

## **Infinity on Trial : The Notional Museum**

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*Inside the museum, infinity goes up on trial  
this is what salvation looks like after a while*

Bob Dylan, 'Visions of Johanna'

In many Indian languages, the word for ghost, *bhoot*, is also a word for the past, as well as for the material substance of things. Following from this, we could say - "if history is a ghost story, it must also lay the foundations of a metaphysics of the future".

Orhan Pamuk calls museums apparatuses for turning time into space. The space of most museums takes up a lot of time. As one of the three members of a collective art practice that often enters a museum through the back door, or the 'staff entrance', while installing art work, or researching objects and documents in the basement or storage area, I have known what it takes to be reduced to near insignificance in the sprawling labyrinth of most museums. It is for this reason that I am drawn repeatedly, sometimes in actuality, at other times in memory, to a re-viewing of a sequence in Jean Lucy Godard's film - *A Bande Apart*, in which two men and a woman run breathlessly through the halls and corridors of the Louvre in Paris, past masterpieces and their guards, who look on, as if puzzled by the trio's effort to escape. Whenever I see this clip, usually on Youtube or in dreams, I am reminded of my collective's repeated transit and sojourn through museums. I wonder what we are running from, and what we are running towards. I wonder who or what gives us chase.

Does this mean that a ghost of the past is always threatening to catch up with spectres from the future somewhere in the corridors of a museum? Would admitting to such a possibility amount to turning a museum into somewhat of a hybrid between a reliquary, a haunted house, a laboratory and a time machine? If a museum time-machine could take us into a future, what kind of past must it leave behind? What are we escaping?

Colloquially, a museum was once also called a *jaadu-ghar* (magic house) or an *ajajib-ghar* (house of strangeness) in many South Asian languages, which comes directly from the sense

of museum as 'wunderkammer'. It is only much later, when the state grows flabby and feels that it has something to imprison by way of culture that the museum (which becomes state property) turns into a sangrahalaya - a house of collections. At its origin, the museum in South Asia was haunted by the wonder that it received from its public. And so it is towards wonder that we should turn if we are to meditate on its future.

We tend to think of museums today as conservative spaces, nervous of letting go of their authoritative interpretations of time and their hold on memory. But at their inception, conservatives detested museums for being way too radical, as apparatuses that tore art and culture out of its often originally sacred context, desacralizing it, and turning it into objects of secular, abstracted contemplation. What seemed like iconophilia to the enraptured secular museum visitor in front of an ex-religious and now pristinely aesthetic artefact, could appear as iconoclasm to the traditionalist. In time however, these newly inaugurated modern 'secular' spaces began to resemble medieval churches and cathedrals, and even ancient temples. The art historian Carol Duncan even spoke of the museum as a space of ritual. The hushed silences in a museum begins to acquire a monastic character, and its pedestals begins to resemble altars. The injunction not to touch the works of art, with which every museum admonishes every visitor, effectively remove their collections from the plane of everyday life where they may have once belonged to a transcendent supra-sensory realm, seemingly outside time and history, even though they are dated and annotated to the t. The museum becomes a factory for the processing of the the sacred into the profane, and that which was once sacred and is now rendered profane is then transformed back into a new, exalted kind of spectral, sacred, secularity. Even today, the National Museum in Delhi, which houses a relic of the Buddha in its Buddhist Art Gallery, has to 'manage' the frequent prostrations of visitors who turn suddenly into pilgrims. It has to find ways to dispose of votive offerings to the relic. The museum may have begun as one thing, but somewhere along the way, it turned into quite another.

As Bob Dylan tells in his nasal twang - 'this is what salvation looked like, after a while'.

It is not surprising then that middle class and petit bourgeois households the world over, but also especially in Indian metropolitan cities and small towns began curating a portion of the wall space of their twentieth century living rooms and parlours into mini-museums in an effort to purchase a dram of transcendence, ensconced nicely within domesticity. The glass fronted 'showcase' - a vitrine boxed into a wall, with a few shelves for the storage and display

of knick knacks, souvenirs, trophies and sacred and secular icons became the notional museum of the new citizen's home. If the 'national museum' in the nation's capital became the reliquary of the nation's top ten relics, then the notional museum of the drawing room showcase became the middle class family's display platform for everything from grandfather's portrait to grandson's medal, with a replica Taj Mahal, a film's star's autographed face, a sea shell and a doll or animal figure denoting the marginal presence or increasing absence of some unfortunate indigenous population at a safe distance from the metropolitan family's tryst with modernity.

