

History at Museum

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Abstract: The present world as known to its extant humanity is a group of a few continents – distanced and dispersed, with some geographic and climatic similarity or difference with races who have distinct physical features and at different stages of material progress and varied levels of human development index – in terms of health, education, economy and life expectancy and now quality of environment, etc. However, except for the new countries – resulted, invaded and occupied by the old world residents through explorations, expeditions and trade and subsequent schemes of deceit, exploitation, subjugation and colonization; the majority of world shows signs of baggage of past through its art, architecture, science, literature and performances and arises curiosity about its past – leading to questions, who the people then were, how they lived, dressed, ate, celebrated, united, fought, mourned, travelled and communicated. To address, record, retain and transmit the virtues and disasters of the past – human made and nature induced, societies established a slew of institutions such as libraries, archives, academies, institutes, societies, and museums. And of course educational institutions played a parallel role in study, research, publication, transmission, interpretation and promotion of the past ... an academic subject called – History, presumed boring at school, for the difficulty to relate a bygone topic to the present and make it appeal relevant to the tender and inexperienced minds of playful age.

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RELEVANCE OF HISTORY

As one advances in age and faces challenges and seeks answers predicaments, calamities, conflicts, pandemics, and any other crisis – climatic, economic, military or social, the first things props in mind is an enquiry has a similar thing happened in past? If yes, how it was solved or overcame. This is the first lesson or experience about the utility of history that begins to change the perceptions about the subject. Nostalgia and fond memories – personal or not would invoke a sense of euphoria. This is leading to a host of ventures in terms of heritage tourism, period dramas in films, literature, revival of lost cuisine, crafts, arts, music, practices etc. Past is not waste or lost but something to be referred to, reflected, appreciated and enjoyed. This is where phrases – though mostly heard incomplete would instantly be remembered and invoke curiosity on why so, such as the one by the philosopher and political theorist Karl Marx – ‘History repeats itself first as tragedy and second as farce’, simple but loaded with time tested memory and experience of humanity. This article seeks to share how History is shared by a time tested institution of the world – museum.

MUSEUM

Though Museum has been a revised term of the medieval Europe to house antiquity of the nobility, the gradual and systematic advancement it made through the changing times made it a relevant, credible and admired place of leisure. From its established and quintessential feature of being a place of display of objects, artifacts and antiquities, it has become a forum for expression and exchange of ideas, values and beliefs that pervade and shape many expressions and practices of today. Museums as old, time tested and continuing entities of neighborhood allow and provide for social interaction, assembly, contemplation and reflection. Along with the progress of democracies and public orientation, they began to encourage more of public participation and community involvement. The wide gamut of activities now being tried or learnt through their innovations and initiatives; encompass, programmes, both in house and out door. Museums seeks to address the audience known and familiar to them and also the alienated and ignorant, able bodied and the disabled, the physical and onsite visitor through the virtual viewer. The advent of technology and the possibilities it allows led museums to transcend the boundaries of time, distance and geography and mitigate the constraints of access and affordability. Equipped and energized with these new tools museums are pushing their limits of functions and reach.

HISTORY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Post colonialism, as societies and geographic territories freed themselves from the historic fallacies, servitude, atrocities and appropriations countries with new identities, associations began to be formed and looked at every possible source and evidence of past as an anchor and proof to establish a norm and assert a claim on what they felt, knew, understood and deserve it to be theirs. As a result, people, events, places, vestiges, remains, ruins, forts, palaces, battle grounds, structures, edifices, places of worship, natural elements, flora and fauna ... almost everything need to be contested and proven to prevent from the new world order and mechanism of practices and its hidden traps and potential adverse consequences.

As a result, a country like India has to prove its traditional knowledge practices related to neem and turmeric to prevent it from paying to an MNC or a foreign country, from its usage. The same applies to the ongoing ventures with regard to reintroduction of cheetah to enable the citizen to witness and believe what wild animal existed on this land barely a few decades ago and was lost due to ignorance and indifference and the environmental catastrophe that entails due to its absence.

So, in essence, the general and layperson perspective and understanding of history moved far away from the lost virtues, glory and opportunities of a prosperous and peaceful land to that of a more relevant, still useful and purposeful topic that provides inspiration, insight and direction to deal with issues. The transition of India through various stages of its post liberation to align with the rest of the world and realize its potential also led to a fillip for the resurgence of History, as manifested through its layered initiatives and work by state sponsored and eminent establishments such as Indian Council of Historical Research etc. However, for a layperson its window is through media, films, books, theatre and of course visual art.

The commemorative days of varied subjects and persons signify, remind and rekindle in history. The reality is in a country so vast and ancient with continuing inhabitation by people for thousands of years have experts on almost every conceivable topic. With every passing day one tends to know and surprised by the repertoire of expertise about facts, myth, folklore and material. Understanding history in bits and pieces is akin to solving a crossword or jigsaw puzzle. With small bits of information that adds to one's awareness the activity becomes more fulfilling as it also leads to expand the horizons and

learn what was cherished and valued and why one needs to be reminded of it, say for example – freedom, whether it is of distant and recent past in different contexts and time periods, let it be by Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj or Sikh Gurus or even hitherto less known tribal leaders such as Birsa Munda, in addition to the familiar galaxy of national leaders. Thus history is not only an interesting topic of curious stories, but also of facing challenges, overcoming adversities, being innovative, evolving strategies and having an everlasting belief in never say die spirit. It is rooted in the innate strength of humanity in resilience.

