

Stretch thy hands museum!

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Abstract

The history of museums in India is almost two hundred years old with the earliest institution of its kind, the Indian Museum established in 1814 at Calcutta. Over the years, the country has a wide variety of museums administered by the agencies of both the public and private sectors. The museums controlled financially by the central and the others as a matter of fact thrive functionally in isolation. The post-colonization aspirations, globalization, and new marketing strategy demand from them both introspection and prospectability.

During the mid-90s of the yester century, the cultural administrators realized that the larger museums of national status should play a vital role not only to spruce up but also to adopt smaller ones in the neighboring region for developing them according to the aspiration of the age. Acting as the leader museums in a particular zone, some institutions were advised to come forward to rescue the underdeveloped museums infusing a new vigour and life and at the same time safeguarding their individual identity.

The four museums of national status situated in the north, south, east and western parts of the country were made responsible for the infrastructural development of the critical geo-political situation; so it was initially a serious challenge for the nodal agency to fulfill its mission. However, covering seven states of the region with a variety of tribal populations, religious faiths and socio-symbolic significance, the project provided a new dimension in the museum movement in India.

Amanda Wingful, an interesting character in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* says:

The future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into an everlasting regret if you don't plan for it.

The destiny of an institution like an individual depends mostly upon its clarity of mission, fulfillment of its policy objectives, and success in systems of planning, control and review.

Having conceptualized the mission and after successfully implementing the plans, efficient museum managers look out for innovative programmes. It is easier for those museums with divergent experience and considerable resources to embark upon some new projects that promote the activities of similar institutions.

We shall present here a case of recent experimentations in the field of museum modernization in India in order to elaborate how the one can extend its collaborative efforts and co-operative role to the others in chronicling the human history.

In India, the earliest museum was established in the year 1814. It ultimately assumed a character of a multi-disciplinary and multi-purpose museum. The institution initially known as the Asiatic Museum changed its name to the Imperial Museum and later to the Indian Museum, located in Kolkata. Since its inception, the Museum, during its fruitful existence of 192 years, underwent multi-linear phases of development: periods of germination, accumulation, consolidation and expansion.

The growth and development of the museums in India, however, neither reflected the subcontinent's geographical vastness nor the lengthy time-span that has elapsed since the establishment of its first museum. The regular museums now in existence cannot surpass in total 700 odd numbers. The statistical profile of cultural institutions in 1999, published by the Department of

Culture, Government of India, records the number of museums by ownership. Accordingly, ownership by the Central Government is 131, the State Governments 238, Private Organizations 61, the Universities 86, the Municipalities 7, and Trusts and Societies is 78. A large number of museums, therefore, are the responsibility of the various departments of the Central and State Governments. These include Environment, Forest, Coal, Railways, Textiles, Defence, Social Welfare and Science & Technology. Nevertheless, judging from the exhibits these museums have in their hold, one will notice a wide variation of themes. Besides art, science, history, technology, natural history, marine, personalia, transport, sports, crafts, one would be astonished to encounter even a specialized museum of toilets.

Indian museums fall under both public and private sectors, but lacking proper coordination, their development does not show uniformity. Considering that India is a nation with a developed culture and a developing economy, the cultural administrators at the turn of the last century made a serious effort to market its museums. In the 1990's, promotional activities such as *Inter-State Exhibitions*, the gearing up of the *Festival of India extravaganza*, as well as the modernization of museum galleries were all assiduously accelerated. The larger museums at the national level with greater resources were directed to play a more vital and leading role. This was not only with regard to their own exhibits; they also were encouraged to adopt smaller museums in neighbouring regions and to assist them to develop their infrastructural facilities in accordance with the aspirations of their clientele. Initially 10% to 15% of the budgetary provisions of these museums were earmarked for that purpose.

The four museums of national importance situated in the north, south, west and east

zones were made responsible for the rescue of underdeveloped museums by infusing new vigour and energy without hampering their individual identity. In the not so easily accessible north-east region of India where a critical geo-political situation prevailed, it was initially a serious challenge for the nodal agency to fulfill its mission. The seven states in this region extend as a crescent on the foothills of the Himalayas and are characterized by diverse tribal populations, religious faiths, deep-rooted taboos and other socio-symbolic traits. Covering them, the project provided a new dimension to the acceleration of the modern museum movement in India.

