

ISSN 2306-3920

The Jahangirnagar
REVIEW
Part-C Vol. XXIII 2012



Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Jahangirnagar University



কলা ও মানবিকী অনুষদ
জাহাঙ্গীরনগর বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়
সাভার, ঢাকা

Museums and Indigenous Societies: An attempt to understand the contemporary role of museums towards their communities

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Abstract: The aim of the essay is to discuss about the contemporary role of museum towards the community and the indigenous society. In this essay, I will address some questions about the role of museum in the society both in historical and the contemporary context toward the indigenous/non western society. It will provide a brief historical overview of museum, the indigenous society and community related to the museums in different parts of the world. It will discuss the role of the museum in the society to represent the culture and heritage of the country and compare or contrast with some examples of museums and the indigenous society. The historical and contemporary role of museum in creating stereotypical images of indigenous societies or non-Western societies has been discussed in the paper. Also efforts, towards challenging this stereotype have been taken up in the paper. How museums can nowadays work to make positive contributions to indigenous/non-Western societies? The conflict over ownership and interpretation of tangible and intangible heritage of indigenous populations as one of the important issues has been focused in the discussion. Although in the past, historically it is evident that the museum role and function was problematic and critical which was closely related with socio-political and power relation. Nowadays, the museum is in a new era of information that lead the museum to take different positive initiative for the society in an equal manners.

1 Introduction

Museum is one of institution and what deals with the culture and heritage of society. This is the place where people come to see the past culture and heritage and the contemporary social and cultural issue of the society with a positive interaction. Museum is the place of all types of people. Museum and the community are closely connected. Museum is in service for the community and society. Heritage, museum and galleries face a wide range of issues today. Many of the issues have connection with ownership- either ownership of resource, ownership of process or ownership of outputs.¹ The indigenous society and all types of community either large or small have strong role to address these issues by establishing partnership with the museum in a democratic way so that it will benefit as many as stakeholders. Museum has challenged to solve these for the museum itself as well as for the society.

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1.1 What is Museum?

Museum is "a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment".² According to ICOM code of ethics number-4 for the museum, it is stated that "Museums Provide opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and management of the natural, cultural heritage. Museums have an important duty to develop their educational role and attract wider audiences from the community, locality or group they serve. Interaction with the constituent community and promotion of their heritage is an integral part of the educational role of the museum."³ The concept of a museum of anthropology is the creation of dominant white society, but the content of the museum is the creation of the dominated native peoples. "The first nations⁴ heritage is frequently seen as the vestige of the colonial domination".⁵ During the last fifteen years criticism of earlier museum ideology has steadily grown stronger, a development which has been parallel to the increase of research in the field of post colonial theory.⁶

2 Discussions

Before going to the discussion, it is significant to discuss about the definition of Indigenous society. "Indigenous community, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sector of the societies now prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sector of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems."⁷ Indigenous people have the right to be Indigenous. They cannot exist as image and reflection of a non-indigenous society.⁸

2.1 Role of the Museums

Museum's historical and contemporary role is creating stereotypical images of indigenous societies/non-western societies. Museum have historically documented and exhibited artifacts and art, which exemplify the best in human endeavor. There are lot of discussion and critique about the role of museum in different context. For example, many African Americans have rejected museum as a places of personal reflection and historical affirmation, for them they have witnessed the continued omission of their contributions and an absence of their expressions in the museum interpretation. Since the 1980s, ethnographic museums have increasingly become contested arenas for the presentation of the non-western societies.⁹ The criticism of experts of the culture of 'others' to western anthropologist. There are some museum theorists who argued that the way the anthropological knowledge about the non-western society has been presented in the exhibitions, often in line with evolutionary ideas, have contributed to 'otherizing' and 'freezing in time' of people.¹⁰ So, it is clear that the museums historically and contemporarily used to

create stereotypical images of indigenous societies/non-western societies. They were representing the “others”. But the real voice was not found in this presentation which is the problematic.

