Talking Tigers

A Public History project
about the Bangalore Fort

Dr. Indira Chowdhury in conversation with Aliyeh Rizvi

The Bangalore Fort or Bengaluru *kote*, situated in present day Kalasipalyam, was once an impressive example of eighteenth-century military architecture in South India (Figures 1 & 2). However, its provenance is still debated. Some say it was constructed in the sixteenth century by Kempegowda I, a local chieftain, while others suggest Chikkadevaraja Wadiyar, the seventeenth-century ruler of Mysuru built it. What is known is that it was renovated around 1761 by Haider Ali, a military commander and ruler of the kingdom of Mysore as a precautionary move against the East India Company that was becoming increasingly powerful in the region. The original mud fort was reinforced with heavy granite stones and incorporated broad ramparts with bastions, a faussebraye (defensive wall located outside a fortification's main walls), five cavaliers and a glacis, a deep moat and a covered (or covert) way without palisades. There were also French influences - banquettes and embrasure openings.

According to Colonel James Welsh, a British officer who passed through Bangalore with his regiment in 1809, it was '... originally shaped much like an egg' and had 'a high stone rampart and deep ditch' (Figure 3). There was ample space for storehouses, a weapons magazine or arsenal, barracks for soldiers

Figure 2. Inside Bangalore Fort

and later, Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace. It had two gates - the Mysore Gate in the south and a north-facing Delhi Gate.

The *Pete* (anglicised *Pettah*) fell to British cannons during the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1790-1792); during the same war, the Fort was the site of the Battle for Bangalore, fought in March 1791 and many brave Mysorean soldiers died here in its defence. After his defeat in the war, Haidar Ali's son, Tipu Sultan, the 'Tiger of Mysore', dismantled much of the Fort to prevent its occupation by the East India Company forces. Following Tipu's death in the Fourth Anglo
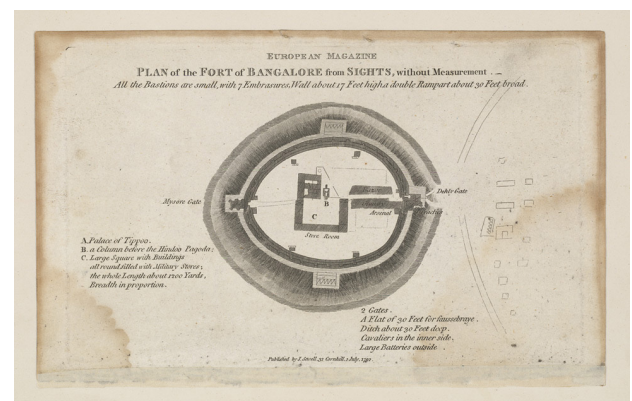
Figure 3. 'Plan of the Fort of Bangalore from sights, without measurement' (Source: Wikipedia; Claude Martin (1735-1800)

Figure 1. Delhi Gate, Bangalore Fort

Mysore War (1799) and the installation of a young Wadiyar king on the throne of Mysuru, it was restored in parts by Diwan Purnaiah, the chief administrator of Mysuru. An English garrison came to be stationed here thereafter. In time, the area east of the Fort developed into Kalasipalayam, a busy transportation hub, Chamarajpet, a new residential suburb in the south, and the commercial areas of Tharagupete and Krishnarajendra Market in the west and north respectively. Medical, educational and charitable institutions also came up within its precincts in the early 1900s to meet the needs of a growing city. The Delhi Gate is all that remains of the Fort today.

In 2012, the Bangalore Fort became the focus of a Public History project, 'The Tiger Comes to Town', a collaboration between the Centre for Public History (CPH) at the Srishti School of Art Design and Technology (now the Srishti-Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). 'The Tiger Comes to Town' was led by Dr. Indira Chowdhury, Director at CPH, who elaborates on the project and its role in connecting an integral part of Bangalore's heritage with the city's people, in this conversation with the project's co-curator, Aliyeh Rizvi.

AR: I remember visiting the Fort with a photographer friend a few months before the project. She observed that while tourists and casual visitors walked in and out quickly, our visit took over an hour. She attributed this to my stopping continuously to point out details and lingering in some places to share contextual stories. She also noted that despite being a structure of significance for the city, there was hardly any information available onsite for visitors. No wonder then, time spent in the Fort was as insubstantial as the meaning or value it had at that time for local populations. This incident prompted reflections on what exactly is our understanding of and engagement with our heritage sites today? How can storytelling facilitate deeper engagements with city history and make our relationship with it more meaningful? How could communicating the Fort's history be made a participatory and collaborative process, easily understood and accessible to all? The 'Tiger Comes to Town', a Public History project emerged from these questions.

AR: Can you tell us more about the approach, framework and methodology chosen for the 'Tiger Comes to Town' Public History project?

