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Role of Memory in Building Peace and Managing Diversity

The draft recommendations on preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes targeted against minorities have focused on three major aspects of the problem. On the other hand, the note by Special Rapporteur and the agenda of the Minority Forum has added the issue of avoiding renewed violence – building the peace and managing diversity.

We think the last section has brought a new dimension to the whole problem under discussion. Violence and atrocity crimes against minority which often turns into genocidal attacks has deep-rooted historical, social, economic and cultural roots and it is imperative that the stakeholders take due account of those. In almost every case of violence against minority there is a majority involved who can be made to play the role of instigator, abettor, planner and/or executioner of such atrocities. How to address both the minority and majority is essential part of the problem and here lies the importance of culture, education and memory in managing diversity and preventing atrocities.

The efforts to ensure protection and promotion of minority rights often create a situation where the communities live together but separately. This is a problem which needs to be addressed in our effort to promote diversity. Without the understanding of otherness of other people one cannot expect the tolerance and respect for otherness to flourish in the society.

It is also to be understood that communities have multiple identity and many things in common which binds and brings them together. The emphasis on separate and conflicting identity of Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent has given rise to massive partition violence of 1947 which led to the establishment of Pakistan on the basis of sole Muslim “national” identity. In 1971 in the very same state of Pakistan the brutal attack by the military junta on the Bengali civilian population of East Pakistan, majority of those were Muslims, resulted in one of the massive violence of the 20th century. The two historical events of 1947 and 1971 are inter-related and there are many studies on the subject, but most forceful ones are those of memory.

We have a lesson to learn from history when Muslim-Hindu communal violence erupted deep in rural Bengal in Noakhali in 1946 which greatly disturbed Mahatma Gandhi. In communal clashes in the urban areas the contending groups do not know each other, but in rural community they are living together side by side for many many years. If one community resort to mass atrocities like killing members of other group, forcibly changing their religion, target their women for sexual violence it signals the breakdown of common and shared community life. Neighbors killing neighbors are worst kind of mass violence. To confront such reality and rebuild the community Gandhi at his old age decided to walk through the villages of Noakhali and address both the community. 73 years old Mahatma Gandhi with only few of his colleagues went from one village to another for more than two months and met the victims and perpetrators. His work in Noakhali deserves to be studied more thoroughly. He specially addressed the majority Muslim population, the perpetrators of violence and tried to re-educate them. Later on he followed the same path in Bihar addressing the

majority Hindu population. Such affirmative actions highlight the importance of culture and education and left for us a legacy which can be re-ignited through memory.

In the post-conflict society memory plays important role to uphold truth and human suffering which strengthens the call for justice. Documentation, preservation and presentation of memory contribute to the understanding of past atrocities and strengthens the process of healing through recognition, restitution and rehabilitation. In many cases when the state fails to deliver justice, the international and regional organizations could not play the role expected from them, the nation remain divided and distanced, the process of memorialization can play the role to heal and reconcile.

Every society has its own strength to memorialize, be it small or grandeur. When memory takes concrete form, be it a song, a book, painting, film, theatre or an institution like museum it creates opportunity to make the experiences of human suffering and struggle concrete and inter-generational. In memory the spirit of humanity persists over elements of hatred and human dimensions prevail over acts of atrocity. That's why memory as an important component of culture plays significant role in any post-conflict society. It is imperative to give collective memory-builders a role to play in ensuring Transitional Justice and overcoming the legacy of past violence.

Here we can mention the role the Liberation War Museum (LWM) played in Bangladesh in its effort to upkeep the memory of massive human suffering during the struggle for liberation. The museum was established as a citizen's effort in 1996, twenty-five years after the tragic event. Over the years the museum enhanced its collection, implemented elaborate programs and earned recognition as an important place of memory. LWM opened its door at a rented two-storied colonial building in the city centre with artifacts, documents and memorabilia of past events. In the backdrop of denial and distortion of history by the state authority the presentation of history through documents and facts generated great interest. The museum got strong support from the community and the private museum gradually became a people's museum. This has led LWM to further its activity with community support. The museum introduced an oral history project to collect eye-witness account of 1971 days by involving young students of the new generation. The Mobile Museum which goes to various educational institutions all over the country presents a glimpse of history to the students. At the end of the program the students are encouraged to learn from senior members of their family about their experiences of 1971 days. The students then write-down what they hear and send those to the museum. Thus LWM is building an archive of memory and so far has collected more than 22,000 eye-witness accounts which proved to be a treasure of people's view of historical events.

Memorialization gave recognition to the victims and individual memory became part of collective understanding of the past. Memory by itself cannot solve the problems of post-conflict society but memory can lead the way to healing and justice. Memory is also a cry for justice and never allows impunity to prevail. The journey of Bangladesh and LWM to memorialize the past has created opportunity to have justice even after long denial of four decades.

Memory while projecting what happened and how it happened also raises the question of why it happened. That puts the society and humanity on a path to deeper understanding of the past to thwart renewed violence and look for ways to establish harmony.

While highlighting the role of community, business and religious leaders in the draft recommendations it is also important to recognize the role of memory and museums, the importance of their role at individual, community, collective and national level.