HISTORY AS A PROOF AND EVIDENCE

Narrative at museum is object based. As quoted by Alex Werner (2008) ‘Displays are still constructed essentially around objects, thus making material culture a key constituent of most museum interpretation narratives.’ History usually transmitted as a written word, record and rarely as an imagery, edifice or object, gets authentic and appropriate explanation, description, attention and promotion. Costumes – civil, military, decorative, religious and ceremonial, ornaments, weapons, coins, seals and images talk about a broad array of activities, hobbies, life, sports, leisure; regarding the bygone societies.

Also what is valued and displayed as an exhibit at a museum of history is completely relative and specific to the context and nonetheless equally interesting and important. It could drastically vary as per the nature of the museum. What is displayed at the National Museum of India is the classical Art History of the ancient India, whereas what is displayed at a regional museum such as Junagadh could be about the artistic legacy and achievements of the region in Saurashtra. One may be surprised to find costumes of gold zari on display – meant for dogs, as the former Nawab and erstwhile ruler of the princely state was an ardent dog lover and an aviator. When it comes to Allahabad Museum, one of the prominent items on display is the pistol of Chandrasekhar Azad, as the location of the museum has inextricable association with the revered late freedom fighter.

History – literary and visual as a consequence of it also could be contested and disputed and may be used to dispel some fallacies, myths and imaginations. It is a known fact that writers at times have compulsions, emotions and loyalties that influenced their prose, poetry that led to exaggerations, misleads and distortions of the facts that appealed to the generations that followed and were constrained to agree to those without having an opportunity to cross check and verify those. One is that of miniature painting of the famous *doha* by Chand Bardai on Prithviraj Chowhan in captivity. As it helps to extol the archery skill of the ruler he served, the historic evidence suggests and confirms the Sultan, died much later (more than a decade) to the death of the king. So, it is up to the visitor, viewer and reader to confirm the truth. Where the museum practices permit, it is better to disclose the truth as the aesthetic beauty as an artistic achievement of the miniature painting is no less significant.

As the history displayed and consumed at museums in general is meant for the non-expert and subject scholar, it is a diluted, basic and elementary version of the subject termed ‘popular history’. However, even that at times could be less glamorous and glorifying to that of the ancient and medieval versions, when it comes to event based and modern, such as the Remembering Bhopal Museum – of the industrial disaster of the Union Carbide or that of Partition Museum – mostly based on crowd sourcing of the memories and material given by the displaced and/or their descendants. Most recent among this genre is the Smritvan Memorial Museum, Kutch- about the natural disaster that struck the region two decades ago, but eventually led to a renewed focus and turnaround of the economy of the region. So, India has been marching ahead with the legacy of having museums of the colonial legacy as displayed at the Victoria Memorial Hall to that of the achievements of the successive prime ministers as displayed at the Prime Ministers Museum in New Delhi. Most of the about confirm to the ‘history from below’ concept indicating the advent of democratic society and value of layperson and

representation of its trials and tribulations. For the unversed 'History from below seeks to take as its subjects ordinary people, and concentrate on their experiences and perspectives, contrasting itself with the stereotype of traditional political history and its focus on the actions of 'great men' as quoted in archives Making History.

On side of the spectrum India has history museums of the royalty, princes, nobility and the rulers in its pristine environs as manifested at the host of museums in Rajasthan under the respective trusts of the royal lineage such as the Mehrangarh Fort Museum, Jodhpur, City Palace Museums in Jaipur and Udaipur and on the other side the country has been addressing and including its achievements of immense social, economic, entertainment, goodwill and heritage value such as the National Museum of Indian Cinema, one of the very prominent worldwide now, along with the cluster of other major film producers of the world, a significant cultural commodity. One has to follow the electronic media to believe the range and instant appeal of its song and dance, easily imitated by the people across the continents, race, class, age and gender. With the Quad, Global South and new realignments and international relations taking shape and the assertive and progressive India in marching ahead with G20 presidency, its vast coast line and maritime heritage would naturally entail establishment of the National Maritime Heritage Museum that shaped its historic associations, contacts and trade with the rest of the world from a very long time through its innumerable ports spread along the peninsula through Arabian Sea in the West, Indian Ocean in the South and Bay of Bengal in the East.

CONCLUSION

The discussion may best be summed up in the words of Werner

“The future direction of historical interpretation in museums is uncertain. 'Hidden', contentious and diverse histories are becoming main stream. Museums are encouraging history to be viewed where possible from multiple perspectives, catering for different learning styles and providing a space for dialogue and debate. They are not the only place in the public sphere where history is consumed but they do provide a unique environment for historical enquiry through their galleries, exhibitions and collections”.

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