



November 2021

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Formulating the Concept of **India's Living Heritage and Museums**

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On February 16, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the significance of revisiting our forgotten history and promoting tourism in its sustainable and enhancing forms. In his address on Maharaja Suheldev's remarkable contribution to protecting the civilisation of this sacred land, he not only elaborated the roadmap for the comprehensive progress of this area but also mapped and linked all the sacred and historic significant places of Uttar Pradesh state. He said,

“... A bronze statue of 40 feet will be set up so that tourists will be able to draw inspiration from the life of Maharaja Suheldev Ji. The upcoming museum will have all the historical information related to Maharaja Suheldev. The roads within and around it will be widened. Many facilities like a park for children, auditorium, tourist homes, parking, cafeteria, etc will be developed. At the same, shops will be developed so that the local craftsmen and the artists will be able to sell their wares easily here.”

When I read his speeches and particularly listen to his noteworthy radio programme called ‘Mann Ki Baat’ one thing that draws attention is to Prime Minister Modi’s consistent invocation of preservation and promotion of our civilisation in today’s context. This article makes a brief attempt to revisit the persistent citing of identification and preservation of the “living heritage” by Narendra Modi and reformulating the institution called “museum” in its indigenous and intrinsic forms.

Like many other things, it is argued that the concept of a museum is foreign to this land. However, when you read the Sanskrit play titled “Pratima-Natakam” written by eminent poet and playwright Mahakavi Bhasa (sometime between the fourth century BCE and the first century CE) you come across the reference of an “art gallery”. In the third act of the play, Bharat, brother of Shri Rama is dismayed to see a statue (Pratima) of his father, Raja Dasharatha in the gallery, which primarily housed sculptures of the late rulers of the Ikshvaku dynasty. Interestingly, Valmiki Ramayana does not have any references to the picture gallery. However, the introduction of this concept essentially hints at the emergence of novel concepts when these plays were composed. Plays written by renowned scholar Bhavabhuti also has references to picture-gallery and collection of paintings. From these instances, it can be said that the concepts of “archiving” and “museum” must have existed in pre-historic times in their indigenous forms. These practices

subtly indicate the human urge to collect things and preserve them most probably for the succeeding generations.

While discussing the history of the museums, David Murray elucidates the original meaning of the word museum; a place dedicated to the Muses and additionally a place to study literature and philosophy. The Western history of museums routinely mentions the Musaeum of Alexandria, built by Ptolemy Philadelphus which disappeared around the fourth century CE. The Latin name Musaeum (Mouseion in Greek) has an etymological connection with the word Museum. In 1796, during the colonial period, the rudimentary setup of the first museum was formulated in Bengal with the cardinal Western concept that tends to perceive time as linear. However, it was in 1814, when a “proper museum” came into existence by the efforts of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Since then, the daily household things, crafts, ornaments, coins, fabrics, manuscripts, paintings, images, Murti-s, Vighraha-s, among other things that are an integral part of the living tradition of this land. These diverse materials were collected, named, documented, and classified under various sections. In 1919, the scope of the museum was defined by focusing on the art, archaeology, history, economic products and prominently as a natural history of the “Oriental region”.

Markham and Hargreaves in their book on the Museums in India (1936) appreciate the fact that it was the European

contribution in setting up the first “scientific” museum in India and enumerates the list of nearly 105 museums in India. However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that many libraries and repositories were initiated by the kings and other ordinary people of this land. One outstanding example is the Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji’s Sarasvati Mahal Library which was founded in the sixteenth century. Sadly, the continuation and active contribution of the Hindu temples and other nameless individuals in preserving the tradition and the living heritage was repudiated and forgotten.

Initially, the colonial approach of “knowing India” and the process to gather these utilitarian as well as exquisite and things that are immeasurable in price was full of curiosity and studious. However, over time rational objectives and a sense of superiority prevailed. The policy and quest for expansionism and political strategies dominated the process of archiving and often plundering the rare and historical materials. During this turbulent and time of authoritarianism, many sacred Murti-s of Hindu deities were stolen and shipped to Europe. H. H. Wilson who was the secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal composed the book on the enormous collection of Colonel Colin Mackenzie who was the Surveyor General of India. Wilson’s descriptive catalogue (1828) enumerates Colonel Mackenzie’s collection of numerous manuscripts, books, drawings, gold, silver, and copper Hindu coins, drawings, plans, images [such

as Kodanda Rama made of Silver with the description: this idol is generally worshipped at the Hindu Temples of the Vaishnava Religion and in the houses of married people (p. 594)].

