

A Public Failure? Museums and Audiences in India

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Throughout their entire career in the subcontinent, museums have been framed within a discourse of failure. At times, it is the authorities that are accused of failing museums by not offering them adequate support; at other times it is the museums that are denounced for functioning poorly. At yet other times, the accusations of failure accumulate around a third party: the visitors to the museum, who constitute the public and whom the museum is supposed to address. In this context, we frequently hear the criticism that museums have failed to serve their public. But can the public too fail the museum? What is the role of the public in a museum, and how can they “fail” at it? What kinds of “failure” discourses have been attached to the connection between Indian museums and their publics, and what can we learn from them? This brief essay is a preliminary attempt to outline some of the complex issues surrounding these themes.

The International Committee on Museums – the United Nations’ nodal organization for museums – defines museums thus:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

It is worth noting the number of times a viewing public is invoked in this definition of the museum. The museum is *in service of society*; it is *open to the public*; it must *communicate and exhibit* (to viewers), for their *education, study and enjoyment*. The artefacts in its collection, the scholarship of its curators, the grandeur of the museum’s edifices, are all only one side of the coin. All of these are meaningless without the public in whose name things are collected, preserved and displayed, for whom the great buildings are built, and for whom its exhibits are laid out. It is this idea of the public presence and the obligation towards public service that marks the difference between the museum and its sister institution of the archive. For although both institutions are committed to collecting items of importance and preserving them for the *longue duree*, and both position themselves as centres of research and knowledge-production, the archive unabashedly is a space for specialists while the museum, however arcane its contents may be, is meant to be a space for public display. When an archive restricts entry to preserve its contents it is considered acceptable practice; if entry to a museum is barred, it is likely to provoke angry protestations. This suggests that while the archive is “about” the things that are in it, the museum is not as much about its things as the people who come to see the things. Archives are embedded in a discourse about institutional

obligations to the preservation of its collections while museums are embedded in a discourse of people's rights of access to its collections.

Scholars who try to trace the history of museums often trace its pre-history to the treasure-houses of churches, temples and palace. These accounts speak of the treasures of monarchs, which piled up precious objects of pecuniary and artistic value; the crypts of temples and churches filled with all sorts of valuable offerings; the curiosity cabinets of merchants filled with wondrous things from near and far. But all of these were privately held, and so while they certainly form part of the history of collecting they cannot properly be placed in the history of museums. Museums as we know them came into existence on the 10th of August, 1793 when the Revolutionary government of France threw open the gates of a French royal palace to the public. Without actually transferring ownership of the treasures within it or affecting the economic status of any of those who passed through the portals of the Louvre, this dramatic gesture managed to effect a symbolic redistribution of the treasures of the monarchy by "giving" them to the people. It was a profoundly democratic act that signaled the transformation of a subject population into citizens: ones who had privileges, and towards whom the state had an obligation as their birthright. In the subsequent wave of museum-making that followed, many European palaces voluntarily opened their doors to the people, as though to pre-empt a more violent takeover. Through this and a number of other concessions, European monarchies offered their subjects partial sense of citizenship. Many of the fictions that serve as the underlying ideology of the museum to this day can be traced back to this moment. These include the idea that museums "hold their collections in trust" for the people; now reframed as "heritage" the museum's treasures are declared to "belong" to the people, deflecting the question of ownership; now precious objects should be valued not for their monetary worth but their "transcendent cultural value," an abstract and numinous quality.

Since museums are made, held and maintained in the name of the people, museums are inextricably tied to publics – and to ideas of and about publics. As this idea took hold, a public that was increasingly self-conscious about its rights began to demand entry to hitherto inaccessible collections, insisting it wanted to see the collections of seeds, fossils and lumps of minerals that had been part of many scholarly collections. Under public pressure, scholarly collections like the British Museum (which at the start was primarily a natural history collection) were forced to open their doors to ordinary people. At the same time, then an increasing number of state authorities saw how they could use museums to their advantage: they sought to make museums and lead publics to them so that they could be educated in ways that they deemed appropriate. Museums became an important part of the apparatus of Victorian social engineering, and to their working-class audiences they were expected to

deliver lessons on industriousness, discipline, good taste and hygiene. In either formulation – entry demanded by right or firmly encouraged by the state -- museums and publics were intertwined. Inevitably, when museums arrived in India, the question of publics would arrive with it.

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In India the museum derives from a colonial knowledge-gathering project. From the late 18th century, as colonial officers surveyed their new territories, the information they gathered often took physical form: as botanical and geological specimens, as slabs of inscribed stones as piles of manuscripts, as the dress, ornaments and skulls of different ethnic types. Believing that this motley collection would one day assemble an *Encyclopedia Indica*, servants of the East India Company persuaded their employer to establish a museum to house and care for these objects. The India Museum, the first museum that took India as its subject, was located in London in the East India Company's headquarters, where a London public came to gaze upon these specimens interspersed with the arms and jewels that formed the Company's growing collection of loot seized in military victories in India.

