

Exactly one month ago, the whole world watched shocking images of the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil engulfed in flames. The destruction of the fire was so severe that most of the museum's rare and precious collections of fossils, natural specimens, audio documentation, and archives were destroyed. The most devastating image that brought home the severity of the fire was the aerial photo of the hollowed out building, the majestic former Paço de São Cristóvão, the erstwhile residence of the Portuguese royal family. For Brazilians reeling under a series of political and economic crises, the fire was symbolic of all that is wrong with the present government.

Tragedies like these are not new and usually happen because of poor care. However, in our technologically-advanced times, there exists know-how to prevent them. Keeping aside the importance of good infrastructure, such tragedies occur also because there is a neglect of these resources by cultural and educational institutions. One could think of lack of facilities for research, or the general apathy towards research, even in universities, as contributing to the neglect. What does apathy do? It takes away from us our ability to seriously understand our history and culture, forcing us to rely instead on myth and casual opinion. Think of it in these terms: if one has to claim ownership to a property, one must have proper (documentary) proof. Without which it is seen as simply a baseless claim. Likewise with the history of a people. It is the institutions such as libraries, archives, and museums along with monumental heritage that preserve this proof of our history and allow us, in the present, to devote time and energy to the understanding of the factors and forces that have exerted the pressures and the pulls to create our culture and society.

Take the case of Goa. Most Goans will assert that Goa has a rich history and culture. But how many of us are aware of Goan history beyond the touristy narrative of Goa as a paradise? To pose this question in another way: was Goa always a paradise or did someone, at a particular point in time, suggest that it was? We can answer these and other questions only if students and researchers have easy access to the materials contained in our cultural institutions.

material forces us to talk about the virtues of digitization. Goa is sadly lacking in this regard. Access to this material in digital form and through the internet is not available. The global trend, nowadays, is for established and well-known libraries and museums to make many of their collections freely available to the public – researchers or anybody else. As an illustration that would resonate with the general Goan public, the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU) in Portugal recently digitized and made freely available a large cache of old photos of Goa of the 1950s/60s taken by Mr. Percival Noronha.

The photographs freeze a moment in time; we get a glimpse of how things looked back then. It gives a glimpse of the past that is immediately relatable because the likeness is not like that of a sketch or painting. Just like a photograph can give a glimpse of the past, written/printed documents too can be similarly useful, though one has to spend countless hours reading and, in some cases, deciphering these documents. And precisely, for this reason, one needs to have easy access to such material. The point is that the lay public and the researcher alike benefits with an ease of access to these resources. What one does with this material depends on, as stated earlier, the educational opportunities available. This also can open up exciting new ways to teach students about history, culture, and politics, not just in schools but also in higher education. Suppose Mr. Noronha had not donated his collection to AHU? Suppose, despite the donation, AHU had not digitized and given free access to the collection?

One can also view ease of access in the digital form as part of a larger practice of furthering (or in some cases starting from scratch) practices of transparent governance. When cultural institutions of public importance open themselves up to the general public, one could argue that it fosters a culture of public participation in the debates and operation of society at large. This could be true for governmental institutions as well, as now a culture of access to valuable information regarding policies and laws will be encoded in the administrative practices. It is true that the Right to Information law addresses this issue to a certain extent; but the governmental bodies do not seem to be very forthcoming. Perhaps because, in India, we have only recently started demanding ease of access to information.

More specifically, and perhaps a bit personally, it is important for researchers to have digital access as not all researchers are able to access libraries, archives and such, because traveling to these institutions requires money and time. Many researchers also find it difficult

to travel and do research at the same time; the time that one spends in procuring visas and/or traveling to reach these institutions can be saved if these resources are available in digital form.

For Past's Sake: Digitization

The case in Rio de Janeiro is a wake-up call for us. Seeing historical and cultural heritage as belonging, and therefore accessible, to the general public is important for a vibrant and diverse democracy.

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