Sometimes, this tension between different kinds of sacredness writ large in the museum can have interesting consequences. We know for instance that the early medieval Tamil Shaivite devotional poet Nandanar was forbidden to even glimpse the icon of *Siva*, the god he was devoted to, because he belonged to an untouchable caste. When Nandanar mustered the courage to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the famous Chidambaram temple in Madurai, the mere fact of having gazed upon the idol caused him to disappear into the image. Vision rendered the seer invisible. Today, there are many resplendent Chola Bronze *Natarajas* (dancing figures of Siva) in the national museum. A twenty first century Nandanar can walk in their presence without being rendered invisible. A dalit man or woman can enter the museum, and encounter an icon they were forbidden to be in the presence of even a mere hundred years ago. Does the person who enters as the museum as a Dalit, exit it also as an untouchable? Something causes the acts of seeing, the status of what is seen, and the identity of the person who does the seeing, to be transformed by the many new and different ways in which vision itself is produced within the museum. The accumulation of these acts of seeing incrementally generates a new set of futures. The person who enters the museum as a Dalit may exit it by changing what is seen in the museum. That alteration transforms the viewer as much as it reconfigures what is seen.

If you leave the museum a different person from the one who entered it, what happens to the person that was you when you entered. Do they get left behind? Does he or she get trapped like a ghost would in the museum machine, wandering the labyrinth like a threadless Theseus, chasing, and being chased by a phantom Minotaur? Is that why, when alone in a room in a museum, you always feel that there are eyes watching you, and they do not belong only to the icons on display, or the security cameras, or the docent asleep in the chair in the corner? Could it be that we leave little fragments of our discarded, unaltered consciousness to hover and watch over each other in museums ?

Museums change the stories we tell about ourselves. All the time.

As it happens, Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, the first native born Assistant Curator of the Indian Museum in Calcutta (which opened its doors in 1814) was also an avid collector and writer of Bengali ghost stories. If museums are populated by the past, (as Trailokyanath knew only too well) then it also takes a teller of ghostly tales like him to leave us with the possibility that haunting might also be a means with which to face the future. At least that is what comes across if we tune into some of the more absurd amongst Trailokyanath's ghost stories. Here, in 'Muktomala' or 'The Pearl Necklace' we have a ghost, a skull-goblin-betaala that puts people to the test. The betaala says -

'Listen, we are betalas. We are out of tune and out of time .We like puzzles and problems, riddles and rhymes. If I give you a tough nut to crack, a really difficult problem, can you solve it like the great King Vikramaditya did when faced with our illustrious predecessor, the areat Betal of the twenty five riddles"

The story goes on. The narrator admits -

'No sir ! I don't have that ability. I am just an ignorant bumpkin . I don't know how to solve riddles or to tell stories.'

....Then skull-betal frowned and said, "You cannot answer riddles, you cant spin a decent yarn. You're good for nothing. But you'd still want me to knock my skull against my neighbour's ghost bones. What nonsense is that ? '

Supposing we read this little exchange as a parable, and supposing we said that the story was basically an allegorical treatment of the interrogation of a museum curator by the objects in his custody. Then, we could say that the objects were basically asking the curator - "Look at us, and tell us what you hear when you find our bones knocking against each other in the vitrines."

What indeed can one hear under the crackle of different epochs rubbing up against each other in a museum collection? Does it tell us a story in which all the pieces fit neatly together like a solved jigsaw puzzle? Or is the story it tells an amalgam of serrated, uneven, uneasy

edges ?

The state of our museums today points us in the direction of dusty but completed jigsaw puzzles. They offer a banal pattern of civilizational greatness, of continuity, of a pattern that culminates in the nation state's embrace of the infinity of time past.

What do i mean by this? Let me try and think through an example from the collection of the National Museum in Delhi.

