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FOUND AND LOST

- What is the best cure for India's ailing museums?

Jawhar Sircar



What ails our museums? We may have larger problems to attend to, but, on the occasion of World Museum Day, can we not ponder this question for a brief while? After all, museums are as much symbols of a nation's pride as, say, its national flag, anthem or monuments. When the Indian Museum was founded in Calcutta in 1814, it was the first of its kind outside Europe. By the late-19th or early-20th century, another seven museums came up across India. Clearly, we had a head-start over most nations — and we still have some of the oldest and finest collections. So where did we lose the plot?

In spite of heroic attempts being made of late by the premier museums in Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai, they are still viewed as poor 'country cousins' by the world at large. The reasons are not difficult to fathom: visitors are usually greeted by bored or indifferent staff, rather than exciting and interactive electronic screens, slick and attractive flyers, or smart and informative interpretation centres. Most Indian museums do not even offer a basic floor plan for visitors to plan their walk-through. Although some minimal information is available on the internet, for just about 5-10 per cent of India's museums, none had a decent interactive portal, before Google started its web-walk of the National Museum and some others. When one took up a small but essential matter like introducing audio guide headphones some five years ago, it appeared that the middle-level officials we spoke to were from Mars. Mercifully, most of the important museums in India now have floor plans and audio guides; but hundreds of other museums, including almost all the state ones, have simply no clue.

But why are we so blasé, across the board? First of all, let us admit that museums were not an integral part of our culture — one that believes in consigning objects to flames or water, once its life is over. Most of us are genetically repelled at the thought of handling 'impure' items that belonged to dead men. Though Islamic rule introduced the *toshakhana*, it was more of a palace treasury than a public display. Thus, when the British injected the concept of collections for purposes of education, exhibitions and pride, the masses looked upon them with wonder, as *jadu-ghars* or halls of mystery. The educated class, however, saw them as demonstrating the lost grandeur of India to their masters: subtle sub-texts in the games of cultural competition and antiquity contests.

Two centuries of enforced or willing cultural absorption, however, have not yielded better museum management. The subject of museology was certainly not held as highly as in the West nor were rewards, societal or monetary, anywhere near what other professions could offer. Like librarians, archivists or government archaeologists, disciplines like museology and conservation suffered all the more after the Central ministries of education and culture split: while academics could reach dizzy heights, the culture ministry's wards sank into penury and degradation. Moreover, since most top museums are controlled by governments, state or Central, their indolent work ethics and obnoxious rules and mind-sets were hardwired into the ethos of museums.

Against this, the only remedy is privatization, at least partially or in governance. But most unions and ministries would consider it sacrilegious to allow the nation's heritage to be handled by rapacious capitalists. Vibrant associations like the Friends of the Museums have hardly taken root here, as inviting outsiders in the consultative process has historically been thwarted by unfair allegations of personal vested interests. In fact, one of India's most successful museum directors died with a broken heart after departmental action following a public outcry, as some of his jealous colleagues sullied his reputation by morphing photographs of wine and meat-bones lying at the pedestals of statues of divinities. This was just after a well-meaning successful party for well-wishers and corporate honchos held within the hallowed premises, as in most museums of the world.

Shortage of space for display and proper storage is an eternal problem: the Indian Museum can exhibit hardly six per cent of its priceless collection, while the Victoria Memorial manages to show some 10 per cent. The much-discussed annexe building of the latter was held up for a decade by dilatory court cases; anxieties over the manner in which a half-baked foreign offer had been tossed; an unrealistic promise by the ministry that it would fund the project itself and, above all, the persistent reluctance of a top executive. Some eight years ago, the Central Bureau of Investigation investigated certain misdemeanours of some senior heads of the Indian Museum in a programme executed in the Northeast. This was enough to terrify the new regime there to resort to as much procedural complications as they could regarding the renovation and expansion proposal. The ministry's massive one-time funding thus remained untouched and lapsed, because all knew that in government, it was a safer option to take no action and remain unblemished. The governor had to come to the rescue.

Strict governmental rules pose real problems for the doer who can hardly convince *babus* in Finance that a museum is not run like Delhi's Bhavans. Strong hints by chronically negative juniors that vigilance cases and CAG-audit taunts are just round the corner are enough to make the most enthusiastic museum chief sweat before touching the *status quo*. Though digitization of collections has slowly started replacing archaic registers, it will take several years to place them in the public domain. Thus the handing over of a gallery by a retired head in a leading museum usually takes between three and five years. However, such excessive caution has not been able to stop thefts or skilful replacement of antiquities by fakes: they only exasperate.

Exhibitions are another killing field as objects are usually over-valued for safer insurance, pushing up premium and costs in India, where the flexibility of easy indemnity that prevails in the West is yet to be understood. In-house curators hardly exist or are willing to exert themselves, while guest curators are viewed with suspicion or are tired out with intolerable delays and non-cooperation. Galleries remain untouched for several decades while the heads come and go.

This litany can go on for pages, but where does the solution lie? I would submit that the acts that govern the national-level museums need energetic and immediate spring-cleaning to revamp governance and rules. Autonomy from governmental procedures is direly called for and professional trustees can be encouraged to visualize and execute desperate rescue operations. We also require a dedicated cadre of well-paid new-generation museum keepers, who are trained overseas (this has just begun), and must be entrusted with adequate powers over entrenched nay-sayers. Mandatory performance targets that are judged half-yearly can inject speed in reforms, but above all, we require political will and a determination to restore museums in India from the pitiable state in which most operate.

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