

MERE SPECTACLE OR MEANS OF CONSERVATION? REFLECTIONS FROM PUNE TRIBAL MUSEUM

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Museums play an important role in the representation of local culture and economic life. It also acts as a great stimulus for tourism development of the region. Tribal museums across India have been playing important role in preservation of tribal culture. Many tribes of India do not have any written history. The memories are passed from one generation to other through oral traditions such as songs, folk tales, and dance forms. All these tangible and intangible aspects of tribal culture are essential for tribal identity. If the tribal community loses it, they may vanish or become mere commodities. Therefore, it is important to preserve and promote tribal culture through tribal museums. Tribal museums can very well communicate the knowledge, practices, products and their natural and social environment. The paper tries to understand the context and idea behind the establishment of tribal museum through the case study of Pune Tribal Museum that was established to present an authentic display of the tribal culture of the state of Maharashtra. The study also aimed to assess the contribution of Pune tribal museum in promotion of tourism. The study tries to present a comparative analysis of the meaning and understanding of tribal museum for tribal and non-tribal youth population visiting the museum. The study primarily aims to employ qualitative and interpretative methodology in drawing inferences and conclusion regarding the meaning, context and evaluation of tribal museum. It has come out from the study that the tribal youth visiting the museum were primarily motivated by the questions of identity and pride, while the non-tribal youth visitor had varied motivations. It can be concluded that the distinction between modern and postmodern has become very fluid in the contemporary museum. It has become very difficult to ascertain when one enters modern and exit the postmodern.

Keywords: Museums, Tribal Culture, Visitor Experience

Introduction

A museum has been defined as “a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited (Oxford Dictionary). The International Council of Museums defined it as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment (ICOM, 2007). This definition has come after lot of deliberations and discussions which continued for a long time. However, there is still considerable disagreement on various terminologies used in the definition. The idea of museum itself has transformed owing to the paradigm shift from modern to postmodern. In seventeenth century

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only distinguished travellers and foreign scholars were, as a rule, allowed to see the collection belonging to European princes, which were often housed in palace itself (Hudson, 1975). Museums have been deeply implicated in the modern project, the natural world, and the later, the world of invention, design and technology (Keene, 2006). It is well established that during seventeenth and eighteenth century principles of modernism received huge acceptability and eminence. In the same period, visitors were admitted to the museums as a privilege, not as a right, and consequently gratitude and admiration, criticism was strictly uncalled for (Hudson, 1975). The same trend continued for a long time even after widespread establishment of public museums. Museums (in past) have been characterised as supporting the values of the upper classes hence a stable society. Bourdieu and Dabrel (1960) argued that museums in particular played important part in supporting and defining social hierarchy (Keene, 2006).

After the advent of postmodernism, theorists such as Lyotard (1979) questioned the cultural logic that was guiding the modernist museum. Lyotard also attacked the nature of knowledge and the grand narrative created by modern museums. Smith (1989) challenged modernist practices of de-contextualising objects and endowing them with inherent meanings, instead called for understanding of museum objects as contextual and situated. This theoretical approach reflects broader postmodern theories about subjectivity (Smith, 2014). Under the umbrella of postmodernism the new museology remained influenced by the concept of 'spectacle' – an unusual, unexpected event or situation that attracts attention and interest (Cambridge Dictionary). Postmodern museums are deeply tied to the consumer culture and uses spectacle in a huge way to attract visitors. Baudrillard one of the major postmodernist thinkers is also known for his ideas about supplanting of the real by the virtual called as simulacra. The post-museums also utilise 'simulacra' and staged representation in a huge manner (Smith, 2014). In a nutshell we can say that Post-museums or Postmodern museums celebrate heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. Museums also play an important role in the representation of local culture. In fact, localism, pluralism and multiplicity of experiences and interpretations paved way for the tribal museums throughout the world. Many tribes in India do not have any written history. The memories are passed from generation to other through oral traditions such as songs, folk tales and dance forms. In India tribal museums were developed as a tool for the preservation of tribal culture. All tangible and intangible aspects of tribal culture are essential for tribal identity. If the tribal loses it, they may disappear and become mere commodities. Therefore, it was considered important to preserve and promote tribal culture through tribal museums. Pune tribal museum was established in the campus of Tribal Research Training Institute (TRTI), Pune in 1965. Since then, TRTI has made continuous efforts to collect, exhibit and update the museum depicting tribal life and culture of Maharashtra state.

