust memorial in Berlin and Washington's Vietnam memorial are both gestures towards reparation, monuments of public apology.

Reactions in diverse societies

In complex, stratified, and diverse societies, the part of history that is self-affirming to some can be a source of self-denial to others. The same thing which provides recognition and pride to some ignites misrecognition and shame in others, be offensive, hurtful and disrespectful. Even when it does no such thing, it may simply not speak to them. Public display of the heritage of only a few is a source of profound estrangement and exclusion for others. Heritage is often linked to cultural domination that invites resistance. It follows that heritage is that which brings comfort or unease, to which people are either attracted or repulsed. Wherever symbolic power is unevenly distributed, artefacts that manifest this accumulated power provoke passionate disputation. Is it surprising then that a statue of a slave-owner or member of the imperial ruling elite provokes indignation among those who were formerly enslaved or colonised? Likewise, in societies where caste hierarchies abound, the continual denial of public recognition to Dalit symbols leads to demands of greater inclusion of their heritage. And when after struggles for recognition, Ambedkar's statues finally make their way into public spaces, why would they, indeed we, not be outraged if an Ambedkar statue is vandalised?

Inescapably public

For the rest, I confine myself to inescapably public statues — not hidden away, or installed in special parks and museums with restricted access, but installed in public squares, at crossroads, unavoidably open for all to see. Who then decides what will be on such public display and why? As

differences are inevitable, as indeed are attempts to influence and pressure key decision makers, how should such collective judgments be reached? How must differences be prevented from turning into interminable disputes, even violence? To see statues of oppressors being torn down is understandable but why reach that tipping point? Why not decide what to do with them after collective deliberation among all stakeholders? Why leave heritage, a matter of long-lasting importance, solely to elected governments that come and go? While politics around heritage is unavoidable, is it not best to have dialogue, consultation, deliberation among people at large, including with artists, philosophers, historians, architects and alert guardians of cultural memory? Didn't public discussion yield a fine decision in the 1960s to remove George V from under the Imperial canopy near India Gate but leave it empty, a gentle reminder that monarchs and dictators have no place in our republic?

The Mahatma and Mohandas

Take the example of Gandhi's statues on account of their obvious global significance, complexity and, since they are surrounded by controversy, their current relevance. Some strongly feel that the Mahatma must be off the pedestal because of his alleged collusion with the Empire, more so for his racism. Assume the worst. Shall we then allow the violent removal of his statues? Now, Gandhi was neither born a Mahatma nor became one overnight. He began life as a very ordinary man, a child of his social milieu with straightforward middle-class aspirations. It is easy to imagine him inheriting caste prejudices in his childhood and, after arrival in London to study law, imbibing the prejudices of his colonial masters, to see himself as close to educated British elites than to Indian peasants or the 'untouchables', and when in Johannesburg, to the oppressed black community.

The real question worth addressing is whether he continued living this way, consolidating his racist and casteist views or struggled to jettison these prejudices. Not just superficially, but by confronting his deepest self, the kind of bad person he had been and then transforming it into something altogether different. By all accounts, Gandhi struggled with his demons all his life and eventually became the Mahatma that he was — a global figure of immense ethical significance, admired by his adversaries, inspiring great men like Martin Luther King, even Nelson Mandela. The statues erected globally honour and celebrate the struggle embodied by this self-reflective Mahatma and not Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the parochial, upper caste Gujarati or the barrister loyal to the British Empire. Those who want to demolish his statues are simply going by an early fragment of his life that he himself disowned with great effort. There can be nothing more absurd or tragic. Imagine a statue of Valmiki torn down because of his perceived criminal past! Imagine further the fate of statues of all great men of the past on the sole ground that they fail the 'patriarchy test'. Who in the past would pass it? Not Marx, the revolutionary, not Ambedkar, our greatest Dalit leader, not Mandela or Martin Luther King, icons of Black struggles, nor I am afraid, all the male gods worshipped by many. The general lesson to be drawn is this: a decision to preserve or remove statues cannot be based on current stereotypes of historical figures or narrow standards of political correctness that highlight a general flaw characteristic of an entire era but must instead rely on complex, collective judgment of a person's overall contribution to social, political and intellectual life. Gandhi, in my view, passes this test. Colston or Cecil Rhodes do not. We must carefully avoid anachronism in our judgments of the past.

Bring some statues up

At a time when statues are being brought down, why not talk of bringing some up? I am puzzled by our persistent obsession with political power, even when used for good purpose. Why is there no movement to erect statues of M.S. Subbulakshmi, Kumar Gandharva, or Begum Akhtar for their massive contribution to our cultural heritage? Won't it be most appropriate to have a statue of Mohammad Rafi or Kishore Kumar in busy public squares near metro stations or bus terminals?

