

EDITORIAL

Museum Anthropology in India

Museum Anthropology: Meanings and Importance

Museum is sometime known as 'the institutional homeland' of anthropology (Lurie, 1981:184). William Sturtevant (1969) in his classic paper 'Does Anthropology Need Museums' suggested three periods for USA: Museum Period (1840-90), Museum-University Period (1890-1920) and University Period (1920-1969). During the Museum Period (1840-90), there was no university training in anthropology and scholars originally belonged to different fields. However, museum collections 'were marginally related to the development of theories of cultural evolution' (Sturtevant, 1969:622). During the Museum-University period, the formal teaching in anthropology began in universities and museum collections were used as evidence for the theory of diffusion. However, 'the importance of museum collections for the anthropology of this time should not be exaggerated' (Sturtevant, 1969:624). During the University Period (1920-1969), there was a steady decline in the proportion of museum anthropologists in comparison to anthropologists based in universities and colleges in the United States. Stating that there are three major classes of culture – material culture, social culture and mental culture –, Sturtevant argued that only material culture can be represented in museum collections and 'from the beginning, research on material culture has been less important in ethnology than on research on social and mental culture' (1969:632). Thus, anthropology museums or museums of ethnology had 'consistently lost their importance for anthropology at large because of a declining interest in the anthropological study of material culture, the neglect of museums that were often faced with conflicting tasks, the recruitment of wrong staff, and the museums' lack of theoretical interest in and significant contributions to anthropology' (Feest, 2013:186). In Stocking's view, the diffusionist schools, with their culture area and distributional concern, and continuing to flourish into 1920s, had made museum collections relevant. But there was a shift towards 'a more behaviourally oriented anthropology' in the Anglo-American tradition which had, by the outbreak of the Second World War, 'left museum anthropology stranded in an institutional, methodological, and

theoretical backwater' (Stocking, 1985:8). Thus, the hey days of structural-functionalism with its ahistorical perspective witnessed museum being decentred from theoretical discourse though collections from small scale societies continued as a part of the material culture of those societies.

During the last few decades, museum anthropology figured at the centre stage of anthropological discourse owing to some significant developments in anthropology as a discipline. According to Herle,

“Museum anthropology refers to the work that anthropologists do within museums as well as the anthropological study of museums as important institutions within modern society. It encompasses a broad range of academic and professional concerns. In both theory and practice, museum anthropology straddles overlapping interests in field research and public outreach, metropolitan centres and (post) colonial peripheries, diverse international communities and local audiences, material culture studies and artistic sensibilities” (Herle, 2016:3).

For Philipp Schorch, museum anthropology implies “critiquing the institution of the ethnographic museum, its colonial histories and frameworks, as well as the resulting ethnographic knowledge” (2023:96). Addressing the question of 'what can Museum Anthropology do in the Twenty-first Century?', he reflected on “the doings of museum anthropology, as historically grounded, ethnographically informed and philosophically framed knowledge practices” (2023:98). Besides, he focussed “on the doing in a double-sense: on what museum anthropology can do, as in affecting, impacting and achieving, as well as on museum anthropology's own doing, as a particular set of knowledge practices brimming with methodological, epistemological and ontological potentials to be harnessed for its own renewal and for cross-disciplinary fertilization across the academy and beyond the museum itself” (2023:106). Visualising a 'move from postcolonial critique to decolonial doing' through museum anthropology, he concluded that “an anthropology not only of and in but through museums might thus make a valid contribution to reimagining and reinventing the world we inherited and inhabit” (2023:107).

Christina Kreps considers museum anthropology as applied anthropology “responding ever more to the call to be more publicly engaged and socially relevant” (2015:57). A 'vigorous and growing perspective within anthropology', museum anthropology, according to Green, “applies insights from cultural anthropology to the assessment of how museums represent cultures, and increasingly looks at museum collections as the material record of cultures over time” (2015:17).