IC: Our project began with the idea of reviving an interest in Tipu Sultan and in the Fort as a historical site of the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1791-1792). The year of our project - 2012, also coincided with the 150-year

celebrations of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) who funded our activities and granted permission for us to use the Fort. The project was offered to students of Srishti as an opportunity to learn how to engage with a major historical monument in the city. It was challenging to interest students of a design school in history, so our strategy was to appeal to their sense of surprise - who was the Tiger? In what ways was he remembered? What were the 'lost' stories? And what did it mean for him to come to the city in which he once roamed?

We began by training students in oral history so they could tap into collective memory and see what emerged. Students studied the period and collected stories about Tipu and the Fort from the public. This had to be combined with archival research as we found that what remained in collective memory after two centuries were not necessarily historical. Besides, the Fort area had a shifting population of small traders and vegetable sellers who came there only in the last thirty to fifty years and did not know historical events that belonged to the 1790s.

The preliminary introductions to the area were made by Suresh Jayaram of 1Shantiroad Studio who conducted a Pete walk while Arun Pai of Bangalore Walks conducted a Fort Walk with students and familiarised them with its stories (Figure 4). They also studied botanical sketches available in the Lalbagh collection and guided by the artist Ramesh Kalkur of Srishti, sketched in situ, in Lalbagh which still has trees from Tipu's time. Our invited experts who trained our students in converting their historical research into stories and scripts for guided walks, and conducted workshops in storytelling techniques drawn from theatre, were Rama Lakshmi (at that time a journalist with Washington Post) and Vijay Padaki of the Bangalore Little Theatre. We then chose specific forms of dissemination.

Figure 4. Understanding the Third Anglo Mysore War with Bangalore Walks

AR: What were the forms of dissemination designed for local communities and groups, and how did they support meaning-making and the building of a relationship with this hitherto long-forgotten heritage site?

IC: Public engagements with the Fort were held over a weekend in October and December 2012. Prior to that students worked inside the Fort to explore different formats in historical storytelling for a diverse audience The fall of the Fort on the 21 of March, 1791 was dramatised in a Shadow Puppet Play about the Battle for Bangalore which appealed to children and

adults (Figures 8-11). Students scripted the shadow puppet theatre inside the Fort and it was narrated in three languages - English, Urdu and Kannada. A former student of Srishti, Nikita Jain worked with the students to create laser-cut cardboard puppets for the shadow theatre. We saw this as an appropriate form that evoked traditional leather puppetry, the Togalu Gobeyaata of Karnataka. The shadow puppetry was juxtaposed with an animation film co-ordinated by our colleague Meera Sankar, that was based on Tipu's 'Dream Diaries', a document that many members of our audiences were unaware of.

Figure 5. The Delhi Gate is transformed into the venue for the Shadow Puppet Play

Figure 6. Srishti students working on the project take visitors on free guided story walks of the fort

Figure 7. The free guided story walks are conducted in multiple languages for diverse audiences

Figure 8. Scenes from the Shadow Puppet Play : Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore. (Source: Anjali Reddy)

Figure 9. Scenes from the Shadow Puppet Play : Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore. (Source: Anjali Reddy)

Figure 10. Scenes from the Shadow Puppet Play : East India Company forces prepare to lay siege to the Fort (Source: Deepa Mohan)

Figure 11. Scenes from the Shadow Puppet Play; the Battle for Bangalore (1791) (Source: Meera Sankar)

We designed an exhibition of information panels and historical images that communicated the history of Tipu and the Fort. In December 2012, the Fort housed this visual exhibition that told Tipu's story through text, contemporary sketches and photographs of artefacts. We also created a little booklet with images of historical paintings and artefacts from the time, reprinted with permission from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and the National Army Museum, UK (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Pages from the booklet 'The Tiger Comes to Town'

The culminating event was a site-specific performance, a play by Dina Mehta titled 'Tiger! Tiger!' on the life of Tipu Sultan, performed by the members of the Bangalore Little Theatre and supported by Ganjam Jewellers who have a long association with the Mysore Royal family and Srirangapatna (Figures 13 & 14). It drew a large urban audience who had, perhaps, not visited the Fort in a long time. The atmosphere was magical.

