

Museums and Peoples' Aspiration

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It is a happy coincidence that on the auspicious day of the opening of the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, a seminar on *Museums and Peoples' Aspiration* has been organised. Jñāna-Pravāha is a Centre for Cultural Studies and it aims at preservation and dissemination of cultural ethos of India through a chain of programmes like seminars, symposia, lectures, group-discussions, in-depth study courses, workshops and a host of other academic pursuits. The organisation of museum has also been an important goal of the Institution, and fortunately, it is achieved today. This, ofcourse, is the elaborate version of a painting unit which was put up in 1999.

Although dimensionally small, this Art-gallery, also called as *Kalā-maṇḍapa*, is a nucleus of our cultural heritage and one can peep into the past through the specimens on display in varied forms. Sri Suresh Neotia, Chairman - Jñāna-Pravāha Trust, deserves our deep appreciation for lending his art treasures, collected during the last about half-a-century. Smt. Bimla Poddar, Managing Trustee and Founder of Jñāna-Pravāha, who is sincerely devoted to the cause of culture is to be felicitated for consecrating the museum as an important component of this organisation. Some objects have been received on temporary loan through the courtesy of Sri Vinod Krishna Kanoria, Patna.

It is very much in the fitness of things that the inauguration of Jñāna-Pravāha Museum is marked by a symposium on a significant topic, and this will grant an opportunity to take stock of achievements and shortcomings by the museum professionals and the art connoisseurs. The self appraisal is essential to meet the growing and forth-coming challenges of complex nature by the museum profession. Although indirectly, India has a long history of origin and development of museum like institutions even before the dawn of the Christian era. This can be vouchsafed by the remains of the Bharhut *stūpa*, which served as an open air gallery with labels incised in contemporary Brāhmī script. The scholars like Barua conjecture the probability of the deployment of persons, like the present day guides, to explain the themes illustrated in stone. This was found necessary as the *Jātaka* tales were at the compiling stage and their message was to be grasped properly by the visitors to the monument.

The poets like Bhāsa and Kālidāsa too, refer to the portrait galleries, *citra-śālās* and the *ālekhyā-grhas*, which housed the paintings or sculptures of the deceased

kings of the dynasty. Such institutions, however, remained as a part of the royal palaces or forts and rarely opened for public, with the exception of the *stūpas* and the *deva-kulas* established by the Kuṣāṇas. The present day museums are the creations of the occidental thought, and in Indian context, as revealed by the efforts of Dr. Nathaniel Wallich in 1814 in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, was to unfold the mysteries of nature, culture, traditions and artefacts of the East. This was necessary not only to be conversant with the outward and inward situation in a vast country like India, but also to have a firm grip over administration. At this stage of inception, it was the will of the ruling class or the elite, which prevailed, and not of the general public. Gradually, with the increase of the English knowing population, the museums started assuming the shape of public organisations, and the interest of people or society was taking to be an integral part of the museum service.

The service to the society developed as a coveted goal in the western museums, but in India this remained somewhat subdued. This distinction has to be analysed in the light of the difference of the social texture in the West and East, where the demands and expectations differ. India missed the Industrial Revolution which was a surmounting factor of the 18th and 19th century Europe and which changed the social pattern to a great extent. This did not happen in East, and particularly in India. The society was rather static and continued to follow the old norms and conventions, ofcourse facing a multiple odds due to attacks and sectarian conflicts. Despite the troublant situation, which prevailed in our country for more than a thousand years beginning since the 10th century to the pre-Independence era, India continued to survive and developed as a great resource centre of world heritage, and in this regard she excelled the western world.

The construction of beautiful and large monuments, shrines, temples in plains and mountains, excellently chiselled sculptures from the Kuṣāṇa to the post-Gupta period harmonising body and spirit, the splendid illustrations on the walls at Ajantā, Bāgh, Sittanvāsāl, etc. and later inception of miniature paintings from Pāla period to the 20th century in multiple schools and their sub-styles, the enchanting music in temples, courts and people of higher strata, culminated into a great heritage. The birth of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861, and the insight of the enthusiastic and learned archaeologists and scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries, was responsible for yielding thousands of art treasures from the womb of earth. This necessitated in founding more museums, not only to store and preserve the antiquarian wealth, but also to analyse and publish it for the benefit of the people. The interest of scholars and public was considered on high priority, and museums at large started functioning to fulfil the expectations of people.

This should, however, be remembered that the involvement of the museums

and public in the West was of different nature, while in India, its texture altogether differed. In the 20th century this interest continued to grow and in West, peoples' expectations were fulfilled by establishing Eco-museums where public, particularly, people of the area dominated and not the museum objects. On the other hand, in India, with the growth of collections, the care and display of objects were the focal point. With the popularity of science and its use in public, the science and technological and art specimens were replaced by the models in such organisations. This was a step forward in meeting the requirements of the people, and specially, of the school-going generation. The champions of the Eco-museums have propounded the view that museum do not require a closed gallery. Peoples' involvement is supreme and objects should not jeopardize it. The objects should better remain *insitu* rather than imprisoned in a showcase. The museums or the museum people should organise programmes in such a way that the interest of the neighbouring people is served as much as possible. These thoughts have ultimately given birth to a science known as a New Museology. For the last about three decades, this concept has reached India, although it has not gained that momentum as seen in West.

