

Special: Modi Govt's Plan for the 'World's Largest Museum' Raises Many Red Flags

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New Delhi: The Narendra Modi government has promised citizens that it is building the “[largest museum in the world](#)” in Delhi, in partnership with France. While a cloud of secrecy from the government has so far meant that there is little clarity on what the Yuga Yugeen Bharat National Museum (YYBNM) will look like, an internal proposal reveals that the plan may be to retell – and remake – history in ways that suit the regime’s agenda of portraying Hinduism as eternal, Muslim rulers as villains and ‘Bharat’ as the root of modern ideas like democracy.

The ‘world’s biggest museum’ wouldn’t fit in the current National Museum premises, with space to display about 7,000-8,000 artefacts at a time. So as part of the ambitious – and controversial – Central Vista Project spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, the national museum, or the YYBNM, will find a new home.

When *The Wire* asked the director of the National Museum and the French company tasked with working on the project about the plans and the future of both the new museum and the existing National Museum, they said all queries should be directed to the Ministry of Culture, indicating a centralisation of decision making on the matter. *The Wire* has reached out to the minister, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, as well as senior bureaucrats in the ministry, and is yet to receive a response.

Critics have feared that the BJP’s attempts at rewriting history – seen in [school textbooks](#) and the [speeches of its leaders](#) – will reflect themselves in this museum too. Over two months of conversations, reporting and research by *The Wire* reveal a story of almost no consultation, an attempt to reframe India’s past in ways that chime with the BJP’s Hindutva template and efforts to reduce the vast plural fabric of India’s cultural heritage to one shade.

There is much that has generated concern and discomfort with whatever has been known about the exercise in recent years. Not least, the intended premises themselves.

The building

‘Adaptive reuse’, in architectural terms, refers to the repurposing of an old building – without minimising or obscuring its historical significance – to give it a new life. The idea is that just because the original aim of the building no longer holds space in today’s world, the building itself doesn’t need to be demolished; instead, it can be changed in certain ways to make it useful again. And that’s what the Modi government has in mind for the North and South Block buildings on Raisina Hill in central Delhi, which currently house the Union ministries of finance, home,

defence and external affairs. With these ministries and other offices set to move to the Common Central Secretariat being built, the North and South Blocks are going to house the YYBNM.

The new museum, spanning about 1,55,000 square metres (as opposed to the 35,000-square metre current building), has generated excitement in the media, as has the partnership with France. While the Ministry of Culture has released statements celebrating the YYBNM project, [saying](#) it is “envisioned as a celebration of India’s unbroken civilizational history”, not much is known about what’s really going on with this change. No budget or plan has been made public, nor is there clarity on how artefacts will be transported and stored. The government’s official website on the Central Vista project has a [page on the new National Museum](#), but that too is scant on details, instead noting: “Detailed design under development.” The [website](#) of the National Museum says nothing about any likely upcoming changes, and the museum’s [social media handles](#) have been busy sharing details of the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj.

In May 2023, Modi unveiled a “[virtual walkthrough](#)” of the new museum at the International Museum Expo. The video says the YYBNM will have 950 rooms, highlighting “*Bharatiya gyan parampara* (Indian knowledge traditions)”, “*aitisahik dharohar* (historical heritage)”, “*madhya-yugeen Bharat* (medieval India)”, “*swatantrata andolan* (freedom struggle)” and “*swatantra Bharat* (independent India)”. The walkthrough does not detail what objects and artefacts will be used to support the narrative being provided; it also seems to suggest that models and videos will play an important role in the museum.

While [some reports](#), quoting sources who are part of the process, have revealed that the new museum will have rooms arranging artefacts both chronologically and thematically, what this entails has been left up to the imagination. What parts of the process the French museum consultancy will be handling, and what is being controlled directly by the Ministry of Culture, is also unclear, as is what artefacts will be on display. While the current National Museum has more than two lakh artefacts in possession, reports have quoted officials, including [National Museum director B.R. Mani](#), as saying that the new museum, or the YYBM, will also bring in artefacts from government museums in other parts of the country.

Former Union culture secretary Jawhar Sircar, who later went on to become a member of the Rajya Sabha from the Trinamool Congress before resigning in September 2024 over the West Bengal government’s handling of a rape and murder case, has been expressing concern over the larger Central Vista project and specifically the National Museum ever since the plans were announced. He also used his position as MP to ask questions of the culture minister about the plans, but does not believe he received honest or straightforward answers.