Finally, a lecture series was organised on 'Science & Technology in the Eighteenth Century' in collaboration
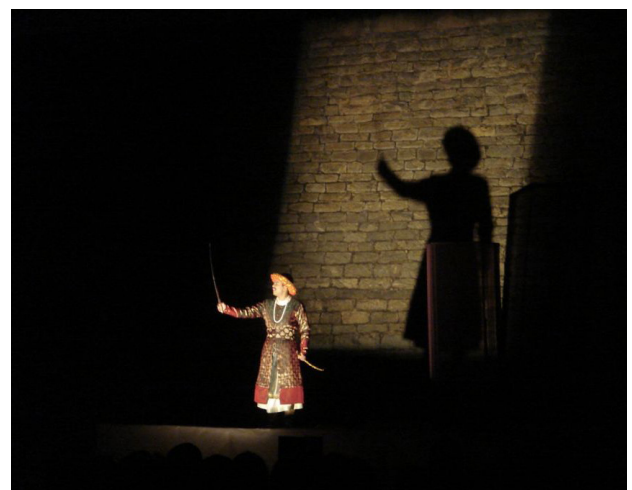
Figures 13 & 14. Scenes from Dina Mehta's play titled 'Tiger! Tiger!' on the life of Tipu Sultan, enacted by members of Bangalore Little Theatre (seen here, Sanjeev Iyer and Hamza Ali) on 23 December 2012 in the Bangalore Fort (Source: Meera Sankar)

with the Visvesvaraya Industrial & Technical Museum (VITM). It was hosted at the museum where a large, attentive audience had the opportunity to listen to the late Dr. Roddam Narasimha speak about the Mysore rockets and projectile technology in the eighteenth century (Figure 15), and Professor Sharada Srinivasan who shared her work on the legendary Wootz Steel (Figure 16).

Figures 15 & 16. Poster and e-vite for Dr. Roddam Narasimha's talk and Professor Sharada Srinivasan's talk, co-hosted by CPH and VITM.

AR: The project was imagined as an inclusive, participatory history-making process and structured as a set of collaborations with different partners and stakeholders. In order to address accessibility and relevance, the dissemination adopted an interdisciplinary, multimedia storytelling approach that integrated oral history, art, design, text, audio, video, photography and performance with technological components. It also brought together governmental bodies such as ASI and VITM, educational and cultural institutions such as Srishti Institute's CPH and Bangalore Little Theatre respectively, and a luxury business house, Ganjam Jewellers. The events were non-ticketed and free. As word spread, corporate bodies sponsored buses so children from government schools could be conveyed to the venue. Local groups stepped in as volunteers to help manage logistics at the fort. The parking attendants at the Victoria Hospital next door became self-appointed publicity and marketing agents. Visitors were often overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia for 'my fort' as they recalled pleasant memories of school trips here in their childhood. They helped publicise the event widely on social media and it also received the full support of city newspapers. The Fort was returned to and owned by the public who now became its custodians and stakeholders.

AR: How is Oral History used as a valuable tool/ resource for deeper engagement with the public space, in this case, a heritage site such as the Bangalore Fort in Kalasipalayam?

IC: Oral history has for a long time been established as a tool of primary research which enables us to understand people's experiences in the past. But it should be seen as more than a tool as it draws attention to the role played by orality, memory and narrative in reconstructing events in contemporary history. When we focus on the dialogic nature of oral history, we also realise, as Alessandro Portelli says: 'Memory is not a passive depository of facts, it is an active process of creating meaning.' This process also involves an active dialogue between the past and the present, and turns the historian into a protagonist alongside the interviewee.

But delving into individual memory and recording an oral history interview is often not enough to create a credible public history intervention. Public historians often draw on multiple disciplines: bringing the learnings from oral history into a larger socio-cultural framework that enables us to make meaning of memory and understand collective recollections within a collective context. Public history therefore moves beyond the practice of oral history to consider

how the interpretation of memory can be understood as a social practice that draws our attention to the 'sites of memory' - what the French historian Pierre Nora has termed 'Le lieux de memoire' (Nora, 1989). But a question that all public historians struggle with is how is memory preserved beyond individual remembrance? Is memory of the past erased by the act of commemoration or through the institutional practices? While Nora sets up an opposition between history and memory, other scholars of memory studies see memory as something that is persistently reworked in response to contemporary contexts (Hamilton and Shopes, 2008). And though the questions around collective memory have not yet been resolved, memories of communities usually enable us to understand how something of the past is understood. In the case of our project, the stories we collected from the temple priest or the khidmatdar at the *dargah*, were not part of their individual memories, rather, they were stories that had been handed down and circulated, and these stories enabled the local community to make sense of their own past and the past of the place they now worked in.

We were aware from the beginning that our project, concerned as it was with events that took place in the eighteenth century, could not possibly tap into the experience or memories of those events. However, what we did manage to collect, through interviews our students did with local people, were stories about Tipu Sultan that were still recounted two centuries later. The priest of the Sri Kote Anjaneyaswamy temple opposite the Fort, for instance, recounted how the horses and elephants were blessed at this temple before a war. Although this was not specific information about any particular war, it alerted us to what the temple and the space around it meant for the priest. The *khidmatgar* of the *dargah* spoke about the saints – the Mastaans who helped Haidar Ali rebuild the Fort.