The seven states of the north-east are fondly called the 'seven sisters' because of their many links and common bonds. The region has a variegated physical feature, snow-clad mountains, undulating hills, dense lush green forests, mighty rivers, sparkling streams, cascading waterfalls, awe-inspiring gorges inlaid with fertile valleys and bouncing dales resulting in a landscape unique in scenic beauty. The regions are wedged between Nepal and China to the north; Bangladesh to the west and Myanmar to the east. The seven sisters comprise Arunachal Pradesh in the extreme north-easterly direction geographically succeeded by the contiguous states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalays, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram, one after another. Later Sikkim joined the seven, thus finally making a cluster of eight.

The nodal agency's (the Indian Museum) support of the development of the infrastructural facilities of the museums in these eight states began in 1999 with the supply of Info Tech accessories for documentation; the provision of equipments for the conservation laboratories; and the arrangement of reciprocal Inter-state exchange of museum exhibitions. It also involved the hosting of cultural extravaganza in the cosmopolitan city of Kolkata, its home city.

At the first instance, the exhibitions and cultural programme were aimed at promoting awareness among the people at large about the rich cultural heritage of India's different regions in order to lift barriers linked to their geographical distance. The motto is again the furtherance of emotional integration of the people of different states by them coming closer with each other with a sense of participation and oneness in respecting, caring, preserving and highlighting the country's sustained and shared cultural achievements. Each region has made a notable contribution in preserving and augmenting the artistic and aesthetic enormity of the sup-continent. It is, therefore, expedient that the people of any one zone should feel proud to be co-sharers of such invaluable art treasures.

The Inter-state exhibitions have also increased the scope for the development of human resources in the institutions, in particular those working in the smaller museums. They have encouraged the curatorial and technical staff of these museums to become more responsible, confident, and independent in their handling of the art treasures of the country. Some of them experienced the technique of conservation method, art of display, publicity and public relations. Through such hands-on-learning process, they were motivated to be innovative and experimental, which brought out the best of them. The states, which were otherwise isolated due to geo-political barriers and the inadvertent planting of the germs of separatism by politico-economical lapses, were inspired through these exhibitions to discover and express the cultural and natural heritage of the country, helping to bridge the hiatus and to remove mutual misunderstandings, if any. The themes of the exhibitions were in that light planned keeping in mind an integrated view of Indian ethos and culture that would reflect the age-old aspirations of the nation as a whole.

The second phase of supportive activities concerns the modernization of museums in the north east state. Series of on-the-spot meetings were convened in these states with the concerned ministers and the directors of museums to ascertain the display requisites, problems of conservation, and other museographical possibilities. The action plan was then prepared for each of the museums to join the project in consultation with the subject experts, officials and the architect designers.

The development programme in the region began with Assam, the sentinel of north-east India, and practically the gateway to the 'seven sisters' states. The geographical area of the state extended about 78,438 km. In Guwahati a five-storied new building completed in 1998 at the cultural complex of Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra was gifted to the state by the central Government for establishing a new museum to preserve and promote the ethnographic heritage of Assam. As the nodal agency of the central Government, the Indian Museum between 2000-2006 gradually set up galleries on ritualistic opera masks used in satriay dance; on traditional musical instruments; textiles and costumes; clay art and hand made pottery; basketry and wood carvings; as well as on the traditional metal ware of Assam, all covering a floor area of 24,178 square feet on the four floors of the Purvajyoti Museum. Simultaneously a prestigious publication on the Museum's Textile collection was brought out with the financial assistance of the nodal museum. In Shibsagar, the old capital of the Ahom kingdom, development of the Government museum and library was progressed. This involved the rearrangement of its exhibits and the setting up an archaeological park in the adjacent courtyard. During the last couple of years, the old building of the Assam State Museum was refurbished with galleries on archaeological objects like coins, inscriptions, manuscripts,

as well as the terracotta and bronze sculptures.

