

The Dancing Girl

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For me the problematic of the museum took shape when I read Jean Paul Sartre referring to the Louvre as 'the department store of French culture'. That is when I really began thinking about museums. Until then there was this notion of an institution which, obviously, is central to any nation building project, carrying with it all the problematics of nationalism within it, but remaining at the margins of people's consciousness. At least, in societies like India, one is made to look at it as an institution with a halo. For example, if I'm a visitor to Delhi from the hinterland, I'll be given a list of places to go to. Number one may be the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President's residence. Number two will be the Parliament House which, of course, is the temple of Democracy. And the third is always the National Museum because that's what gives you your identity. That's what shapes you, tells you why you're Indian and how you're Indian and how old you are and what your context is and so on. So this is kind of drilled into you, even from school days. It is a kind of formation exercise. It, therefore, produces an aura. Even in your imagination, you encounter the museum as a place with some aura. You enter it as if you're going into a church or a temple with a certain reverence and all those objects speak to you as the important building blocks of your past; almost like the DNA of your past. And you seldom are forced to ask questions about what its relevance is, besides its special location within your own nationalist premise. For me, this was the sort of space the museum occupied for a long time. Until one begins asking questions about the connection between museum and memory. Is history a project of memory? Is that memory constructed through an agency called archaeology? Is therefore the museum a corollary of archeology? Supposing there was no archaeology, can a museum be valid? And so on.

It's like a chain of interconnections and, in the Indian context, it becomes fairly complex. The idea of archaeological practice here is well documented in the editions of 'The Indian Antiquary' from 1872 and the Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of India from 1902. The ASI itself, set up in 1861 by Alexander Cunningham, was a clearly colonial enterprise. Much of it starts with what is called the 'noble intention' to find 'our common human heritage'. But when we look back now on 150 years of the ASI experience and we scan the material they put together in those volumes, we hear the patronizing tone. We realize that here was a civilizational project the colonial enterprise set up; and that the practice of archaeology and its corollary of sequestering all that material into specific kinds of reserves and collections and housing it, etc. were all part of the idea of looking at a 'primitive' people

and, in the process, 'civilizing the savage'. Its intention is clear and is not at all masked. Today, when we look back, it's clear that it was a patronizing act.

So it's within this context that the museum has been functioning here and one has therefore been looking critically at practices of archaeology. I won't go into that now because it's a different story altogether. But it leads me, for example, to the idea of examining a single museum object for re-configuration. The 'Dancing Girl' of Mohenjodaro. There is an interesting story connected with it. The archeological excavation happened between 1921 and 1929, conducted by the prominent archaeologist John Marshall. It came up with many marvels. Besides the buried site of an ancient city which had its sewerage and drainage system, the Great Baths and common kitchens, it also brought up a certain language (*Brahmi*), which we still have not been able to fully decipher. While the pictograms of Pharaonic Egypt have been deciphered we still have not fully deciphered the lovely Mohenjodaro and Harappan seals which are exhibited in the National Museum.

Many other objects too were found. There's the bust of an anonymous thick-lipped, bearded male and now, of course, everyone is comparing him to Narendra Modi. But all these objects and artefacts are neutrally named. The Harappan seals are neutrally named. There is a figure seated in a yogic position with a headgear of bull horns, who has been called *Pashupati*. He's supposed to be the image of some ancient Shiva or a proto-Shiva if you want. But most of them are neutrally named. There is no labeling of the objects, informed with contemporary knowledge. Except this statuette of a 4.1" tall girl. She is standing in this very common posture in India, called the *tribhangi*. To be comfortable while standing, you distribute your weight by thrusting your hip in one direction and your torso in the other in a counter movement. It's a very common posture you see on the streets. This could be any woman standing at a bus-stand or in front of an ATM machine awaiting her turn. But she alone was named 'the dancer'. [Of course, in a recent twist which is a bigger travesty, a right-wing scholar, Prof. Thakur Prasad Varma has, in the journal 'Itihas' (History), chosen to re-christen the statuette as *Parvati*, the consort of *Shiva*].

Why did the archaeologists name her 'the dancer'? This is where the story gets interesting. The period coincides with the time when a rousing public debate was raging in India over women dedicated to dance in temples – a community called *devadasis*, belonging to the isai vellala caste. Since the 1870s, the Victorian government had been making noises about the

'obscenity', 'immorality' and 'primitiveness' of these female dancers. They found it completely unacceptable. Social circumstances were changing. The *devadasis*, who earlier danced in temples, moved to the courts when temple patronage declined in the 17th century. It was this courtesan dance that met with British disapproval. Through their financial hold over the princely states within the British Raj, they intervened and persuaded the royal courts to stop patronizing the dance. The dancing women were reduced to penury. Many of them slipped into sex work. Their numbers were not small. There are some accounts which put the number of *devadasis* around the Tanjore temple in the late 19th century at over 28,000. They were trained in dance and music. They were entertainers, performers, singers and were all over the sub-continent, in Lucknow, Lahore, Calcutta, Chittagong, Bhuvaneshwar or Pune. Their moving on to the streets subsequent to the withdrawal of royal patronage led to a certain moral outrage. Towards the end of the 19th century, already a new 'nationalist' urban middle class was emerging in India who exhibited a moral outrage at these, what were deemed, immoral practices.

