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Constructing History – bringing enquiry into the History classroom

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One of the reasons why students dislike History is because they cannot connect with it. They don't understand the past in a way that enables them to compare and contrast events, periods and individuals or to make links across time and understand the present in the light of the past.

Another reason for disliking the subject is because students are not often given experiences which make them enquire. Enquiry helps students appreciate the true value of studying History – thinking and planning a way through a problem, asking questions, undertaking research, identifying relevant evidence and evaluating its reliability, moving from tentative to firmer conclusions on the basis of that evidence, making conclusions (tentative or otherwise) and effectively communicating it. Through the process they get an opportunity to think like a historian and construct History.

While introducing the subject to the students of class six in a school run by J. Krishnamurti Foundation in Pune, I often pointed out that everything had a history: the children themselves to begin with, their families, their school, places and objects they were in touch with. I encouraged them to explore and construct some of this history.

One such experience led us to investigate and construct the history of an old temple in the vicinity about which none of us in the school community seemed to know much. It was a challenge indeed, since having chosen a not-so-well-known temple, I was not sure whether we would find enough evidence to enable our research. I began nevertheless, realizing that the children would have at least gone through the process of enquiry and realized how historians worked.

Since we had no literature to fall back on, we began by visiting the temple which required a couple of hours' climb up "Shambhu hill", named after the Shiva temple we were about to explore. Twenty of my twelve year old students and I trudged up the hill along with our sketch books, notebooks and pencils, with excitement and a spirit of adventure.

I had requested the priest to be present during our visit, in order to guide us. The initial part of the visit included exploring the temple premises. The children observed and learnt about the different parts of the temple: the 'garbhagriha', where the main idol was housed, the 'sadhana sthal', the place for prayers, the 'mandap' in the centre, where people gathered, the 'tulsi sthan', with the basil plant, an important part of any Indian temple, the adjoining 'Bhakta nivas' constructed to shelter pilgrims, the 'parikrama' the path built around the temple for circumambulating, the 'shikhara' or the spire above the temple, a common feature of temples specially in north India. etc. They also found out about the material used for the construction of the temple. This was, in a way, their first lesson on temple architecture. Children captured sketches of different parts of the temple in



An Old Hindu Temple



Sunrise at Shambhu Hill

their sketch books. It was later a treat to see some of these sketches, often with intricate details, demonstrating not just their artistic skills but also their keen observation.

The shocking discovery that women were not allowed into the ‘garbhagriha’ (sanctum sanctorum) led to a series of questions and induced much indignation among the young ladies in the group; an incidental learning about gender discrimination in places of worship, for biological/cultural reasons that the budding critical thinkers found outrageous. Several other questions like “Is it necessary to go to a temple to worship God?”, “Why are most priests men and not women?”, “Why does one have to perform certain rites to please God?”, “How can sacrificing an innocent animal be a part of worship?”, “If the purpose of all religions is to spread peace then why is it that we fight so much over different religions?” were raised by the children and discussed over the next few days. Clearly there were beliefs and traditions that they could identify with and some that they could not. It was reassuring to know they were not too inhibited to question some of these.

The priest also told us about the social, cultural and economic dimensions of the annual ‘mela’, an event during which the otherwise deserted monument suddenly transformed into a hub of activities pulling people from the neighbouring villages in flocks. This led to the next question about the management of the

temple. Who organized such events? Who managed the day to day affairs? How was the money required for the maintenance, generated? The priest referred to a Trust that had been formed, to handle the temple affairs.

During our tour, we constantly looked for evidence in the form of inscriptions with recorded history. We did find a couple of inscriptions, which told us it was 200 years old, that a Holkar king had chanced upon four ‘Shivalingas’ at the site while hunting and that Ahalyabai Holkar had funded the building of the temple. The children later followed this trail to find out the connections that the Holkars had, with the region they lived in.

We also asked the priest, about the history. He narrated this in bits and pieces, with several interesting anecdotes, which we tried to put together. We had to relentlessly probe however, in order to know more.



Inscriptions on a temple wall

At the end of the visit we did have a narration. It was important for the children to realize however, that what they had just heard as the “history” was but only a version created from the memory of one person, orally conveyed to us. Surely there would be other pieces of evidence to corroborate or support or challenge that version?

Our sincere attempt to locate some literature, however, was initially in vain since we could not lay our hands on a single source.

We now decided to check whether other versions of the history existed among the people. We visited the local village nearby and met the village head as well as an old school teacher, who gave us some glimpses of the history, most of which seemed to be similar to the narration of the priest. We now wanted to get in touch with at least one member of the Trust. Our endeavor led us finally and quite miraculously, to a source of significance – a copy of a document which was of immense value to us.

The creation of this document had a history of its own. At some point, in order to preserve the heritage of the place, the people of the Trust had wanted to renovate the temple as it was very old. They had intended to provide drinking water, plant more trees, create rooms for shelter and parking spaces for all pilgrims. They had soon realized however, that the land on which the temple had been built, had belonged to the Forest Department and therefore, in order to renovate, they would need the permission of the Central Government. While drafting a proposal to the Government of India, they had to put together the history of the temple and the religious and social significance of the monument. The total cost of the project was 15 lacs. Since the monument had been recognized as a ‘Class – C’ place of pilgrimage, they had hopes of getting from the government the money needed for the renovation.

The most propitious moment of our journey was to get hold of an old, dusty, bound version of the copy of this document. The children spent time in studying the proposal, retrieved from it whatever information they could and cross checked some of the information gathered earlier.

The document actually did corroborate most of what the people had narrated orally. Since no formal book on the monument had apparently been written, this was as far as we could possibly go in constructing what was a tentative history of the ‘Shambhu Mahadev’ temple but so was most of the history that we studied, was it not? Tentative conclusions till proved wrong by fresh evidence?

By using available sources to construct an account of the past, children learn that accounts of the past may differ, because evidence is incomplete and that the past is mostly reconstructed from different viewpoints. It is this process and this realization that I had hoped would remain with the children.

When we began, we did not know whether we would be able to go beyond the oral traditions to construct the history, whether we would come across any other corroborating evidence in the form of literature or inscription. Even if we hadn’t, the experience would still have taught us something about the basics of historical enquiry.

What else did I achieve through the experience?

Apart from generating an interest in a historical monument, exposing children to some basic elements of temple architecture, observing and discerning evidence, using a historical building to make connections between various disciplines, increasing an awareness and sensitivity towards our built heritage and encouraging a critical examination of values and traditions handed down to us, I was able to encourage children to explore, enquire and construct history within their limited sphere of influence.

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