

History Outside the Classroom: A Student's Experience

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To learn is to take in new knowledge. Sometimes we are told what to learn. Sometimes it is left to us and sometimes we choose to go towards something and take it in. The classroom is the seat of formal education in the world we live in, training students about all that has happened before them, so as to prepare them for the world around them, so that they can go out and change it in the future.

However, it still does not provide a holistic view of the world. Theory takes precedence over practical learning. Sometimes, in reality learning, and a lot of it at that, happens outside the classroom. The area outside the classroom comprises the entire world and this is what we are being prepared to enter after our schooling. So to get a taste of it before being pushed out there definitely prepares us better. Here are my experiences with learning outside the classroom.

My subject of interest is history. I have a fascination with the past and with artefacts, old buildings, ruins, records, antiques...if it's not from today, I will probably be interested in it! However, the past is not to everyone's liking. I would even say that history is a subject that some despise because of the way it is taught within the classroom. There are some teachers who are amazing history teachers, able to bring the subject to life, draw maps and give fascinating explanations, but it seems to be the unfortunate reality that most people I have met have had terrible history teachers who have ruined the subject for them forever. I too have had a bad history teacher, though in school the teachers we had for history were mostly quite good. However, we occasionally had biased teachers who only knew how to read from the text, had no real knowledge in the subject, would make students copy out questions and answers as work because they did not know better, and it was these occasional teachers who ruined the subject. Despite school ruining it for me, however, my passion for the subject did not go down because of all that I did outside.

I discovered local history in grade 9, before any lasting damage to my interest was delivered! The Cooum cultural mapping was where it started. How

many know that the Cooum river, now almost a drain, in Chennai, was once considered a holy river, with remnants of temples going over a thousand years along its banks? From that point, I moved on to the brief Adyar Cultural Mapping. Meanwhile, a Facebook group called Madras Local History Group began to draw me in further, with photographs and interesting pieces of information.

From there, my involvement with local history grew, as I attended walks, talks, heritage trips, even helping conduct a couple of walks myself. These entailed recce trips, where we walked the length of the route, figured out where we had to ask for permission, accordingly set up which places would be visited, put out the word, and finally, take people around on the day of the event. This I did twice, with Nivedita Louis, a journalist and historian.

Conducting and taking part in all this gave me an idea of what was going on in my city, Chennai, even while the events of the nation and the wider world were taking place and of the historic importance of the city. It also taught me how heritage in the city is being razed down due to our ignorance and I learned how little is being done to stop it. For instance, when Shah Jahan was being crowned, Madras town was being bought from the Raja of Chandragiri. When people talk of the first railway in India, they think of the Mumbai-Thane line. But even before that, the railway was being used to transport timber down from the Red Hills in Madras. Royapuram Railway Station is the oldest surviving station in the country. One of the first hotels in India with an elevator which was in existence in Chennai, ended up as a Bata showroom and was torn down last year for commercial purposes.

Apart from local history, thanks to my grandfather's collection of antique coins that I am slowly building up, I learned about numismatics. Attending coin fairs, conducting research on various coins minted across the centuries, their denominations and relative values, all taught me about past economies and the complexity of money in the past. I found out, as well, how coins represent our times, with the language on them and anything they

may have engraved on them. Coins can also tell us the economic strength of a kingdom and how prosperous it was, both by the coin and metal values, as well as how much it can be purchased for today.

During my visits to old and ancient temples on heritage trips, I found myself developing an interest in the writing etched onto the walls. Interested in finding out what they said, I did a course in Tamil epigraphy with the REACH Foundation. Fourteen Sundays and two trips to ancient temples later, I can read Tamil inscriptions, from Tamil Brahmi, dating all the way back to 5 BCE and found on pot shards and on rock faces, to the Tamil inscriptions of the Pallava, Chola and Vijaynagar times and also very commonly on temple walls, all the way up to even British era Tamil inscriptions up to around 200 years ago

Though my main interest may be History, reading is also a favourite hobby. Imagine my joy when I discovered the 200 year old Madras Literary Society, a library with over 55,000 thousand books set up in 1812 by men working for the East India Company. These books go back over 400 years and the library is in a heritage building. I visit on and off, earlier to help with indexing and cataloguing, and now with running their Instagram page. Volunteering at the MLS has taught me about the

kind of literature and magazines in circulation years ago and has given me a peek into colonial life. I have volunteered at the MLS stall at Lit for Life, the annual literature festival of Chennai. This has helped me interact with a host of authors I normally would not have met, as well as taught me how to manage a stall at an event, a skill that may be required later in life.

Throughout all this, I had to go to various places on my own and because of this, my sense of location and geography sharpened. I started taking public transport everywhere I went, which meant I had to quickly figure out directions and routes.

Most of what I have done outside the classroom has been informal (except for my epigraphy classes). However, the common thread running through it all is that they are all done through interest. The push was completely internal. My travelling by public transport may not seem like much, but it has taught me communication, prices of various tickets, distances, time, accommodation, adjustment and a sense of independence. A classroom is merely a structural setup, that gives you a set of things that have to be learned within a given period of time. Internships, volunteering, even personal projects: all these give you an independent view of the world. If you were to get out of the classroom, and explore by yourself, the possibilities are endless.