Aims & Objectives

- To understand the context and idea behind the establishment of tribal museum through the case study of Pune Tribal Museum.
- To present a comparative analysis of meaning and understanding of tribal museum for tribal and non-tribal youth visiting the museum.

Methodology

The study primarily employed qualitative and interpretative methodology in drawing inferences and conclusion regarding the meaning, context and evaluation of tribal museum. For the purpose of this study five tribal students in the age group of 20-25 from the Savitribai Phule Pune University were selected who had visited the Pune tribal museums in the past. Focused group discussion was conducted with the tribal youth to understand their views and experience regarding the Pune tribal museum. Similarly, five non-tribal youth in the age group of 20-25 have been selected who had visited Pune Tribal Museum in the past. Unstructured interview was conducted with the non-tribal youth to present a comparative analysis of the visitor's experience. The work also relied heavily on secondary sources such as books, articles, reports written on tribal history, tribal culture its preservation and tribal movements in India and Maharashtra.

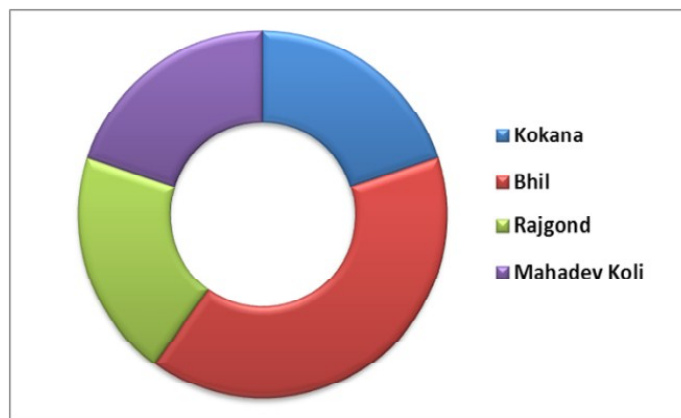


Figure 1.1: Composition of Tribal Youth Participants

Pune Tribal Museum - Context and Idea

Museum plays an important role in the creation of knowledge. The critical theory in geography has argued that all knowledge is subjective and situated. Therefore, it is essential to find out the context and idea behind the creation of tribal museum of Pune. Some of the reasons behind its creation were very broad since they are related to tribal life, movement and transformation of the community as a whole at the national level, while few influences were particularly local in nature. Following discussion will try to uncover the real idea and context behind the establishment of Pune tribal museum.

Tribal Culture – Need for Protection and Conservation?

Demand to protect tribal culture in India emerged before independence only. It was reflected in the writings of some of the historians, anthropologist and sociologist. However, there existed difference of opinion among the scholars regarding the nature and direction of the transformation. S.C. Roy (1937) while giving example of the hill *Bhutiyas* argued that increasing contact of tribes with others had widened their mental outlook and has removed certain old prejudices and fears. Despite of that they had preserved much of their original simplicity, sense of self respect, independence of spirit, along with much of their traditional exuberance of life (Ghurye, 1963). On the other hand D.N. Majumdar confronted the theory of positive change through external contact. In his paper entitled “Primitive Society and its Discomforts” he sharply attacked British administration and criticised it for ignoring and altering tribal life and all its aspects. He gave following examples to highlight loss of tribal culture (Ghurye, 1963).

- Tribal land for shifting cultivation has been taken away
- Marriage by capture has been treated as offence
- Contact with outsiders introduced new diseases in tribal life.

A.V. Thakkar who is also known as Thakkar Bappa, renowned social worker belonging to Servants of India was also a great advocate of tribal rights. One can see his photograph in Pune tribal museum along with a note on his contribution in the upliftment of tribals of Maharashtra and Gujarat. Thakkar Bappa (1941) expressed that Aborigines, or Adivasi had been neglected by all the rulers that enjoyed dominion over India in the past. (Ghurye, 1963). Thakkar Bappa was against tribal exploitation but supported mainstreaming. Another great social anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1939) while giving example of *Baigas* - termed the transformation as ‘over hasty and unregulated process of uplift and civilisation’ (Ghurye, 1963).