Greene (2015) has discussed some developments in anthropology during the last few decades that have a bearing on museum. The first is the post-modern and reflexive turn treating museums 'good to think with' and 'reflexive of intellectual currents and tensions within the field'

(Ames, 1986, Clifford, 1988, Karp and Lavine, 1991), for example, cultural and social politics of representation (Clifford, 1988), impact of colonialism, collecting histories and the complex ways of artefacts entering the museum (Wintle, 2013), biography of objects (Appadurai, 1988) and sometime application of network analysis to argue that museums are as much about social relations as about objects (Gosden and Larson, 2007). Besides, both museums and their objects are regarded as part of a broad cultural processes, such as nation building, identity, globalisation and tourism (Macdonald, 1998). Another important aspect for Greene (2015) is the emphatic voice of indigenous communities in rediscovering museums as sites where they could reclaim their tangible and intangible cultural heritage by asserting cultural sovereignty over such objects. Museums are regarded as symbols implying troubled history of anthropological engagement with colonial repression and appropriation. Thus, the claim for repatriation especially of skeletal remains of indigenous populations in various museums to respective communities became more and more vociferous during the last few decades resulting in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990 in the USA. The realisation of museums as powerful sites of cultural representation by various indigenous communities has resulted in inclusion of 'native voice' and co-curation in various exhibitions.

Another important trend has been the concept of New Museology (Boylan, 1990, Bedekar, 1995, Vergo, 1989a, 1989b). While the term 'ecomuseology', coined by Hugues de Varine in 1971, explicitly links museums and ecology, it was George Henri Rivière who, while reorganizing French national parks, persuaded the local communities to decide for themselves what they wanted to preserve as their unique heritage (Davis, 1999). While the ideal of traditional museology represents the scramble for growth, "ecomuseology does not lay emphasis on growth beyond an optimum limit because of the concepts of participatory public" (Bedekar, 1995:31). Boylan considered ecomuseum as "a museum concerned with total ecology and environment, natural and human, of a defined locality" (1990:32). All these became the basis of New Museology which regarded the community/communities as the custodian and curator of their heritage with the professional curator acting as a facilitator in the process. Above all, Boylan pointed out that the true 'owners' of the museum should be ordinary people, not the museum's staff or governing body. Traditional museums were alleged to be elitist, obsolete and isolated from the modern world involving a waste of public money (Hudson, 1977:15). Besides, old museology' was "too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums" (Vergo, 1989a:3). In contrast to museum models centred on classic collections, 'New Museology' implied changes in 'value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity' within museums and redistribution of power within museums involving 'curatorial redistribution' (Stam, 1993).

Ann Laura Jones (1993) made two points. First, academic anthropologists rarely consider museum anthropology as an important area for the employment of anthropologists. Second, museum anthropologists now practice in a highly politicized public setting, put current theory into practice in interesting ways. The practice of anthropology in museums has entered a stage of heightened risk and intense public scrutiny. The new atmosphere of 'relevance and accountability' - a change from 'the isolation and triviality of past decades' - has made 'museum environment as dynamic and challenging an arena for anthropology as the halls of academia'.

Museum Anthropology: The Case of India

In India, museum, like archaeology and anthropology, is a colonial construct. However, it is not an absolute replica of the western mould since museum visit as a part of pilgrimage is a typical Indian response to the western metropolitan concept of museum. The first museum to have developed in India by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Kolkata in 1814 was a multipurpose museum in which ethnographic/anthropological collections were an important part. Subsequently, in accordance with the Indian Museum Act 1866, the Asiatic Society handed over the entire collection to the Board of Trustees in the same year. Dr John Anderson, the first curator of this imperial institution, showed some interest in the anthropological collection. While writing in the first annual report of the Indian Museum in January 1867, Anderson stated,

"If the ethnology of India is to be illustrated in the galleries, each leading tribe should have its physical features portrayed by male and female crania and pelvis and by coloured casts taken from life and its civilization delineated by the clothing of the tribe and by its manufacturers whether for household purposes, agriculture, chase, defence, ornaments, amusements or religious worship" (quoted in Sarkar, 2005:6).

At this stage, it is relevant to discuss the collection strategies of E.H. Man who had spent his entire career in Andaman and Nicobar Islands from 1871 to 1901. Man collected and donated ethnographic objects to many important museums in Europe like Leiden, Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Florence, Oxford, Cambridge, London (British Museum, Kew Gardens), Edinburgh and also in India at Indian Museum, Kolkata. Man was a close embodiment of Susan Pearce's definition of the 'systematic collector', whose methods are accorded an 'intellectual primacy' rooted in scientific reason and whose central aim is to 'complete a set' (Pearce, 1992:84, 87).

