



Implications of New Museology for Museum Practice in India: A Case Study of Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS)

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Abstract

Traditional museums around the world are forced to undergo changes and become more inclusive and representative of their communities in light of postcolonial criticism and New Museum theory. New Museum theory, also called Critical museum theory or New Museology was a result of the debate around the growing demands for the inclusion of indigenous people in the representation of their cultural heritage. As a result, new roles and directions for museums and heritage institutions have emerged which put forward a different museological approach focused not only on artefacts but also on people. Under this new approach, the concept of a museum as a dynamic cultural centre replaces the concept of the museum as a repository of collections. This paper presents the theoretical underpinnings of New Museology and its development in international context. It also examines the development of New Museology in India and provides an overview of its implication in Indian museum practices, using Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh as an example.

Keywords: New Museology, Indigenous Museology, Ethnographic Museum

I. New Museology: Theoretical Underpinnings

Postcolonial critique of museums led to the rise of a new form of museology from 1980s onwards known as “New Museology” which resulted from a collaboration between the scholarly communities and source communities whose cultures are on display in Western museums. Peter Vergo defines New Museology as a “state of widespread dissatisfaction with the old museology, both within and outside the museum profession” and further points out “what is wrong with the ‘old’ museology is that it is too much about museum *methods*, and too little about the purposes of museums” (Vergo 3).

An important objective of New Museology is giving the communities control over the representation and management of their own cultural heritage, thus embracing multiple perspectives (Marstine 5). As an approach, New Museology is concerned with making museum practices more democratized and rejects the top down power structures historically found within museums. It does not stand in opposition to traditional museums but provides new insights and concepts in order to create a more inclusive model where the development of local communities is made a priority. Here, the knowledge and skills of the people are considered as valuable as those of museum professionals. As such the communities assume the role of the curators while the museum staffs and curators act as the facilitators: “The new museologists strive to bridge the gap between professionals and non-professionals by working with community members, utilizing the people’s own knowledge, experiences, and resources” (Kreps 10).

In this manner, museums function as what James Clifford calls a “contact zone” which is a space where different cultures come into contact for the purpose of discussion, negotiation and dialogue. Borrowing from Mary Louise Pratt’s idea of *contact zone* which she uses “to refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992, 6-7), Clifford provides an important model of museum as a “contact zone” for its successful functioning in the 21st century. Clifford’s model of museum as “contact zone” is a space where different cultures come into contact for the purpose of discussion, negotiation and dialogue: “When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship*-a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull” (Clifford 192).

The Santiago Round-Table organized by UNESCO in Santiago de Chile, Chile in 1972 was the first significant international event under the New Museology movement. This resulted in the “Declaration of Santiago de Chile” (1972) which was published by UNESCO in 1973. One of the key ideas that came out of this is that museums have a responsibility towards meeting the needs of their communities. It was at this conference that the concept of ‘integral museum’ was born. Thereafter, several other workshops and seminars were conducted in different parts of the world to discuss the evolving theoretical framework of New Museology (Bhatnagar 58).

Furthermore, with the development of New Museology, the concept of heritage has undergone a drastic change. The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by UNESCO in 2003 had a great impact in bringing a shift in our understanding of cultural heritage from “static” and “monumental” to “dynamic” and “living” process (Alivizatou 47), calling for a more inclusive and people-oriented museum approach. The 2003 Convention has been seen by many as a response to the 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural, Natural Heritage* which was criticized for privileging Eurocentric conception of heritage. Adopted by UNESCO’s General Conference in October 2003 and put into force on 20th April 2006, the 2003 Convention was an attempt to put forward the non-Western understanding and practices of heritage. Following the convention, one sees a conceptual shift in the understanding of the idea of heritage which now consists of both tangible and intangible heritage (Smith, Akagawa 2009).

II. Developments in New Museology

Museological practices in the 1980s were greatly influenced by the New Museology Movement which stressed the social role of museums in the development of its respective societies in contrast to the old classical model which gave greater importance to collections. As a result, several variants of new museums began to emerge namely; Integral museum, neighborhood museum, community museum, eco-museum and open-air museum. These museums are mostly established, administered and run by members of a community within their own territory to fulfill their social, cultural, economic or environmental needs. Such museums are best suited and successful in small territories.

The Anacostia Community Museum, previously known as Anacostia Neighborhood Museum which opened in 1967 as an intermediary of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. can be considered as one of the first examples of the new museum concept. The museum was more oriented towards its people and less focused on objects. Such community museums develop as part of community development project which requires active participation of its respective communities. Integral museum which began in Latin America is integrated in its approach as it is concerned both with heritage and development of the society. Another kind of new museum model is the neighborhood museum which is developed around the geographical area of the already existing established museum. Very often, an already well established traditional museum cannot break easily from its traditional museum functions because of various reasons. Nevertheless, in an effort to adapt to new museological roles, one of which is serving its communities, it can sponsor and assist a neighborhood museum. In this regard, the established museum functions only as a sponsoring agent, providing expert advice and training while the intermediary in the form of the neighborhood museum is entirely independent in all other aspects of its operation.

