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Face the past

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Seventy years amounts to three generations. Soon the generation that has experienced Partition and the creation of India and Pakistan will have faded. Stories about separation and the pains of a new beginning will have become history-book material. Does that mean the third generation that is in its prime now no longer feels the agony of 1947? Several Max Mueller Bhavan centres on the subcontinent have interviewed grandsons and granddaughters of Partition witnesses and come up with the astonishing insight that the third generation indeed continues to be affected by the loss and the agony the division of the country has inflicted. Such agony may remain fairly unnoticed, it may have receded into the subconscious, but history lives in our bones, not alone in history books.

I have been wondering for many years whether the much-touted insecurity of educated Indians who meet their counterparts in Europe and North America does actually originate from the unresolved tragedy of loss. Surely, every aware Indian has a hidden guilt about how his or her nation became independent? Why is this tragedy so little discussed in everyday conversation and relegated mostly to academic discourses? Understandably, it may have something to do with the fear of raking up religious animosity. Then why is there no broad, non-political effort to reach out to the 'other side of silence' (to use the title of Urvashi Butalia's courageous book) beyond national borders and revisit a common history and culture?

As a German who was born in 1948, that is well after the Second World War, I have lived through a similar history - similar, yet contrary as well. My father was a soldier on the Russian front, he returned wounded, but alive. One of my maternal uncles died in combat as a very young man, I never met him. My grandmother mourned him until her death at ninety.

As a schoolboy, I was confronted by the hostility meted out to Germans when I visited England and the United States of America. I met a

wonderful Polish woman, Litka, when attending high school in Wisconsin. Every weekend she cooked lunch after I had earned myself some pocket money working in her garden. She was like a foster mother to me. Before she took me to a Polish Jewish woman friend in Chicago, she asked me to reduce my age so there was not the shadow of a doubt that I was involved in Jewish war crimes. On the arm of Litka's friend was a tattooed number - her prisoner's number in the Auschwitz concentration camp.



This number deeply affected me. Back in Germany, I became a so-called conscientious objector, refusing military service. I began to study German literature in Vienna and chose, as my field of research, the literature on the two world wars. Today we call most of the books I worked on 'Holocaust Literature'. Around this time, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* became an oft-used term, meaning 'the process of coming to terms with one's past'. The prevailing opinion was that the Holocaust was a crime perpetrated by the German people collectively, hence they bear a collective guilt (Kollektivschuld). This appears harsh, to many possibly unjust, especially towards those born after the war. But I hold that this was a device with which our schools, universities and different social bodies were able to squarely confront our past, analyse and interpret it and fix it in our minds.

To this day, we carry with us this feeling of being branded, I certainly do. My post-war generation does, and probably the generations behind me feel similarly, even though the happy-go-lucky and pleasure-hunting lifestyles of many do not betray the shadows of the past. We are, in the West, reminded of the German past in numerous ways, be it involuntarily through snide or innocently hurtful remarks made by foreigners, or through a widespread culture of remembrance. There are statues, memorials, monuments and museums reminding us of Jewish extermination and similar crimes.

The situation on the Indian subcontinent is entirely different. Here, religions play dominant roles, here the linguistic barriers and the politics of language are significant. The social rift created by Partition is not just a fact of history, but it is being acted out right into the present time. Germany was able to start anew after the war, healing the social fabric which had been torn apart; India after 1947 did not have that wonderful boon. German society faced comparatively few practical difficulties to reintegrate the Jewish community and pay reparation especially to East European countries because the community was decimated to the point of near-extinction. Even then, the readiness to accept the grave sins of our fathers has spared a whole people from living eternally in psychological hiding.

By comparison, India's problems originating from Partition continue to be

far more intricate and burdened with potential conflict. Every single day, the living together of religious and ethnic communities needs to be successfully accomplished.

I wonder why the large and powerful Indian diaspora is doing so little to contribute to heal the 70-year-old festering wound of violent separation, doing so little towards - to borrow the term - *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Some conflicts can become more precise in their contours when seen from a distance, and other problems become less acute or even vanish. While visiting London and New York, I have regularly witnessed the camaraderie of Indians with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. They work together, they have common problems which they jointly tackle, and the local population hardly bothers to distinguish between the persons of these three countries. On the socio-cultural level, the expatriates experience, many surely with amazement, their common roots. Can they not share this experience with their society back home?

It is quite noticeable in the US and more so in Europe that India lacks a strong media representation. Not like the Chinese or Japanese, the Russians or Arabs, who make their presence felt with television and radio channels, language programmes, newspaper correspondents. Socio-cultural power abroad needs to be built up for two reasons: one, to present a diversified and honest, even self-critical, image of India in foreign countries, and two, to radiate the strength of this diversified, honest and self-critical image back to India. The expatriate's experience of liberal global communality must seep into the consciousness of the Indian political and intellectual class and give a wider framework to the opinion of the middle class. Is this too optimistic a view?

For example, I have been an admirer of the cultural work of the Indian embassy in Berlin since the unification of the two Germanys. I have myself participated in their programmes almost every year. But, does the German population-at-large have any knowledge of what the embassy's Tagore Centre is doing? And do we, here in India, know anything of their work, their struggles and accomplishments? The answer to both questions is 'No'. But why? Is India not important enough? It is, but it has not, jointly with an active diaspora, built up a vibrant presence abroad which can be felt and can influence the populations in foreign countries as well as bounce back to become a constructive opinion-maker - and peace-maker - in India.

Is it too much to dream in the year 70 after Independence that the Indian diaspora will accept some of the responsibility of coming to terms with history? They are sufficiently removed from the tumble of everyday life in India, and yet the subcontinent's history is very much their history as well. After having lived in this country for 44 years, it has, in secret ways, become my own history and my own pain as well.