The views expressed by scholars either supporting the idea that contact with outsiders has brought forth revolutionary transformation in the tribal way of life or that of those who vehemently opposed any change in the sacred and untouched tribal culture. Both highlighted a very significant point that change was occurring at rapid pace and it was real. This reality forced anthropologist, sociologist and conservationists to collect more information on the tangible and intangible aspects of the culture of indigenous people of India. This information in later stages formed the basis of the establishment of tribal museums such as Pune tribal museum.

Emergence of New Ethnographies

Historical events form an important background in the analysis and interpretation of change in the society. In context of Indian tribes the position in terms of available history is highly varied. Many Indian tribes hardly had anything in the name of history. At the same time events of the past may be reflected through folklores and proverbs (Mann & Mann, 1989). On the basis of that rough framework of the history

can be carved out. Therefore, scholars considered those cultural aspects more significant in the making of tribal history and also to study the impact of non-tribal contacts on the neighbouring tribal population. Some tribal ethnography highlighting definitive cultures were made available during the later part of colonial rule but most of these ethnographies were produced by administrators. Massive work on the tribal culture and milieu was produced during 1960-70 by scholars such as K.S. Singh, Guraye etc. Anthropological Survey of India was established in 1945. It led to the publication of Anthropological Atlas of India, People of India etc. In Maharashtra several anthropological researches have been carried out by scholars such as G.S. Ghurye (1943, 1957, 1959), Irawati Karve (1958, 1969), B.H. Mehta (1933, 1968), J.V. Farriera (1962, 1965), V.B. Punekar (1959), L.N. Chapekar (1960). Tribal Research Institute at Pune with a small team of researchers under the guidance of R.P. Sisalkar had undertaken researches on the tribes of Maharashtra (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1976). These academic developments acted as a foundation stone in the creation of tribal museum of Pune.

Developmental Planning induced Change

After independence, Five Year Plans were introduced. Temples of Modern India were constructed in the interior and backward regions of the country. It gave rise to abrupt growth of a strong network of agencies to work for tribal development and change (Mann & Mann, 1989). Planned programmes and schemes augmented the magnitude of cultural contact with neighbouring non-tribal communities and their way of life. It not only changed the margins but also softened the inner harder core to accept new culture. This development planning induced change filled the minds of intellectual community and the tribal rights activists with immense fear of absolute annihilation or irreversible damage to the tribal culture and way of life. Consequently, efforts were made to conserve and preserve the tribal culture. Establishment of Pune tribal museum was a significant step in this regard.

Contribution of Dr. Govind Gare

Dr. Govind Meghaji Gare was born in 1939 at Nimgiri, Junnar Taluka of Maharashtra in a very poor tribal family. With his hard work and dedication he attained Ph.D. from Pune University. He was the first tribal from Maharashtra to become an Indian Administrative Services officer in 1982. He is one of the great scholars of tribal culture and way of life. He remained the Director of Tribal Research Training Institute, Pune for several years. He published the mouthpiece of TRTI called *Adivasi Sanshodhan Patrika*, through which he introduced and highlighted intimate details of the tribal life. Dr. Gare argued that tribal rely heavily on nature and are minimalistic in terms of needs. They are closely synced with the ecology of their habitat that has made them more tolerant and independent. Dr. Gare has produced some excellent work on tribal movements and leaders, tribal development, Thakkar Bappa, Warli Paintings, Tribal folklore, dance and music. He has written ethnographic accounts on the *Bhils* of Satpura and other tribes of Maharashtra. Dr. Gare remained instrumental in the

expansion and progress of Pune Tribal Museum. His contribution has been recognised by the museum as well. As a mark of respect, Dr. Gare's photograph is showcased in the museum along with other artefacts.

Visitors Experience - Comparative Analysis of Tribal & Non-Tribal Youth

The museum visitor experience cannot be adequately described by only defining the content of museum, designs of exhibitions or demographics. To get a more complete picture it is important to understand the meaning derived by visitors from their experience (Falk, 2000, 2009). The current work relies on the methodology developed by John Falk (2000, 2009) in which he has given more emphasis on motivation, individual sense of identity, entering and exiting narratives to explain the experience of people visiting museums. The study focused on critical research questions raised by Falk (2000, 2009) to present a comparative account of the experiences of tribal and non-tribal youth visiting Pune tribal museum.

