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SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES

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HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MUSEUMS IN INDIA - A STUDY



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Abstract: *The Museums have been the forbearers of the thinking of their respective periods. Etymologically, the term 'museum' is derived from the Greek word 'Museion' which means temple of the Muses the goddesses protecting arts and sciences. The Museion or 'Musaion' which was founded by Ptolemaies I (who died in 283 B.C.) in Alexandria was a centre for learning and scholarship in the world of ancient Greece and an important establishment of Hellenic civilization, housing rich collection. It was a temple of the muses, occupying a large building in the royal quarter of the town, functioning as a centre of research and education. Hence the primary purpose of the museum was religious. It was not so much connected with the objects of material culture. As daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the muses represented collective memory to their elementary heritage. The objects of the material culture were not deemed to be connected with memory at that time and hence they were not so much collected.*

Keywords: *Museums, stupa, Pratima, neo-classicism, excavated sites, Archaeological Survey*

Introduction

During the 9th to 12th centuries of the Middle Ages of European history, the museum stood as the 'House of Relics'. Its main function was the preservation and the saturation of relics of saints who played an important role in the political and cultural life of the day. In other words, the relics of the important saint during the Middle Ages in Europe were the objects of exceptionally intensive sacral activity governing the political and cultural life of the people. Hence the relic was the key to understanding the surrounding world. The Christian Church which relied on the dogmatic religious ideology used these houses of relics for religious purposes and thereby influenced the masses.

History of Museums

Even in Asia, such early social institutions did exist to keep the collective memory of people alive. In India, a *Stupa*, containing the bodily relics of Buddha, was an embodiment of sacredness and spiritual value. The relics of the Buddha were collected and preserved inside the stupa which gave it social status and sanctity. A stupa also acted as a treasure house because it treasured the most precious objects viz, relics of the Buddha. It also acted as the Mirror to reflect the moral and social values of the time. A magnificent structure viz., the stupa was built suiting to valuable contents. Thus, the stupa like a modern museum collected valuable items in the form of relics of the Buddha; it conserved these objects and ultimately passed on the message to its devotees who flocked there from far off regions and lands. The tradition emanating from these provided social norms to govern the socio-religious aspects of the society. Hence a stupa realizing the similar social objectivity was an earlier manifestation contacting back the social reality and providing the traces of theoretical museology in India even as early as in 3rd century B.C.

Ancient and medieval Indian literature is full of such terms as *Alekhyagriha*, '*Vithi*', and '*Citrasala*' etc. which stand for galleries housing paintings, sculptures and terra-cotta. These were however the royal museums where ordinary people had no access. The various Sanskrit plays, viz., *Pratima* by Bhasa and *Naisadhivacarita* of Sriharsa belonging to 12th century A.D. respectively speak of the permanent and mobile exhibition galleries attached to the royal courts. The audio-visual shows and *Pata-Citras* (scroll paintings) were intended basically for public enjoyment and instruction, one of the important functions of the modern museum.

The era of Renaissance, from 14th to 16th century A.D. marked qualitatively a new change in the history of the museum movement. Increased interest in social and natural objects, representing scientific knowledge, was of special interest to the neo-rich class of the changing society. The growing demand for curios (Latin '*Curiositas*' meaning thirst for knowledge) and rarities (Latin '*Raritas*' viz., rare things) gave rise to big collections of authentic objects. The love for a universal collection of art objects and natural curiosities necessitated a new organization. The term 'museum' for a collection was first introduced in the late 15th century. The search for rare cultural and natural objects gained momentum soon after Renaissance. The chambers housing art curiosities and natural objects were a new kind of institutionalized museum phenomenon, which for all its variety was, in essence, a form of a museum. The situation changed in the late 18th century as the classical age crumbled under the pressure of an emerging industrial world which considered a classical antique to be an object as the material source and producer of knowledge. The numerous archaeological discoveries brought out by the archaeologists and historians became irreplaceable testimonials that alone could reveal the secrets of by gone ages.

The interpretation of classical antique objects had provided fresh values to objects of fine arts i.e., architecture, sculpture and paintings which entered the portals of the museum to testify not only its historicity and materially but also the spiritual meaning hidden within itself. This is how the collections started to become institutions and in the time of neo-classicism, a new definition of the concepts of museum developed.