Theoretically, Man's collection can be classified from two aspects – evolutionary anthropology and 'salvage ethnography' paradigm of collecting. Man was influenced by the theory of social evolutionism in which material culture was regarded as 'the key' for demonstrating evolutionary progress and gradualism by arranging objects from perceived 'simplicity' to 'complexity'

of their formal or functional qualities. From the paradigm of 'salvage ethnography', Man's collection tried to provide a 'comprehensive' picture of 'traditional' Andamanese and Nicobarese material culture rendering his knowledge to them 'as exhaustive as possible' and his donations constituting 'as complete as a European Museum is likely to get' (Winkle, 2013:64).

It is relevant to state that out of 105 museums in colonial India, anthropological specimens are reported only from a few museums, such as the Indian Museum, Kolkata, Gass Forest Museum, Coimbatore, Government Museum, Chennai, and Government (Napier) Museum, Thiruvananthapuram, etc. However, the functioning of the colonial museum in India has, as Guha Thakurta observed, "remained wracked by a set of construed binaries where knowledge stood pitted against wonder, where the scientific gaze battled to find a place and a set of various eyes, and where the prospects of education saw itself subverted by the demand of mere ... recreation". (2004: 79)

In post-independent India, anthropology museums served three basic purposes: to promote national integration, to celebrate cultural diversity and to be used as a teaching aid in Anthropology Departments of various universities. In all these cases, emphasis was on collection and display of material culture of small communities without bearing much on anthropological theory. In this background, the emergence of post-colonial perspectives was a means of assertion of former colonies to decolonise their intellectual tradition (Gandhi, 2019; Krishnan, 2009). The development of autoethnography was one such means by which the colonial stereotypical narratives of the tribal cultural practices in India were interrogated and contextualised. During 1980s autoethnography began as a protest to the existing social science methodologies of how the stories of the "Other" were not accurately represented and became another approach both for challenging colonial narratives and to assert one's own ethnicity (Marak, 2015). The trend is most visible in the North East India. Besides, the Guwahati Declaration on New Museology was made on 28th December 1988, which stated that all possible efforts be made to recognise the 'value of the contribution of new museology' and such 'new orientation to socialize museology be recognized'; besides, "the Indian concept of trusteeship, as elaborated in the Gandhian philosophy be extended to the spheres of museums which are to be established, maintained and operated by the hands of representatives of the concerned communities for the value-based museology work in the directions chosen by each community itself" (Bedekar, 1995:31).

Keeping the above trends in view, museum anthropology is emerging as part of the centre stage of anthropological and museum discourse. In this regard, Mathur and Singh (2015a) have made a critique of colonial museums in India. According to them, modern museum which, as an institution in its 'modern democratic form', evolved and proliferated in the metropolitan centres of Europe

during nineteenth century and emerged, what Bennett called, as the phenomena of 'exhibitionary complex' (Bennett, 1995), "to serve, in increasingly sophisticated ways, the formation of the new national and imperial identities of Euro-Western nation states" (Mathur and Singh 2015b:4). Considering the emergence of a museum in the colony as 'a lesser counterpart to the exemplary metropolitan institutional paradigm', Mathur and Singh (2015b: 4-5)) make the following points: it was defined 'by the politics of colonial patronage and the materialist-acquisitionist needs of the great imperial knowledge-production project'; the museum in the colony 'was, in fact, a museum of the colony, addressing not just Indian visitors but also imperial authorities'; besides, the appearance of Indians within the museum as objects themselves 'dramatizes the paradoxical origins of museum as an institutional form: the apparatus that allowed for a ritualistic public enactment of democracy in the metropolis simultaneously functioned in the colony to position (in highly undemocratic ways) the public as a subject society outside the domain of citizenship and rights'; such a view of the museum in the colony - merely 'as a deracinated transplant scarred by its origin within the 'civilizing mission'' - 'denies the reality of a more complicated history'. With regard to the question to what extent museum was 'indigenised', the makers of Indian museums did not appear, Mathur and Singh stated, 'to fully erode the Victorian moral and didactic structure of the museum, or completely hijack its 'Westernness' to make it entirely their own' (2015b:11). However, 'the instability of sacred and secular values' accorded to museum objects and recreation as the central function of museum known from the subaltern perception of museum as *ajaiabghar* (a house of strange objects), Mathur and Singh emphasised, "do suggest a 'collective and spectacular experiment' of sorts, and appear to challenge the premise of a stable, universal 'museum-effect', the notion at the heart of Alper's influential thesis that museums consolidate a specific 'way of seeing' " (2015b:11).

