

Research Paper

MUSEUMS, THE PRESERVER OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The historical values of the museums, the meaning of the word Museum, and the contents of the museum along with the things presented in it are explained. The facts about the museums are highlighted by offering suitable illustrations. The government Museum, Madras, Kanchipuram, Pudukkottai, and the Fort Museum at Vellore are all cited as examples. The importance of Art galleries, the different kinds of Museums such as the Fort St. George Museum at Chennai, the Museum maintained by the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology of the University of Madras, the Marine Museum at Mandapam, Ranganatha Swamy temple Museum at Sri Rangam etc. are also described. The various impacts and influences of the Museums in addition to their historicity are also explicated. The Museum materials assistance in the periodisation is also revealed.

Introduction

History, to be more objective, should be authentic and written on the basis of primary sources. The museums maintained by the government, the private individuals and teaching institutions are the components of the country's ancient monuments and antiquities.¹ On par with art galleries and public libraries, the Museum contents as nation's treasures² assist the portrayal of its history of different categories. It is also worth to note that museum is a "permanent institution in the service of the society and of 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 purpose of education, study and enjoyment".³ Museums not only enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment but also collect, safeguard and make the artifacts and specimens accessible to the society."⁴

The word museum

The word museum, which is derived from the Greek work "Mouseion," denotes a place or temple of Muses, the Divine patron of arts. Further a Museum is a multi purpose and multi disciplinary institution it contains materials, pertaining to Art, Archaeology, Anthropology, Geology, Zoology, and Botany etc. So the museum appeal even to the average mind and teaches things by visual expressions. The museum is a powerful media in imparting knowledge even to a common man and enables the knowledgeable preceptors to acknowledge it as a teaching aid in promoting the knowledge of history. In this regard it is worth to note that a museum devotes to the conservation of objects of historical value and illustrates facts chronologically.⁵

Being a custodian of the vast and innumerable cultural and artistic wealth, the museum with due care protects and preserves the cultural properties. For instance the Asokan lion capital is preserved in the Archaeological museum, New Delhi. The Government Museum at Cuddalore established in 1990, consists of wood carvings belonging to the 18th century and acquired from the Avinahsilingeswarar temple car, the bronze icon of Navaneetha Krishna belonging to the 13th century, the Vishwarupa Veerabhadra image datable to 13th century etc.⁶ The stone sculptures of Subrahmanya, Surya, Dakshinamurthi, Bhairava, Virabhadra,

Saptamatriask, the bronze images of Nataraja, Ganesa, the materials used by the Kattunaickkan tribe are the few collections available in the Government museum, Cuddalore and such representations of the history and culture widen the horizon of knowledge of researchers, students of history and common public.⁷ Kanchipuram, treated as one of the seven holy cities of India, the seat of Pallava and Chola monarchies, the centre of Saivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Jainism, is a centre having a Government museum, functioning from 1999. This museum contains epigraphic records, archaeological, anthropological, geological, botanical, Zoological and numismatic materials of historical importance. By visiting that museum one can have a comprehensive picture of historical and cultural importance.⁸

The Government Museum

The Government Museum, Pudukkottai, dedicated to the public in 1919 by the Tondaiman of Pudukkottai is a repository of objects of wood carvings, paintings, musical instruments, pre-historic tools weapons, ornaments, wonderful sculptures, beautiful bronzes, coins etc. Variety of invertebrates, species of birds, snakes, mammals etc. are also displayed. All of them offer a total historical glimpse of that region.⁹ They throw much light on the historical bent of mind the Tondaiman rulers of the erstwhile Pudukkottai state. The good number of the collections of burial urns, arms, tribal materials, wood carvings, sculptures, bronze images, the sculptural portraits of Sivaganga rulers not only add the glory of the museum but also testify to the contributions or the government museum, sivaganga.¹⁰ They all prove the rare qualities of the museums in the preservation of the historical sources.

The museum at Vellore Fort is yet another historically significant place. Its rare collection includes objects of art, archaeology, pre-historic tools and weapons, sculptures, bronze icons, wood carvings, coins, hero stones, a bronze double antenna, datable to 400 B.C, the ivory chess board and coins used by Vikrama Raja Singha, a Kandian king of Sri Lanka. As they are all preserved in an apt and appropriate way one could have an estimate of the values and qualities of a museum. "The number of hero stones collected from different areas in Tamil Nadu and preserved there exhibit the

cultural traits of the Tamils.” It is known for its archaeological and anthropological objects.