On the other bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam at one center of the neo Vaishnavite culture, the Majuli collection of ritualistic articles found their appropriate place at a museum corner of the Aunati satra.

In Nagaland, one would come across different tribal sub-groups within a broad community of the Nagas who live in an area of 16,579 km spreading over the hills and plains. The Nagaland State Museum at Kohima, since its inception in 1970 attempted to present a panoramic view of the rich socio-cultural life of fourteen recognized major tribes and the equal number of sub-tribes, which needed a thorough remodeling after two decades. With the physical and financial support of the nodal agency, three floors of the Museum were reorganized to provide glimpses of ethnographic materials of wooden and metal effigies, dress and ornaments, arms and weapons, as also the paintings executed by the modern artists of Nagaland.

After accomplishing the task in the capital of the State, the nodal agency launched its goodwill mission in the far-flung districts of Phek, Tuensang, Mokokchung and Mon, developing smaller museums. At Mokokchung, a gallery of portraits of the indigenous leaders painted by the local artists was added to the museum. Besides, at the government, the Tourist Museum in Topsham archaeological and ethnological exhibits were displayed for attracting the tourists coming to Nagaland.

At Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, the State Museum received during 2001-2002, three modernized galleries displaying the specimens of archaeology, ethnology and zoology. An assorted collection of documentary heritage and indigenous art objects formed another two small galleries in the Museum. Later at Lunglei and Khawbung other museums of ethnographic interest were

developed. In recent time at Khawbung, an interesting poets' square was designed with the portraits of nineteen celebrated Litterateurs of local origin carved on stone slabs of the rock.

In Meghalaya, literally meaning the 'about of the clouds', a state contiguous to Assam and predominantly inhabited by the Khasi, the Jaintiya and the Garo tribal communities spreading over a hilly region of 22,429 square km, the State Museum at Shillong, named after Captain Williamson Sangma became the beneficiary of the supporting project. The infrastructural facilities included the modernization of galleries displaying the craft of basketry, traditional fishing technology, sericulture and various aspects of socio-economic life of the people. Another tourist spot in the state, Maolai, was also included in the developing map with an archaeological park and museum.

An archaeological park was also set up at Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, 45 kilometer off the Tibet-China border. Itanagar, the capital, has its State Museum better known as Jawaharlal Nehru Museum. It was recently renovated with 27 dioramic presentations of the Arunachal tribes.

Manipur with its capital at Imphal has a number of museums, the foremost of which is the State Museum located in the heart of the city. The early years of the 21st century in this Museum witnessed the emergence of a natural history gallery covering a space of 3000 square feet and an ethnography gallery of similar size spreading over two floors in the museum building. A visually pleasing presentation of varied wildlife, natural vegetation, avian specimens, medicinal plants and mineral wealth of Manipur has been highlighted in one while the other has a projection of household utensils, weaponry, gold and silver ornaments and masks, ritualistic articles connected with ancestor worship, as well as colourful textiles.

The nodal museum has restored a wooden

royal boat called *biyang hiren* measuring 6' 6" by 4' used by the Manipur kings during traditional boat races. The custom was introduced as early as the 7th century A.D. The kings of Manipur performed ceremonial rides of this boat twice a year in the months of September (*langban*) and November (*hiyangei*) for the prosperity of their kingdom. Conservators and archaeological engineers restored one such boat that was built from a single tree in 1930. A special display corner was constructed to house the royal boat that holds much historic significance.

Sikkim, nesting under the protective shadow of the mighty mount of the Khangchendznga lies in the heart of the towering eastern Himalayas, which denotes a 'new home' for the migrant Lepchas and Bhutias. The capital of the State, Gangtok had an unassuming building accommodating all and sundry decorative arts and crafts besides ethnographic specimens. Apart from equipping the State Museum with info-technological tools and conservation aids, a gallery illustrating the Buddhist ceremonial rites and customs was developed.