The concept of “Eco-museum” (Davis 1999) which was developed in France in the 1970s is another important new museum model which could be best suited to represent indigenous cultures. It was Hugues de Varine, the former director of ICOM who invented the term ‘Eco-museum’ while it was George Henri Riviere who came up with its contents. In the words of Georges Henri Riviere: “An Eco-museum is an instrument conceived, fashioned and operated jointly by a public authority and local population. The public authority’s involvement is through the experts, facilities and resources it provides; the local populations involvement depends on its aspiration, knowledge and individual approach” (Georges Henri 182). The concept of “eco-museum” has been the driving force in bringing museums closer to the people. Here, man is shown in its natural environment. The population participates in the preservation and development of its natural and cultural heritage. The eco-museum also functions as a school for its population to learn about its past and culture. It is not confined within the four walls but cover entire territory of the local population. The eco-museum also has a building housing permanent exhibitions. Table 1 presents the conceptual difference between old and new museums.

Table 1. Conceptual Difference between Old and New Museums

“TRADITIONAL” MUSEUM	COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MUSEUM
i Building(s)	Territory
ii Collection(s)	Heritage (cultural and /or natural) plus all other resources available in community.
iii Scientific discipline(s)	Global development Interdisciplinary approach
iv Public (voluntary, amateur)	(a)The population of the community (b)Visitors to the community
v Pursuit of knowledge, Entertainment	Education, Capacity of creative initiative.

Source: Bhatnagar, Anupama. *Museum Museology and New Museology*, Sundeep Prakashan, 1999.

Many communities around the world have come up with their own model of museum to meet their requirements as there is no one universal model which can be applied across cultures. Rene Rivard has made an argument for ‘people’s museography’ which is “a body of techniques and practices applied by a population to the conservation and enhancement, in a museum or otherwise, of the collective heritage of the community or territory” (quoted in Kreps 28). Depending on the local situations and requirements of the community, an appropriate model may be devised to suits their needs. Such an approach implies that “there is no single set of curatorial practices that is universally applicable or appropriate” (Kreps 28).

III. New Museology in India

In the Indian context, the seminar at Guwahati organized by Museum Association of India in 1988 under the chairmanship of Dr. Nigam and leadership of prominent Indian museologist, Prof. Bedekar was an important event where Indian museologists assembled together to discuss about the concept of New Museology. Subsequently, the Guwahati Declaration on New Museology was adopted on 28th December 1988. Basically, it was agreed that museums should look beyond their walls and into the communities that they represent. Under the new museum paradigm, the idea of museum as a place for storing collections was now replaced by the idea of museum as a dynamic cultural centre. Furthermore, for a museum to succeed, “it must reflect the cultural and spiritual values of the community” and should be able to meet the needs of the community. (Simpson 2006, 155). Vasant Bedekar, a noted Indian museologist stated that in order for a museum to be museologically relevant to different cultural contexts, there is a need to make considerable changes in the development of ‘post-museum’ (Simpson 235-236) which is essentially “a site from which to redress social inequalities” (Marstine 2006, 19). These changes should take into consideration the indigenous museological and curatorial approaches of non-Western cultures which place greater importance “in preserving the intangible traditions with which the objects are associated” (Smith 12).

It is ethical museum practice to employ “Ethnomuseology” which is the use of culturally appropriate methods of curating and conserving ethnographic materials which is derived from the knowledge systems of the source communities. This is not only limited to community centers or museums run by indigenous communities but also includes mainstream public museums (Simpson 2018)

New Museology Movement was thus started in India in the 1980s after the Guwahati Declaration on New Museology was unanimously adopted by Indian Museologists (Bhatnagar 65). The early traditional museums in India were built following European museum model with emphasis on past culture and art-history. Most of the anthropological sections in big Indian museums continue to follow colonial museum model and have limited exhibits that mostly focus on objects with artistic values. When material culture is studied in isolation without taking into consideration the communities and cultural context, it leads to “growing museumization of the communities” (Chakravarty 26). One of the main principles and functions of museum under the new museological paradigm is therefore the involvement of communities in all the developmental stage in the process of setting up a museum.

The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) or Museum of Mankind at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh could be said to be spearheading the New Museum Movement in India. It was established by Anthropological Survey of India in 1977 and is considered to be the biggest anthropological museum in India. The museum boasts of a huge ethnographic collection belonging to around 40 tribal communities from all parts of India. Apart from its actual size dwellings of various Indian tribes, it also has indoor museum space exhibiting arts and crafts items, agricultural implements, costumes and household items belonging to different tribal communities.

At its inception, the museum had no objects in its collection but it was founded on “a set of principles” with the goal of serving as a “facilitator for forging interrelation between Community and Museums” (<http://igrms.gov.in/en/aboutus/organization>). The museum aims towards “national integration, and promotes research and training and inter-institutional networking for salvage and revitalization of vanishing but valuable cultural traditions and highlights the unity and diversity” as stated in its mission statement. Moreover, as an important aspect of its new museum education process brought by the New Museum Movement, “the authoritarian voice of the museum personnel/curator as the source of non formal education to the masses is being replaced by the democratic process involving communities as important source of knowledge, with the museum personnel/curator acting as a facilitator of its dissemination” (<http://igrms.gov.in/en/aboutus/mission>).