Bernard Cohn has overviewed this “state-managed looting” in his book “Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge” and explained how initially the East India Company and later the British Crown accumulated the enormous collection by using inducement, extortion and by theft. A boastful display of the collections was often displayed in the museum of East India House. This tragic series of stealing the heritage and cultural artefacts continued even after India’s independence. UNESCO estimated that around 50,000 artefacts were smuggled out of India between 1979 and 1989. These three-decade old statistics are self-explanatory to highlight the serious challenges before India.

The quest to bring back the stolen Murti-s, artefacts and antiquities from various parts of the world was started in 2003 by Narendra Modi when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. After assuming the office of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and his government brought back more than 200 cultural and heritage objects. Repatriation of India’s heritage became one of the important components of India’s foreign policy.



Prime Minister Modi looks at the Murtis- and artefacts handed over by the US.

Also, it is important to mention the ‘India Pride Project’ initiated by Vijay Kumar and Anurag Saxena and other volunteers who have made a significant contribution in creating awareness and tracking and investigating the stolen heritage of India. The next challenging task is to restore these Murti-s to their original abode, the temple site.

Many museums including the National Museum at Delhi houses many Murti-s and Vighraha-s. Sandeep Balkrishna has highlighted this in his online article “How Hindus Preserve their Heritage: A Tale of a Stark Contrast”. In his article, he

passionately discusses a pertinent question of why there is an apathetic delay in restoring the Murti-s at their original homes. This question essentially throws light upon the stark contrast between encountering a living tradition and viewing artefacts and fragments of the extinct civilisations. Balkrishna also asks the complex question of why would anyone consider a “living tradition and culture to be heritage”.

The objects and images displayed and interpreted in museums emit diverse vibrations in the minds of the viewer. For many Indians, the artefacts displayed in the museum are still very much part of his or her living tradition and vibrant habitat. Murti or Vighraha removed from its abode and placed in the artificial settings is perhaps an example of fine art but for an Indian mind, it is a cherished and most venerated image of a beloved deity. A mere darśana of the Murti or Vighraha evokes spiritual emotions and effortlessly connect him or her with the continuing civilisation of this land. The innate strength of this cultural continuity and living heritage needs neither any printed description nor commentary or any didactic assistance to comprehend its past.

Coming back to the question of heritage, it is worth noting that since 2003, the term “living heritage” identified by the concept of “continuity” is getting more and more attention in the heritage discourse. The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property

(ICCROM) initiated the Living Heritage Sites programme in 2003. I propose more research and discussion is vital to increase the awareness and sensitivity towards the living heritage sites of India. The document titled “Guidelines for HRIDAY: Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana 2015” prepared by India’s Ministry of Urban Development has provided a very evocative description of the heritage discourse. It mentions,

“The heritage development of (a) city is not about development and conservation of few monuments, but (the) development of (the) entire city, its planning, its basic services, quality of life to its communities, its economy and livelihoods, cleanliness, security, reinvigoration of its’ soul and explicit manifestation of its character.” (p.1)

Auspiciously there is an important milestone which will be soon with the return of the Murti of Devi Annapoorna to its original abode in Varanasi. Exactly one year before on 29 November 2020, Modi mentioned the special relationship of Devi Annapoorna with Kashi which was stolen and smuggled outside India.



Murti of Devi Annapoorna

(Image Source: Photography on the right by Don Hall, from the website of University of Regina, Canada)

This historic event should encourage all the stakeholders to revisit the heritage reclamation and conservation practices and return to the indigenous traditions of studying and preserving the living heritage, cultural and tangible structures. Even today, various temple rituals and performances are an integral part of the ancient techniques to preserve the wooden structures and portions of the Ratha (car) and other artefacts of the temple sites. The temple is not only about going to the Garbagruha (sanctum sanctorum) for the darśana of the presiding deity but it is a greater place that epitomises the meticulous attention and thought paid to identify the place, its topography, elevation, vegetation, proximity to the water bodies, and so

on. The temple complex houses many buildings that primarily sustains and serves diverse functions for the temple and also for the society.

The ongoing Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham (corridor) project effectively encompasses this notion. The Kashi Viswanath Dham project not only reclaims its sanctity and lost heritage but reinvents, by allocating proper space to the facilities such as Vedic Kendra, Bhogshala, library, museum and gallery, etc.

Narendra Modi has also announced that a museum with excellent facilities will be built in Ayodhya which will be the part of Ayodhya development plan.

The reclamation exercise of the temple sites will provide space where a systematic and organic structure will be planned. This new vision and transformational approach will accelerate the process of bringing more and more Murti-s and Vighraha-s back to their original homes. To conclude, I once again quote from last year speech of Prime Minister Modi.

“...the soul of any land is represented by the feelings of the people there. What is said through song, music, art and literature, is the public sentiments. Political and military power is temporary, but the public sentiments expressed through art and culture are permanent. And therefore, it is very important for India, for every Indian, to preserve and promote our rich history, our heritage. This is one such asset which sets us apart from other countries of the world.”

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