

The problem with renovation

With the upgradation of the Jallianwala Bagh complex in Amritsar eliciting widespread criticism, experts weigh in on the frequent confusion between renovation and restoration, the argument against altering historical sites, and the emotions such sacred grounds evoke in their starkness

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

THE inauguration of the newly-renovated Jallianwala Bagh complex in Amritsar last weekend has been followed by sharp criticism from various quarters for the erasure of the history and significance of a site of massacre through thoughtless and unnecessary beautification. But, supporters of the decision have argued that the additions will only make people conscious of its history.

Amandeep Madra, OBE, who is the founder of the UK Punjab Heritage Association and co-author of *Eyewitness at Amritsar: A Visual History of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre 1919*, points out that memorials themselves are not historic, the giant red sandstone structure at Jallianwala Bagh installed in the early 1960s, qualifying more as a piece of iconography.



JASPREET OBEROI



KISHWAR DESAI

The issue, however, is that "the actual Bagh itself—the space in the middle of the old city of Amritsar where one of the most brutal massacres of British rule in the 20th century took place—has now been completely stripped of what it was like in 1919".

Madra explains that an important aspect of the Bagh, and key to understanding the events that took place on that fateful day, is that it is entirely walled in except for a few very narrow entrances. "Dyer came in through the one main entrance which was mercifully too narrow for his armoured cars. Had they been able to come in, the death toll could have been higher." This narrow entrance, he asserts, is a critical part of the memorial journey undertaken by visitors where they would traverse the very path taken by Reginald Dyer and his shooting party. "The renovations have turned this narrow original alleyway into a gallery of smiling figures in relief on those very walls," he says, highlighting how manicured gardens in what



On August 28, a renovated Jallianwala Bagh Memorial was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Museum galleries with laser lights have been developed in the complex, along with murals depicting the martyrs, and a sound and light show to display the events of April 13, 1919. PICS/GETTY IMAGES

is a killing field, along with laser shows, and loud bombastic music are wholly inappropriate to represent this sad human story. What the area needed, he suggests, was a separate visitor centre for people to learn of its history and remember the people who were martyred.

Moreover, as author Kishwar Desai who has written *Jallianwala Bagh, 1919: The Real Story*, explains, the new sculpture gallery is not only a misinterpretation of history, it also covers up the original brickwork and simplicity of the place. "This was not a cheery crowd going for a festival, as has now been proven," she notes. "In fact this was a crowd attending a political meeting, despite warning from the British administration. By April 13, Amritsar was already a city under siege, and buildings had been burnt during an altercation with the British three days prior." Suggesting that the galli and garden be restored to

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Kishwar Desai, author

the original, she says: "What hurts is that this is the galli through which bleeding men and boys, cut to ribbons by bullets, crawled through after Dyer had left. At least earlier we got a sense of the period by looking at those nanakshahi bricks, which had witnessed their death... Nothing could be further from what it was—barren and undulating land." For historical sites like Auschwitz or Jallianwala Bagh, which are sites of conscience, there is a strong argument, she says, for never changing the original structure as they evoke the memory of particular tragedies.

For Madra, "The physical scars in the bullet holes in walls are visceral reminders of the sheer brutality and terror of that day. The scale of the Bagh as a gathering place needs to be seen in its entirety to try to re-imagine the size of the crowd and the almost unimaginable wickedness that was inflicted upon them. That kind of connection



with the originality of the place is central to the idea of memory." The author further points out that the city of Amritsar itself, once an important trading city on the silk route, has undergone similar thoughtless interventions over the years. The central market areas that surrounded the Golden Temple and the Jallianwala Bagh were part of the very fabric of the ancient city, he explains. But, in recent years, "one of the main routes leading to the Dargah Sahib has been turned into a Disneyland-style boulevard, with regimented standard shop fronts, Victorian cast iron lampposts, a McDonalds and selfie-friendly sculptures of grinning bhangra dancers."

Socio-political commentator

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means the bringing of a particular historical monument or site to resemble the original as closely as possible, renovation is a broader category involving rebuilding, and even the addition of decorative elements. "Imagine if at the site of Mohenjodaro or Harappa, we were to place sculptures on the walls or create a pretty garden, instead of strictly maintaining it for

historical reasons," she asks, asserting that the same rigour should be applied for more recent historical sites too. For Desai, the present government's recognition of the need to preserve forgotten aspects of our history unlike previous governments is commendable. However, she also acknowledges that



AMANDEEP MADRA

"care needs to be taken to not overwhelm the original aspects of a particular place". The case of Jallianwala Bagh, in particular, is unique, she says, because "the site itself is the museum and the interpretation centre. Much of it lies in the feeling and emotions with which we approach it; even if we had just the bare ground in front

of us, it would tell us a thousand stories of the people who died there that day. And that is why one wishes we would not "beautify" it or overbuild upon it. This is sacred ground, where the martyrs lay bleeding—and we could have captured that brutality by allowing the earth itself to speak."

For Desai, whose team at the Partition Museum in Amritsar went through original records to piece together the names and

number of people killed at the Bagh, interventions should have been minimal and in keeping with the site's specific time period. "Historical interpretation centres or museums which tell you what the space was used for should not interfere with the historical features of the building by covering them up as has been done in Jallianwala Bagh," she observes.