Responding to the virtual walkthrough and the other scant information available about the new museum, Sircar said, “It’s very difficult to understand what they’re talking about. Indian history began from Mehargarh, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, we have no evidence of anything before that. After that we have the so-called Aryan phase etc., the phasing has already been determined. Whatever you do beyond that is not history; it’s mythology. History requires solid proof. And the

proof lies in the artefacts we can see, the evidence of engineering we can see.”

Perhaps some of the confusion around the YYBNM can be seen in the fact that the government has been unclear about how it even plans to spell the name of this museum. In different government communications, the name of the museum – said to [translate to](#) ‘timeless and eternal India museum’ – has been switched between Yug/Yuge/Yuga/Yugey-Yugeen/Yugin/Yugeena. *The Wire* has asked the Ministry of Culture what the name of the museum is, or how it is written in the Devanagari script. This article will be updated once a response is received.

The proposal

An internal document accessed by *The Wire*, titled ‘Proposed Galleries for New National Museum’, details plans for 12 wings to be housed in the museum. They start from the ‘pre-historic age’ and go up to independence from colonial rule. The document refers again and again to ‘Bharat’ – only to be expected, perhaps, given the name of the museum, and the Modi government’s penchant for [using the country’s Hindi name](#).

What has created more concern, though, are the classifications and chronology that have been set out. While this may not be the final document that is used to define the way artefacts are presented and curated in the YYBNM, *The Wire* has learnt that the proposed document was the most recent one circulated to the ‘National Museum Core Team for Content’, which comprises six people currently associated with the National Museum, including its director, and five other academics and researchers.

The documents lays out plans for the following wings (reproduced verbatim, without edits):

Made with Flourish

The document names both the members of the committee and experts who are looking after each wing, but it is unclear what level of consultation or collaboration has taken place between officers in the Ministry of Culture and those named. The listed committee members are: Dr B.R. Mani (director general, National Museum); Ashish Goyal (additional director general, National Museum); Professor Manvi Seth (head, Department of Museology, National Museum Institute); Professor Satish C. Pandey (head, Department of Conservation, National Museum Institute); Vintee Sain (director, Exhibition Cell, National Museum); Professor Rajiv Lochan (Department of History, Panjab University); Professor Naman Ahuja (School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University); Dr Ashutosh Bhatnagar (director, Center for Jammu and Kashmir Studies); Dr Satyavrata Tripathi (retired curator, National Museum); Dr Abira Bhattacharya (assistant curator, anthropology department, National Museum); and Dr Rajeev Dwivedi (Archaeological Survey of India).

One of the academics on the list, when contacted by *The Wire*, said it would be best to speak to the Secretary in the Union Ministry of Culture, as looking after the museum was his responsibility. The director of the National Museum too had a similar response. Another academic, not listed as a member of the committee but as a wing-specific expert, said they had no idea about the plans and

had not been approached about the new museum.

The Wire reached out to culture minister Shekhawat, the Secretary, Union Ministry of Culture, Arunish Chawla and Joint Secretary, Sanjay Kaul, who holds the charge of looking after museums, and asked who was making decisions about the curation of the museum and the way galleries would be defined, and whether a final decision on this has been reached. This article will be updated if a response is received.

Three significant concerns

Historians *The Wire* spoke to highlighted three broad areas of concern in the way galleries were classified in the proposal: historical inaccuracies in terms of timelines and frameworks of understanding; the use of politically motivated words for certain historical events (such as the use of 'invasion' for certain migrations); and vague phrases that have no real historical or cultural meaning being used to describe certain sub-topics (including 'literary exuberance' and 'popular memories of the past').

Professor Supriya Varma, who taught history at Jawaharlal Nehru University and specialises in archaeology, told *The Wire* that a "very outdated framework of archaeology and history" is visible in the document. The historical framework followed by the document was one of unilinear development – a trajectory of societies from hunter-gatherers to pastoralists to urban settlements as so on. "This is a 19th-century social evolutionary concept that has long been abandoned," she said, "and it's well understood that all these societies and subsistence strategies co-exist. In fact even now we have agriculturists, pastoralists, hunting-gathering societies, they all overlap and co-exist. So to think that there is this teleological development is very dated, 19th-century conceptualisation." A similar outdated conception is in the description of the Gupta era as a 'Golden Age', she said.

The problem doesn't stop with just the framework. Even the chronology set out in the document and the classifications used suggest the existence of historical misconception, Varma said. "For instance, they seem to have equated the Vedic with the Harappan. The Harappan chronology is well understood to be from 3200 to 1500 BCE. Whereas the early Vedic is supposed to be from 1500 to 1000 BCE, the later Vedic is 1000 to 600 BCE. It definitely does not start in the 6th millennium BCE, as they have put down for the Wing 3."