2.2 How the stereotypical images can be challenged?

The historical role of some museum to create stereotypical image of non-western society has been challenged through out the world. Cajsa Lagerkvist has argued that the critique that is directed at display of ‘other people’ no longer refers to distant cultures but to all minor community in a society. Research may have contributed to the theoretical understanding of these discourses, but real pressure on museum to change has come increasingly from community representation, which has demanded the right to speak for them and to control representation of their own culture.¹¹ Reactions against misrepresentation or exclusion of certain perspectives have been common throughout the twentieth century and have pushed the academy and, consequently, museums to change of focus and new frames of interpretation. From the late 1960s onwards class, ethnicity, and gender have provided the main perspectives to gain better representation in museums.¹² During the last two decades, ethnicity perspectives and the representation of others was critically discussed all over the world. This issue is related with the politics of multiculturalism, diversity and the power relation.¹³ The UNESCO declaration of cultural diversity states that diversity is necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.¹⁴

2.3 The positive contribution towards the indigenous or non-western societies

There are some examples of positive contribution of museum toward the indigenous society or non-western society. For example, the experience of the Australian Museum in its programme in New South Wales is one of them. This programme was developed to assist Aboriginal people to establish and maintain cultural centres, site management programme, networks and recommendation to help them meet their own cultural needs.¹⁵ The active participation of communities in the activities of museums and its programme development helps to create a democratic practice.

2.4 Interpretation of Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Indigenous population

The problem of interpretation of both tangible and intangible heritage of indigenous society was problematic because of the power relation and the constructing notion of others. Traditionally in western models, heritage, museums and galleries have tended to concentrate their collection and preservation activities on material culture. Heritage has focused on the preservation and conservation of immovable tangible heritage and museum and gallery moveable tangible heritage. However, it has been encouraged to consider the intangible cultural heritage. The convention¹⁶ for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage by the UNESCO is a remarkable step for considering and safeguarding the intangible heritage of indigenous society. The value of intangible cultural heritage has already been engaged with in a number of countries that have a culturally diverse population and indigenous peoples.¹⁷

2.5 The dispute over ownership

The dispute over ownership of cultural heritage has been discussed very often in the museum and heritage sector. The ownership issue of cultural properties are connected with both legal and ethical issue. There are remarkable discussions on culture and heritage sector about the ownership as well as repatriation, restitution or the return of the cultural property to its source community. This issue is closely related with the past conquest, colonization and the present power relationship.¹⁸ Historically it is evident that the process of collection of cultural properties was in many cases through the conquest over the others or through the exploitation of power relation between dominant and subservient groups or as an illicit trading or without original owners expressed permission. The Parthenon Marble at British Museum from Greece and the Benin bronze or the Maori treasure in New Zealand museum case is most discussed issue in present time. Arapata T. Hakiwai has challenged western eurocentric approach to research interpretation and presentation of Maori cultural heritage. He argued that these approaches removed the life and spirit from object.¹⁹ For legitimising the problem in museum it is important to involve the indigenous people. They will collaborate and legitimise how their cultures are researched, interpreted and presented in the museum. It is an ethical right for indigenous people to have the control and ownership over their material culture and the production of interpretation whether it represents the identity in an affirm sense.

2.6 What is the correct way of present a Society?

It is very difficult to determine the correct way to present any society. Museum can take initiatives to facilitate the cultural empowerment of the less powerful communities. There are some good examples of presenting culture and society by involving the originating community. There is example of the exhibition 'Robes of Power: Totem poles on cloth' 1986.²⁰ This exhibition of North-west coast Indian 'Button Blanket' was curated solely by Gitksan India artist and Writer Doreen Jensen, a first nation's person, in collaboration with museum staffs. These examples demonstrate that a person with culturally knowledgeable but without professional museum training could still meet the normal curatorial and scholarly standards by working in collaboration with museum staff.²¹ The display and interpretation of the robes were designed to cross a number of institutional boundaries or differentiation to represent in one exhibition the different cultural styles demonstrate both the antiquity and continuity of Indian tradition that linked the past with the present.

2.6.1 The Concept of "neighborhood Museum": The idea of neighborhood museum was first introduced in Anacostia Museum in 1967 and it was highlighted as a potential model for community access and involvement that focus on the democratization of museum action in a discourse of new museology.²²

2.6.2 The social inclusion in Museum: Social inclusion is very important issue for the museum and to present the society. The term social inclusion entered the museum domain since long before. Many people and different organizations explored the societal roles of museum and sought new models that would enable a close relationship between people, place and past.²³

2.6.3 Integrated Museum: The idea of integrated museum was announced at the meeting of UNESCO and ICOM at Santiago, Chile in May 1972. The new models recognized the local community as the most important stakeholder. The museum was perceived as a tool for social change and promoted the museum to move from an object-centered philosophy to a museum where the people and the community were placed in the prime place.²⁴ The Eco-museum concept and the democratization of Museum practice are the steps toward the development of museum sector both in term of equal representation and community involvement.