The two notable political events in modern human history viz., the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and, more particularly the French Revolution's Declaration of Human and Civil Rights of 1789, resulted in a new class-based capitalist system which in turn allowed considerable social reforms and the tremendous advancement in the field of science and culture. This opened up new opportunities for the development of education and culture. This new development further intensified the collection of objects of art and culture and a gradual increase in public access to museum collections.

The first national museum in the world was the British Museum which was created in 1753. The first public museum of America was founded in Charleston, South Carolina in 1773. It was in 1793; France announced the opening of the palace of the Louvre as the Museum of the Republic. This gave momentum to new museum activity, for although Spain had opened the National Museum of Natural Sciences in 1776 and the British Museum had been in existence since 1753, none of these beginnings had made the kind of impact on the public mind as the announcement concerning the Louvre. Starting from France a new trend began to spread through the European continent that made the museum a new public institution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries A.D. Hereafter a large number of private and royal aristocratic, scholarly and society-owned collections were gradually being turned into public museums. The Atlas Museum in Berlin was founded in 1830.

The development of the museum in North America took a slightly different turn. Museum activity was marked by private initiative and committee work. Objects related to ethnography, natural history, art and technology were being widely collected and put to educational use. The Peale's Museum founded after a well-known American musicologist Charles Wilson Peale was established in 1786. The world-famous Smithsonian Institution at Washington was created in 1846. In the mid-1870s the U.S.A. had as many as 200 museums. Among the other noted museums of the world, Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington Museum, London was established in 1851. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded in New York in 1872. The National Museum of Japan in Tokyo was founded in 1872.

There was tremendous activity in the domain of museum movement throughout the world. In the United States alone the number of museums rose from 600 to 2500 between the two world wars. In Germany, there were 1500 museums in 1930. In the erstwhile U.S.S.R., the period between 1921-1936 had the foundation of more than 540 museums. There were about 1000 museums in Great Britain by the year 1962. By the

end of the third quarter of the present century, the museum as an institution had established itself as a very potential, powerful social agent to deal with the past cultural and natural heritage of mankind and to relate the phenomenon of past with the present tendencies for a better and meaningful future. Concerning the development of the Museum Movement in India, four major factors helped the growth of the museum and the museum movement in India. Firstly, the British Civil Servants in India, who had seen museum movement in their own country, gave an enthusiastic lead. Secondly, whole-hearted support was given by the local rulers and the nobility to foster Indian art and culture. Thirdly the collections of the learned, philanthropic societies were donated to form the nucleus of big museums. Lastly, the emergence of the Archaeological Survey of India strengthened the movement by opening site museums at many excavated sites.

History and Development of Museums in India

The Indian Museum, Calcutta, the first public museum on Indian soil founded in 1814, was an alien model imported from the west. In 1814 the Asiatic Society of Bengal accepted the offer of a Danish Botanist, Dr. Nathaniel Wallich to act as an honorary curator of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, which was started by the above society. This was instantly followed by the Madras Literary Society which expressed its desire to establish a Museum of Economic Geology at Madras in 1828. In 1850 the Surgeon Edward Balfour took charge of the proposed museum which was established in 1851.

The examples set by the above two societies proved a great incentive and many more museums in different parts of the country opened. The Victoria Museum, Karachi (now in Pakistan) in the North-West and the Thiruvananthapuram Museum in South India were established in 1851 and 1857 respectively. By the year 1857, there were twelve museums in the whole of the Indian peninsula. The dawn of the twentieth century was an era of awakening and great reforms. Lord Curzon revived the archaeological Survey of India with a view to surveying and exploring the relics of ancient Indian culture and also for opening the site-museums on important sites. Several site museums in places like Saranath, Pagan, Taxila, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (now in Pakistan), Nalanda, were established in the early years of the existence of the department. Later a few more site museums came at Chamba, Jodhpur in 1909, Khajuraho and Gwalior in 1910 and Dacca (now in Bangladesh) in 1931. Dr. J.P. Vogel produced the first Directory of Indian Museums by supplying detailed information relating to each of the museums which were then thirty-nine in number, to the conference of Orient lists at Madras.

In the year 1936, a grant was offered by the Carnegie Corporation, New York to survey the Indian museums. The work was entrusted to Markham, M.P. and H. Har greaves, former Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who visited all the existing museums in the country and brought out the Report on the Museums of India the first standard work of its kind. It includes one hundred and five museums which were taken into consideration for the above report.

