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Museums in India: Past and Future

PEOPLE with leisure and sensitivity to artistic objects have been known to collect them for many centuries. However, placing collections in a museum for public display, has a more recent ancestry. In Europe it was nurtured as part of a search for a European identity that surfaced in the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment period. Identity was crucial to Europe at that time since Europe was undergoing radical change. The traditional aristocracy was being edged out by a newly emerging moneyed middle class, and colonialism was confronting Europe with cultures very different from its own. People like Hans Sloane and Joseph Banks with large private collections were eager to combine money with knowledge. This provided the nucleus for some of the leading museums in Britain. The money, of course, grew with industrialization and was augmented through colonial ventures. Identity was tied into the definition of culture and class. The Renaissance underlined the idea of European culture being rooted in ancient Greek culture, but the latter was unfamiliar to everyone in Europe except the elite. Therefore, when museums emerged they were contributing to the creation of classical culture.

Private collections of art that had become a symbol of status did not always remain with the family. By the 19th century they were becoming the nucleus of public museums, some assisted by state funding. This coincided with the European need to assert its superiority among world cultures, an assertion legitimizing

colonial and imperial power. Bringing the finest objects from other cultures to European museums was a demonstration of power and of the capturing of other cultures. Used in comparative studies these objects illustrated what was projected as the hierarchy of cultures.

The intention of the museum was to display objects in a classified manner. The general classification was fairly simplistic. It began with separating natural objects from those that were made by human effort. Geological samples, plant and animal fossils, and some recent specimens were included in the first category. These were easier to organize using the classifications of Charles Darwin and Carl Linneus. The objects made by humans – ranging from tiny coins to huge obelisks – were more difficult to classify, since the intention was to relate them to a universal history of human evolution. Historical change required explanation so the stages of human life were applied to the history of a society. Primitive beginnings were followed by a period of growth, culminating in a golden age, subsequent to which there was a gradual decline. European culture however remained at the apex.

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What were collected in museums from private collections and some purchase, were objects that came to be defined as ‘antiquities’, from earlier times. These provided a picture of the past. In the period of the Enlightenment, this activity was expanded in two ways. One was the assumption that a museum should exhibit geological and natural history. The museum had to keep up with advances in knowledge. Second, the intention of the museum was to educate the public. The museum was in a sense the companion institution to the university. Some universities had museums, but when these became expensive to maintain there was a separation, although a connection was retained through close collaboration.

Turning to India, the institution of a museum was initially a colonial imposition. Its establishment lay in colonial views of

knowledge about India with a recognizable ideological purpose of giving an identity to the Indian past. The museum did not grow from the individual collector's activities. There had been collectors of special artefacts in the pre-colonial past, such as the collections of Sarfoji in Tanjore, the Mughal princes, the bhandaras of Jaina monasteries, and occasional small collections made by the landed aristocracy or wealthy merchants. Old and rare illustrated books in particular were to be found in such collections, before some of them inexplicably got dispersed. But these collections were initially ignored perhaps because access to them was limited. Had the libraries of the Mughal aristocracy been collected there might not have been a tragic dispersal of the books. However, the major museums were from the start state institutions tied into colonial ideas about the Indian past. Even where existing collections were incorporated there was seldom discussion in any detail on who had made the collection and why.

The notion of a museum gradually changed. It ceased to be just a collection of objects – what we today call the vastu sangrahalaya. It began to be seen as an institution reflecting new knowledge about the biography of the environments and cultures. Some were isolated cultures previously unknown. Some when juxtaposed with others began to suggest connections that had not been envisaged earlier. The old wunder-kammer or chamber of curiosities gave way to an institution of learning and additionally, aesthetic enjoyment. In India, the ajaib-ghar, the house of curiosities has not quite been converted into an institution of learning in every case.

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What the British collected in India to begin with came largely from their own explorations and excavations and from donations. The need to house these objects began with placing them in the Asiatic Society premises in Calcutta, conjoining them to Indology. But the objects outgrew the space. It was then thought to house them in the Indian Museum, established in 1814. This was about half a century after the British Museum was founded.

The awareness of the museum as essential to both heritage and history was familiar to Europe but less so to India.

