



# Museum and Museum-Like Structures:

## The Politics of Exhibition and Nationalism in India

by Jyotindra Jain

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The broad course that the Western museum has followed from its inception has been well discussed and documented, but the general histories and specific biographies of individual museums of the "Other" are less known and often hardly beyond a voyeuristic gaze at this curious institution. In the following article I shall touch upon several issues with regard to status, role, and practices of present-day museums. Though my examples will basically come from India, I hope that they will evoke some of the universal issues and debates related to the institution of museum world-wide.

### The Museum's Role in the Shifting Cultural Identity of Objects

Let me start with a few questions. To what extent does a material or embodied museum object, isolated from its cultural context, represent its own identity? Was there ever one identity or one life of a cultural object? Wasn't the object, even while being a part of a living tradition, passing through many lives? Isn't it true that "objects were not what they were made to be but what they have become? This is to contradict the pervasive identification in museum research and material culture studies which stabilizes the identity of a thing in its fixed and founded material form" (Thomas, 1991, p. 4). There are at least two contexts, if not more, in which a cultural object's identity circulates: one, the context of its use in a living culture; and two, the museum context. Both are processual and dynamic.

Richard Davis' exemplary work titled *Lives of Indian Images* (1997) draws our attention to several examples of Indian objects which had many past lives and meanings before their landing in museums. One such example is that of the third century BC stone image of the so-called Didarganj Yakshi, a celestial female, which remained buried underground until the early 20th century on the banks of the River Ganges in Bihar. The image was dug out by a villager who had no knowledge about its iconographic identity. One of the villagers installed this image under a temporary structure built as shrine, thinking it was a Hindu goddess. Soon after that D.B. Spooner, the Director of the colonial Patna Museum, identified the image as that of a *Yakshi* or a celestial female, and not a goddess, and on this pretext of a minor nuance in identification, removed it from the temporary shrine to the Patna Museum, prioritizing knowledge over belief and "art" over living practices. Davis, after Walter Benjamin, describing this shift from cult value of the villager to the exhibition value of the museum director comments:

It was their power and authority, the latent ability to impose their will by force if necessary, that enabled Spooner to dislodge the *Yakshi* from her incipient temple and relocate her in their own recently founded institution, the Patna Museum, which itself represented through its neat classifications and displays British rule over the material remains over India's past. (Davis, 1997, p. 6)

### The Cultural "Biography" of an Object

Another of Davis' examples pertains to a 12th century bronze image of Dancing Shiva, the Hindu deity which was stolen from the premises of a South Indian temple and was sold via

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*Didarganj Yakshi, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC stone image found in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Courtesy of Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.*



*Wooden figure of the Bhuta, deities and spirits of the dead. Courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, New Delhi.*

London to a Canadian collector of Indian art. Davis, using the cultural biographical method of Igor Kopytoff, looks at the journey of the image “as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meaning, and classified and re-classified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 68). He also takes into account Stanley Fish’s reader response literary theory, which validates subjective responses of readers. Using this processual approach, Davis traces the various statuses of the stolen image which include fabrication of the image in the 12th century; its consecration and installation in a temple around the same time; its removal from the temple in the times of turbulence in ca 14th century and being buried underground; its chance-finding by a local villager; its being sold and resold several times in India and abroad and finally its being smuggled out to London and from there to Canada; its remaining in

police custody for a period; and finally its return to India. Here, besides others, at least six phases of its biography are visible—as work of a craftsman, as consecrated and therefore living image for worship, as de-consecrated image buried underground, as shifted to the market and therefore acquiring a commodity status, its acquisition by a collector for display, rendering it as art object, and finally returning to India in 1991 to become a part of national cultural heritage, where it is locked up in a safe vault—neither in a temple nor in a museum.

Examples of the shifting identity of objects which have already entered the museum space too are not lacking. In his well-known analysis of the 1984-85 celebrated MOMA exhibition,



Akshardham, a Hindu temple-cum cultural complex, recently built in New Delhi. Courtesy of BAPS,\* New Delhi/Ahmedabad..

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*Primitivism in 20th Century Arts: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, James Clifford comments on the juxtaposition of certain tribal objects next to the modernist works of Picasso, Giacometti, Brancusi, etc, presumed to be inspired by the former. As pointed out by Clifford “the affinities shown at MOMA are all on modernist terms” (Clifford, 1988, p. 195). In this object system a tribal piece is detached from one milieu in order to circulate freely in another, a world of art—of museums, markets and connoisseurship. The concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either, constituting authentic ‘traditional’ worlds or appropriating their product in the timeless category of “art” (Clifford, 1988, p.200).