The last fifty years have been significant for the growth of museums and the museum's profession in India. There are more than 400 museums in India today. Although the archaeology and art museums are more in number yet, the museums devoted to specific subjects have also been developed to carry out their educational programmes in different fields of human knowledge. The Craft Museum, New Delhi, the Health Museum, Hyderabad and the Textile Museum, Ahmedabad are some of the examples of this type. The history and personalia museums, apart from archaeology museums, are very few and orrecent growth. The Victoria Memorial Calcutta, for the British period, the Ravindranath Tagore Museum, Shantiniketan, the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, New Delhi, the Fort St. George Museum, Madras and the Nehru Memorial Museum at Tinmurti Bhavan in New Delhi illustrate this type of museums. Owing to the rapid growth of technology and industry in the country the latest types, which have been developed recently, are the museums of pure and applied sciences, technology and industry. The Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Calcutta, was established in 1959. The Central Museum of the Birla Educational Trust at Pilani lays more emphasis on agriculture. Similarly, the Visveswaraya Industrial and Technological Museum at Bangalore is another example. Similar Science Centers are being developed in Bombay, Patna, Bhopal and other places. A Museum of Man devoted to anthropology is being developed at Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. A group of museums attached to the Forest College, Dehradun, having separate sections on silviculture, timber, minor forest products and entomology is another noteworthy addition. The Agriculture Museum, Coimbatore contains samples of geological formation, agriculture implements, soils and manure. There are various museums devoted to the Engineering and Medical Sciences as well. The children's museums and Bal Bhavans, although of later origin is of considerable significance.

The National Museum of Natural History at New Delhi is an excellent example of its kind, although still in the formative stage. Several University museums are run under various departments as teaching centres of different disciplines. The museums, like all other social institutions, have changed through time. They have changed in form, function and basic concept. A museum has now changed from a repository of objects to an educational agency. Its policy to collect isolable objects has changed and it now emphasizes integrating an object and its social and natural networks with the visitor's experience. A museum is now no more a privilege for a few but it serves the society as a whole. Over and above this change a museum is today active participation in the socio-cultural life of the community which it stands for. A general definition of the museum on a broad international basis is given in Article of the Statutes of the International Council of Museums 1974. It says that a museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches communicate and exhibits for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.

The growing appreciation for culture, cultural tourism, impressive international exhibitions and huge promotional campaigns have provided the extraordinary impetus to museum movement and the worldwide popularity of museums as places for leisure and education. The museums have thus become a social phenomenon wherein the recreational and experiential functions are predominant. There have thus grown several kinds of museums, devoted to every field of knowledge and human experience. The diversified network of the museum, such as the museums of archaeology, history, civilization, natural science, art, architecture, maritime and other scientific disciplines have grown throughout the world.

Besides their typological differences, the museums have assumed diversified roles also. Science Centres and youth museums in the United States, with the least collection centres and most educationally oriented sectors, are probably the fastest growing. The sophistication of interactive technologies allows visitors to engage themselves in personalized dialogue with the environment. The Ottawa based National Museum of Science and Technology is a good example. Similarly, the recently designed Biodome, the first museum garden dedicated to the environment at Montreal, is unique for its naturalistic design and architectural wonder. With the opening of the Centre Georges - Pompidou in Paris in 1977 a new era of the art museum was started. With its interior spaces recognized in 1985, the Centre Georges-Pompidou is the pioneer of the new trends in the field of museum movement.

Conclusion

To sum up there are three basic functions, viz., preservation, research and communication which museums concentrate on the communication aspect. During the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and North America, the museum was developed to formalize preservation. Yet the American museums grew more education-oriented. Overtime, American museums grew more preservation-aware while European museums became more education-oriented. It was during the 1960s and early 70s that there was a dramatic change in concept and museums in Latin America and Europe grew more community-oriented. The boom in industrial technology and a close partnership between science, technology and entertainment was first realized in late 1960. The best example of this is undoubtedly Florida's Epcot centre which for more than two decades has delighted millions of visitors by celebrating the exploits of modern technology with a touch of magic. The same concept is favoured at the *site Des sciences De L'industrie in Paris*. A lot more such examples can be given to exhibit the variety and versatility in the field of museums and new museum concepts. We may therefore conclude that museum-like all social institutions have changed through time. They have changed in form in functions and concepts. The evolutionary process can be summarized thus from a repository to an educational agency. From an emphasis on isolable objects to one that integrates an object and its social natural network with a visitor's experience. From privilege for a few to service for the many museums. From a passive to an active participant in the socio-cultural configuration in which it finds itself.

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