2.6.4 Social Empowerment: Share ownership of the Museum: The challenges in front of museum are community involvement and have equal representation agendas in museums in a multicultural society. Therefore, a growing number of museums taking on the task of creating a more inclusive institution in a multicultural and diverse society²⁵

The above new concepts of museum's action help the museums to become an institute that closely connected with the society and presents the society more acceptably to the public.

3. Some examples of Museum and indigenous community

3.1 India

The concept of museum in Indian subcontinent was brought by the colonial British power and develops it as a colonial discourse in the subcontinent.²⁶ The imperialist British government was, however, really not interested in museum development in India. They were interested in enriching the Company's Museum in London, established in 1801, with specimens carried away from the Indian Empire. Whatever support they provided here for museum development was aimed at acquisition of knowledge about the country's wealth. They made no efforts to protect the cultural property of the subcontinent. Charles Stuart, a British officer, collected different specimen and these collections were shipped from Calcutta to London and they were auctioned at Christies in June 1830.²⁷ There was no ethical consideration for this type of activities. Most of the British High officials were interested about the cultural properties. They collected it and shifted it to London. Still the collection is displayed at the British Museum.

3.2 Bangladesh

There are several museums in the country, which are repositories of the country's rich cultural heritage. The Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi, established in April 1910 under the patronage of Kumar Saratkumar Ray of the Dighapatiya Raj family, is one of the earliest museums in the country. Lord Carmichael, the then governor of Bengal visited Rajshahi in 1912 and was impressed by the Society's collection of relics. Soon after this, the governor of Bengal by a circular (No 11 dated 14 February 1913) guaranteed perfect freedom to the promoters of local museums in matters of collection, preservation and display of ancient sculptures and their antiquities.

The Kumar constructed the museum building at his own cost on the land donated by his elder brother, Raja Pramada Nath Ray of Dighapatiya. Lord Carmichael laid its foundation stone on 13 November 1916 and the Kumar made

over the building, fully furnished, to the society for housing its museum and library under a Deed of Trust executed on 27 November 1919. Lord Ronaldshay, the governor of Bengal, opened it on the same day.

Narendra Narayan Ray Chaudhury of Baldha established the Baldha museum at Dhaka in 1925 along with a Botanical Garden. It started as a home museum and it grew into a repository of varied items. In between the creation of these two museums the Dhaka (Dacca) Museum was founded in 1913. The example of establishment of Varendra Research Society by the leadership of Sarat Kumar Roy²⁸ is one of the milestones of the consciousness of local people about their culture and heritage. The year 1796 was the starting point of the history of museums in Bengal as well as in the Indian subcontinent.²⁹ The members of the Asiatic Society took the initiative. They collected different specimens of Archaeological, anthropological, geological and Zoological materials and felt to house this perfectly. There are some indigenous community also represented in the museum of Bangladesh. The display about the tribal people is an example of national museum of Bangladesh. The culture and the heritage of different tribal community were presented in the display. The indigenous people had participated in this programme.

Minor communities and Museum: In the present scenario, Buddhists and Hindus are the minor community in Bangladesh and the majority people are Muslim. Before twelfth century, the culture and heritage was dominated by the Hindu monarch. So the past culture and heritage is connected with the Hindu and Buddhist community. Most of the material cultural evidence collected in the museum originated from the present minor community. At the time of my personal visit at National Museum of Bangladesh, I found that there is some stone sculpture that was reused and converted to stone plaque for writing Arabic calligraphy. The museum did not show the obverse side to show the Hindu deity but they showed the Islamic calligraphy. This example indicates the poor involvement of minor community in the museum practice in Bangladesh although the cultural policy of the country as well as the museum is secular but in practice it is problematic.

Another example of the indigenous art like Rickshaw painting in Bangladesh is very traditional, considered as poor man's art that is not preserved in the museum of Bangladesh. This art is popular to other part of the world such as Japan, Korea, and France.³⁰ The community involvement in the museum activities can be played a vital role to reduce this problem and make the museum as a fortress of all people.