Briefly, the cultural object, once it enters the museum system, undergoes several “lives.” The basis for this continuous shift and conceptual reconstruction of objects as they circulate in museums and exhibitions is the curatorial interpretation. Through this possibility of interpretation and representation religious and religious-nationalist concerns have begun to play an important role in museums and museum-like structures mushrooming all over India.

### **The Development of the Museum in India**

The museum was kind of still-born in colonial India—it never took roots in the country as

other colonial institutions did—the game of cricket and the railways—they grew, they adapted, they touched the masses. Here, the institution of museum has remained more closed to its negative overtones of the German word “museal”—moribund, dead, and therefore museum-like. Instead, and enigmatically the space of museum has become a hallowed space like that of a temple where notions of communal religious and national identities began to determine their roles and functions.

In this context I am reminded of a point made by Duncan Cameron (1972, pp. 197, 201) that there are two distinct museum-related stances: the traditional one of the Museum as temple, and a newer one of the Museum as forum. To India, a country of temples, converting the institution of museum into a temple came naturally. In 1982, a large number of wooden figures of the cult of the Bhuta, deities and spirits of the dead which were discarded from a shrine in the Indian state of Karnataka, were brought to the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. As the objects were cultic figures connected with the spirits of dead persons, none of the Museum staff would agree to document or restore them. Finally one staffer accepted the job under Government pressure. When he died prematurely within a year of starting the work, his wife and several employees of the Museum attributed his demise to the wrath of the Bhuta deities. When I became Director of the Crafts

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Museum in 1984, I noticed offerings being made to these and other images displayed in the Museum by several Museum employees. Treating exhibits as objects of worship is quite a regular feature in Indian museums. Cameron could not have found a more literal example of the Museum adopting the role of a temple than this one.

Examples of the museum acting as temple of art (which was actually the point made by Cameron) are also not lacking. With the rise of museums as temples of culture, ordinary objects of everyday life, isolated from their cultural context, began to be aestheticised as art. Looking at the increasing demand for museum-like objects, the Indian craftsman began to produce replicas of such objects—lacking in function but high in decorative value. Museums began to determine the canon of aesthetic values and act as temples of art. Centuries old traditions practiced by millions of craftsmen now began to be reproduced from the museum mould.

### ***The Museum and Morality***

Of late, the museum in India is increasingly becoming a layered space with resurgent political, social, and religious interventions. In 1990, the Director General of the National Museum in New Delhi served alcohol on the museum premises to a delegation of visiting Western dignitaries to which the Government took objections on account of a certain regulation. Amazingly, a group of the museum staff even claimed that serving alcohol in a space that displayed Hindu deities violated their religious sentiment. Similarly, when the cafeteria of the same museum began to serve meat in July 2002, the Hindu nationalist brigade, represented by the All India Hindu

Council, organized a public protest and burnt effigies of the museum's director for hurting their religious feelings. The Council also demanded ritual purification of all the sacred objects and manuscripts, which were defiled due to serving of non-vegetarian food on the museum premises.

It may be noted that the majority of Hindu images displayed in the National Museum belonged to the canonical tradition which required that the cultic image be ritually consecrated before installation in a temple and be de-consecrated by another ceremony when removed. A broken image may not be worshipped. Thus, the Hindu images displayed in the National Museum were not "living images," but a type deserted by the invoked spirits and therefore not worthy of worship. Considering these and other facts, the National Museum's staff objecting to serving alcohol in a space where images of Hindu deities were displayed appears to be coloured with politically inspired, resurgent reconstruction of the Hindu nationalist and ethical ideology, one of the fora for its expression being the museum.



*A gateway to Akshardham, Hindu cultural complex in New Delhi. Courtesy of BAPS,\* New Delhi/Ahmedabad.*

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Museological practices today cannot be treated as “naturalized givens” but must be seen as “products of particular historical and cultural contexts created to serve specific interests and purposes” (Kreps, 2006, p. 459). The modern museum is increasingly becoming a site of contestation—a site for asserting social and national identities, religious fundamentalism and ethnic conflicts. As pointed out by Flora Kaplan, museums “are now widely understood as secular sites of contestation and representation, and as places where groups vied with each other to define and re-define ‘themselves’ as nations” (2006, p. 165).

