

MUSEUMS AND MEMORY

Jawhar Sircar

DNA , 23rd May 2017

On the 18th of April each year, museums in India celebrate International Museum Day and for a week or so, but except for a small group of enthusiasts all of this goes unnoticed by the most of us. This is symptomatic of the disconnect between the average Indian and his heritage. Much of the mental or knowledge gap is thus substituted, rather effectively, with involuntary "correspondence courses" of post-truth half lies that are planted so vigorously on WhatsApp. But why did or do museums not attract us so passionately, as in the West or in the Far East, where China, Japan and Korea splurge on setting up more and more museums and in drawing record footfalls?

Part of the answer lies in our cultural genes. 80% of Indians who were schooled in the traditional Hindu virtue of "purity" still look upon a dead person's belongings as "impure". Once dead and gone, all that are strongly associated with one's existence need to be immersed in the waters or consigned to fire. Except of course, for landed property, cash, gold, precious stones, weapons, common utensils and some family heirlooms like valuable sarees. But as the vast majority had hardly any such possessions, they moved on, with not even a grave to mark the dead, let alone preserve materials of his body. In such a society, it is rather difficult to expect museums of artefacts to be set as assiduously as in Europe, where sentimental visits to the graves of relations are rather regular.

There is an interesting argument that our scant regard for precise history and fondness for myths was because Brahmanism required us to forget inconvenient or unpleasant pasts, so as to retain peace amongst sharp ethnic communities. This erased memories that would otherwise have led communities to continue to hate some specific groups for what they perceived as historical injustices, and was thus an effective mechanism to sustain a multi-ethnic culture. The contemporary Puranas, for instance, forgot to record that Alexander had almost grabbed the Indus region, until foreign historians tore into this amnesia. Our love for legends rather than for factual history has thus been harnessed so effectively to garner votes and seize power. The collateral damage lies in the sporadic bouts of rage against targeted communities for alleged or real historic wrongs and in the stifling of any meaningful debate on such issues. A popular and vocal stand is that the majority here should emulate other religions that hardly brook any dissent and one of them is so closed that even slight deviance is denounced as blasphemy, punishable with death. But the problem that is overlooked in this easy reasoning is that while the Islamic states on both sides of our border hardly have sizeable Hindu minorities, for many reasons including sponsored violence against them, India has 180 million Muslims. 20 percent of its people do not subscribe to one religion and plurality and coexistence are, therefore, not only virtues

that made India's experiment with multi-ethnicity as resounding success: it is also an absolute necessity.

Returning to museums all over the world, we find that they emphasise on the "national narrative" that bind a people to their past, even if some links to "glory" are rather tenuous. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonial powers, however, used them to showcase the trophies they had snatched from others, like the exquisite sculptures taken from Amaravati or the Elgin Marbles from Greece or even the gold of Egypt and Babylon. It is not as if India was always a loser, it gained as well, such as a part of the Aurel Stein Central Asian collections. These include priceless manuscripts, art objects and even frescoes systematically chiselled away from the walls of grottos or caves of Xinjiang. The Chinese described it as outright burglary, but the Stein collection was distributed among the British Museum, the British Library, the Indian Museum and the Srinagar Museum. The British have restored, catalogued and displayed much of the Stein Collection, but the National Museum had literally to be goaded into opening its crates, a century after they were brought to India. Only the inventory has recently been completed by an external scholar, with Herculean effort.

All that museums require is a bit of attention from governments, both State and Central, and the priority that it has never received after the 1960s. After all, a proud nation surely needs to show the world and it's own people enviable collections that start some 5500 long years ago.