Every time I visit the National Museum in Delhi, I am drawn to a small ten and a half centimeter long cast bronze figurine in the Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization gallery located in the ground floor. I think it speaks in whispers, not just to me, but to everyone who might care to stop and listen instead of just walking by . I am referring to the object indexed as Acc. No. HR- 5721/195, commonly known as 'The Dancing Girl' found by the archaeologist D.R. Sahnii in 1926-27 in a broken down house in the 'ninth lane' of the area designated as HR of the Indus valley citadel of Mohenjodaro.

Not far from the glass case where this object is kept lie the skeletal remains of a woman from an Indus Valley site. The bones are arranged as if they have just been exposed during a dig. Looking at the aslant jawbone of the exposed skeleton I cannot help thinking to myself about the possibility that the bones miniature woman in bronze may be an actual portrait of a human being. I know, that somewhere in the National Museum in Karachi, Pakistan, there is another bronze figure, numbered DK- 12728 found by Ernest Mackay in 1930-31 in the late level II of Harappa in Room 81, House X, Block 9 of the area of Harappa designated as DK-G. DK - 12728 in Karachi is a twin of HR- 5721/195 in Delhi, and is somewhat unfairly nicknamed the 'ugly sister'. Could these two tiny women in bronze, locked behind glass in two national museums, now separated by a militarized border, have been modeled after two actual human beings, who lived, loved, danced, breathed and died like human beings always do? Could their mitochondrial DNA still be coursing through many women alive today, burning calories into energy in countless cells. Could there be a tantalizingly unbroken chain of causes and consequences that directly link the present realities experienced by human beings today to that distant past. Could our distant 'past, which was the actual 'present' of two women in an Indus valley citadel, who may or may not have been sisters, work its way into what would become the remote, scattered 'future' inheritance of a four and a half some thousand year old material culture?

The National Museum website lists No. 5721/195 as "One of the rarest artefacts world-over" and goes on to describe it as "...a unique blend of antiqueness and art indexing the lifestyle, taste and cultural excellence of a people in such remote past as about five millenniums from now, the tiny bronze-cast, the statue of a young lady now unanimously called 'Indus dancing girl', represents a stylistically poised female figure performing a dance."

The word that strikes me most in the above description is 'unanimously'. We are not told how and why the curators of the National Museum divined that the figure is now 'unanimously' a dancing girl. The archaeologist who excavated her, John Marshall, spoke of the 'insouciant' gesture of the standing female figure. Another British Archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, even spoke of her 'Balochi style face with pouting face and insolent look in her eyes'. Gregory Possehl said of the statuette - "We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it".

Recently, the narrative around the woman of 'ninth lane' of Mohenjo-Daro has morphed again. The contemporary desire to see everything in ancient South Asia reflected through the lens of resurgent Hindutva has led a new kind of historian, unencumbered by the embarrassment of having to furnish evidence to claim that object No. 5721/195 is an early form of the later Hindu goddess Parvati.

A museum ensures that a ten and a half centimeter figurine can be the bearer of an archaeologists fantasy as well as the vehicle of a religious revivalist's wet dream. The museum offers the object to each visitor, curious or not, prejudiced or not, with a pretended equanimity. Each constructs a different future from the same past. The moment that arrests a turn in a nautch girl dance step for one scholar becomes a goddess with one arm akimbo for another interpreter. Occasionally, It can also be the more sober bearer of a poet's reflection. Here, for instance, is yet another twist in the tale of the four and half thousand year young woman in bronze.

The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali wrote a terse encomium to object No. HR - 5721/195. It is titled, simply, and appropriately, 'At the Museum'. Agha Shahid Ali asks, as if interrupted mid sentence, in the first of twenty odd hemistiches -

But in 2500 B.C. Harappa,  
who cast in bronze a servant girl?  
No one keeps records  
of soldiers and slaves.

The sculptor knew this,  
polishing the ache  
Off her fingers stiff  
from washing the walls  
and scrubbing the floors,  
from stirring the meat  
and the crushed asafoetida  
in the bitter gourd.

But I'm grateful she smiled  
at the sculptor,  
as she smiles at me  
in bronze,  
a child who had to play woman  
to her lord  
when the warm June rains  
came to Harappa.