Motivation

People may get motivated due to external factors or internal factors. External factors are related to some benefits that the person would accrue by performing particular activity. Intrinsic motivation comes when an individual does something for its own sake, even when there is absence of any reward. Visiting a museum is one of the examples of intrinsically motivated activities. It has come out from the discussion that the main motivational factor behind the visit of tribal youth to the tribal museum was to re-visit disappearing aspects of tribal culture. Some of them linked it to their sense of pride. As one of the participant stated:

"I really felt proud to know that something exists in this city that exhibits or showcases our culture"

While, learning new culture remained the main motivation for non-tribal youth. Few of them wanted to review and revise preconceived notions they had about the tribes of Maharashtra. Good number of non-tribal youth visited the museum for the purpose of entertainment.

Entering Narrative

Revisiting childhood memories was the principal entering narrative of the majority of the tribal youth. The tribal youth participants had a mix of rural and urban upbringing. The participants who spent their childhood in a predominantly rural setup shared stories related to their childhood experiences. They wanted to see those things in the museum which they admired and loved during the time they lived in the village. Number of tribal youths who had total urban upbringing revisited their memories when they visited their grandparents in the village as children. Interestingly, some of the tribal participant were facing dilemma while entering into the museum. It was related to the acceptance or non-acceptance of the portrayal of their own community in the museum. As one of the participant said:

“My grandfather had blue eyes, which I didn’t use to find in the fellow tribesmen. I was hoping to find at least a picture depicting fellow tribesmen with blue eyes. Surprisingly, I saw one photograph of a man from my tribe with facial structure and colour of eyes similar to that of my grandfather.”

Non-tribal youth’s entering narrative was predominantly influenced by popular culture. They were expecting to see images of tribal resembling Jarwas and Sentinelese. Few of them wanted to genuinely clear their doubts regarding misconceptions they were having related to the tribal such as their portrayal as savage people.

Museum and Individual Sense of Identity

Identity has remained a major motivational factor for the people to visit museums throughout the World. In the recent times, question of identity and museum experience has been extensively discussed by several scholars such as Leinhardt, et. al, 2002, Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004, Hooper Grenhill, 2004, Falk, 2006. Most of these researchers have argued that museums can play crucial role in shaping both individual and national identities through their collections (Kelly, 2010). Majority of tribal youth who had visited Pune tribal museum accepted that it helped them in defining their own identity. During the group discussion one tribal girl stated,

“While visiting Pune Tribal Museum, I came face to face with my own identity. Who am I?”

During the discussion the tribal youth opened up and expressed their resentment over the fact that tribal culture is not the same as it has been projected in the popular culture. Such level of distortion has made their lives very difficult. Participants mentioned that tribal youth do not readily disclose their identity in the urban areas because they always have this fear back in the mind that they will be ridiculed. All of them asserted that their culture is diverse in the real sense and is necessary that ‘others’ should recognise the same. At the same time, they reinforced this view that they are ‘different’ from others and they are extremely proud of it.

Emotional Connect and the Museums

Emotions play an important role in building museum memories and learning (Falk, 2000, 2006). The events that are emotionally more arousing are likely to be remembered more. Emotional content also influences identity related motivations. Events and artefacts having emotional value or significance are the one that satisfy the need and interest of the visitor because it is intimately related to their own identity or being themselves. Pune tribal museum was full of materials and displays that were having emotional connect for the tribal youth. As one tribal girl said:

“I loved the grinder because it reminded me of my grandmother. I felt as if I am at my ancestral place”

A boy belonging to *Bhil* tribe mentioned that he got emotional after seeing a photograph of *Bhil* women in her traditional attire. He said,

“When I saw the portrait of a Bhil women kept in the museum, I felt as if my mother is standing in front of me.”

One of the participant said that he got emotional when he saw a Warli painting drawn by small tribal girl that is kept in the museum. He got thrilled by merely imagining that the art form has been preserved and transferred from older generation to the younger. It can be said that Pune tribal museum was very well able to establish an emotional connect with the tribal youth visitors, however majority of the non-tribal youth remained indifferent about the emotional connect.