AR: The commercial area around the Fort contains an extraordinary number of Sufi shrines that blur the lines between the material and the spiritual. They are also central to Bengaluru's local culture and history. We were told that many of them house the tombs of saint-soldiers, the *Shaheed*, who died during the Battle for Bangalore. Legends about mysterious spiritual occurrences concerned with the reinforcement of the fort were also shared. They connected Haidar Ali to the *dargahs* or shrines of Hazrat Tawakkal Shah Mastan Soharwardy in Cottonpet and Hazrat Manik Mastan Shah Soharwardy on Avenue Road. Hazrat Mir Bahadur Shah Al-Maroof Syed Pacha Shaheed, who is buried in a *dargah* near the KR Market, was identified as the Fort Commander or Qilledar who died during battle while defending the

breach. The priest at the seventeenth century Sri Kote Venkataramanaswamy temple also mentioned hearing stories about the performing of a special pooja and bells being rung here for the wellbeing of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan before they left for battle. This offered us new perspectives on the important role oral history, collective memory and people's stories have to play in creating new historical narratives for the city.

AR: What role can Oral History and collective memory in particular, play in assessing / contextualising Bengaluru's historical events, sites, artefacts and objects of history?

IC: Looking back, CPH's first attempt at engaging with public history through archival research, showcasing historical artefacts and curating snippets from oral history interviews did create a lively interest in the Fort and in Tipu Sultan and his times. We had large groups of students from diverse backgrounds visiting the Fort from all over the city and the Shadow Puppet play, the animation film based on Tipu's dream diary and the play, 'Tiger! Tiger!' were much appreciated. However, the site-specific performance was by invitation only (a request from the sponsors) and we had to turn away a number of local children who had turned up attracted by the lights and music and I would like to think, by the theatrical presence of 'Tipu' in the play. This was, perhaps, the unfortunate consequence of not having more dialogue with all collaborators about the importance of including audiences across the class divide. Public history, after all, is people's history and needs an audience that is diverse and not restricted to the privileged few. In hindsight, I feel we could have given more thought to this aspect of public history.

AR: The logistics and operational implications of managing events at an eighteenth-century venue that was originally built for battle proved to be a challenge. On the other hand, the 'public' nature of the Fort and its location in Kalasipalyam helped draw in a wider, walk-in audience comprising various local groups, institutions and communities in the area. We observed that the convergence of stories from different sources recorded during the oral interviews and shared in the Sound Booth, layered collective memory over the information and experience design, contributed to an increased interest in the fort and helped build pride of place. The in-depth, continuous engagement with the site over several months also created an intimate relationship between the structure and the students who said 'because we now know, we care.' This offered a valuable insight into how engagement with a heritage site through information and direct experiences, can help build context, meaning and value, as well as ownership and belonging.

AR: How is Public History defined, recognized and identified in the Indian context? How can the engagements with the Bangalore Fort in the eighteenth century be understood as a unique Public History project, perhaps one of the first of its kind, for Bengaluru?

IC: Public history works with the historical method and tools to talk about the past beyond academia. Although public history is hardly recognized or even identified as a discipline in India, it has taken different forms in our context. So, curated museum visits, public exhibitions that work with historical themes and city walks that evoke the past have been around for a while all over India. More recently, the feminist bilingual writer and activist, Sarmistha Datta Gupta and the artist Sanchayan Ghosh have brought together memory and history in an exhibition to mark hundred years of the Jalianwala Bagh massacre titled 'Ways of Remembering Jalianwala Bagh and Rabindranath Tagore's response to the Massacre' using memories that had been handed down to those who survived or stories from families that had lost their loved ones.

The engagement with the Bangalore Fort that was undertaken in 2012 by our Centre, was certainly unique and one of the first attempts in the city to reimagine history and make it more accessible. There was an active engagement with the Fort through the research process that included story-telling imaginatively using visual forms that represented the times of the Tiger of Mysore.

Note: All photographs in this article, unless otherwise mentioned, are taken by Aliyeh Rizvi.

References

Chowdhury, Indira (2018). 'Looking the Tiger in the Eye': Oral History, Heritage Sites and Public Culture, Chapter in David Dean (ed). The Companion to Public History, Wiley Blackwell.

Hamilton, Paula and Shopes, Linda (2008). Oral History and Public Memories, Temple University, 2008.

Iyer, Meera (2019). Discovering Bengaluru, INTACH Bengaluru Chapter.

Nora, Pierre (1989). 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', Representations, Spring, 1989, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter Memory, (pp. 7-24)

Rice, B.L (1897). Mysore, A Gazetteer Compiled for Government, Vol. II. Westminster, Archibald Constable and Company.

Welsh, Colonel James (n.d.). Military Reminiscences: extracted from a journal of nearly forty years' active service in the East Indies. London: Smith, Elder, and Co., Cornhill, MDCCCXXX.

Dr. Indira Chowdhury is an oral history practitioner and a historian with a Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. The author of several books, including archival books, she has set up institutional archives in different parts of India.