Museums encouraged the parallel study of objects that were gradually becoming the counterpart to texts. Information from texts is intangible and abstract. Objects are tangible and three-dimensional. Often the juxtaposition of objects creates or erodes connections. The pattern of their proximity is therefore significant. The larger collections fuelled a study of historical change through objects that came from the same region over a number of centuries. The change could be of material, from clay to stone to metal, or it could be of form. Such collections also enabled a comparative study of the same object from different regions – the most striking example of which was the portrait of the Buddha. Thus the Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati heads of the Buddha, representing the same person, sculpted in three different regions, are physically quite distinct. Central to this difference are historical styles and the local aesthetic.

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Acquiring a collection was doubtless motivated largely by curiosity about the culture and its authors. Housing a collection, however, required classifying it. Classification was dependent on theories both of history and aesthetics which, as we know, change with new knowledge. These drew on the history of the colony as envisaged by colonial scholarship and which had an interface with colonial policy. This was present even in the broader relationship of European to non-European cultures. The merger of colonial interests and intellectual curiosity led to an interest in the ancient histories of other cultures. This led to deciphering hieroglyphs allowing a reading of Egyptian history and the cuneiform script that gave access to ancient West Asia. And parallel to this came James Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi script. Information on the ancient world was now different from what was contained in ancient Greek and Latin texts. But the European bias remained, and these texts continued to have priority as sources of history.

Historical classification was either by subject or by chronology. Subject matter was influenced to some degree by extending the concept of evolution from natural history to social history. For chronology historical-dynastic labels became the norm. In the process of tracing the evolution of a culture and evaluating it, one of the past cultures was treated as the norm. If Europe chose Greek art, the choice for India was Gupta art. But the choice was arrived at after much argument. Some preferred Gandhara art of the Indo-Bactrian Greek period since it incorporated the Hellenistic aesthetic, whereas others dismissed this as a hybrid form. The sculpture that came from places more centrally located in British India was described by some as Aryan, adding even more confusion to the use of this label with reference to things Indian.

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In classifying objects primacy was given to objects representing religion and the life of the elite. This was more so in India as according to the colonial reading of the past, religion was seen as the single factor that identified various Indians. And the elite were of course the stuff of history in those days. These were thought to be – and still are – appropriate objects for a museum. This unnecessarily narrowed the area of knowledge. For example, some of the most exquisite scientific instruments of earlier time, aesthetically on par with other objects, such as the superb medieval astrolabes, were not thought to be that important and, therefore, few found a place in the museums of India. Astrolabes are not deities and although they tell us more about the universe than do deities, such objects come low in the hierarchy. Part of the reason was that Indians of past times were not seen as rational and scientific despite their impressive contributions to mathematics, medicine and astronomy. But these were the very subjects that should have been reflected in museums as they demonstrated what historians were speaking of when they defined civilization as a collective process and not a unique event.

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The 19th century was obsessed with questions such as which culture could be described as the earliest civilization. These are questions that we now consider irrelevant. The concept of distinctively separate civilizations, each with its demarcated territory, its single major language and single dominant religion, has now been largely discarded. Today we study civilization as a porous, ongoing process, the making of which was dependent on considerable cross-fertilization. Territorial control, the use of language and the practice of religion, constantly change. What is important is to track the change, and to ascertain how much of it has evolved from local factors and what emerges out of interaction with other cultures. No culture is ever an island unto itself. This interdependence needs to be reflected in museums.

Yet, an impressive example of this has been demonstrated in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The Museum has a collection of Indian, Chinese, Central Asian and West Asian objects. So, instead of confining them to four separate galleries it linked the four areas by using a theme, that of the Silk Route. This was the pan-Asian trade route that went from China through Central Asia, drawing in India and reaching the eastern Mediterranean. Its time span was approximately the entire first millennium AD. The museum display demonstrates the interface between four areas and their cultures, highlighting the impact that they had on each other. It gives form to precisely how the new concept of civilization should be defined. This could be done to great effect for the Indian subcontinent, with overland routes and maritime contacts.

It is sometimes said that museum displays remove objects from their context. Whether it is a sculpture taken out of a temple or a stupa, or calligraphy taken from a mosque or a tombstone, or a miniature painting that was once a book illustration, none of these objects have a context when they are displayed. The context obviously does not have to be physically present but

should be made apparent. When taken in isolation, the object becomes a commodity. This often leads to its commercialization. When this happens two new categories of specialists emerge. The private collector becomes an art connoisseur – someone who knows about art and can appreciate and value the object. The other is the antiquarian dealer for whom objects from the past are commodities for purchase and sale.

