

Museums and Peoples' Expectation

Sri M. C. Pande

It seems curious to speak on a topic *Museums and Peoples' Aspiration* to a group of people who are not only interested in museums but are actually engaged in museum-work. Yet, I believe that the topic under discussion is basically inherent in the larger concept of people oriented community museums which developed in the West during 1970's and 1980's under different nomenclatures like New Museology, Eco-Museology, Heritology, etc., at different places, though their objectives and functions were almost similar, i.e., development of the local community. Until then, the traditional museology was museum centric with emphasis on more and still more collections of as many varieties of objects, research and presentations and, therefore, in the beginning of 1970's when big National or Central museums have grown enormously in size and collections and reached their apex, the lesser developed communities of the world found even large museums inadequate and therefore, unsuitable due to three main reasons:

- (a) Alienated with the economic and world culture trends of the developed communities, the lesser developed communities in Norway, Portugal, Canada, etc. established their local Eco-museums with local means and initiative to quench their developmental urge.
- (b) The socio-economic crisis in some other places like Brazil, Spain, Portugal, France and Mexico, in conjunction with their respective central leadership, led some communities to develop their own small museums, based and managed locally, using their own culture, heritage and resources for the successful development of the local communities, efficiently.
- (c) Further, in several other countries like Canada, U.S.A., Scandinavia, Mexico, etc., which had social unrest due to the conflicts between majorities and minorities, the ethnic and cultural minorities founded their own ethnic museums to protect their respective identities and cultural heritage against the onslaught/influence of the dominant culture of their corresponding majority communities.

The New-Museology, also called the Heritology, deals with human heritage as a whole. The holistic approach of Prof. Solas discards the concept of presenting a fragmentary picture of life in a museum. He also refuses to divide museums into categories, such as, Art, Science or any other type depending on the emphases of the type of objects collected in each museum, as was being done prior to him. Since, no museum, howsoever big and resourceful it may be, can present the full story of life successfully, it is felt that all the traditional museums are presenting only a partial

story of man that is suiting the respective museums' workers rather than the visiting public. Effectiveness or usefulness of such presentations is only partial, to say the least. Therefore, community museums, which can effectively present limited aspirations of the local people within their limited resources of men, money, material, space and skill are more relevant, useful and successful tool for the respective communities due to the following reasons:

- (a) In a community museum local people are both the initiator and actor.
- (b) Because of local involvement of people, along-with their culture, heritage and historical remains, the community museums have become centres of development, by the community and for the community.
- (c) The main objective of the community museums being local development, all their activities of collection, research, educational exhibitions, etc. remain subservient to the development of their respective communities. Due to their special requirements, such museums do not attach themselves to any particular discipline, unlike a traditional museum.

The concept of people oriented community museums and their activities is still new to Indian situation. Still wedded to traditional museology till I retired in 1987, not much progress was made in making the museums in India people oriented. The topic of new-museology was collectively discussed for the first time in the conference of the MAI at Mysore in October 1997 and again in INC-ICOM in February 1998 at Mumbai. Though, I have no first hand knowledge of the proceedings of the two conferences, yet the papers presented therein by various museums workers have been analysed, to a great extent, by Sunjay Jain in his thesis *Marketing of Indian Museums: Theory and Application*. From Jain's analysis, it appears that the concept of community museums and their socio-educational relevance as propounded and practiced in the West is not fully understood in India.

The concept of people oriented museums developed in the West as a necessary sequel to lure common man to finance and support museum activities. For this the museum workers have had to satisfy the people about the usefulness of the museum to society. To become increasingly public friendly, museum managements have to conduct periodical surveys to gather exact information about peoples' requirements and aspirations. I wonder, if any detailed survey has been conducted by any Indian Museum. The lack of interest in gathering peoples' requirements and aspirations in India stems to my mind from two reasons:

- (a) Indian museums, by and large, run on Government Grants. So there is no compulsion on the museums to make extra efforts to woo the public for collecting funds.
- (b) The public perception is not clear in India about the utility of the museums in their neighbourhood. Over the years, the public perception of a museum has not

changed much. There are many people who still believe that a museum collects all old and odd things. The reason for such a poor perception mainly lie in our functioning as amply brought out by Sunjay Jain in his thesis referred earlier. Jain's observations and deductions are quite pertinent and effective in pinpointing the shortcomings in the approach and functioning of many Indian museums in becoming people oriented or friendly. The public remains generally ill informed, if not fully ignorant, about the museum even located nearby about its contents, activities and potential usage. Hardly there are agencies to provide basic information and create appropriate awareness about the Indian museums in the public.

Some stray efforts seem to have been made to collect information of peoples' requirements, which is not enough. Indian museums serve heterogeneous groups—specialists, not-so-specialists, laymen, both, educated and uneducated. To prove useful and relevant to all kinds of people and groups is a great challenge and for which each museum must conduct detailed socio-educational surveys in tune to the requirements and aspirations of the local community they propose to serve in Indian conditions. A museum is not a luxury. It is utilitarian necessity for the community and as such workers in each museum must strive to know and fulfil the needs and aspirations of the local people.

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