In Wing 8, where the document refers to 'international relations of Cholas with China, Sri Lanka and East Asia, Varma said these nation-states were nowhere near existence in this period. "These are all modern nations which came in the 20th century, yet they're being referred to in the period covering 6th century CE to 12th century CE," she said.

Wing 11 is supposed to be on the 'transition from medieval to modern' between 1857 and 1947 CE, but "this is not the period in which the transition took place", Varma said. "Conventionally, in the periodisation we follow in history, early modern is the 16th to 18th century, modern is 19th century, and contemporary is the 20th century."

The last wing, talking of 'democratic revival', assumes that there was previously democracy in the region. "At best, there is reference to 16 mahajanapadas where there were sanghas, but these were oligarchic. Definitely no democracy existed at that time. It was largely a monarchical system that we had, and perhaps a few oligarchic systems where some older men were in charge, in some of the sanghas in the 6th century BCE."

There is also a "Hindutva framework" and ideology that can be read in the proposal, particularly visible in the labelling of certain migration as 'invasion'. This has been reflected in [Modi's speeches in the past](#), in which he has declared that India under the Sultanate and Mughal rule did not have freedom and thus began "1,000 years of slavery". The proposal talks about "invasions" starting from the Sultanate era, but does not refer to wars, fighting and takeovers that took place before that between different kings in the subcontinent as invasions.

Wing 9 talking about invaders from Central Asia in the 12th century is "highly problematic", Varma said, adding that "there have been movements of people into South Asia from very early on. For example, homo sapiens sapiens migrated from Africa into South Asia nearly 60,000-70,000 years ago. Hunter-gatherers from Iran came around 10,000 BCE, and Steppe pastoralists from Central Asia between 2000 and 1500 BCE. The movement of Scythians, Kushans and Huns from Central Asia into South Asia occurred between the 2nd century BCE and 6th century CE. Would they also count as invaders? All in all, it's predominantly a Hindutva framework that they are working with."

Speaking on how the YYBNM might look, Sircar said, "It's going to be a narrative thrust on the people. A narrative without factual substance." A central problem in the whole plan, he continued, is that there is no public discussion. "The history of India is not the captive property of the current culture ministry or government. You need public consultation, instead of just making and remaking committees as if out of Lego. First you tell us what the central idea is, then you let the public say who is a specialist in it."

The history of India, if studied as a narrative told through existing artefacts and evidence, is scattered across museums in India and some in Pakistan, Sircar said. "But we take it as an integrated heritage. What is it that they're wanting from this new museum?" There's no clarity available on that.

The French connection

On December 19 last year, the Union culture ministry [announced a partnership](#) with France Museums Développement (FMD) "to develop the Yuga Yugeen Bharat National Museum as a world-class cultural institution". FMD is a museum consultancy and a subsidiary of Agence France Museums, which was created in 2007 when France partnered with the United Arab Emirates to set up the Louvre, Abu Dhabi.

According to the Ministry of Culture, FMD's expertise in adaptive reuse is what it is bringing to the table in this partnership: "The Yuga Yugeen Bharat National Museum will be developed through Adaptive Reuse, in collaboration with France, renowned for its expertise in such projects,

exemplified by the Louvre, Grand Palais, and Hôtel de la Marine. This approach mirrors France's "Grands Projets" initiative, which saw the transformation of government buildings into iconic cultural spaces, most notably the Louvre. This historical precedent, where a government ministry vacated a landmark building to create a world-class museum, provides a valuable framework for the development of the Yuga Yugeen Bharat National Museum."

While the formal announcement of this partnership came just two months ago, it has been in the works since 2020, when the two countries first signed a letter of intent on the matter. In April 2023, another [letter of intent](#) was signed between Indian ambassador to France Jawed Ashraf and French ambassador to India Emmanuel Lenain. The letter talked about the two countries' plans to cooperate on the National Museum project and "intensify their cooperation in museology". The letter contains only three specific details about the National Museum project: that it will be situated in the North and South block buildings; that it will "display the rich history and heritage of India through millennia"; and that the collection will come from both what already exists in the National Museum as well as collections of "pan-India museums". *The Wire* contacted Ambassador Ashraf, who served in France till December 31, 2024, to ask about the role that was envisioned for FMD. This article will be updated when a response is received.