Museums in India are no longer perceived as merely academic ivory towers; rather, they function more as centres of edutainment. Communities are considered the real curators of their heritage, and this has resulted in a revision of the curator's role as the sole custodian of heritage to being a facilitator in that process. For example, Sharon Macdonald calls museums 'key cultural loci of our times' (1996: 2); furthermore, "museums negotiate a nexus between cultural production and consumption, and between expert and lay knowledge" (Macdonald, 1996: 4). In addition, the notion of museum as a collection for scholarly use has been largely replaced by the idea of the museum as a means of communication (Lumley, 1988: 15).

Discussing the problems of contemporary museums in India, Rama Lakshmi (2017b) accused them of suffering from 'an immobilising crisis of imagination' 'trapped in an uninspiring sameness', because of our 'civilisational arrogance and ennui' implying that since 'we have the objects, so we do not need to do anything else'. Talking of contemporary India which is 'going

through a second wave nation-building', Rama Lakshmi felt that our museum should 'address the difficult social, environmental and cultural anxieties that inevitably follow such transition' as well as 'what we lose and what gets shaped in the process'. She further stated that while 'in a democracy like India arguments are in political arena or in the media', the challenge is 'how to gently nudge a museum in India into the argument by radically re-imagining it as a more constructive, contemplative platform for contested issues'. According to Rama Lakshmi, India missed many of the stages in the steady evolution of museums witnessed around the world. However, this is, she believed, 'both a crisis and an opportunity': crisis, because 'an entire generation of Indians has grown up without experiencing the magic of what our museums could have been'; opportunity, because, 'as is true with all things in India now, we can skip a few generations and leapfrog into the endless possibilities of the future'. Rama Lakshmi pointed out that 'in an age of hyper-communication the user-generated-content mantra, which is being posed as a challenge, actually provides us with the solution to the future of museums in India' and 'in the context of our robust and argumentative democracy this technology mantra, suits us perfectly because it allows us to tweak the story constantly'.

Arguing for a need of the museums in the North East India 'to transform themselves from the sepulchres of objects into dynamic centre of ideas' and 'to reorient museums from mere ex-situ display of artefacts to in situ revitalisation of the nexus of community culture and development', K. K. Chakravarty (n.d.) emphasised that 'a museum curator in the North East will have to stop acting like the hegemonic subject, objectifying communities as superseded cultures' as found in a homogenising colonial approach. He further stated that 'instead of cannibalising the holistic tribal context into dynastic, denominational, racial or technological classification, the North East museums have to ground themselves in community values of guardianship, invitation, obligation, to nature, ancestors, posterity or spirit'.

At this stage, let us discuss some museums in India which are influenced by various theoretical developments discussed earlier.

Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Bhopal (National Museum of Mankind)

Unlike other national museums, which were set up to house collections, IGRMS began not with any artefact in position but with certain ideas only. A unique feature of this museum is the open air exhibition (Basa, 2009). The Tribal Habitat was the first open air exhibition complex that was opened to the public in 1988. It was a unique way of celebrating the diversity of culture in India by presenting houses from different communities that had been constructed by the respective community with raw materials brought from their local area. Other open air exhibitions include Himalayan Village, Coastal Village, and Desert Village. These exhibits were intended to show human