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **deeply** (adverb) – seriously, intensely, strongly, awfully, terribly.
- ❖ **contested** (adjective) – opposed, disputed, challenged.
- ❖ **heritage** (noun modifier) – tradition, history, background, culture.
- ❖ **rely on** (phrasal verb) – depend on; resort to, have recourse to.

- ❖ **collective** (adjective) – combined, united/joint, cooperative (by all people as a group).
- ❖ **topple** (verb) – knock down, tear down, pull down, demolish.
- ❖ **icon** (noun) – representation, symbol, figure/model.
- ❖ **oppression** (noun) – persecution, abuse, ill treatment, suppression.
- ❖ **humiliation** (noun) – embarrassment, shame, indignity/dishonour, insult, offence.
- ❖ **tear down** (phrasal verb) – knock down, pull down, demolish/topple.
- ❖ **imperial** (adjective) – policy or ideology of extending country's rule over foreign nations.
- ❖ **inherit** (verb) – assume, take over, receive (from a former user of something).
- ❖ **ancestor** (noun) – forebear, forefather, predecessor.
- ❖ **inheritance** (noun) – the passing on of something (traits, properties, etc..) from parents to their offspring; legacy, bequest, endowment.
- ❖ **elite** (noun) – high society people; the group of most powerful people in a society.
- ❖ **affirm** (verb) – confirm, ratify, endorse, uphold.
- ❖ **collective identity** (noun) – the shared sense of belonging to a group.
- ❖ **artefact** (noun) – an object that is made by a human workmanship, especially one of historical or archaeological interest. Artifact is the American spelling.
- ❖ **evoke** (verb) – invoke, give rise to, bring forth, bring to mind.
- ❖ **ethics** (noun) – standards, principles, morality, rule of conduct.
- ❖ **intangible** (adjective) – impalpable, untouchable, non-physical, unembodied, invisible.
- ❖ **narrative** (noun) – a representation of a particular situation; portrayal/account.
- ❖ **tangible** (adjective) – palpable, touchable, physical, visible, noticeable.
- ❖ **materially** (adverb) – significantly, greatly, considerably.
- ❖ **embody** (verb) – include, incorporate, encompass, integrate.
- ❖ **value-neutral** (adjective) – impartial, disinterested, dispassionate, unbiased.
- ❖ **saturate** (verb) – fill, spread throughout, imbue (to the highest level after that no more can be added/ done).
- ❖ **conversely** (adverb) – inversely, the other way round, oppositely/reciprocally.
- ❖ **fit** (adjective) – suitable, good enough, relevant, appropriate.
- ❖ **dispassionate** (adjective) – unemotional, neutral, fair-minded, balanced.
- ❖ **reflection** (noun) – indication, display, demonstration, manifestation.
- ❖ **call for** (phrasal verb) – require, publicly ask/necessitate, demand.
- ❖ **stain** (noun) – mark, blemish, taint, blot.
- ❖ **recurring** (adjective) – happening repeatedly; reappearing/reoccurring.
- ❖ **regret** (noun) – sadness, unhappiness, lamentation, grief, mourning.
- ❖ **mourn** (verb) – grieve, sorrow, lament.
- ❖ **assassination** (noun) – murder, killing.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **the Holocaust** (noun) – It was the World War II genocide of the European Jews. The ideological and systematic state-sponsored prosecution and mass murder of (6) millions of European Jews by the German Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945.
- ❖ **gesture** (noun) – action, deed, sign.
- ❖ **reparation** (noun) – amends, restitution, redress.
- ❖ **apology** (noun) – expression of regret.
- ❖ **stratified** (adjective) – divided into categories based on social status/education/income.
- ❖ **stratify** (verb) – categorize, organize, sort.
- ❖ **self-affirming** (adjective) – self-asserting, self-declaring, self-attesting.
- ❖ **self-denial** (adjective) – self-sacrifice, selflessness, unselfishness, moderation, self-discipline.
- ❖ **ignite** (verb) – arouse, kindle, trigger.
- ❖ **offensive** (adjective) – annoying, insulting, humiliating, discourteous, outrageous.
- ❖ **profound** (adjective) – deep, serious, difficult, intense.
- ❖ **estrangement** (noun) – alienation, isolation, disaffection, turning away, hostility.
- ❖ **exclusion** (noun) – banning/barring; rejection, ostracism, banishment.
- ❖ **repulse** (verb) – reject, turn down, refuse, repel.
- ❖ **manifest** (verb) – indicate, show, display, exhibit.
- ❖ **accumulated** (adjective) – gathered/collected, amassed, racked up, increased.
- ❖ **passionate** (adjective) – intense, impassioned, ardent, fervent.
- ❖ **disputation** (noun) – dispute, argument, conflict.
- ❖ **indignation** (noun) – anger, resentment, affront.