3.3 United States

In the United States, the civil disturbances and the cultural revival movement focused attention on the cultural needs of ethnic communities and disadvantaged inner city residents. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, museum curators in the United States gradually began to recognize that the needs of inner-city residents and minority groups were not being met and so began the growth of community museums. At the same time they have started rethinking the traditional role of the museum towards developments of society. These developments in American museums also had repercussions throughout the international museum community and were part of a widespread change in attitude towards the role of the museum in relation to the community.³¹

3.4 Australia

The Aboriginal people are the indigenous people of Australia. The societies are pluralistic and living together. There are six state governments and two territories in Australia. Each state has a major museum. The Aboriginal population in each state varies greatly in its composition and lifestyle. The aboriginal people live a semi traditional lifestyle on traditional lands in the northern parts of the country. They present a whole range of variation in the pursuit responses that are required by museums in assisting Aboriginal people in the pursuit of their heritage objectives. In the area of Aboriginal cultural material, the museum pursued a policy of collecting and preserving the material manifestations of the 'dead and dying' indigenous people of Australia before they become extinct. One of the main manifestations of change during this period was the Regional Seminar held by UNESCO in Adelaide, Australia in 1978, entitled "Previous Indigenous Cultures: New Role for Museums". For many people working within the museum world, this was the first time that they had actually dealt with Aboriginal people. One of the outcomes of the seminar was the realization within the museum field that Aboriginal people had a legitimate right to participate at all levels in the creation and usage and presentation of the material held within museum. The Australian Museum had created various programmes to help Aboriginal people to understand how museums can assist them in their needs, in identifying and achieving their specific cultural objectives, such as community museum training programme to develop museum-based skills, so that they would be able to develop and run a cultural center or keeping place with their own communities.³²

3.5 New Zealand

The Maori people are the indigenous people of New Zealand. In New Zealand, a prime motivation was to acquire objects from what many Europeans believed was a dying race. Many believe that the Maori race would suffer dramatically as a result of colonization and thus vigorously collected, recorded and documented this noble and savage race before its inevitable fate.³³ Many Maori people are actively seeking ways of repossessing their cultural inheritance and of re-imposing their right to control the treasures handed down by their ancestors. Maori people are increasingly calling for the return of their artistic and cultural heritage, because it is essential part of their identity, ethnicity and culture. Maori people are disenchanted with museums over their attitudes regarding cultural treasures and want some degree of control and communicate their view to themselves and to the world around them. For museums to be legitimate in the eyes of Maori people, they had to break with western traditions of so-called sound museological practice and make Maoris the players in the script, which inform, educates and communicates, not only to the museum profession but also to the world at large. "The search for legitimacy is the search for cultural integrity and ethnic realm, it is a search that challenges the museum orthodoxy and raises questions about how we define what a museum is and perhaps what it should be".³⁴

4. Conclusion

Through the discussion, it is clear that historically and contemporarily museum and the community are closely connected. Nowadays, it has challenged to act in diverse

and multicultural context. Museums are working for the social inclusion and work for community representation in their activities. The involvement of community in the museum helps the people of the society to feel closer with the museum. The negotiation with the people from different community group and collaboration with indigenous people and ethnic groups and communities can be a good solution for the presentation of a multicultural in a museum. The collaboration with the indigenous people and their active participation can help to reduce the problem. This collaboration and active participation of indigenous society will be more useful for collecting and preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of the indigenous population. The identity and ethnicity of different indigenous society are expected to represent in the museum as a fact and the voice must be their own with out any bias and stereotyping. It will be interesting for the museum to involve indigenous people in collaboration with the professional museum staff for developing its activities related to the community, culture and heritage of the people.

সার-সংক্ষেপ : প্রান্তিক সমাজ ও জাদুঘর এবং এর সমকালীন ভূমিকা নিয়ে আলোচনা করা এই প্রবন্ধের উদ্দেশ্য। ঐতিহাসিক ও সাম্প্রতিক পরিস্থিতি বিবেচনা করে এই প্রবন্ধে অ-পশ্চিমা সমাজ ও প্রান্তিক জনগোষ্ঠী বিষয়ে কিছু জিজ্ঞাসা উত্থাপন করা হয়েছে। পৃথিবীর বিভিন্ন প্রান্তের জাদুঘর ইতিহাস ও এর সঙ্গে সম্পর্কিত সমাজ বা সম্প্রদায়ের সম্পর্ক বিষয়ে আলোচনা করা হয়েছে। প্রান্তিক জনগোষ্ঠী বা অ-পশ্চিমা সমাজ সম্পর্কে স্টেরিটাইপ ধারণা নির্মাণে মিউজিয়ামের ভূমিকা আলোচিত করা হয়েছে। এছাড়াও মিউজিয়াম কিভাবে প্রান্তিক জনগোষ্ঠীর প্রতি ধনাত্মক অবদান রাখতে পারে সে বিষয়ে আলোকপাত করা হয়েছে। প্রান্তিক জনগোষ্ঠীর বস্তুগত-অবস্থা ও ইতিহাসের মালিকানা এবং ব্যাখ্যা সম্পর্কে সাংঘর্ষিক অবস্থানও এই প্রবন্ধের কেন্দ্র বিন্দুতে রয়েছে। যদিও মিউজিয়ামের ভূমিকা যে ক্ষমতা ও আর্থ-সামাজিক প্রজ্ঞানটি দিয়ে ধনিষ্টভাবে নির্ভরশীল তথাপিও বর্তমানে, মিউজিয়াম তথা-পশ্চিম নবন যুগে প্রবেশ করেছে বিধায় সমাজের জন্য ভিন্ন পন্থে ব্যবহার করতে পারে।

