Rethinking Museums : the emerging face of story-telling museums

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Genesis

It is not my intention to delve into the history of museums to establish how *thinking* and *rethinking* of museums have been a continuous process. This has been done by many historians and it is now adequately known that most of the public museums in the world were set up with royal holdings and feudal collections or left-over of some great industrial exhibitions. These collection-based museums, devoid of any activity, displayed paintings hung on the wall, sculptures set on pedestals, and smaller artefacts encased in glass cabinets with *touch-me-not* embargo.

The first major *rethinking* in the museum domain, in my opinion, was done in 1930s in the Deutsches Museum in Munich, introducing the concept of working exhibits. Since then, first generation science museums and second generation science centres have come a long way, changing the collection-based museums to activity-oriented playgrounds. But whenever I wanted to discuss the need for rethinking about the traditional museum character, I faced a stumbling block of deeply entrenched conviction that such major transitions, as happened in science museums with technology support, are simply not possible in art-archaeology-history museums.

Today I would submit to you how some of the latest history museums in the world, including India, are passing through the *rethinking* process and developing story-telling museums with the help of newly emerging computer technology.

Purpose of Museums

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines Museum in a comprehensive manner in the following lines:
'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'
The definition has four parts:
   a) The first is the character of a museum, that it shall be non-profit, permanent institution, and open to public.
   b) The second part emphasizes the duties – service of society and its development.
   c) The third part deals with the functions of museum – acquisition, conservation, research (including documentation), communication and exhibition.
   d) The fourth part deals with the purpose – education, study and enjoyment.

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It is clear from this definition that education and enjoyment (along with study) are accepted as the primary purpose of a museum. Many museums need reorientation of priorities and rescheduling of activities to fit in this definition.

Thinking in Museums

The thinking in museums during the last two decades is probably reflected in the themes of International Museums Day observed by the museum community every year on 18 May at the behest of ICOM. These themes primarily reflect museums' commitment to the service of society and its development as enunciated in the ICOM definition of Museums.

2010   "Museums for Social Harmony"
2009   "Museums and Tourism"
2008   "Museums as Agents of Social Change & Development"
2007   "Museums and Universal Heritage"
2006   "Museums and Young People"
2005   "Museums Building Cultures"
2004   "Museums and Intangible Heritage"
2003   "Museums and Friends"
2002   "Museums and Globalization"
2001   "Museums: Building Community"
2000   "Museums in Peace & Harmony in Society"
1999   "Pleasures of Discovery"
1998   "The Fight against Illicit Traffic of Cultural Property" (repeated from 1997)
1997   "The Fight against Illicit Traffic of Cultural Property"
1996   "Collecting Today for Tomorrow"
1995   "Response and Responsibility"
1994   "Behind the Scenes in Museums"
1993   "Museums and Indigenous Peoples"
1992   "Museums and Environment"

Celebration of International Museums Days with these themes raises some vital questions:
   a) How many museums have done something beyond holding discourses or some token activities on the particular day?
   b) How many museums have rescheduled their year round activities based on the themes?
   c) How many museums have reorganised their existing galleries on the basis of theme of these themes?
   d) Finally how many new museums have been established with these themes?

Authentic survey reports are not available on the above questions but just a few museums would probably score on the latter two questions.

What is Rethinking

Rethinking museums would result in a plan for a paradigm shift in the concept of museums, the kind of shift that the Deutsches Museum demonstrated in the 1930s inviting visitors' participation in working of exhibits as mentioned earlier. It has always been held that the science museums enjoy the advantage of having technological support required for such paradigm shift, implying that art-archaeology-history museums are lacking that advantage. With the invasion of communication technology in recent years, even small children at home have become computer savvy. It is no wonder that some history museums have come up with the concept of story-telling museum with interactive computer support and immersive visualization. In such museums, history is no longer depicted by touch-me-not exhibits. It is now an inclusive personal experience enjoyed by visitors.

Why story-telling museum?

A story-telling museum presents a particular episode of history, partially with artefacts and largely through personal experience so that the episode is presented in its complete form. The reason for setting up story-telling museums, in contrast with traditional object-based passive museums, is manifold:
   a) Attraction and Retentivity – the charm of stories and the novelty in presentation attracts larger number of visitors and keep them captivated for longer time.
   b) Collection Gaps – no matter how big a museum is, it will always have yawning gaps in its collection which needs to be filled in to project a complete story.
   c) Contextual References – contextual references, given through dramatic audio-video presentations, are far more fascinating than descriptive labels which look boring.
   d) Socio-economic Relevance – in its commitment to the 'service of society and its development', story-telling museums can highlight the socio-economic relevance much more effectively.
   e) Large Footfalls – story-telling museums are usually made talk of the town, resulting in large footfalls due to repeat visits as well as new visits.
   f) Self-sustenance – larger revenue may result in self-sustenance, in contrast with museums perennially dependent on government support.

Interactive Computer Support

   a) Animated Visuals : commonplace trivision or scroll or duratrans, or digital visuals with special effects.
   b) Audio-Visuals : with LCD/DLP projectors 2500-5000 lumen, or TFT/Plasma Screens 32"- 50" size, individual, or multiple, or in video wall.
   c) Interactive Computer Multi-media : assimilation and dissemination of information; visitors' participation in search operation, quiz, matching games.

Immersive Visualisation

a) Walk-through Diorama – large dioramas in glass cabinet, having excellent visual appeal, are being used in many museums since long; walk through a realistically created nature trail, or battlefield etc., with sound-light synchronised narration offers a much more absorbing experience.

b) Period Setting, Stage Setting – artefacts are generally displayed in isolation, without contextual reference; a carefully created period/stage setting tells us the complete story of the creation of the artefacts.

c) Audio-Video- Opto-Mechanical animation – instead of reading a long text, whever necessary, visitors listen to the audio narration synchronised with intermittent video clippings, optical illusions and mechanical simulations creating the right atmosphere for a natural feel.

d) Multi-screen Projection – panoramic multi-screen projection with split visuals, engulfing the visitors into a historic event helps in breaking the barriers of space and time in the minds of the visitors; momentarily they go back to the time and scene of the event.

e) Animatronics – historical personalities appear to act and speak in a natural stage setting, with the help of computerised pneumatic control; for instance Abraham Lincoln delivering the 'Gettysburg Speech', or Jawaharlal Nehru delivering the 'Tryst with Destiny' speech, or Rabindranath Tagore reciting his own poem.

f) Virtual Reality – shoot a video movie on a very important historic event and while walking inside the gallery, visitors will find themselves going back to the past and acting inside the historic event; walk along with Mahatma Gandhi in his Dandi March of 1931, or get mixed in a crowd celebrating the Independence on 15 August, 1947, doesn't matter even if you were not born at that time.

Case Studies

I would apologise for the brevity of this write-up. This presentation is not meant to be textual but is primarily visual with stills and video clips explaining how some story-telling museums in the USA and India have recently been developed. Subsequent part of the address shall be visual with power point presentation and video clips on the following story-telling museums:

➢ National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.
➢ US Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.
➢ Mount Vernon Interpretation Centre, Virginia
➢ Lincoln Museum, Springfield, Illinois
➢ Kolkata Panorama, Kolkata
➢ Parliament Museum, New Delhi

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