Role of Museums to promote and preserve Intangible cultural heritage in the Indian Context

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Museums and Community
Museums are the cultural institutions of a country and have long been associated with the tangible aspects of their collections. Over a period of time cultural institution have learned to interact with societies and communities and now are actively working with both tangible and intangible heritage. As per the ICOM definition\(^1\) adopted in 2007, at the 21st General Conferences in Vienna, Austria, museums should involve both tangible and intangible cultural heritage\(^2\) in their institutional and educational activities.

In the time of urbanization, communities are losing their intangible cultural heritage very fast. The new generation is losing the connection between their cultural heritage and beliefs followed over a long period by their elders. Museums can build this relationship and fill the gap through cultural interpretation of the artifacts and with community support. For this museums need to focus on proper conservation and documentation of the tangible and intangible heritage.

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1. 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.

2. Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development (2003).
India, because of its complicated and ancient culture, is rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. In India many communities live with their cultural knowledge, traditions, rituals, oral expressions and historical heritage. Museums are gradually recognizing the need to go beyond collection, conservation and education of tangible heritage. Museums need to adopt a new model to engage themselves with communities for a constant process of transformation through the collection of intangible heritage. With the beginning of this new era, museums are working in directions to connect with communities in an effective way but still are lacking the right punch.

With the advent of a new world order, i.e., urbanization, traditional knowledge about culture is not being passed on to future generation for many reasons, such as families moving to urban areas for better employment. These community members are far from their roots, traditions and family arts and crafts. And thus newer generations of particular communities are losing their interest in their traditional art, crafts and other cultural skills.

Museums can play the role of a mediator or communication bridge to fill the gaps between the generations and to share the community knowledge on a larger platform with different communities and a diverse range of visitors. For example, the National Museum, New Delhi, has an extensive collection of Indian textiles of the different states, like bandhani work from Rajasthan, banarasi textiles from Banaras, Pulkari from Punjab, Mochikari from Gujarat, Kanth from Bengal, Pichhawai from Nathdwara and Chamba rumal from Himachal Pradesh. Currently, these special textiles are produced in living centres for textile arts and crafts in different states of India, such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, Banaras, Nathdwara, etc. There is some written evidence also available, such as the famous book of “aaine-a- a kabart”, which shows that the Mughal emperor Akbar (16th century A.D.) had royal factories for different textile arts in areas such as Lahore (Punjab), Agra, Fatehpur (Uttar Pradesh), Ahamadabad (Gujarat).

The National Museum organized an exhibition on Pichhawai3. This exhibition, “In Adoration of Krishna- Pichhawai of Shrinathji”, held from 8 December 2007 to 20 January 2008, was based on the Tapi Collection. The exhibition curator invited various pichhawai artists from Nathdwara especially for this exhibition and these artists demonstrated the pichhawai art to the wide range of visitors. To reach a wide range of audiences a one-day painting workshop was also organized in the museum compound by traditional artist Piush Sharma4 from Nathdwara. As per their tradition, before the start of anything new, these pichhawai artists performed rituals to please God. The workshop was also started with proper arti and followed by other religious rituals. This live performance of arti and other rituals imparted to visitors that pichhawai is not just an art for the artists but is very religious work and shows their dedication to art.

Sanskriti Museum, New Delhi, and the National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum (Crafts Museum, New Delhi) have collections of different types of social and cultural objects related to the different communities of India. These museums are known for organizing a broad range of programmes on the traditional art of terracotta with traditional potters, to cater to different community members as well as for regular visitors to share in social, cultural and traditional knowledge.

The potter and his art have played a significant role in many conventional societies since ancient times. Almost every village in India has terracotta as a living art. Potters as such also play an important role in many rituals and ceremonies like Chak Poojna. Chak Poojna is a marriage ceremony performed in many north Indian communities, such as the Yadav5 Community of Haryana, India. In this ceremony the family donates cloths and money to the potters. There is a need that the museums should not only organize the workshops but should also put emphasis on the intangible aspects of the terracotta art, like how this art is very important in religious and cultural rituals such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, Basant panchami, etc. The images of deities are engraved by the traditional Kumhars (potter). Do we really know that this is done apart from making pots look good? How and what impact does this practice have on a particular community? There is a need to understand the impact of these activities on a community. And, moreover, there is also a need to recognize a role between museum and community.

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3 Pichhawai hold an important role in the worship of Krishna as Shrinathji, in the temple of Nathdwara, as a decorative backdrop.
4 The family of Piush Sharma have been traditional pichhawai painters for the last 15 generations.
5 Yadav are the Indian caste of Hindu. Yadav people believe that they are the descendents of Lord Sri Krishna.
**Emotional Touch**

Indian museums have a wide range of traditional, religious and cultural arts and crafts in their collections; some of these collections are the living heritage of certain communities. These communities have used these artifacts in the past to pass on knowledge and skills generation by generation in families by the elders.

Sometimes communities find themselves emotionally attached to the museum artifacts. A beautiful example in this case is in the National Museum. The museum houses various Buddha replicas as a part of its collection and every month many Buddhist people come to the gallery and pray, especially on the occasion on *Budha purnima*. Hundreds of visitors from Buddhist communities come to see the Buddha replicas. This is an example where a museum does not make any special efforts to connect with a community but an object itself connects to and welcomes the community in the museum.

![Community people praying in front of Buddhist relics in the Buddhist gallery, National Museum, New Delhi.](image)

Gallery walks with community members  
Traditional Dance perform by community members
Conclusion
Museums can use intangible heritage to develop a better understanding for their visitors. With the help of tangible and intangible heritage, museums can fill the gap between museums and their non-visitors. For this museums need to identify, document and represent the intangible aspects of their collections. Through their collections museums can encourage communities, groups and individuals to preserve their intangible cultural heritage. Museums can arrange exhibitions and educational activities such as gallery walks, seminars, conferences and workshops with the help of communities on a regular basis. Social communities can use museums as cultural platforms to educate and communicate with their ancestors. There is an urgent need for museums and community groups to come together to promote and preserve intangible cultural heritage. It is better to keep your identity alive rather than adopting that of others.

Bibliography


