

The Cost of Civilisational Amnesia

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Movement I: Return to Civilisational Inquiry

Essay 006

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॥ सा विद्या या विमुक्तये ॥

Every civilisation remembers selectively. No civilisation preserves every event, every idea, every institution or every experience that contributes to its journey. The passage of time naturally filters memory. Certain traditions endure. Certain ideas survive. Others gradually recede into obscurity.

Forgetting, therefore, is natural, but Civilisational amnesia is not.

The distinction between the two is important. Forgetting refers to the loss of particular details. Amnesia occurs when a civilisation loses the ability to understand itself. It remembers fragments but no longer comprehends their meaning. Names survive, symbols survive, rituals survive, yet the intellectual foundations that once connected them begin to disappear.

The consequences of such amnesia are rarely visible at first.

A civilisation does not suddenly awaken one morning and discover that its memory has vanished. The process is gradual. Institutions continue functioning. Customs continue to be observed. Stories continue to be narrated. Words continue to be repeated. Yet with each passing generation, the distance between practice and understanding may increase.

Eventually, the form survives while the meaning fades.

This is often how civilisational decline begins—not necessarily through military defeat, political collapse or economic weakness, but through the gradual erosion of civilisational self-understanding.

The danger becomes particularly acute when inherited knowledge is reduced to isolated fragments. A civilisation may continue to remember its heroes while forgetting the questions they confronted. It may celebrate its texts while neglecting their insights. It may preserve rituals while overlooking the principles that originally animated them.

Consider how frequently certain names continue to occupy public consciousness.

Rama.

Krishna.

Chanakya.

Vyasa.

Valmiki.

Their presence remains undeniable.

Yet familiarity with a name should not be mistaken for engagement with the ideas associated with it. The survival of memory alone does not guarantee the survival of understanding. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of civilisational amnesia is that a society may continue to remember its inheritance while simultaneously becoming disconnected from it.

This condition is particularly difficult to recognise because it often creates the illusion of continuity.

People assume that because a text remains available, its knowledge remains alive.

The two are not necessarily the same.

A text may survive physically while its intellectual significance gradually disappears from public consciousness. Libraries may preserve manuscripts. Institutions may preserve traditions. Yet if the questions contained within those texts cease to be examined, the civilisation risks losing access to the very insights it has successfully preserved.

Civilisational amnesia may also arise through another process: the gradual disruption of transmission itself. The loss of memory is not always the consequence of neglect alone. Sometimes it emerges through alterations in the manner knowledge is preserved, interpreted and communicated across generations.

One source of such disruption lies within the civilisation itself. Over long periods of time, texts frequently undergo interpolation, redaction and reinterpretation. New generations add explanations, modify passages, emphasise particular themes or transmit inherited knowledge through changing intellectual lenses. Such developments are not unique to Indic civilisation; they occur wherever texts survive for centuries. While many such additions may be valuable, they also create the possibility that later readers encounter layers of interpretation without always distinguishing them from the original formulation. The result is not necessarily falsehood, but increasing distance between a civilisation and its earliest intellectual foundations.

A second source of disruption emerges when external powers acquire political control over a civilisation for extended periods. Conquest alone does not produce

civilisational amnesia. More significant is the ability of a ruling power to influence the institutions through which knowledge is transmitted. Educational systems, languages of administration and accepted intellectual frameworks gradually shape how future generations understand both themselves and their past.

The Indian experience during British colonial rule provides an important illustration. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay submitted his Minute on Indian Education, advocating the promotion of English-language education and the prioritisation of European literature and science within state-supported education. He argued for the creation of a class of Indians who would serve as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the wider population. Subsequent educational policies increasingly directed official support towards English education and Western intellectual traditions while reducing emphasis upon many indigenous systems of learning.

The issue is not whether Western knowledge possessed value; clearly it did and continues to do so. The question is whether the encounter occurred through informed dialogue or through the gradual displacement of existing intellectual traditions.