As they present a view of history based on the different aspects of life of man of the dead and gone glorious part they are of immense historical value. The museums' primary object is to collect and preserve objects of distinctive nature, irrespective of period. It exhibits the objects of scientific, artistic or historical importance to the viewers about the facts belonging to the past which had already been disappeared. Those institutions, which have no profit motives, are reputable and serve as place maintaining trustworthy source materials for understanding and rewriting the socio-cultural and art history of the past. While the Ramalinga Vilasam palace at Ramananthapuram, Padmanathapuram, palace at Thuckalai, the palace Museum at Sivaganga, the Saraswati Mahal Museum at Thanjavur are preserving the remnants of the past rulers of the respective periods. The Archaeological Site museum of Dharmapuri established in 1979 is a treasure house of different varieties of archaeological artifacts.¹²

Tamil Nadu museum

Since the various kinds of museums available in Tamil Nadu captivate the attention of many people including the scholars of history as they contain “interesting objects vary from archaeology to anthropology and from the ancient days to the present times “it is warranted to notice the kinds of museums. The museum, known as Art gallery, Thanjavur is a treasure house of art objects which are available both in stones and metals belonging to the Chola period between the 9th and 13th centuries. The St. George fort museum at Chennai is an unique one because of the availability of materials belonging to the period of the Odeyars of Mysore. The Department of Ancient History and Archaeology of the University of Madras has collected excavated materials and antiquities around Chennai and they are preserved and exhibited in the Museum.

The GASS forest museum of Coimbatore has exhibited the articles related to the forests. Several objects of Natural History and Botany are preserved in the Government Museum, Chennai. The multi purpose museum is a store house of materials of art, archaeology, anthropology etc. To know more about the history and activities of the Madras regiment, war museum, Wellington at Nilgris could be approached. A Marine museum of Mandapam is a Science museum. Raja Sarfoji II Memorial Hall, Thanjavur is yet another store house of different kinds of objects of rarity and immense value. The preservation of ivory icons and idols are preserved in the Sri Renganatha swamy temple museum, Sri Rangam.

The Theosophical Society Museum

The Theosophical Society Museum, at Adayar, Chennai is a museum pertaining to religion and theology. Thus the different varieties of few museums, in addition to many in number available in Tamil Nadu expose the true nature of the museums. Above all the Madras museum contains world renowned South Indian bronze icons of different types, the Amaravathi sculpture, Thanjavur armory, stone and Copper plate inscriptions, the Dowleswaram, hoard coins of Raja Raja I and Kulothunga I, Adhichanallur, the pre-historical stone implements collected by Bruce Foote, the potteries of the Roman colony located at Arikamedu near Pondicherry, the exquisite crystal reliquaries from Bhattiprolu Stupa etc. These materials preserved in the Madras museum are clearly arranged in different buildings and areas. The chemical conservation system adopted for the preservation is an unique feature. The Birds' gallery, the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, the gallery

of contemporary art, the excellent system of lighting and the methodical and systematic display stand as models for other museums.¹³

The preservation of the different kinds of materials in the museum is a must because they are all cultural properties which depict the cultural heritage. As the materials available in the museums are the tangible expression of the composite cultural traditions their preservation demands much attention. Only when efforts are undertaken for the preservation of the objects the flaws and mistakes are brought to light and they suggest the new ways and means to be adopted for proper upkeep, maintenance and preservation of museum objects.¹⁴ From the period of the inception of the Indian Museum Act, i.e., Act X of 1814 till 1912 there were 39 museums which gave importance to the objects of art and artifacts of archaeology.¹⁵ It is also worth to note that the materials collected and preserved are not giving importance either to the educating or creating an awakening in the mind of the rural population of India. The number of increase in museums is also pathetically poor in number. Unless this menacing mentality is changed the preservation of the cultural heritage as well as the composite culture will be also ways at stake. So it is obvious that a cultural and social resurgence could be spearheaded by making a public awareness about the museums among all the sections of the people of India.