This led to a distancing from the *devadasis*. In the year 1930, a bill was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council called the 'Devadasi Abolition Bill', a call for reforms within the practice as well as its erasure. The *devadasis* were universities of extraordinary knowledge and practices, but here was a call for their being banned. The move was, in fact, led by a woman, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, from the very same community, who had returned after studying medicine at Cambridge. She was made to be the mouthpiece of this movement against the *devadasi*. There was not a day in major Indian cities with well-known publications and newspapers when this was not a front page story. 'Today there was a demonstration against so-and-so *devadasi* dancing at so-and-so place'. 'Today, so-and-so person spoke out against the *devadasi* system.' [It could be Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Madanmohan Malaviya or Ramaswami Naicker. Every day in the newspapers this was front page news. It was a raging debate.

In 1926, the excavators Ernst Mackay and D.R. Sahnii at Mohenjodaro find this little figurine. The only association they can make of her is with a dancer. Their mind is crowded with the daily news reports on dance and dancers. It's one of those moments of suggestive transference. They don't know if it's a dancer, they have no proof; they have not found the remains of a performance space in Mohenjodaro; there are no depictions of anything akin to dance there; but they promptly name the female figurine a dancer. John Marshall added weight to it with the following cheesy description of the figurine: "A half-impudent posture,

and legs slightly forward as she beats time to music with her legs and feet.” What it helped to do, and that is the crux of what I’m trying to say (and that is why this figurine finds a very important place in the National Museum), is that it helped in the ‘invention’ of a tradition. Suddenly, Indian dance became 5000 years old. Until then the evidence of Indian dances was derived from Ajanta frescos or temple sculptures. That evidence took us, maybe, 2000 years. We have a written text, the *Natya Shastra*, which too is dated somewhere around there. But suddenly, here is evidence that not only our civilization, but even our dance, is among the oldest in the world. It pre-figured the civilization of the colonial ruler by millennia. So that became an argument.

The irony was delicious. On the one hand, was a movement to abolish the *devadasi* and, on the other, the discovery of this figurine politically reified the dance, gave it antiquity and transported it 5000 years back and made it ‘national heritage’. Interestingly, just around that time, a Brahmin scholar in Madras (now Chennai) tried to present a *devadasi* performance before an august assembly. He was prevented from doing it due to the moral censor. Incensed, he decided to learn a few dance pieces from the *devadasis*, cross-dressed and performed himself. He’s the one who cleaned up and sanitized the form, edited out erotic elements and re-invented the *sadir* or *dasi-attam* as Bharatanatyam. A wholly new dance got invented in 1929. This is an interesting sequence of events, from 1926 to 1929, where just one artifact, one object, which now finds a pride of place in the national museum, created and invented an entire new tradition for us, an entire new past for us. Of course, a false past.

But even post-Independence, we’ve not had the courage to look back at it, question it, challenge it. The Devadasi Abolition Bill became a full-fledged Act in Oct 1947, months after India gets Independence. The birth of the Indian nation state is on the censored bodies of these practicing artists. From that point, the *devadasi* was invisibilized. They just vanished into thin air. You don’t find them anymore in public. You won’t find a *devadasi* singer or a dancer anymore. They have all gone into the IT industry or business management or whatever, but they have vanished.

So now, for me, this object becomes the trigger for a possible re-inquiry into a very recent past. But, in that recent past, we’ve managed to obfuscate and confuse a lot of things. We’ve managed to invent a tradition which is totally hollow and false. So I’m thinking – the National Museum is not going to loan out this figurine – have the dummy or a replica of the ‘dancing

girl' taken from city to city. A travelling museum of just one object. Go to centers where dance is prominent and start a debate and dialogue on what our past is. Now every dancer, Indian classical dancer, loves to say 'Our dance is 5000 years old.' It will be interesting to use this material to probably prove that your dance is in fact a modern dance. It's a contemporary dance. It was invented in the year 1929 and you can, in fact, work with it to deal with contemporary themes and contemporary society. So, along with pedagogy, along with information, along with re-investing into it new meanings, we can also bring a critical debate onto what the old information has erased from public memory.

This is the possible kind of work, I think, one can do with select museum objects in a public space. Otherwise for me, like Neil Postman said, the museum is a space for dialogue. Then no matter where it is, whether it's a brick and mortar building or an open space, whether it's an institutionalized activity or voluntary activity, it has to be a space for dialogue. It cannot be a space for closed meanings and clichés. I would therefore, in the spirit of this 'dancing girl' pick up something familiar – which seems familiar because we've encountered it in school and college texts, etc. – pick up something familiar and make it unfamiliar. And thereby recover the past, and move towards the future with a completely clean slate, cleansing the debris and baggage of the past.