Finally, while translating the plans into positive domain of action, in certain museums the nodal agency had to face some ticklish issues. In Meghalays, the display zone to project the "origin of man" had to be renamed as "man through the ages" since the indigenous theory of the advent of humankind does not subscribe to the global conception of the subject. Again, in Nagaland the developers were not allowed to display the sculpture of an entwined snake couple because the serpents to the people of this land represent an ominous symbol.

In many ways, the north-east is generally unlike the rest of India. With the exception of Assam and Sikkim and partly Manipur (where the religious force of Hinduism and Buddhism is a binding factor), the other states' majority tribal population assumed Christianity as their

inner core of faith; the hill tribal people still follow their old customs and traditions and possess a sustained unique culture.

Whatever may be the socio-political motivation, the representative museum of the

Union Government extended its sincere co-operation through these projects in the full spirit of friendship and fraternity, duly reciprocated by all parties.

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About the author

An Indologist of wide acclaim and an author specializing in Indian art, iconography, epigraphic studies and museology, Dr. Shyamalkanti Chakravarti had his debut in the museum world in 1966 as Curator in the Archaeology Department of the Indian Museum, Kolkata. He then speeded through the posts of Education Officer and Deputy Director and finally shot up to the exalted position of the Director-Secretary, Indian Museum (1997-2004). Dr. Chakravarti had assumed the office of the Honorary Executive Secretary of the Gurusaday Museum of Folk Art (1995-2004) and held additional charge of the Director, National Library of India (2001-2003). He was also awarded the Senior Visiting Fellowship in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC by the Smithsonian Institute, USA (2004); and the Fellowship in Museology of the Rabindra Bharati University (2005-06). He also acted as the Advisor in the Institute of Tibetan studies at the Barcelona University.

The precinct of his scholastic attainments covered, among other things, a seemly UNESCO training in museum method in Japan (1983). He is the received a special honour from the Institute Cultural Cabanas, Mexico for his outstanding contribution in the field of art and museum-education (1986). He also received Museum Management training organized by the Government of India from the Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad (1994). After obtaining his Ph. D in Arts from Jadavpur University, he was also awarded D Sc (honoris causa) for his contribution to art and culture and social service. He received the Syed Muztaba Ali literary award for the best belletrist of the year (1978), and Rashtriya Vikas Jyoti award for his services to art, culture and museum science (1999).

Dr. Chakravarti has widely traveled in Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, and Hong Kong in pursuit of Buddhist studies and the countries of Europe and America, such as Belgium, Holland, U.K., Norway, Spain, France, Mexico and the USA for specialization in classical art and culture as well as in museography.

Dr. Chakravarti has authored many valuable titles which include *Patralekha: romance of letter writing in Indian art and literature*; *Descriptive catalogue of Prakrit and Sanskrit inscriptions in the Indian Museum*; *Wood and metal effigies of Nagaland*; *Wood carvings in the Gurusaday Museum*; *Kalighat paintings in the Gurusaday*; *Museum, Bengal terracotta in the Indian Museum*; *The Bamiyan Buddhas*. He has the credit of editing the updated and annotated volume of the history of the *Indian Museum (1814-2004)*; *Vinayatoshini; a compilation of essays on Indology, art and alternative medicine*; *Select work of Benoytosh Bhanacharya*; *Raja Rajendralala Mitra-a centenary obit: Mahtma Gandhi in mural*.

Dr. Chakravarti has developed many prestigious galleries in the Indian Museum; planned and organized international exhibitions in Germany, Mongolia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, China and Taiwan, as well as inter-state exhibitions in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. He has the credit of developing the infrastructural facilities of the museums and libraries on behalf of the Union Government of India in the north-eastern states. He introduced many novel features in the Indian Museum and National Library such as museum on wheels, gallery classes to correlate museum education with school and college curricula; mobile conservation laboratory and the exhibit of the month. He has also created museum corners in the Metro subway stations, *akshara vriksha* (alphabet tree) at the City Park and *akshara-patanga*(alphabet kite) in the garden of the National Library besides advising for other architectural wonders in the city of Kolkata.