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Commodification puts a price on each object and it becomes an investment as is common now among the wealthy. This introduces the category of private patronage, and in a society moving into the market economy, this has become an effective way of investing high incomes. One of the interesting trends in all such societies is that often the commercial side of dealing with art objects is in the hands of the wives of the wealthy. This tends to make it less of a commercial enterprise.

With wealthy individuals now treating antiques as investments, private collections and even private museums will doubtless increase in number and in holdings. Museums dependent on state funding will slowly fall back in bidding for special objects in the art market. Prices are frequently determined by the international market rather than the domestic market which makes it even more expensive for developing economies. Yet as a historian, I do feel that some significant objects should be located in accessible public museums. Perhaps we should consider some of the ways in which other countries cope with this problem. One of the more common is, of course, for the state to give tax benefits for objects that are donated to a particular museum, but held by the donor in his/her lifetime. The problem with private collections is that converting an antique into a commodity seriously curtails its centrality in research.

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But enough of the general scene. Let me turn to the Indian Museum whose two-hundredth anniversary we are celebrating. Established in 1814, it had expanded by the late 19th century to include objects pertinent to geology, zoology, ethnology, archaeology as well as arts and crafts, for collection and display. The inclusion of all these aspects of human existence, seen as interrelated, was essentially in conformity with 19th century philosophy relating to the evolution and interface of life and cultures. But some of what was cutting edge knowledge a century ago is now no longer so.

For example, the then current knowledge of ethnography was reflected in the Museum by the contribution of Herbert Risley on racial types. The 19th century saw the establishing of what was called ‘race science’. It was avidly applied to the classification of various cultures in the subcontinent frequently with a racial label. Risley went around collecting data on cephalic indexes and nasal width. But by the mid-20th century, the idea of race had been virtually discarded as having little basis in fact. Given the tenacity with which we still hold on to the idea of race, perhaps the museum could have a small exhibition explaining why race became a category of classification, and why this has now been discarded.

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Moving from the natural world to that made by humans had an underlying message. It demonstrated progress from the natural to the primitive to the civilized. Exhibiting the past in a particular way was a method of showing that it had come to be understood by those who studied it. This was a conviction that grew, amongst other things from the idea, perhaps best expressed by the German historian of the time, Leopold von Ranke, that history could reveal the past as it had actually been. Historicity was to be based on precisely what the sources tell us. Such empiricism has been dismissed as the narcotic of the 19th century. Yet, archaeology and the museum can discover and

exhibit the realities of the past. Merely laying out the objects bypasses the responsibility that historians and curators have of selecting and analyzing the information that they present. The selection is inevitably linked, consciously or subconsciously, to the theory explaining the significance of that which is being presented.

In setting up museums it was additionally intended to state that the colonizing power was giving attention to understanding the alien cultures over which it ruled. The attention tended to be paternalistic and not participatory. Until 1910, the Board of Trustees of the Indian Museum for example, was overwhelmingly British with a small scatter of Indians. The British representation was in part that of professionals specializing in the knowledge of the sections represented, the rest being employees of the government. These latter tended not to be particularly innovative and seldom took the initiative to change the format. This is a problem that we continue to face in our state institutions linked to education.

Administrators assume that they too are specialists in disciplines. With the pace at which knowledge is advancing today even specialists find it hard to keep up, leave alone administrators. Changes therefore tend not to be made when most required.

The objects displayed in the galleries of the arts section in many museums were generally recognized as symbols of high status being associated with deities and royalty. Among the displays was a section called Industrial Arts. This referred to objects that were either handmade or with a minimal use of machines in contrast to the real industry where objects were made with sophisticated machines. This distinction is bothersome and has not been discussed sufficiently.

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Was the individual artist all that different from the individual craftsman in past times. Both were anonymous, but for the rare sculptor named in ancient times and the painters associated with the Mughal court. What we call classical art came from guilds of

craftsmen, as is attested to by inscriptions at Sanchi and other sources. By way of contrast one thinks of the names of individual artists that are associated with the finest pieces of Greek classical sculpture. When does the individual artist begin to be recognized and what does this mean for the way in which what we today call 'art' is understood.

The separation of art from craft also encouraged a distinction between popular culture and high culture, between the work of the craftsman intended for relatively routine use and that intended for royalty and special occasions. The craftsman who sculpted the figure of a deity was in fact just another craftsman, similar to the one who wove textiles. But the sanctification of the figure gave it a special status that set it aside from the mundane. This problem had earlier raised a couple of questions, still substantially unanswered. When does art cease to be a craft? Did those who used these objects regard them as functional or as aesthetic objects? Presumably there would have been no problem in using an aesthetic object in a functional way.