Following the western theology of museums, the Indian museologists also sometimes feel frustrated and think that the destiny of the museums in the country is doomed. Both government and people are becoming somewhat indifferent to these institutions. This feeling of lamentation may be justified to some extent, but it seems to be based on the present day museums in European and American cities, where life is very costly and the resources are shrinking. At the same time, many museums are gradually outliving their utility. This bleak picture may not be painted in the Indian conditions, especially where the number of the traditional, historical and art-museums is large. Undoubtedly, the increase of number of visitors to a museum and art-galleries is an encouraging fact, but this depends on various conditions. Sometimes, the fluctuation of number of visitors to a museum may be due to local scenario, law and order, situation, recession, disruption of transport facilities, shifting of a museum to some inconvenient site, etc. But even under such precarious circumstances, a museum continues to contribute enormously, as it preserves the heritage. It presents and disseminates the ethos of culture whether the number of visitors is more or less. This may not be the situation in the West, where the museums thrive more on temporary exhibitions, loans and donations. In India, the latest is the beginning of a Toilet Museum by Dr. Vindhreshwari Pathak in New Delhi which seems but strange quite informative and interesting. Some of the recent surveys and studies paint a disappointing picture of the present day museums. The vices are non-attractive look, less interesting programmes, poor display, poor maintenance, nothing exciting or new, curatorial apathy, unimpressive atmosphere, etc. How can such places boast of fulfilling peoples' aspirations!

The background of foundation of museums in West and East, as discussed above, suggests that the circumstances in both the zones are of different nature. The service to the society, as conceived by museologists in West, has the priority in fulfilling the needs, requirements or expectations of public, and most of these may be of social nature. Such physical needs may not be termed as aspirations. Ofcourse, fulfilling or meeting of the physical requirements is of considerable significance, but this does not reflect the concept of aspiration, which is more internal rather than external. It is the harmony of body and soul, and the western concept has distanced itself from the soul part, which is the basic element of the Indian culture. Most of the museums are abode of our cultural heritage, and they have to endeavour in the direction that in the guise of protection of the artefacts and art-treasures in the museums and art-galleries, the culture is protected, the spiritual content is also taken care of and flourished. If this is not done, the peoples' aspirations are not fulfilled. In the Indian context, a great service which a museum can render to the community will be to create an awakening for respect, care and treatment of our heritage whether in an art-gallery or in the individual possession. The museums have to be more responsive to the public, students and scholars, and the staff is expected to be more courteous and cooperative.

If a museum in the Indian context has to play an effective and constructive role it owes to fulfil some aspirations of the society, cultural awakening has to be on the priority. How to arouse and further the feeling of respect and care for our heritage should be the concern of a museum. This can be ensured through a number of activities like temporary indoor and outdoor exhibitions, illustrated talks, symposium and involvement of people in the area. Educational institutions, teachers, students and their guardians should be motivated. This ensures a good liaison between a museum and the community.

Beside cultural awakening, some solid contribution is also expected from the museum and it should look like the real service to the society. Extension of conservation and restoration of objects in the possession of people may be one of such devices. The fee for such service may be nominal or token. Those who can afford may be charged as per expenditure involved. This system would result in proper care of our art treasures. The antiquarian wealth belongs to the nation and posterity whether it is in the custody of an institution or an individual, rich or poor. If it is mutilated or damaged due to negligence or lack of resources, it is ultimately the loss of the society or nation. We should, therefore, be liberal in extending such assistance and this action on the part of museum will be a fulfilment of social aspiration by the museum.

Similarly, the museum must bring out the attractive handouts, booklets, guidebooks, albums and other publications, which are affordable. Ofcourse, most of the museums are facing financial and stringencies and even for their bare survival

they have to augment these sources, but the museums which are in slightly better situation, have to realise that the profit earning is not their aim. Sometimes, only expensive literature is brought out and the institution remains cut off. This goes against the spirit of museum and debars public involvement in a museum.

To conclude, when we analyse the service to the people by the museum, it must not aim just at meeting the physical requirements of the community, but it has to aim at finding the food for mind and soul as well. Indian art was not created only to quench the aesthetic thirst of the onlooker, but the artist aspired at discovering the divinity through his creation. If this aspect is not unfolded and furthered, the museums and art-galleries will not be able to fulfil the aspirations of people. This should also be remembered that the museums also expect a reasonably good and respectable treatment from the society. People have to realise the important role played by the museums in education, healthy entertainment, useful information, protection and preservation of country's heritage. The museums serve people and the society has to ensure their proper functioning, safety and development. It is a two-way traffic, museums are for people and people are for museums.

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