A poem turns Mohenjodaro into Harappa, as it easily might turn Delhi into Lahore, and the display of one museum into the storage of another. Ghosts are shape shifters. Bones get mixed up when you dig for them. The museum is a crime scene waiting for the patient detective and the poet of the future.

Whereas all museums are repositories of objects that are forgotten, either because they are too well known or not known at all, or of that needs to be remembered, the museum itself is hardly ever treated as an object in its own right. We need to wonder about what a museum is, in order to think about what it yet may be. We need to stare at the showcase inset into the walls of our homes for a very long time to understand who we became as we arranged each souvenir.

The museum is more than just a storehouse. Like I said, it is also the scene of a crime. In our time, in India especially, the museum transforms objects that gather to it into pieces of evidence in the case of the honour killing of civilizations at the hand of nationalism. This takes the form of transforming things we do not know much about, like a bronze figure of a naked young woman, into an idea that some of us simply won't let go of - that the Indus Valley was settled by 'Vedic' Aryans.

But this case, like so many others, has been fixed in advance. The museum has turned into more than a crime scene of strangled artifacts. It is now also the courtroom where the trial of the nation for the murder of the infinitude of material cultures leads to acquittal. What gets written into the trial's proceedings, becomes the nation's new ancestral narrative. This is what the museum today puts out as knowledge, as history. We are told that our ancestors will save us. The museum pronounces this salvation in an effort to appease the ancestral spirits. And at home, we light incense in front of grandpa's portrait on the occasional new moon.

But no matter what a museum puts out as its story, this is never going to happen. The ghosts in the museum, and in the show case are not at peace. They cannot be. They are planning revolts. The question of the future of the museum is also a question about the way the past will not let itself lie low when confronted with stabilizing narratives.

Consequently, there is a crying need for museums , or museum like spaces, that also propose to anticipate all that is yet to come, instead of just doing retrospectively forensic acts of cosmetic makeover. The museum as an institution needs to look ahead towards the riddles that it will be best by tomorrow. By doing this, museums will help us to undertake the difficult task of remembering to make room for what we do not yet know. Our ignorance will always be miles ahead of our knowledge.

Museums need to admit a certain amount of necessary ignorance into their corridors and galleries. By ignorance, I do not mean false knowledge, or pretended certainties. I mean the acceptance of the fact that our knowledge of the past is incomplete. I argue for this acceptance not to tarnish what is certain, but to remember that a great deal about the past is, and will always remain a mystery, and so the drawing up of clear conclusions is an act of myth-making, post factum. The museum that spells out everything knows nothing. It does not know that it does not know the past. We may know the ambitions of our grandfathers, but we



do not know the secret desires of our grandmothers.

The museum of the future will be a philosophical playground

The museum of the future will be a theatre for the rehearsal of unrealizable historical propositions

The museum of the future will be a crime scene perpetually under investigation

The museum of the future will be a workshop for the repair of broken enquiries

The museum of the future will be a garage for unlikely transports between ages

The museum of the future will be a warehouse for the storage of unresolved questions

The museum of the future will be a terminus where the trains from tomorrow will arrive on time today

The museum of the future will be a spaceship for journeys into inner space and outer time

The museum of the future will be an agora where solitude will be exchanged for solidarity

The museum of the future will be a hospice where dated concepts will go to leave the world in peace

The museum of the future will be a club house for retired civilizing missions

The museum of the future will be a studio for those who don't yet know they are artists

The museum of the future will be a hothouse for the cultivation of rare life forms of the mind

The museum of the future will be a hideout for fugitive good ideas

The museum of the future will be a penitentiary for cultural arrogances

The museum of the future will be a school for unlearning identitarian formulae

The museum of the future will be a library of misunderstood wall texts

The museum of the future will be an archive of forgotten proclamations about all that needs doing

The museum of the future will be a calendar of historical missed opportunities

The museum of the future will be brothel for glamorous defeats and discounted victories

The museum of the future will be a switchboard for art forms, memories and histories to connect, disconnect and reconnect with each other and their extant or yet to be publics.

The museum of the future will be more of a notional and less of a national museum.

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NOTES and SOURCES for this essay

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