The distinction between classical and folk was, of course, made in medieval times. The courtly culture often referred to as *marga*, was differentiated from the folk culture or *desi*. Was this also an indirect distinction between the artist and the craftsman? The artists who painted birds and animals for Jahangir did so under their own names. They followed the rules of their training but could innovate if they chose to. The craftsmen of this period remained anonymous although they too were technically trained and did innovate.

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Associated with this is how medieval times perceived earlier periods. Epic heroes said to belong to the ancient past are sometimes depicted in medieval dress and style in miniature paintings. Are they being seen as people distant in time or is this an attempt to update personalities from the past? We today accept this pictorial updating of ancient narratives, but would shudder if the epic heroes were painted in shirt and trousers.

Perhaps it suggests that in medieval times the past was seen as more integral to the present, whereas we are more alienated from the past seeing it as distant and apart.

Yet, style and patronage are complex matters. The Candella kings of Bundelkhand were patrons of some of the finest sculpture in the medieval temples at Khajuraho. Nevertheless, they were also patrons of the small shrine to their ancestral deity, Maniyadevi in Mahoba. Maniyadevi was aniconic but was in worship and was later converted to the goddess Sharada. Was Maniyadevi too obscure to be sculpted into an icon? Was there some other reason for keeping the original form of the rock, even after its patrons had been associated with temples to Puranic deities? Should lesser and aniconic deities not be accommodated in a museum if only just to make the point that other forms were also part of the cultural pattern?

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To return to the idea of the museum in 1814. The existing European museums such as the British Museum, the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Louvre in Paris, were substantially collections of what were believed to be objects of interest and importance pertaining to the past and creating a European identity. The museum acquired, collected, conserved and exhibited these objects. The museum also became a centre for advanced research. This required an up to date reference library of books and journals, open to public membership. The library of the British Museum in the 19th century was more than just a museum library. It was home to a variety of intellectuals who through their research and theories have changed the face of the globe in different ways. To the library would now be added a phototec and a conservation unit. In conservation the controversy over the degree to which the object should be changed in order to conserve it, was solved in Europe by arguing for the minimum. In India, the restoration of objects to their original forms can produce distinctly unhappy results.

Another dimension is introduced when objects are viewed as items of heritage contributing to the identity of the society. This is the point at which history entered the functioning of the museum. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that the hegemonic history of India in colonial times, was that of James Mill, *The History of British India*, published from 1818. It was, therefore, contemporary with the establishing of the Indian Museum. Was there a link between the two? It can be argued that the understanding of the Indian past at that time, rooted as it was in colonial interpretations, was in turn reflected both in the histories of the time and in the display of major museums.

Mill periodized the history of India into Hindu, Muslim and British, a periodization that still lingers despite its having no basis. Museum displays often follow this idea. Chronology can be maintained without giving objects dynastic labels. Where a dynasty has ruled briefly such as the Shunga, can a sculpture be accurately ascribed to this dynastic period, or would it not be better to give a somewhat broader time bracket? Sometimes the technical form is more helpful in understanding the nature of change. Whereas mural painting is profuse in early centuries of the first millennium AD, it is miniature painting that is more common later in the second millennium AD. What accounts for this radical change? Surely not just the use of paper however significant this may have been. Changes in court fashions and styles have multiple explanations.

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Chronology itself is multifaceted. The past has its own genealogy onto which we impose our chronology. Fernand Braudel spoke of the three dimensions of time relevant to every historical event. These are, the moment when the event happens, then the longer background of the event, and finally the long duration – the many centuries that mould the landscape of the event. To this has been added the fourth, namely, the point in time when the observer perceives the object in a museum. I am

not suggesting that the chronology of each object should have these three time measurements, but only that the consciousness of these may be reflected in statements on chronology.

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With some rare exceptions, the display of objects in our museums tend to follow the periodization based on religion and dynasty rather than considering other categories. Yet historical periodization itself has now changed radically. A search for new classifications could be a useful cross-disciplinary study between historians and curators.

This is also tied into the labels given to objects. These tend to be minimalistic, giving information on dynasty and, if required, on religious identity. This is perfectly legitimate provided they carry a precise meaning and sufficient information. But such requirements are generally lacking. Where an icon or frieze is taken from the external niche of a façade, this needs to be stated with some explanation of why it was placed where it was initially, preferably with some graphic presentation of its original location. Where a painting was part of an illustrated manuscript, we need to be told what the text was about and why it was commissioned, and by whom, and what incident is being depicted in the painting, in addition to the name of the artist and the date. Even where there are paintings of familiar stories, there is a need to draw attention to special features.

