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CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND DOCUMENTATION

PROGRESS IN DOCUMENTATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN INDIA DURING THE LAST FOUR DECADES

by R. V. Ramana

Museums comprise the collective memory of humanity and creative diversity of nature, local and exotic, depending upon their size and scope. Museums observe, analyse, preserve, study, group and display movable, tangible materials and their associated information. The collections, thus, are the cornerstones of museum activities and need to be recorded in suitable ways to meet the existing and emerging needs of the professional practices and the diverse users, making use of the contemporary technologies of information and communication. The advent, proliferation, affordability of the user friendly gadgets for communication and entertainment, combined with the concerted global efforts to bridge and reduce the gap of inequalities by providing basic needs of economy, health and education; and the phenomenon of globalization – have led to phenomenal and unprecedented exchange of people across the continents. This caused immense awareness and curiosity about other places, people and their cultures and possible interactions, collaborations and exchange of goods and services of mutual need. This rapid change which was more pronounced in the last decade of the last century in India, has become an established trend in the 21st century. As a result, till recent past it had about three generations of professionals co-existing – technology ignorant, technology aware and technology conversant professionals. Now, it has a near equal mix of the latter two categories, which will be replaced in a decade and a half by the technology savvy generation. As a corollary and other factors, there are documentation systems and practices of various kinds, at different museums and other collecting institutions. In the largest democracy and a cradle to one of the early civilizations in continuity for over the last few thousand years, it offers a great mix of opportunities and challenges to deal with its never ending and exhaustive list of cultural wealth. Further, it is a multilingual and heterogeneous society with reasonable climatic and geographic variations. In short, this article attempts to share what could be done in about the last two decades to the documentation of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible), with occasional references to the doyens, proponents and pioneers, who dabbled, perceived and promoted documentation in possible ways and a host of young, talented, informed and qualified freelancers, enthusiasts and specialists; who are contributing to this field in possible ways as individuals, assistants, writers, researchers, consultants and administrators. Also there are players from non-government organisations.

An early documentation conference in India was held in Mysore in 1973 by the national professional body named Museums Association of India. It published a monograph on this subject. A need to record the collection and to do this job properly and be informed about this activity has been a preoccupation of the native museum profession for long. About five years later i.e. by 1978, the first conference of computer documentation of museum objects is known to be held in Paris. Dr. V. H. Bedekar, then Head of

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Department of Museology at The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, the pioneering institute of this subject was a participant. A doctoral student was registered to investigate the topic Computer documentation of museum objects by early 1980s at this department. By late 1980s the National Museum of the country has initiated and explored the possibilities. But considering the expenses, stage of advancement (functional ability/ limitation) of the gadget, and the technical skills of the majority of museum personnel; these could not fructify then. Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh; was an early institution to have shown interest and achieved some success in this area by collaborating with the local division of national informatics limited.

As the above indicate the institutional and professional initiatives and systematic or concerted efforts to improvement the technical and practical matters and possibilities of documentation, Cultural Relations/ Exchanges as a bilateral diplomatic tool had been a feature of cultural matters around the same time, which also gave a fillip and enhanced the importance of documentation. Master works of art or prominent/ popular object/s of museum is a universal phenomenon. As Monalisa is symbolic of Louvre, almost every museum prides itself in one or a small number of items. Introduction and popularity of Archaeology and promulgation of antiquarian laws as a legislative punitive measures to protect monuments and antiquity in India; and also studies in Indology, developed an awareness about the importance and value of antiquity. Chance discoveries at different places, in addition to planned excavations, resulted in a variety of items, some of which became national identity and cultural epitomes. The dancing girl of Mohenjodaro at National Museum, lion capital of Ashoka at Saranath Museum, and the wisk flyer-Didarganj Yakshi; are a few examples. Transfer and transport of the last item of the above list and minor damages resulted of it, had further proved the importance of documentation and also revision of policies with regard to exchange of items and categorization of antiquities according to their rarity and cultural significance.



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In addition to art, archaeology, history, with the passage of time, items of anthropology, folk, tribal arts and crafts found place at museums which needed equal focus and authentic field data for their documentation. The sheer diversity of people and their life styles continue to elicit a lot of information, which would be useful in proper interpretation of their material in museum context. A segment of global citizens, co-exists with the isolated natives who might have never crossed the boundaries of their walkable distance. There are material items belonging to these sections that offer interesting opportunities and experiences to museums to represent their cultures. Between the above two extremes of possible lifestyles, there are nomadic people who interact and transact with other communities seasonally to sustain their pastoral living.