#### **Museum-Like Structures**

In India today, there is a large-scale emergence of museum-like structures in the newly conceptualized temple complexes. Here imaginary, communal nationalist history is invoked and represented in specially created exhibition spaces attached to these temple complexes to gain credibility from the hallowed space of the museum. In India as elsewhere the term “museum” not only possesses an aura of depth and legitimacy with regard to history and tradition but also enjoys a certain secular claim. The museum model therefore serves well the nationalists/Hindu nationalists in appropriating a national space, which the temple with its limited sectarian appeal cannot.

Let me take an example to illustrate this new phenomenon of museum-like structures mushrooming in pockets of India.



*Child dancers stand on the steps of Akshardham dressed in the colours of the Indian national flag. Courtesy of BAPS,\* New Delhi/Ahmedabad.*

In the last decade there has been a strong resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India which is spurred by the organized channeling of global/diasporic capital and by appropriation of new media technologies of image production for spectacularizing the religious as *art*, *culture*, and *tradition* to attain communal nationalist goals. Hindus have an ancient tradition of building monumental and elaborately carved temples which goes back to more than a thousand years. The chief function of these temples was to serve as abodes of deities, where devotees worshiped and performed rituals. But of late a new phenomenon appears to alter this role and function—there is a shift of emphasis from the religion of Hinduism (temple, ritual, worship) to the culture and heritage of Hinduism (Hindu territory, values, language, art, history, and nation). This shift is politically motivated and employs exhibitory and museum-like structures attached to temples to attain communal nationalist objectives.

I shall examine one of these newly built religio-cultural complexes in Delhi to demonstrate how the colonial institution of museum as repository of art and culture, which never took root in India, has begun to find other uses—sectarian and political in nature with strong nationalist concerns. Akshardham is one such Hindu temple-cum cultural complex, recently built in New Delhi by a branch of an 18th century neo-Hindu sect of Swaminarayan, which emphasizes the revival of the ancient Vedic/Aryan religion and culture. Spread over a hundred acres of

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prime urban land in Delhi on the eastern bank of the River Yamuna, the complex was opened in 2005. This massive temple complex claims not so much to be a shrine as a “cultural complex (which) brilliantly showcases India’s glorious heritage through its ancient tradition of art, architecture and wisdom” (publicity brochure of the complex). Almost 75% of the space of the complex is devoted to exhibitions which are celebrated as examples of embodiment of India’s cultural heritage.

Remarkably, the complex which flaunts the notion of Indian art, culture and heritage, actually interprets the history and culture of India through the lens of a grossly sectarian, distorted, and imaginary view of Hinduism, and then casts the nation from this mould as a Hindu nation. Let me briefly examine the museological strategies employed to this objective. The museum effect of the temple is regularly underlined by constantly publicizing its 234 carved pillars, 9 domes, 20 spires, 20,000 stone images, etc. Several large halls have exhibitions on the sect’s history with life-like figures animated by audio-animatronics. An electronic boat ride tells the “history of India” from ancient to modern times through virtual reality scenes assigning to ancient India the knowledge and practices of democracy, laws of gravity, aeronautics, atomic science, embryology, astro-physics, etc.—all in modern scientific terms—but remarkably excluding any reference to the Islamic history of India or the colonial period or Christianity. Similarly, the *Garden of India* exhibition showcases India’s great men and women, strategically excluding non-Hindu personalities.

This con-fusion of the sectarian with the national, through museological techniques

becomes evident when on the evening of the inauguration of the complex a group of child dancers dressed in the colours of the Indian national flag formed a tableau in the form of the Indian tri-colour amidst the national song intercepted by praises of the sect itself.

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Let me sum up in the words of Flora Kaplan:

Material representations of traditionality and age help to legitimate an ethnic group’s claims to unique identity and political power and to their attempt to create a sense of unity among themselves. This is a major reason why the creation of a museum is often seen as vital to those groups seeking wider visibility in order to be granted political rights, autonomy or “national” status. (Kaplan 2006, p.153)

The emergent museum-like structures described above are not a part of the mainstream museum culture of India. The institution of museum never took roots in the country, in the sense that they never attracted public attention in large measure. On the other hand, the aura and the visual impact of the museum is being utilized by certain sectarian groups for ideological propaganda. These ideologues are also questioning certain representations of their sects in the mainstream museums. The museum space is continuously being negotiated between the nationalist, sectarian, and aesthetic considerations. ✨

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**\*Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, the organization that built Akshardham.**

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