The significance of this development extends beyond language alone. Educational institutions do more than transmit information; they shape intellectual habits, historical consciousness and cultural reference points. When a civilisation's younger generations become progressively detached from the texts, languages and methods through which earlier generations understood themselves, a gap begins to emerge. The civilisation may continue to exist politically and socially, yet its access to portions of its own intellectual inheritance gradually weakens.

Civilisational amnesia therefore cannot always be explained by the disappearance of texts. Sometimes the texts survive. The manuscripts survive. The stories survive. Yet the pathways through which successive generations once engaged with them become increasingly fragile. When this occurs, the challenge before a civilisation is not merely preservation. It is recovery.

This distinction acquires particular relevance in the modern age.

Never before have human societies possessed such immediate access to information. Ancient texts can be downloaded instantly. Commentaries can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Knowledge that once required years of travel and effort is now available within seconds.

Yet access and understanding are not identical.

The abundance of information sometimes creates a new challenge. Individuals encounter countless fragments of knowledge without ever engaging deeply with any of them. Quotations circulate widely. Summaries replace study. Conclusions are consumed without examining the reasoning that produced them. In the process, familiarity expands while understanding contracts.

The result is a peculiar form of civilisational detachment. People inherit answers without inheriting the questions. They inherit conclusions without inheriting the inquiry. They inherit symbols without inheriting the meanings. What appears to be knowledge may therefore conceal a deeper discontinuity. This phenomenon extends beyond texts alone. It influences the character of societies.

Across the world, communities increasingly confront challenges that earlier generations would have recognised in different forms. Family structures experience strain. Relationships become more fragile. Technological immersion increasingly substitutes direct human interaction. Anxiety rises despite unprecedented material abundance. Public discourse grows more polarised. Individual achievement is frequently pursued at the expense of collective well-being. The desire for immediate gratification often overwhelms the cultivation of character.

These developments should not be attributed to any single cause. Nor should they be romanticised as problems unknown to earlier generations. Human societies have always confronted disorder, conflict and uncertainty.

Yet civilisations historically developed intellectual frameworks through which such challenges could be examined and addressed. When those frameworks become inaccessible, societies may continue to experience familiar problems while gradually losing the conceptual tools that once assisted in understanding them.

The consequence is not merely confusion.

It is intellectual dependency.

A civilisation that loses confidence in its own accumulated observations eventually becomes dependent upon frameworks developed elsewhere, often without examining whether those frameworks adequately address its particular circumstances, experiences and historical realities.

This does not imply that external ideas should be rejected. Civilisations have always learned from one another. Exchange enriches intellectual life.

The difficulty arises when borrowing replaces inquiry.

A civilisation confident in its intellectual inheritance engages with external ideas from a position of understanding. A civilisation suffering from amnesia often adopts them from a position of uncertainty.

Recovery therefore requires more than preservation. It requires re-engagement.

Civilisational memory cannot be restored merely by repeating inherited formulas. Nor can it be recovered through nostalgia. The objective is not to recreate the past. The objective is to recover the capacity for meaningful conversation with it.

This is why the study of civilisational texts remains important. Such texts preserve more than stories. They preserve observations, questions and accumulated

reflections concerning power, duty, governance, family, society, morality and human conduct. Most importantly, they preserve ways of thinking.

When approached seriously, they allow a civilisation to reconnect with its own intellectual journey.

The purpose of such engagement is not blind acceptance.

Every generation must examine inherited knowledge critically. Certain ideas may require refinement. Certain interpretations may require reconsideration. New circumstances inevitably generate new questions.

Yet meaningful renewal becomes possible only when there exists something with which to engage.

A civilisation that forgets its intellectual inheritance loses not merely knowledge of the past.

It loses a portion of its capacity to shape the future.

For the greatest cost of civilisational amnesia is not what a civilisation forgets.

It is what it becomes incapable of remembering.

— End of Essay 006 —

—About Manthan House

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