Even as some colonial officers sent the objects that they gathered to London, others formed scholarly associations within India, whose premises too began to fill up with items of their research. The Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1784; the Madras Literary Society was founded in Madras (now Chennai) in 1812; and a similar group in Bombay (now Mumbai) in the 1840's. While similar to the collection exhibited in London, in India these remained the preserve of small circles of scholars. This was not by design. In fact, many of these societies had appealed to the Company to take over their collections which had grown too large for them to maintain, but the East India Company was uninterested in forming public museums in India, and the requests of these societies fell upon deaf ears.

It was only in the aftermath of the great Uprising of 1857, after the Crown took power from the East India Company, that this began to change. Eager to placate the Indian public by signaling its difference from Company rule, the Raj embarked upon conspicuous reforms that would mark it off as a more benevolent authority. Along with many other policies and reforms designed to exhibit pastoral care, this phase of British rule had a marked impact upon the field of museums. A surge of museum-building swept across Indian territories in the second half of the 19th century. The scholarly collections started by amateurs in the late 18th and early 19th centuries finally gained government support and were housed in majestic new buildings in the principal cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Dozens of new museums were established in the great cities and lesser towns of British India.

As soon as the museums were opened to the public, Indian audiences entered them, and they did so in prodigious numbers. In 1895, the Keeper of the Madras Museum Edgar Thurston noted that 36,500 visitors had come to his museum on a single day.¹ Nineteen years later in 1914, the Jaipur-based surgeon and crafts revivalist T. H. Hendley reported that the Madras Museum had over 400,000 visitors the previous year while the Imperial Museum, Calcutta, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in Bombay had more than *twice* that number. At the time, these were the largest museum attendance figures in the world, surpassing the figures even for the British Museum in the same year.²

What allure could the museum hold for this vast audience who flocked to it? Did it allow them a glimpse of fabulous treasures? Was it arranged to delight and instruct them, to bring them the wonders found in faraway lands? Oddly, it did none of these things. The new museums established by the government were not built for 'the gratification of occidental curiosity, or the satisfaction of aesthetic longings,' we are informed by policy documents of the time. Instead, they were made to support '... a development of a trade in (Indian) products.'³ Museums set up in the first fifty years of the Raj era were primarily Economic or Industrial museums which were to collect information about any item or process in India that had a potential use. Minerals and metals which could be mined; soil, different types of which could support different crops; timbers, useful for furniture or construction; flowers whose essences yielded perfume or medicine; insects, which produced silk or honey or wax or dye... nothing was without economic possibilities. The museum would display a sample of each resource, along with maps showing their occurrence and charts describing techniques for their extraction. The prodigious craft skills available in India were no less a resource to exploit than minerals or fertile soil. To this end, local officials were urged to collect samples and document the natural and human resources in their regions which they were to send to museums in nearby towns.

At the time that these museums were being founded in Victorian India, they were proliferating in Victorian Britain as well. However, the range and purpose of museums in Britain was much broader than in India. Many economic and industrial museums were set up to help British manufacturers improve their products. At the same time, collections of fine art were opened to the public. These, it was thought, would ennoble the minds and souls of the working-class that had swelled centres of industry: the working class would soon eschew the

¹Government of Madras, Department of Education, "Administration Report of the Government Central Museum for the Year 1895-96."

² T H Hendley, 'Indian Museums,' *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, no. 125, 1914: p. 56.

³ Secretary to the Home Department, 'Note on Arrangements for Exhibitions', the National Archives of India, File 1882: Home Department Public Branch A July 188 no 157: Subject: Distribution of Business between the Home and Revenue Departments.

drinking houses in favour of 'the rapt contemplation of a Raphael.'⁴ Curiously, while the museums built by the Raj in India in the 19th c. were primarily economic museums, colonial museum-makers in India spoke of them *as though they were art museums*. Indian audiences were expected to be in some way exalted by their visit to these museums full of timber samples and lumps of rock, just as British audiences were expected to be ennobled through their exposure to Rubens and Raphael.