Museums are not only the preservers of the artifacts and objects but also the protectors of the cultural and natural heritage of India. The materials available in the museums stand testimony to the cultural superiority and historical development. By adopting comprehensive protection measures by preventing the processes of dilapidation and destruction, the government and the public in a united way should venture into the proper preservation and upkeep of the museum materials. Possibilities of theft, illicit traffic and vandalism should be curtailed by the government with the introduction of harsh legislations. The monuments, sculptures should be maintained by the apt implementation of the legislations introduced on this line. The registration of antiquities under the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 should be scrupulously followed. By adopting photo documentation, micro filming etc. the problems which affect the preservation could be eliminated. “A definite policy should be formulated for display and storage of items like coins, seals, realings, jewellery and miniature paintings.¹⁶

The museums, which play a definite role in educational activities, should possess a favourable and congenial atmosphere applicable to people of all walks of life. Then only the preserved materials will be beneficial to all the raison deter of the creation of a museum could be fulfilled. The multiple socio, economic and psychological factors must be employed aptly in preserving the museum materials in tact without a pinch of deviation from its original objectives.¹⁷ The Government is authorized to prevent injury to and preserve buildings remarkable for their antiquity of for their historical or architectural value.¹⁸ The museums are known for their utilitarian value with regard to education, preservation of the historical sources and objects of cultural value. The museums should have opportunities to procure objects by exploration and collections. As a lesson of history one should note that by the proper preservation of the museums a cultural and social resurgence could be achieved. So as a measure of national importance the preservation of museums has become a unavoidable one. As preservation deals with collection, maintenance, security, education,

mode of display etc., are of immense value, as an educative process, the museums should be preserved effectively for serving the nation.

As the foreign and native literature, the theological and secular literature, inscriptions, copper plates, coins, monuments are the significant sources for history, all the materials preserved in the museums have their own history and assist the writing of history. Each and every collection, arranged in a perfect order in the museum will depict a specific aspect of history. The art pieces, sculptures, coins, manuscripts, stamps, weapons, ornaments, wooden carvings, beads, costlier polished stones, the photo copies pertaining to various commemorative occasions, dress materials etc. too are significant sources. They offer feasts to the eyes of those who witness them. The entertainments which they render are known for their utility value and serve as encouragement for children to preserve things effectively in all possible ways. They infuse a spirit of aesthetic sense in the minds of viewers.

Conclusion

The museum objects are immensely helpful due to the fixation of their period more accurately. They present the facts about the part as a coherent and linear narrative. The observers are able to have the doctrinarian of facts by the facts already deciphered and noted with details. The objects offer the detailed account of history entirely comparable to the facts already deciphered. As the artifacts available in the museums are collected in an ethical way from different sources it will be no wrong to call the museum as a preserver of history. The designing of museums has evolved in a historical perspective. Museums co-operate with different people such as historians, researchers, viewers, artists, staff of the institution etc. The visual arts, paintings, illustrations, sculptures, drawings, ceramics, metal work, furniture, sculpture available in the museums could be called a preserver of the primary sources of history. Above all as cultural materials are collected, preserved and displayed in the museums, they are the tangible forms of expressions art, craft, materials of science and technology; they contain materials to express the customs, traditions, manners, folklore, knowledge and skill and they are exhibits in the intangible form and the facts about language, music and dance are disclosed in expressive form.¹⁹ Thus the museum is not only a part and parcel of history but also functions as an unavoidable source of history.

Acknowledgement

The authors are deeply indebted to Professor and Head, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India for their inspiring help, constant support and for providing facilities in the department to carry out the research work.

Notes and References

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6. Personal visit to the Government Museum located at Kalleswarar Nagar, Coimbatore on 2nd January, 2011.
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8. Personal visit to the Government Museum, functioning from M.M. Avenue, Kanchipuram on 10th January 2011.

9. Personal visit to the Museum located at Thirugokarunan, Pudukottai on 14th January, 2011.

10. Personal visit to the Government Museum located in the weekly Market Road, Sivaganga on 3rd March, 2011.

11. Personal observation made on 10th February 2011 at the Fort Museum, Vellore.