None of the documents publicly available clearly mark what exactly FMD's role will be – whether it will be limited to repurposing the North and South Block spaces to convert them to a museum, or whether curatorial decisions and choices will also be made in collaboration. *The Wire* wrote to FMD with queries on its role, the timeline of the project and the costs involved, and received a response from the agency's press team stating, "At this time, we are unable to provide further information regarding your inquiry. France Muséums do not wish to communicate on this project for now."

"However, you can contact the Ministry of Culture in India, which will be able to answer your questions about the project," the response continued.

Some have pointed out the irony in this collaboration.

Ever since it was first announced, the Modi regime has insisted that the Central Vista redevelopment, including moving to a new parliament, is part of a "decolonisation" process. While inaugurating 'Kartavya Path' in September 2022, for instance – which is the revamped version of Rajpath – [the prime minister said](#), "Today we are filling new colours to the portrait of tomorrow leaving behind the past. This new aura which is visible everywhere is the aura of confidence of New India. Kingsway or Rajpath, the symbol of slavery, has become a matter of history from today, has been erased forever. Today a new history has been created in the form of Kartavya Path. I congratulate all the countrymen for the freedom from yet another identity of slavery in this 'Amrit Kaal' of independence."

To then hand over partial control for developing the country's largest museum to France – another former colonial power – has raised eyebrows. "You call yourself anti-colonial, and then you go to

the biggest colonial nation after England, France, and ask them for anti-colonial ideas? Meanwhile the French consulting company is busy making money [on the project],” Sircar said.

Concerns over the existing National Museum

The future of the current National Museum – including the building that houses it – has been another cause for concern for museum experts, historians and those engaged with heritage conservation. With plans of the National Museum being closed down and moved, and the [building reduced to rubble](#), creating uproar from several quarters, including the political opposition and the [Indian History Congress](#), it was reported in April last year that the Union government [scrapped plans](#) to move artefacts to a ‘temporary location’ for storage while the YYBNM is prepared.

Since the strong backlash, officials have [told reporters](#) that the original building “may not” be torn down after all. The same vague response was also provided in parliament in December 2023, when Lok Sabha MP Manish Tewari asked then Union culture minister G. Kishan Reddy why the museum was being torn down and moved to the North and South Block buildings. “No decision has been taken regarding demolition of the National Museum, at present,” [Reddy said](#). This answer was [repeated in July 2024](#), when then Rajya Sabha MP Sircar asked the same question. “A decision on the existing building of the National Museum is yet to be taken,” Reddy said this time.

The Wire wrote to Dr B.R. Mani, director of the National Museum, asking whether a decision has been made regarding the museum’s future, and whether staff and leadership from the National Museum are likely to be transferred to the YYBNM. “I am directed to inform you that you may contact Ministry of Culture for the queries,” the director’s office replied.

Sircar believes that the government has realised that neither of its plans – first to move the artefacts in the National Museum to a ‘temporary’ location and then, when that proved untenable, to move them all directly to the YYBNM – are realistic, and so it will in fact allow the existing National Museum to continue as it stands while it pushes its own narrative through the new museum.

The plan to find a temporary storage space was nothing short of “stupid”, Sircar told *The Wire*. “You can’t just shift a museum. Artefacts aren’t like *aloo* or *bhindi*, that you pick it up from here and put it down there, each object requires a specific type of climatic conditions – moisture, light, heat, temperature control. Once they actually started looking for spaces, they realised that it won’t be possible – no storage space can provide the required conditions. So after wasting three years, they came back to the idea that artefacts should be moved directly to the North and South Blocks,” he said.

But even that plan, he believes, is unlikely to be carried out. “Even that is stupid – North and South Blocks are built for bureaucratic offices. It’s meant for a different purpose,” Sircar said. This isn’t the first time a museum has needed to expand in today’s world – and if the government truly wanted to expand the National Museum, he thinks it could have found better ways to do so. “You look at the new materials you [the museum] have, the acquisitions you’ve made, and then you

build around that. Museums across the world have got new spaces made, like the domes in the British Museum, for instance. These have been made keeping weather conditions and other requirements in mind. Here they just want to take things like the [Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-Daro](#) and stick it in what used to be a deputy secretary's office? So that idea has also failed.”

In this situation, the YYBNM has become an “escape route”, a way for the government to claim that it is still going ahead with its plans even if the existing National Museum is not touched. “The Yugey-Yugeen Museum – whatever that means – is then a sign of the ‘mahapurush’ retreating,” Sircar said.

The Wire has asked the minister and the Ministry of Culture whether a decision has been taken yet on the building, and what the plans for the existing National Museum look like. This article will be updated once a response is received.