The public that entered the museum was clearly not addressed by it, and they found their own ways of taking pleasure in the institution. According to museum keepers in India, huge crowds of visitors swarmed all over the museum, rushing past carefully arranged galleries full of rare things only to stop and shriek out the names of what was already familiar to them – clay models of fruit, or stuffed figures of common animals and birds -- completely missing the didactic lessons laid out in the museum. "For the great mass of visitors to the museums in India, who come under the heading of sight-seers, and who regard museums as *tamasha* houses, it matters but little what exhibits are displayed," complained Thurston.⁵ J. Ph. Vogel, Keeper of the Mathura Museum, grumbled about the "constant flow of a noisy crowd" through Indian museums. Along with several other commentators, Vogel noted that the popularity of the museum among poorer, lower-caste Indians marked this as a space for their use, keeping the better class of native away from the museum. "The popularity of our museums with the lower classes has resulted in making them unpopular with the higher," he complained. "Does one ever hear of an Indian chief or leading man giving a donation to a museum or giving some valuable object on loan? I am afraid the Indian aristocracy look on the museum as something pleasing to the vulgar with which they are not concerned."⁶ Thus, although the Keepers in Indian museums took pride in the quantity of visitors their institutions attracted, they were dismayed by the quality.

What Vogel observed in 1911 continues to mark Indian museums today. Museums, along with many other public goods (such as public transport, public schools and public parks) are primarily used by those who cannot afford more expensive private alternatives. Through this, the social presence of Indian museums differs markedly from the usage patterns observed for European Museums by Bourdieu and Darbel.⁷ In Europe, Bourdieu and Darbel have famously

⁴ A 19th c authority cited in Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London 1995: p 32.

⁵ Government of Madras, Department of Education, "Administration Report of the Government Central Museum for the Year 1895-96."

⁶ Dr. J. Ph. Vogel of in *Conference of Orientalists including Museums and Archaeology Conference held in Simla July 1911*, Government of India, pp. 117-18. For a fine discussion of audiences at museums and scientific exhibitions in India, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 1999: Ch. 2.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public* (Eng. Trans.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990. See also Tony Bennett, Ch 7, 'Museums and Progress:

noted, museums were a tool of embourgeoisment, where working class or lower middle class visitors hoped to promote themselves through the acquisition of culture and taste. In India, something quite different seems to have happened: the crowds come, not to be disciplined by the museum but to enjoy it in carnivalesque fashion; they do not expect to be changed by the museum visit, but to have the liberty to enjoy themselves within it.

What allure did the museum hold for these vast subaltern audiences who were unable to read the museum's labels and were uninterested in the museum's lessons about economic resources? However pedantic the colonial museum's displays may have been, externally, it placed them in an attractive setting. Built as part of a new colonial extension of the city, the museum was often at the centre of grand civic spaces that included parks, zoos, and boulevards. The museum buildings were appealing, and sometimes flamboyant, structures, with soaring facades and fine interiors. They had the appurtenances of modernity, including running water, toilets and electric or gas light. In the museum he had established at Jaipur, Hendley noted how 'the country people who thronged the museum, especially on holidays, who were not only delighted with the exhibits but astonished at being allowed to wander at their will about the beautiful halls of the building.'⁸ Not only were they allowed to enter the museum, the institution was even hospitable to them. The displays might have remained inscrutable but entrance was kept free and open to all, and often in the parks outside were bandstands where musicians hired by the municipality would play. Many museums arranged for special zenana days, when women in purdah could visit a museum staffed entirely by female employees.

It is not generally recognized that these museums and parks were the first, and probably the only, set of attractive buildings and well-ordered public spaces in India that were accessible to all, regardless of their class, gender or caste. What an extraordinary innovation this was in India, the land of *homo hierarchus*, where access to 'public' space and facilities such as village commons, grazing lands and water sources had traditionally been highly regulated. It is salutary to remember that in India even the temple was open only to select strata of Hindus: the Temple Entry Act, which gave the lowest castes the right to enter temples, was passed nearly a decade after Independence, in 1955. The coming of the public museum to India, then, offered the country's first hospitable urban space to the poor and marginalized. And by allowing entry to all into the museum by right, the museum well may be the place that offered the Indian public its first intimations of what it means to be a citizen rather than a subject. Even at this great remove from the convulsions of Revolutionary France or the slow

Narrative, Ideology, Performance,' in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995.

⁸Hendley, op. Cit., p. 41.

and incremental growth of British republicanism, the museum still brought with it the whiff of democracy.