adaptation in ecologically variable conditions in terms of both settlement and subsistence. The exhibit also celebrates traditional and ecofriendly architecture. The Mythological Trail has been curated by folk and tribal artists and artisans narrating their myths and stories through the medium of terracotta and metal emphasising the three categories of creation, sustenance, and destruction. Ecofriendly and sustainable by nature, the open air exhibition on Traditional Technology celebrates an important aspect of collective memory. Sacred Groves constitutes another significant open air exhibition celebrating traditional ideas about conserving biodiversity and Kumhar pada displays the pottery traditions of contemporary India. This museum has not only been documenting the intangible cultural heritage of India but also emphasizing that culture is an important input in sustainable development. Besides, the IGRMS has resorted to a number of strategies to face the twin challenges of bringing communities to museums and of taking museums to the communities. To stress the creation of an inclusive society, there are a number of activities at IGRMS relating to the vulnerable sections of society including women and children. In IGRMS the curator acts as a facilitator to identify the space, while the communities are involved in curating the display.

Remember Bhopal Museum

In 2010, I concluded my Professor B. M Das Memorial Oration by stating the following:

“To me, homogenization of multiple voices in the name of integration would result in not only intellectual sterilization of the museum profession, but also would do more dis-service to the cause of national integration by silencing the dissenting imagination. Could today's museum professionals live up to the challenge of displaying dissenting imagination? Only posterity will evaluate our success or otherwise in this regard”.

I did not realise then that I would get my answer in next four years in the form of Remember Bhopal Museum which 'tells the story of trauma of the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal – the world's worst industrial disaster – and three decades of relentless struggle for justice'. Launching a five-year project, a team of survivors, activists, academics and museum professionals began the process of building India's first museum that tells the story of a contemporary event and a social movement. It was opened on the 30th anniversary of the Union Carbide gas leak in 2014. There are important features of this Museum (Lakshmi, 2017c). It is 'the first museum in India that has not accepted a single rupee from either the government or any corporation – both of whom are regarded as guilty in their eyes'. It is 'the first museum with the story of a contemporary social struggle and predominantly reliant on oral histories'. Unlike a traditional museum that collects objects first and then researches the story embedded in them, in this museum at first stories and experiences of the survivors were recorded and 'then located the object central to it'. The oral histories in this museum

act as 'both the story and story teller'. They are 'the narrative thread in a museum that foreground people rather than the object'. The display consists of 'objects of both personal and protest memory' as well as exhibits of short audio recordings of people, along with objects and photographs. The idea is to hand-over the reins of the museum to the community. The Museum, Rama Lakshmi emphasizes, 'is not only a place to remember but also to remind others about the tragedy and travesty of justice, and about how victims became warriors'. Further, the museum aims to be 'a fluid and dynamic site that will expand to accommodate many more stories and objects'.

Partition Museum, Amritsar

'The World's First Partition Museum' was opened in 2017 at the Town Hall, Amritsar (Desai, 2017) by an NGO named The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust to commemorate the 70th year of the Partition. Regarding the failure to confront 'the harsh imposition of homelessness upon eighteen million people' – 'the largest migration in history' - for seven decades, Desai felt that to remain silent was considered to be 'politically correct'. The idea about the Museum is 'not to sensationalise this homelessness', but 'to create an archive so that we can all learn never to inflict this pain on another'. Moreover, the post-partition generation with no baggage became partners in the making of the Museum. Desai further stated that it was 'not just the politics but the human experience of eighteen million uprooted individuals was important to record'. For her, the story of Partition is 'much, much more than the communal violence narrative that has engulfed it for decades' since the experiences were very different and these other aspects of Partition were somehow neglected. This Museum is deliberately being made as a People's Museum aiming to 'record the actual story of the migration before it's too late as already the Partition survivors are in their 80s and 90s and increasingly frail'. It is also regarded as a People's Museum since it helps us learn 'to deal with the fear of partition, just as survivors dealt with theirs'. The museum has oral narratives containing the stories of experiences undergone by the victims of partition. It has ten galleries including 'inspirational stories of people who dealt with their grief, rising above it, using this transformational experience to become artists, poets, authors'. It has also 'a contemporary expression of how people view Partition today'. For example, the Tree of Hope created out of barbed wire is 'an interactive installation' which is slowly being greened through the leaves which visitors hang upon it by acknowledging 'the terrible past but wish to move forward, in peace'.