Footnote

1. Cf Gerard Corsane, Issues in Heritage Museums and galleries: A brief introduction, in Heritage. Museums and Galleries. An International Journal, (ed.), Corsane. Gerard., London/New York, Routledge. 2005.
2. Definition by the 10th General Assembly of ICOM (1974) and it is an interim definition.
3. ICOM code of ethics for museum, p 8.
4. The term First nations appears to be emerging as a preferred self-designation by the indigenous people of Canada(Indian, Inuit, and Merits)
5. Michale M. Ames, Cultural empowerment and museum: opening up anthropology through collaboration, in Observation of Knowledge Ed. Susan Pearce, London & Atlantic Highlands, 1990.
6. cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist., Empowerment and anger: Learning how to share ownership of the museum, Museum and society, July 2006. 4(2) 52-68
7. Definition accepted by the United Nations working group on Indigenous population, from Study of the problem of discrimination against Indigenous populations, J. Martinez Cobo, United Nations Special Rapporteur, 1987

8. Coolangatta Statement, on Indigenous people's rights in education. World Indigenous peoples' conference on education, Hilo, Hawaii, august 6, 1999.
9. Ulla Wagner, 'Presenting <<the other>>-Dilemmas for ethnographic museums' Nordisk museology. 1998.2, pp. 79-94
10. Karp and Kratz 2000, Durrans 1988, Lidchi 1997, cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist 2006
11. cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist., Empowerment and anger: Learning how to share ownership of the museum, *Museum and society*, July 2006. 4(2) 52-68
12. cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist,2006
13. cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist2006
14. Unesco, Unesco declaration on cultural diversity, 2001.
15. Phillip Gordon, Community museum: The Australian experience, In *Heritage. Museums and Galleries. An Introductory Reader* ed. Corsane, Gerard ,Routledge London/New York., 2005.
16. At 32 session of the UNESCO general conference on 17th oct, 2003.
17. Cf Gerard Corsane, Issues in Heritage, museums and galleries: A brief introduction, in *Heritage. Museums and Galleries. An Introductory Reader*, (ed.), Corsane. Gerard., London/New York, Routledge. 2005.
18. Gerard Corsane, Issues in Heritage, museums and galleries: A brief introduction, in *Heritage. Museums and Galleries. An Introductory Reader*, (ed.), Corsane. Gerard., London/New York, Routledge. 2005.
19. Arapata T. Hakiwai., "The search for legitimacy: Museum in Aotearoa, New Zealand-A Maori viewpoint" in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard. Corsane, London and New York, 2005.
20. see details : Jensen, D. and Sargent, P. (eds) , *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth*, University of British Columbia Press: Vancouver, 1986.
21. Michale M. Ames, Cultural empowerment and museum: opening up anthropology through collaboration, in *Observation of Knowledge* Ed. Susan Pearce, London & Atlantic Highlands, 1990. all see the details
22. Portia James, Building a community based identity at Anacostis Museum, in.*Heritage. Museums and Galleries. An Introductory Reader*, (ed.), Corsane. Gerard., London/New York, Routledge. 2005.
23. Peter Davis, Ecomuseums and democratization of Japanes Museology, *International Journal of heritage Studies*, Vol-10, Routledge, 2004
24. Peter Davis, Ecomuseums and democratization of Japanes Museology, *International Journal of heritage Studies*, Vol-10, Routledge, 2004
25. cf. Cajsa, Lagerkvist., Empowerment and anger: Learning how to share ownership of the museum, *Museum and society*, July 2006. 4(2) 52-68
26. Enamul haq, 1972
27. http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/E_0074.htm dated 07-05-04
28. Kumar Saratkumar Ray was Jamindar (Landlord) of the Dighapatiya Raj family of Varendra region in Rajshahi division in Bangladesh.
29. http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/M_0414.htm dated-07-05-04
30. See detail about the ricksha painting at www.ricksha.org
31. Simpson 2001:9-11
32. Cf Corsane, 2005
33. Cf Corsane, 2005
34. cf Consane 2005:154-162

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