GLOSSARY

The historicaldialogue.lk Resources is a shared space for individuals/organizations to highlight their work on historical dialogue and memorialization in Sri Lanka. If you would like to feature your material here, please get in touch with us at info@historicaldialogue.lk

Accountability

Accountability is one of the primary objectives of Transitional Justice processes. It involves the establishing of guilt and acknowledging of responsibility for war-time crimes committed and can be extended to seeking appropriate punishment for them on the grounds that this is the only path to justice and healing for the survivors. This can result in full-scale trials at the national or international level though alternative, localized forms of accounting and acknowledgement are now seen to be more effective, particularly in societies that have robust, indigenous systems that address injury and culpability while simultaneously enabling healing.

Collective Memory

Collective Memory is what is shared or recollected by a group of individuals such as a family, community or a nation. It is passed on from one generation to the next through oral, textual or visual traditions. It is inextricably tied to the interpretation and writing of local, regional and national histories which shape our understanding of the past. Collective memory ties disparate groups of people together and thus defines the group in the process. However, this process, like memorialisation, can also be very fraught due to various social, political and economic divisions that exist within societies and the different experiences that are shared due to spatial and temporal differences. For example, the collective memory of Tamils living in Jaffna, Muslims living in Kattankudy and Sinhalese living in Matara would be vastly different.

Historical dialogue

Historical dialogue engages new generations on how meanings about the past can change with time and according to different socio-political contexts. It opens up the space to evaluate different perspectives on history, challenge hoary myths and consider the impact of historical narratives on social, political and cultural structures. Historical dialogue can be used as a tool to resolve conflicts, aid reconciliation, build peace and promote democracy. It highlights disputed histories and the importance of acknowledging how such histories can marginalize and vilify both individuals and communities. Anyone with an open, questioning mind can be part of a historical dialogue. Students from the universities of Jaffna, Colombo and Kelaniya have engaged in historical dialogues and we hope many students in other universities as well as high schools will begin to engage in it.
Memorialization

Memorialisation is a process by which individuals, communities and nations reflect on and preserve memories of their past. It therefore can be both private and public and involves mental exertion as well as social practices such as religious rituals, commemorative ceremonies, collecting memorabilia, creating archives, building memorials and museums, sharing stories, making films, performing dramas, sewing tapestries, naming streets and parks etc. In the aftermath of violent conflicts, it can enable mourning and healing, the acknowledgement of past abuses, and the fostering of dialogue to ensure non-recurrence. However, memorialisation processes can also be hurtful and fraught with conflict as they are often politicised, controlled by the dominant and powerful, can be marginalising and exclusionary, and seek to sanitise violence and enable selective remembering.

Memory

Memory is the sum total of what we remember. It involves the human brain encoding, storing and subsequently retrieving stored information. We are able to learn from, adapt and modify our behaviour and thoughts by drawing on our previous experiences. Thus, memory is inextricably intertwined with the past. However, it is distinct from history which is a particular representation of the past. Remembering the past is not an easy, seamless process, particularly when the past is associated with many painful experiences. Remembering frequently involves a conscious effort, a lot of hard work. Often, when we have had painful experiences, our first response is to try to forget that painful experience and all thoughts and feelings associated with that experience. This can result in us either consciously suppressing memories or unconsciously repressing them. Memory is frequently associated with visuality and spatiality such as photographs and places but other sensory stimuli such as sounds, smells and touch are equally important memory retainers and triggers and encompass ‘embodied memory’.

Oral history

Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of individuals and communities regarding past events and experiences. It is the oldest form of historical inquiry — pre-dating the written word — as knowledge was passed from generation to generation through various forms of oral narratives. With the introduction of tape recorders in the 1940s and now the employment of sophisticated digital technology, the collection, preservation and archiving of such narratives have also proliferated. Currently, there are many initiatives in Sri Lanka to collect testimonies and stories about the civil war, as a form of archiving memories for future generations.

Postmemory

Postmemory is a term coined by Marianne Hirsch, in 1992, to capture the structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience, particularly in the context of the Holocaust. Postmemory is not dependent on a connection to the past but rather involves an imaginative investment, projection or inheritance: Stories, images and other reminders of personal, collective and cultural trauma that are shared by the previous generation can have such a deep and affective impact on the postgeneration that they come to own these memories. This could result in the experiences and life stories of the postgeneration being displaced or evacuated by those of the previous generation. Postmemory is very prevalent among Tamil youth in the diaspora.
Reconciliation

Reconciliation in a post-war context is often a multi-tiered process that aims to cleanse, reconcile, heal and re-integrate communities torn apart by war while also ensuring that past injustices are rectified and the rule of law is restored. It thus involves political power sharing, economic restructuring as well as social reconstruction. Reconciliation is most effective if it receives state support and commitment though the active participation and cooperation of a variety of stakeholders, most important among them being war survivors and perpetrators, is also crucial. The template for many reconciliation processes across the globe, for many years, has been the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission despite its very Christian framework. Many countries are now seeking to adapt indigenous systems of reconciliation that are better suited for their own socio-cultural and politico-historical contexts such as *gacaca* proceedings in Rwanda, *gamba* spirit ceremonies in Central Mozambique and *mato oput* rites in Northern Uganda. However, many shortcomings in the form of gender, religious and ethnic biases have been noted in these processes as well.

Social Reconstruction

Social reconstruction coupled with political power sharing and economic restructuring are often ignored aspects of reconciliation processes. This has resulted in very superficial gestures towards reconciliation such as the restoration of buildings and the erection of memorials that have merely papered over the structures of inequality, exploitation and discrimination that originally fuelled the war. Educational institutions play a crucial role in social reconstruction processes that seek to push for positive social change by raising awareness about inequality and discrimination, questioning stereotypes and re-thinking the past through historical dialogue.

Transitional Justice

Transitional Justice (TJ) refers to the ways in which post war countries respond to mass atrocities and systematic human rights violations which justice systems already in place are unable to adequately address. The United Nations has identified four central pillars that support TJ mechanisms:

- **Truth**: Fact finding or truth seeking in order to establish culpability and accountability
- **Justice**: The identification and prosecution of perpetrators of gross human rights violations
- **Reparations**: The acknowledgement that victims of human rights violations are entitled to receive adequate compensation for the harms they suffered.
- **Guarantee of non-recurrence**: Ensuring that similar violations will not occur in the future through institutional reforms, memorialisation etc.

How such mechanisms have played out in individual countries has varied greatly and also led to a great deal of debate and dissension. In Sri Lanka, some political actors have argued that mass prosecutions could de-stabilize much needed political stability within the country while human rights activists have countered that truth seeking and trials are crucial to heal wounds and restore confidence among war survivors. Yet other civil society activists have urged that non-punitive and more culturally sensitive mechanisms be adopted to address violations.