- ❖ **enslave** (verb) – oppress, dominate, exploit, persecute, suppress.
- ❖ **colonise** (verb) – to establish a colony and take over control of the indigenous people.
- ❖ **hierarchy** (noun) – ranking, grading; class system.
- ❖ **abound** (verb) – be plentiful, be abundant, be numerous.
- ❖ **make one's way** (phrase) – proceed in to a certain place.
- ❖ **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually.
- ❖ **outrage** (verb) – offend, infuriate, stir up, displease/anger.
- ❖ **vandalise** (verb) – destroy, damage, spoil property (public/private) intentionally.
- ❖ **inescapably** (adverb) – undeniably, unavoidably, inevitably.
- ❖ **interminable** (adjective) – constant, non-stop, never-ending.
- ❖ **oppressor** (noun) – persecutor, intimidator, dictator, autocrat.
- ❖ **tipping point** (noun) – the point in a condition at which a small development/change causes major & unstoppable changes.
- ❖ **deliberation** (noun) – consideration, thinking, contemplation.
- ❖ **stakeholder** (noun) – a person with an interest in something.
- ❖ **solely** (adverb) – only, entirely, completely.
- ❖ **at large** (phrase) – as a whole, generally, extensively.
- ❖ **yield** (verb) – give, provide, produce.
- ❖ **monarch** (noun) – sovereign, ruler.
- ❖ **on account of** (phrase) – because of, owing to/due to, by virtue of.
- ❖ **relevance** (noun) – significance, importance, appropriateness.
- ❖ **off** (adverb) – removed.
- ❖ **pedestal** (noun) – base, platform, foundation, support (of a statue).
- ❖ **alleged** (adjective) – claimed, purported, assumed, reported.
- ❖ **collusion** (noun) – conspiracy, intrigue, secret understanding, collaboration.
- ❖ **more so** (phrase) – to a greater degree; to a greater extent.
- ❖ **racism** (noun) – the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another.
- ❖ **milieu** (noun) – environment, background, atmosphere.
- ❖ **prejudice** (noun) – discrimination, partiality, intolerance, bigotry.
- ❖ **imbibe** (verb) – absorb, take in, acquire.
- ❖ **the oppressed** (noun) – a person who is ill-treated, persecuted or exploited, the underprivileged.
- ❖ **consolidate** (verb) – strengthen, make stronger, reinforce, fortify.
- ❖ **jettison** (verb) – discard, throw out, abandon.
- ❖ **superficially** (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, outwardly.
- ❖ **by all accounts** (phrase) – supposedly, apparently, seemingly.
- ❖ **demon** (noun) – spirit, devil, savage, beast.
- ❖ **adversary** (noun) – rival, enemy, nemesis/opponent, competitor.
- ❖ **self-reflective** (adjective) – relating to a serious thinking about someone's character/actions.
- ❖ **parochial** (adjective) – narrow-minded, illiberal, short-sighted, inward-looking.
- ❖ **barrister** (noun) – advocate, lawyer, legal practitioner.
- ❖ **go by** (phrasal verb) – to follow something.
- ❖ **fragment** (noun) – part, section, chapter.
- ❖ **disown** (verb) – reject, deny, abandon, renounce.
- ❖ **absurd** (adjective) – unreasonable, irrational, illogical.
- ❖ **patriarchy** (noun) – a family/group/society/community/government controlled by a man/a group of men, descent described through male line of the family.
- ❖ **stereotype** (noun) – an oversimplified and/or unfair belief or idea that groups of people have particular characteristics or that all people in a group are the same.
- ❖ **narrow** (adjective) – narrow-minded, inward-looking, illiberal, parochial.
- ❖ **flaw** (noun) – defect, fault, imperfection/weakness.
- ❖ **characteristic** (noun) – attribute, feature, aspect.
- ❖ **anachronism** (noun) – irrelevant/inappropriate thing at a time; something located at a time when it could not have existed or occurred.
- ❖ **bring down** (phrasal verb) – knock down, tear down, pull down, demolish/topple.
- ❖ **bring up** (phrasal verb) – raise, introduce.
- ❖ **puzzle** (verb) – perplex, confuse, bewilder/mystify.
- ❖ **persistent** (adjective) – continuing, unrelenting, unceasing, never-ending.
- ❖ **obsession** (noun) – fixation, preoccupation; the condition of thinking too much about something.