All this means lengthier labels and more work for the curators but without that the purpose of the museum is defeated. It also means that labels have to be constantly updated and corrected. Where the information in a label is controversial, this should at least be mentioned. If all the objects belong to a single dynasty, then various links evoking the period can help provide a context. I am not suggesting that every gallery should be a textbook in itself but explaining why the gallery is arranged the way it is and justifying the arrangement and what it is attempting to say, would be a necessary addition. And for the visitor it provides accessible ways by which the object can be understood both in

isolation and as a collection. Fortunately there are many electronic devices now that can be employed quite easily for this purpose.

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Curators, art historians and other scholars may well be familiar with the history and value of the objects on display. For them, the museum as a place that houses, conserves and exhibits a collection of antiquities and historical artefacts, may be sufficient. But the function of the museum today is far larger in its role as educating citizens. These two aspects are interrelated. If the display does not give access to knowledge it ceases to be of value in educating the public. Thus if a museum claims to project a visual representation of Indian civilization to the public it has to be aware of the more recent discussions on what constitutes civilization. Does the concept still continue to convey what it might have done a century ago?

Educating the public through museums has its own problems. An object exhibited in isolation with just a brief label loses its meaning. What the public sees is partial, limited generally to its aesthetic quality. Walter Benjamin has argued that any object thus exhibited is embedded in a tradition and if one is seeking for the aura of the object it lies in the tradition. Others would argue that the museum liberates the object from its tradition and introduces other facets in its appreciation. But then these facets have to be indicated.

The museum is also the location of what is regarded as heritage. There are problems with defining heritage. It draws from a constellation of past events. What we regard as our heritage today may not be the same as what our ancestors believed was their heritage, no matter how far back we go. It might be salutary to remember that for many centuries people did not know of the emperor Ashoka and his concept of dhamma. His is just one among dozens of names in the Puranic king lists. Only the Buddhists remembered him and they were silenced by medieval

times. He was rediscovered in the 19th century. But today he is viewed as part of our national heritage that continued unbroken for over two millennia. How did this happen and why? We have a diverse and multilayered heritage, and as with the construction of all national heritage we face the problem of selecting the cultures that we regard as national. The cultures of the dominant communities invariably get pride of place even if the attempt is to present a homogenized packet as a national culture, as is preferred by any Ministry of Culture. This does not always reflect the sensitivities of multiple cultures. The definition of heritage has to become more inclusive.

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The western world has defined its culture in a linear trajectory, but it is now facing the pressure of immigrant communities bringing their own heritage. It will be fascinating to see how their national cultures will be defined a couple of centuries from now when immigrants will be integrated into their societies. It will be equally interesting to see how the immigrants in the diaspora will define their heritage from the home country. The constituents of this image will inevitably be largely imaginary and this will increase over time.

A museum carries a message. In colonial days it was the message of presenting a past and incidentally in doing so also glorifying what colonial scholarship had done for the colony. This effort deserves appreciation, although not by ignoring its motivation. But two centuries later the contours have changed – both in terms of what the museum stands for and what are its functions. The appeal is no longer to colonial authority but to a public being made aware of and seeking to articulate its identity. This it seems to me is a major change in the concept of the museum since the last two hundred years. The ingredients of this identity are complex since they are no longer just the narrow definitions of 19th century scholarship. The identity has to reflect a society constituted of many cultures each seeking visibility. It is not only a recognition of our culture but also of

the many other cultures of which we are increasingly becoming a part and to which we are contributing. Such a reflection is not an impossible task. But it needs both sensitivity and an understanding of the interface between cultures.

The future of the museum requires us to think again about the museum as an institution, especially at anniversaries. It is not enough that objects are displayed. We have to think about how this is done and why it is done the way it is. Are there other more effective and pertinent ways? The purpose of the museum has changed as it is bound to with conceptual changes in how we view the past and relate it to our present society, and how we use the past. As with the writing of history the museum also represents mediation between the past and us. And the past is not something out there, it is a part of us. We need to understand the past, not in isolation but in context. I can only repeat the sentiment often repeated, that a museum should make the invisible, visible. And we are all looking forward to this happening in the new Indian Museum.

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