

With increasing awareness about the need for preservation, heritage history has brought the past closer to people, says **Gautam Chatterjee**

Keeping the past alive

Everytime you are out on the streets you will come across enough evidence to prove that Indian heritage is very much alive. Be it monuments, in Delhi or Bauling of eastern India or the traditional medicines of Rajasthan. All these are a part of story in currency. To feel, touch or hear these, you need not be a history buff. History is not for academics and historians alone who interpret the past and hold discussions in various era and finally capsule them in text books.

For the common man, history is something beyond the text books. On seeing monuments, for instance, one tends to become nostalgic and this enables one to appreciate the aesthetic aspects of the past. The silhouettes, the carvings and hanging windows or merely the stone element hold us in thrall. There is an evident connectivity with the bygone era which comes to the fore in certain situations. This is nothing but heritage history and the "small masons" or the archaeologists who preserve these monuments are heritage historians," says Dr Sengupta of the National Archives of India who has propounded this concept of heritage history.

Heritage history is not merely restricted to monuments. It encompasses all human endeavours of the past and is enjoyed by people in the non-academic sense. In Vrindavan, the land of Vaishnavites, you hear the *Radhey Shyam* or in eastern Uttar Pradesh *Ram Dhan*. They constitute the musical traditions of these areas and are as old as *Abhang* of Maharashtra. The sound and composition conjure up the relation of past but this is still current as in different sects the disciples continue to sing the ancient tunes to spiritually entertain the modern being. Thus the Kiran singers are heritage historians because they preserved the old notes and are representing them in original



forms without their own interpretations.

Explaining the concept broadly, Dr Sengupta says that the creators of past and the heritage we see are integral part of contemporary history. From archaic buildings to the streets, or from the traditional art of Worli people to the art of putting *tilaks* on the forehead, be it *tripundra* or *urdhapundra*, are all part of our heritage. Thus all those who nurture the heritage and utilise it for the present era are heritage historians.

Today we are celebrating 50 years of India's independence, and heritage figures in top

agenda — be it freedom struggle or rebuilding India in post-independence era. At this juncture its pertinent to understand heritage itself. Heritage is not of any secluded academic address but more a functional operation of people. The finer sense of enjoyment about our rich past is very personal for everyone. And heritage historians range from those who look after the continuity of simple traditional art to the archaeologists who are all out to preserve the monumental ruins and the archivists who maintain and upkeep very brittle documents of the past for our reference.

It is time to redefine history

and historians. History, be it of institutions or of past events, analysed and interpreted, are for secluded historians. Once J H Hexten described the life of the professional historian as "the life of teaching, silent study, work and writing interspersed with brief orgies of gossip". It is debatable whether we agree to this theory or not but history which is uninviting for a commoner cannot be a real heritage.

If history simply means an academic exercise then we can say that "history is of the historian, by the historian and for the historian". But one need not be a historian to understand the by-

gone era through academics only. The monuments we can touch, the visual art we see, the music we hear and the customs and tradition we follow are our heritage history with an element of currency.

To enjoy the art of Tagore or Jamini Roy do we need specialist interpretations? No, it is our inward journey as we ourselves understand and interpret the work. This is the way we enjoy the history. A common man would say "In this case I don't need a historian to interpret the work". If he says so, he is not really wrong. Supposing you view folk Worli art and then relate it to the stick figures of pre-his-

toric rock art, then you yourself become the historian no matter how wrong or right you are!

In order to discover the subtle difference between history and heritage history, Dr S Sengupta says that "a heritage historian utilises the sources of history, culture, civilisations and uses them for modern people and this presentation is *in situ*. On the other hand, the historian goes through historical facts and philosophises the conclusion. Alongside, the historian uses these for decorative purposes by keeping them in museums. But a heritage historian uses them in the living life scope."

The concept of heritage history is close to the idea of "public history" which was coined in the '70s in the US and since the '80s it has got inducted into academic syllabus. In one edition of the journal *The Public Historian* (Vol. 17, Summer 1995, No.3) one can find the areas of address in public history. The syllabus encompasses Policy Analysis, Corporate Biography and Information Service, as well as Federal, State, Local, Oral history. It also deals with the entire range from archival manuscripts to historic preservation, cultural records, editing and media. These are the broad areas of American address which suffice the context of public history in the US. The above points of public history involves historical research analysis and "presentation with some degree of explicit application to the needs of contemporary life."

Even though heritage history and public history may sound the same, if one delves a little further, in Indian context, heritage revolves around everybody and it need not be taught. A bit of awareness can link it up as "living history" and anybody can enjoy or use the legacy in their lifetime.

However, in India too, heritage history has come into academic study as for the first time Jabalpur University has introduced a course called 'Archives and Indian Heritage

Studies' from the current academic session. The syllabus encompasses the definition to the procedure of recording oral traditions. It talks about the archival methodology of Government to private records. It highlights the preservation and research dissemination techniques. The study also addresses the concept of looking at local institutions, buildings and roads from the perspective of heritage history.

Heritage history is getting currency today as an awareness is raging in Indian life to understand, preserve and disseminate information on their own past, very local and very close to their life. Speaking on this subject, P S Moldeen, director, Kerala State Archives, said: "People from grassroots are interested in preserving their own heritage but they are not aware how to go about it. In this regard we have organised workshops to impart training on how to preserve those manuscripts or artefacts. This workshop was for the representative of panchayats and now they have gone back to their villages to educate the locals about the importance of their heritage and the preservation methodology as well. Likewise, the concept of preserving heritage is gaining currency."

It is up to us to understand our living heritage and utilise it in our time be it through art aesthetics, or through the sonorous tune of 'Om' to indigenous folk music, or be it through the red stones of those monuments which speak up for themselves through the eternal silence.

If the concept of heritage history is disseminated right from the school levels without the burden of syllabus our next generation would take care of the nomenclature of our traditions no matter how much satellite-beaming of foreign cultures continues and they need not be taught again and again that "India is the epitome of diversity in unity".