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A woman from the Dongria Kondh tribe watches a gathering on the foothills of the Niyamgiri mountain, which they worship as their living god, to protest against plans to mine bauxite from that mountain near Lanjigarh in Orissa February 23, 2010.

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A Rajasthani nomad girl reacts to the camera as others walk along with their donkeys on a street at Badshapur In Haryana January 31, 2010.

The increasing urbanisation, though has changed the lifestyles and entertainment options, the nostalgic feelings of ethnic and rural lifestyle, inextricable linked to seasons and farming, is occasionally revived through traditional feasts, festivity, music and dance.

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Dancers dressed in traditional attires sit on a cot during a break while taking part in rehearsals for the 'garba' dancel in Ahmedabad September 23, 2011.

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Women dance in the village temple during a pre-wedding function at Talwas village, located in Rajasthan, July 5, 2011.

Changing lifestyles due to displacement and uprooting from the native places for a host of reasons, also make some items antiques. People living close to ample sources of water bodies have practices of food, dress and hygiene dependent and influenced by it. Thus communities who wash hair everyday have special devises to segregate and dry the wet plaits of hair, which of late are becoming a rarity.

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A girl has her wet hair braided by her mother in Chennai March 17, 2011.



comb

Modern and contemporary art also came to be documented and presented alongside other forms of art. Obliteration of traditional division of work based on caste, emancipation of masses and redundancies of old practices have led to establishment of new breed of museums such as Sulabh International Toilet Museum. Also new possibilities are being explored in documentation and representation of marginalised people and their cultures.

According to Deepak Srinivasan,

Boundaries are being tested as the cultural sector moves towards reflective and collaborative practices that challenge modernist predecessor forms. Amongst

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contemporary art practitioners and gallery-based practices one sees a transition from traditionalist-modernist spaces to 'unconventional' art spaces.

Oral histories, lived histories, 'micro-histories' of practice and personal histories have all been unrecognized, termed non-consequential or with any socio-political significance. Prevalent political practice has chosen to do this despite academics and practitioners' (social workers, community workers, activists, artists) producing increasing evidence towards the necessity of these local, cultural and democratic processes in preserving and developing social space. Jatan trust, a media collective based in Madhya Pradesh, (India, <http://jatantrust.org>) has worked with 6 small districts and towns in the Hoshangabad district documenting micro-practices of culture, livelihood and social exchange. This audio-video documentation has been embedded in an interactive digital interface map. Available online as well as in the form of a mobile installation, Jatan's museum of memory consists of a documentation of possibly disappearing practices, cultural markers in globalizing rural space, an archive and an interactive "museum". **In defining the museum thus, as both collective community memory, and as digital and mobile, the traditionalist museum as a symbol of dominant history is subverted and re-utilized.**



Jatan Museum of Memories -2005. Recording oral history of Rajhar family and community.

A major shift in documentation in the country took place with the initiatives undertaken by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts and the support it received from international funding agencies like UNDP in 1994. It encompassed tangible and intangible heritage. An ancient tradition of Hindu pantheon had been transmission of knowledge of four Vedas, orally to successive generations, through chanting.

IGNCA initiated the documentation of Vedic chanting and also the documentation of elderly people of each of the communities in the North-East region of India. Recently IGNCA began to document their knowledge in resource management, dispute resolution, creation myth etc. to work on the community history of India. Coming to the overall achievements, till now, it has a digital documentation of 3 crores (30 millions) pages of literature written as manuscripts – hand written, books of 15 lakh (1.5 millions) pages, 1, 50, 000 visuals (.15 million) and audio-visuals of 1000 hours. It also collaborates with

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the allied agencies of cultural heritage in the country such as the Archaeological Survey of India. Since 1972, over 3 lakh antiquities have been registered by the ASI. The registration forms are being digitized with the photographs by the IGNCA for the National Mission for Monuments and Antiquities.

IGNCA has been trying to achieve in-situ revitalization of knowledge and conservation of the materials by the user community. It seeks to conserve intangible knowledge associated with the tangible objects, which is eroding very fast compared to the objects itself. The activities of this unique cultural institution acquire significance in a country with 5000 years old cultural history, with 28 states with diverse cultures and languages and over 1000 tribal and ethnic groups with their individual and cultural identity.

As there has been modest success with the initiatives taken and the results, a lot need to be done and completed. Documentation continues to be an important activity and play a vital role in preservation and promotion of cultural heritage of this country.

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Inside Greece, where the world's economic nightmares are born

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