It is worth quoting renown historian Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty at length behind the conception and mission of the Museum of Mankind: “[The Museum] celebrates the truth that the folk and tribal communities of rural India possess the ability to recognize, codify, classify, present their knowledge, and harness it to harvesting nature through eco-specific, regional models of development without destruction; that the right to environmental self determination of such communities should not be overridden by concepts of overriding national or international interest, or terra nullius; and that, the Museum is only an agency for assisting them in the recollection and replenishment of their life enhancing knowledge and traditions. The Manav Sangralaya does not aim at exhibiting physical artifacts, as mere specimens of languishing, vanishing or dead cultures. Rather, it seeks to project, preserve, invigorate and present valuable elements of living cultures and build protective ramparts around endangered ones. It does not suggest that a physically or culturally moribund community is, of necessity, a community which deserves to die and find a niche in a Museum...What distinguishes the Museum of Mankind at Bhopal from other open air museum of the world, therefore, is the fact that this Museum considers itself as a dynamic instrument for preserving communities, their habitats, their bio-cultural diversities, bio-conservation strategies, knowledge and skills. It considers ex situ conservation through display or storage, collection and documentation as an unavoidable and evil necessity, and as a very significant contribution to its primary objective of in situ salvage and revitalization. (Chakravarty 30).

In this way, indigenous people who were objectified in museums during the colonial era are empowered and given a voice in this museum. The museum’s emphasis on immaterial, intangible cultural heritage allows the source communities to design their own exhibits according to their own understanding and conception of heritage. Spread over a huge 200 hectares of land with outdoor exhibits of traditional houses on open air display, it challenges the very idea of a conventional Western museum which houses exhibits within a theme of timelessness. The idea is to present everything as it is in its own natural setting including the very own concept of time and season. The mud

houses and outdoor exhibits are allowed to experience nature and go through changes because of exposure to rain, wind or sun (Guzy 119). Artists and representatives from respective indigenous communities are the ones who build, design and decorate their own traditional houses without any directions from above. The houses are restored annually or as required by them. The Museum thus acknowledges and promotes culturally specific and appropriate technologies such as rural architecture, water management systems, indigenous medicines, museology, etc. It does so by carrying out field projects where both government agencies and NGOs take part (Chakravarty 31). A key emphasis of the new museum movement is the use of local heritage as tool for local development through the active participation of local communities (Soni 42) which the museum lives up to. The museum actively engages with communities and regularly conducts workshops, lectures and exhibitions in an effort to promote the rich living traditions of India.

However, when it comes to the representational practices and strategies, India seems to have adopted the colonial taxonomy as the colonial mindset can be discerned in the way tribal people are represented in glass cases without any cultural contexts for largely non-tribal cultures. Since New Museology is also about challenging and replacing colonial myths and stereotypes, museums in India should reexamine their methods of display. Many ethnographic museums in India continue to follow the colonial museum model where the tribal societies are often depicted as living close to nature through dioramas invoking the idea that they are primitive forest dwellers living in wilderness untouched by civilization. It is important to question the politics of display at most of the museums in India where they continue to display only select group of people like the tribal societies.

Dahl and Stade made an important observation that though “anthropology as an academic discipline” is about the study and research of “all human social and cultural life”, indigenous peoples are considered to be more “ethnographic” and more “exhibitible cultural group” (Dahl and Stade 157-158). Such displays contribute to the continued construction and representation of the tribal groups as the cultural other. This practice has its roots in colonial ethnography which was one of the investigative modalities (Cohn 2006) employed by colonial power and is largely responsible for creating an image of India’s tribal groups as “primitives” or “savages”: “it is a mode of thinking that has proven difficult to shake off and continues to influence how indigenous peoples are represented in museums and related cultural institutions” (Silverman 9). Museums in India need to reevaluate its representational strategies and practices. Efforts should be made to present a more diverse India within museums. Academic anthropology is no longer only just about the study of pre-industrial cultures. This has to be correspondingly reflected in anthropological museums today (Dahl and Stade 158); the tribal groups should be situated in the present by showing the continuity of their art and culture.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the New Museum theory is successful to some extent in creating a space for indigenous voice at Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya. It has been instrumental in bringing a positive change in the nature of relationship between museums and communities. The one-way relationship which was the norm in past has been replaced by a two-way process where the input of the source communities in the management and representation of their cultural heritage is considered important. Museums are now using new technologies to interpret and contextualize objects more efficiently. Cultural events and workshops are organized within the premise of the museum in order to give the visitors a better understanding of the cultures on display.

However, New Museology has not been widely implemented in all the museums due to several factors. To adopt the principles of New Museology and make it a part of museum practices is not straightforward. It is adopted by different museums depending on their values, missions and policies. Another major factor is the structural constraints which limit the degree to which New Museology can be practically applied in museums. In such museums, conventional understanding of museums as collection-driven is still very much alive. Consequently, the activities of such museums are very much influenced and determined by their collections. Despite this, some progress has been made around the discourse of New Museology and has been beneficial in bringing communities closer to museums.

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