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'Accepting humiliation is not humility'

Live musicians need to be protected from hecklers, who do much damage to the morale of indie artistes, say music industry experts post Samar Mehdi's traumatic experience at a Delhi pub

NIDHI LODAYA

FOR a musician who performs live, the audience's response is everything. Composer and percussive fingerstyle guitarist Samar Mehdi, who has been doing live gigs for the last four years, would know better.

But, an incident last week, involving a jeering crowd, left him rattled, forcing him to take cudgels for his community of musicians, which has been at the receiving end for far too long.

Mehdi was performing at the Imperfecto Ruin Pub in Delhi, when he was harassed and heckled by a group of drunk men in the audience, who extensively cursed and disrespected him. "The show went on and so did the hostility. I felt like the more the audience was cheering me on, the more the problem group felt motivated to put me down and vice versa. I couldn't understand their issue, but I chose not to engage because I was focussing on delivering the performance," a distraught Mehdi later shared on Instagram. He learnt that the venue managers did not act against the hecklers, because they had paid more money for the table they had booked. Mehdi felt it was necessary to speak about the issue on social media, because "ignoring the deeper social problem, would make these kind of situations normal for a lot of people". "Saying no, demanding better treatment as a human being and a professional, or standing up to someone is not arrogance, [especially] when someone treats you poorly or beneath themselves. Accepting humiliation is not humility," he says now in an

email interview with mid-day. Sarthak Kulshrestha, a promoter and one of the founders of Bohemian Live, a touring, booking and promoting agency, says such incidents have become commonplace. "They keep happening all across India, but it is mostly happening in non-music venues," he says.

Indian venues are predominantly F&B non-music venues, where the main focus is not the music, but F&B. While the music venues are strictly for listeners, non-music venues tend to approach musicians as a means to fill a spot every night, rarely bothering to learn of what music they perform or inform the crowd about their work. The audience more often than not comprises guests who are there to eat, drink, have a good time, and listen to Bollywood music, say music industry experts.

A performer like Mehdi, who is known for his original indie tracks, doesn't fit their idea of "fun", and this often leads to heckling the artiste. "I know making money is im-

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Amit Gurbaxani, music journalist



portant for venues, but they [venue managers] also have to understand that just because someone is paying a lot at the table, doesn't mean they can disrespect anyone—whether it is the artiste, the venue staff or even the venue guard. This social class hierarchy needs to stop," says Ritnika Nayan, owner of Music Gets Me High, a music consultancy firm



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in India.

Akshay Kapoor, founder and editor of *The Indian Music Diaries*, an online portal for Indian independent music, feels that the Indian audience is still not sophisticated enough to understand music and musicians.

Most Indian audience members, he feels, are still under the impression that the only kind of music that exists is Bollywood, cover music or tracks played by a DJ. "In fact, many are of the belief that English songs are synonymous with Hollywood music and thus, an indie artist performing their originals seems unfathomable," says Kulshrestha.

But Amit Gurbaxani, a music journalist, feels that "it is not only disrespectful, but also stupid to request a Bollywood cover from an indie artiste, who is there to present his originals. "If the music doesn't suit your taste, go somewhere else. Don't ruin it for everybody else."

Mehdi says the heckling is one reason why live musicians prefer doing curated intimate shows. "There's a significantly smaller audience, but one that's purely there for the music. This helps artistes avoid such situations."

However, avoiding such gigs can come at the cost of the artistes' career. "It might seem easy for us non-performers to say artistes should boycott or blacklist venues that don't take action against misbehaving customers, but any real and significant change requires some amount of sacrifice," feels Gurbaxani.

According to Kulshrestha, artistes should draw a contract and have an artiste manager state all the terms right from F&B, security, the kind of music played, etc., with the venue. Nayan, who has dealt with such situations as a manager in the past, feels that it's very important for artistes to have a support team at the venue, which can immediately take care of these issues if they come up.

Another solution, Gurbaxani says, is that whenever an artiste is playing at a new venue, "they or their management could speak to those, who have performed there previously, about the hospitality, F&B arrangements and the kind of audience there."

However, since music continues to be viewed as a hobby, Kapoor and Kulshrestha feel that it will take some systematic unlearning to accept artistes and what they do. "Now, music is a viable career and people are taking it more seriously, so it should be treated like any other art," Nayan argues.

Meanwhile, Mehdi is urging more musicians and artistes to "come forward and share their own experiences". "It doesn't have to be on social media if they're not comfortable with it; it can just be with people they trust in their own circles. The only way this can change is if we first make people aware of the problem and then they acknowledge it. The conversation depends on us coming together and collectively going forward."

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Musician Samar Mehdi, who has been doing live gigs for the last four years, was harassed by a group of drunk men in the audience at the Imperfecto Ruin Pub in Delhi. He learnt that the venue managers did not act against the hecklers, because they had paid more money for the table they had booked. PICS/COURTESY/SWARNAVA MUKHERJEE



RITNIKA NAYAN