Vacha Museum, Tejgarh, Gujarat

Vacha meaning 'voice, speech or expression' is a museum located at Tejgarh in Gujarat and is regarded as 'the museum of Adivasi voice' (Devy, 2024). It represents the Adivasi cultural production and is curated by them which is an evolving practice through collective participation. It

emerged from an 'experiment' of the Adivasi Academy (since 2000) to explore 'the link between denial of access to the means of development and the 'structural aphasia' imposed on the marginalized languages'. With an emphasis on 'process of self-reliance rather than achieving quantitative success' through the Academy, 'there has been a conscious attempt at recovering the cultural memory of the nomadic and Adivasi communities, and investing it into economic and social dynamics in such a way that culture could be 'monetised' without disrupting the organic coherence between the Adivasi psyche and their material success'. Arguing for the relevance of this Museum, Devy stated that 'for communities that are culturally marginalised and economically disadvantaged, an element of their pride in their identity is important as a strategy to empower them' (Devy, 2024) and hence, the Museum is the centre piece of the Academy. With the largest collection of Adivasi art (including the Pithoro painting of the Rathwa Adivasi community who inhabit there) in its galleries, it has also the largest collection of resource literature on Indian tribes in its library. An open-museum of languages, known as *bhasa-vana* (forest of languages) has been created wherein each tree -through the use of censor – 'speaks' a different language. There is a photo archive of about 60,000 images. With Adivasi objects received from German and British Museums, an exhibition was curated symbolising a 'move towards decolonization of Adivasi culture'. Purva-Prakash has emerged as the first community owned publishing programme of the Adivasis. A magazine called Dhol (drum) in a few tribal languages is also brought out which is intended 'to be read out loud rather than for individual reading'. An Adivasi craft cooperative, known as 'Tribals First' has also been formed. All these aspects lead one to infer that Vacha is 'self-made and a notable expression' of Adivasi 'gaze'.

Peace Museum, Imphal, Manipur

While during the Second World War the British Allied Forces fought against the Japanese Forces in the colonial Indian territory of Manipur, during the twenty-first century, the democratic countries of the United Kingdom, Japan and India are striving for global peace. For the commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Imphal, the opening of the Imphal Peace Museum took place on 22nd June 2019. The historical significance and implications of Imphal Peace Museum has been comprehensively stated by Pradip Phanjoubam (2019). It stands for reconciliation and peace; it is a tribute to the soldiers and civilians who have lost their lives; it narrates the experiences of the Manipuris during the War, the impact of the War on their society and culture, their resilience and how the Manipuris have moved beyond. The Post War section of the Museum is not 'aimed at a witch hunting exercise or a blame game either'; rather 'it is about a celebration of the beauty of peace'. The other important aspect is "to never -- to serve as a promotion of what the holocaust scholars and trauma historians have called 'fidelity to trauma', in which the purpose of memory becomes reduced to trapping the subjects in their traumatic past, disabling them to leave the

past behind and move on” (Phanjoubam, 2019:37). On the contrary, like the 'Truth and Reconciliation' principle of Nelson Mandela as a trauma resolution approach, the Post War section tries to convey a message to visitors, especially the younger generation, 'the magnificent regenerative capacity of life to rebuild and flourish even after having gone through the most traumatic experience'. As Phanjoubam points out, 'the War was the threshold Manipur walked through to enter its own brave new world'.

To conclude, museum anthropology is emerging in India as an important theatre for anthropological theories. In this regard, an important trend has been the emergence of community based museums in the northeast India for assertion of their ethnicities coinciding with the emphasis on autoethnography. Besides, workshop has been organised in Indian Museum, Kolkata to gather meanings of the colonial collections from northeast India by inviting the source communities. Of course, much has been said about the concepts of 'development from below' and 'history from below'. With a challenge to the prevalent view of museums in India as, what Mathur and Singh called, 'static, moribund, irrelevant, and anachronistic'(2015b:12) as well as with increasing emphasis on people centric approach and even dismantling the grand-narrative of traditional museological discourse, it may not be out of place to visualise for the development and assertion of the concept of Museum from Below in India in a post-colonial context. The trend has already made its humble beginnings, particularly in North East India.

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Author's Note: The contents of this editorial are my personal views and not that of the National Monuments Authority, New Delhi