Eurocentric Aesthetics or Localism?

The word eurocentrism is defined as everything that omits non-European, whether it is history, tradition or culture. It is exclusionary and primarily caters to the elite. It is synonymous to western hegemony and follows linear historical path. Eurocentric museums are the one that conforms to the norms, values and standards of the west in terms of design, architecture, and exhibition of artefacts. On the other hand, localism bats for multicultural and diverse representations. Pune tribal museum cannot be called as Eurocentric in the true sense. The basic premise behind its creation was to preserve and conserve tribal culture of Maharashtra, hence supported the idea of multiculturalism and pluralism. However, the museum was having clear imprints of Eurocentric aesthetics with regard to design and exhibits. Tribal youth visitors were unhappy about the exclusion of several facts. The museum largely ignored superstitions, rituals and traditions such as *daru* (liquor), *ganja* (marijuana) and *bidi* (local cigarette) which is integral and intimate part of the tribal way of life. Similarly, most of the tribal youth wanted more elaborate and real representation of the tribal culture. Both tribal and non-tribal youth preferred staged dance performances, light and sound show, audio-visual effects to generate more interest and create awareness among the visitors. Tribal youth even suggested converting the Pune tribal museum into a theme park dedicated to tribal culture.

Pune Tribal Museum - Whether devoid of reality?

Both tribal and non-tribal youth visitor said that the museum is not devoid of reality. However, they also said that the information that has been shared by the museum is insufficient and at places inadequate. It totally ignored several aspects such as song, dance forms, oral traditions, and medicinal plants.

Inclusion of New Context in the Museum?

The tribal youth participants argued that in the last five decades tribal culture and tribal areas of India and particularly Maharashtra has undergone tremendous transformation. The most important context they mentioned was development and displacement. According to them it is the tribal population of India that has experienced the real cost of development. For tribal youth participants it was very important that the tribal society, especially the younger generation should know that how tribal

people are becoming isolated and disconnected from their own culture. According to them the next very important aspect that needs to be included in the museum is the 'sustainability of tribal life'. They unequivocally stated that since tribal life is based on optimal use of resources, therefore tribal way of life can be the best alternative to tackle the challenge of global warming and climate change.

Major Contribution of the Pune Tribal Museum?

Majority of tribal youth mentioned that the most important contribution of Pune tribal museum is preservation and conservation of tribal culture. According to them the museum is connecting the missing links for those tribals who are completely detached from their culture. The tribal youth also said that it is acting as a medium to take tribal culture to the masses. Non-tribal youth attributed diffusion of information as the main contribution of the museum. They considered it very important for tourism development in the region. Non-tribal youth also accepted that the museum is trying to create awareness among the people about tribal culture.

Conclusion

We are aware that the objective of establishing museum has always been a modernist project. However, the moment government started making museums such as TRTI Tribal Museum it was essentially to represent the cultural diversity of their constituencies. Establishment of public museums showcasing tribal life conforms to postmodernism with great emphasis on plurality of the society. On the other hand, Pune tribal museum appears to be modern and Eurocentric through its design, organisation and structure but it also houses shiny mask, replica of *Warli* paintings, representing postmodern condition at the same time. It can be concluded that tribal youth visiting the museum were motivated by the questions of identity and pride. While the non-tribal youth visitor had varied motivations from entertainment to learning new things about tribal culture. The museum has been successful in establishing an emotional connects with the tribal youth. The non-tribal youth remained predominantly indifferent about the emotional connect. Tribal youth favoured inclusion of newer context to the existing museum such as displacement, sustainability of tribal life and tribal innovations. Non-tribal youth mainly focused on the facilities available at the museum. Tribal and non-tribal youth were on the same platform about bringing new aspects in the museum to suit the needs of current generation such as staged representations, audio-visual technologies, light and sound show, live dance performances, souvenir store and a café which conforms to the idea of Post-Museum. The youth visitors were in favour of expansion of the museum, at the same time they did not wanted any alteration with the current setup. Overall it can be said in context of contemporary museum that the distinction between what is modern and postmodern has become very fluid and blur. It has become very difficult to ascertain that when one enters modern and exit the postmodern.

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