

The Hidden Cost of Outsourcing Our Memories to Technology

As we increasingly rely on smartphones and AI for information storage, we risk losing vital cognitive skills and cultural connections.

4 min. read · [View original](#)

“Twelve fours are...?” called out my 14-year-old daughter, planning her study schedule for final exams, meticulously matching lessons and subjects with hours and days.

“48,” I replied from the kitchen, busy adding spices to the curry. As I gathered curry leaves, mustard, cumin, and fenugreek, I paused, recalling that my mother-in-law would have included whole red chillies. The thought awakened my senses, reminiscent of the pungent aromas that once filled our kitchen.

My memory conjured images of my mother-in-law, standing upright, a towel wrapped around her head after her early morning hair wash, the queen of her domain. She added home-dried, freshly ground spices to her curries, infusing the kitchen with a symphony of scents. Her cooking brimmed with love, invigorating those who partook of this soulful meal.

From my kitchen doorway, I spotted my eighth-grade son reaching for the calculator to complete his maths homework.

“Hey,” I called out, “leave that alone. Use your brain!”

Already punching numbers, he drawled lazily, “Why tax my brain when the calculator can do the work?”

I struggled to find a convincing counterargument.

My mind drifted back to sunny childhood vacations spent memorising multiplication tables. The reward? A coveted 50 paise coin or a rare word of appreciation from my father.

Father's mental math prowess never ceased to amaze us. While we frantically searched our memories, answers rolled off his tongue triumphantly. He'd beam with pride, crediting his school teacher who ensured the entire class knew their tables by heart.

Memorisation was then an integral part of education. Four decades later, I find my own recall serving me well, enabling me to navigate the world of numbers, a tool that, like fire, can serve or scorch depending on how we wield it.

I contemplate the vast repository of knowledge we've painstakingly acquired, available to us at a moment's notice. Yet now, day by day, we surrender our memory to artificial intelligence. How will my children fare in adulthood with so much of their essential memory stored in a cloud?

Is the smartphone making us less intelligent? Will our ability to memorise fade away? Once, we knew phone numbers by heart: our married sister's home, her unmarried friend (if you were her brother), and our neighbours'. In the days before ubiquitous home phones, we

cultivated good relationships with phone-owning neighbours, using their numbers as our own for friends and relatives. We proudly recalled our family doctor's number, the versatile handyman's, the grocer's, and that trusted colleague's who could submit our leave requests.. Now, I doubt we retain more than five. With a start, I realise I know only two: mine and my husband's.

My husband's landline number once pulsed through my heart every evening during our courtship. It drew me out on cold winter nights to queue at STD booths, fingers trembling as I dialled, uncertain whose voice would greet me - his or his mother's.

Now, we entrust the burden of numbers and symbols to our ever-willing digital companions. Anticipating our declining memory skills, apps promise to locate our spectacles, car keys, house keys, and even our phones. I ponder the addresses and routes our minds once held steadfast for decades. Some could navigate places visited in childhood 30 years later. But with digital maps, we no longer need to remember.

We're creating an AI doppelganger, tasked with information we deem unworthy of remembering. In the process of evolution, unused functions atrophy.

I reflect on the oral traditions that have shaped human civilization, passing down our journey through millennia. Great epics, myths, and histories have been preserved through the simple yet marvellous capacity of the human mind to memorise and share memories.

On our mothers' laps and in our grandmothers' cosy beds, we learned who we are, where we come from, and the path to maintain our humanity. Through simple tales, they narrated stories of kindness, loyalty, family ties, and community bonds. Their enchanting oral narratives, woven with song, poetry, and music, connected us to our heritage and the energy that brings us to life.

Great traditions of transmitting knowledge through memorisation fostered rich discussions among scholars and philosophers, their arguments challenging us to this day. Across cultures, oral storytelling has been revered. Elders pass down wisdom and

cultural values, ensuring the preservation of collective memory.

Modern education brought a heavy reliance on writing, an acquired skill unlike our innate ability to learn by listening. We master our mother tongue effortlessly, deeply, and intimately through this natural process. Oral traditions have been inclusive: anyone could create, listen, or teach. While technology has given us access to vast information, it has also introduced what experts call 'digital amnesia.'

I ponder the place of memory in our lives. Are we not, in essence, our memories and our relationship with them?

Wordsworth's *Daffodils* celebrates memory, illustrating how recollection is a rich source of creativity and healing.

Memories, personal and collective, are a great resource available to each of us. And memories carry power. It is memory that moves us towards seeking healing, redemption, justice, forgiveness, towards reconciling in peace and love. Artists often transform personal or collective memories into multi-layered

narratives that find a deep resonance with audiences. Frida Kahlo drew from personal pain, while Sadat Hasan Manto based stories on shared memories of the Indian partition. Interpretations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* depend on listener's knowledge and recollections.

Can AI transmute painful memories into pearls of wisdom as poets do?

Memory makes us human. We must consider how to preserve our capacity for memorisation. It's about claiming our place in the vast universe that preceded us, connecting with our cultural heritage, and forging our personal identities.

Ganga Mukhi is a filmmaker, curator and film educationist based in Pune.

CONTRIBUTE YOUR COMMENTS 2 / 2

New

Published : Aug 25, 2024 09:10 IST - 5 MINS READ