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In the heady years after Independence, the institution of the museum was seized eagerly by the government of the newly-minted Republic of India. It was seen as an arena for cultural representations, but for a culture whose contours had been shaped by the state in service of new narratives needed by India. These included tales of a great civilizational past that could inspire patriotism and of a plural history that could be used to demonstrate unity in diversity. As the internal map of India was drawn and re-drawn, the provinces and then the newly-formed linguistic states were given museums that celebrated their own sub-national cultural formations. Museums became an integral part of every state for Prime Minister Nehru was convinced that museums and other visual displays would be able to “speak” to the vast illiterate population who could not be reached by the written word.⁹

In the new dispensation, the public was seen as the “problem” that the museum would somehow solve. But how? Essay after essay published in the *Journal of Indian Museums* in the 50’s, 60’s, 70’s and even 80’s address the issue of the illiterate visitor. Typical of these is an essay on ‘Indian Museums and their Public’ written by the director of the Salar Jang Museum, M L Nigam. In it, the author observed that in the colonial period, “the history of India was divided into three distinct periods, viz., the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the Buddhist period with a view to make people, caste and creed conscious... to perpetuate colonial rule. With the changed political socio-economic outlook and environment of the Indian Republic, museum personnel are searching for new goals and objectives for museum research and education.”¹⁰As the state pressed the museum into its service, it had to reorient its messages to serve current national needs, but in this essay written in the 1980’s, Nigam presents this as an unresolved problem. Museums can serve the state, but it was not clear to the museologists quite how they would do so.

Even while the state was investing in the expansion of the museum network in the country, financial stringencies meant that museums, particularly the newly-built ones, would lack the architectural flourishes and ancillary pleasures that had been available in the museums built in the colonial period. Instead, in a convergence of post-War minimal aesthetics and the requirements of economy, museums would be minimalistic in their design and display, their concrete boxes holding sparsely populated vitrines that lacked context and explanation.

⁹Journal of Indian Museums, Vols 4-8. Museums Association of India, 1948: p. 120

¹⁰M L Nigam, ‘Indian Museums and their Public,’ Journal of Indian Museums vol 39, 1983: pp 43-47” p. 46.

Despite the professed interest in addressing its public anew, the museums of Independent India became entangled in contradictory impulses that made the institution less appealing, less delightful and less popular than the museums of yore.

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Today, some of the grand institutions that had been founded in the colonial period remain the most highly-visited museums in India in preference to the drab buildings of the post-colonial period. Why do these large audiences still visit museums, even when there are so many other sources of visual pleasure available today? As with much of reception studies, understanding the inner responses of museum visitors is an unrealizable dream. But in her study of lower-class audiences in Mumbai's CSMVS museum the historian Savia Viegas offered some tantalizing glimpses.¹¹ In the arms and armour gallery, Viegas found that life-size figures of (Muslim) Mughal emperors were believed by the visitors to be local (Hindu) kings Shivaji and Sambhaji, and family groups jostled to have their photographs taken next to 'their' heroes. The authoritative labels that clearly identified the armour were simply not being read by the audiences who relied on, and relayed, an oral tradition that was already in circulation about an alternative meaning of these things.

For other visitors from rural areas near Mumbai, Viegas found that the museum visit had a ritual significance. These visitors were Dalits, members of the lowest, 'untouchable' castes and followers of the great political leader Dr B R Ambedkar (1891-1956) who had urged them to reject Hinduism and to embrace the more egalitarian faith of Buddhism instead. Every year, on the occasion of Ambedkar's death anniversary, hundreds of thousands of Dalits travel from rural Maharashtra to Mumbai to pay respects at Dr Ambedkar's cremation site. Many then carry on to the museum, where they view the ancient Buddhist sculptures as 'their' heritage. A Dalit visitor said that he felt a 'violent reaction' when they saw the Brahmanical exhibits that he associated with the Hindu communities who oppress them. When he saw how the Hindu sculptures were accommodated in grand galleries while Buddhist ones were relegated to the corridors, it made him "want to vomit."¹² As this viewer travelled through the museum he too had little interest in the art historical narrative that the museum was attempting to convey. Instead, much like the audiences that had irked Edgar Thurston so long ago in Madras, who had rushed past his elaborate taxonomical displays and who paused only in front of objects already familiar to them, this Dalit visitor visited the museum to see himself in it: he was not seeking new knowledge but rather confirmation of what he already

¹¹Savia Viegas, 'Rich Men's Collections, A Nation's Heritage, and Poor Men's Perceptions: Visitors at the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India,' *Teaching South Asia*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 2001.

¹²*Ibid.*, n.5.

knew. And now, here, in the floor plan of the museum, in the hierarchy of spaces allotted to Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, he was able to see a map of his own marginality.

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Many of the discourses of failure around Indian museums arise when these Indian museums are judged by an alien yardstick. This is not to contradict many of the complaints that have been made about Indian museums, which have indeed been unforgivably passive, obfuscatory, irresponsible. But if we judge Indian museums only by their inability to perform a function that museums elsewhere are able to accomplish, we will blind ourselves to what museums in India do actually do, or the social effects that their presence stimulates. Failures are of many types, and some failures succeed in being rather interesting ones indeed.