

A CONCERTED EFFORT IN RE-IMAGINING MUSEUMS

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the inauguration of the Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya, in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: PTI

On the occasion of International Museum Day on May 18, the Ministry of Culture has made admissions to all museums under its ambit free of cost for a week. This not only makes our art and culture accessible to all, but also provides us an opportunity to propagate our civilisational heritage.

The occasion also gives us an opportunity to look back at the progress that we have made in re-imagining our museums and cultural spaces. There has been a transformational shift in our perspectives of our heritage and this can be seen in our approach to preserve and promote it. First, there has been a shift from a museum-centric approach to a cultural spaces approach. Second, we have been able to build museums for specific purposes rather than rely on general purpose museums. And finally, we have looked at museums with a whole-of-government approach to ensure that museums provide a wholesome experience.

India is one of the few continuously inhabited civilisational states that continues to thrive. Therefore, our art, culture and heritage are not just available for viewing in museums but can be witnessed in our day-to-day activities. The festivals we celebrate, the deities we worship, the food we eat, and the dance and music performances we appreciate are all a testimony to our civilisational ethos. Keeping this in mind, our approach has been to continuously integrate our culture into our lives rather than to position them in museums. So, when the Prime Minister brings back stolen heritage from other countries, there is an attempt to restore it to the place it was taken from rather than to have it languish in the warehouse of a museum. It is with this underlying philosophy that the recently retrieved idol of Goddess Annapurna was returned to its rightful place at Kashi Vishwanath temple, Varanasi. There is now a plan to continue repatriating heritage objects to their original locations, wherever feasible. Similarly, the attempt to embed art and our civilisational heritage in places such as the new Central Vista Project also builds on this approach to have cultural spaces that are contiguous and transcend standalone buildings.

In August 2013, in response to a question in Parliament on the government's plan to establish a National Tribal Museum in the country, the government at that time responded that there was no such plan. Today, to recognise the role of over 200 tribal freedom fighters across India who participated in about 85 revolts and uprisings against colonial rule, 10 tribal freedom fighter museums are being set up across the country. On the occasion of the first Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas on November 15 last year, the Prime Minister launched the Birsa Munda museum in Ranchi.

Similarly, last month on April 14, on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya. The museum is a tribute to every Prime Minister of India since independence and showcases the contributions they made and the challenges they faced in their tenure.

In tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Prime Minister inaugurated the Statue of Unity in October 2018, which also contains a museum that chronicles the various facets of Patel in great detail.

These examples show the transformational journey that has been made in the last eight years.

The strategic shift to specific theme-based museums, which have unique content and a definite purpose, also ensures that rich material is on display and the overall experience is wholesome. There have been several other attempts along these lines that are worth mentioning, such as the Biplobi Bharat museum in Kolkata, the arms and armour museum at the Red Fort, a gallery on Gautama Buddha in Delhi, and the museum on Jammu and Kashmir.

India is home to over 1,000 museums representing a rich and diverse blend of the cultural, religious and scientific achievements that our civilisation has witnessed over the years. These museums do not just lie under the control of the Ministry of Culture. Other Ministries manage the Railway museums, the crafts and textiles museums, and the food museum, to name a few. Therefore, the government is taking a whole-of-government approach to provide a wholesome experience to all stakeholders. To achieve this, as an example, the 25 science cities, centres and museums under the National Council of Science Museums, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture, are backed with a Memoranda of Understanding with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). This ensures that the spaces are being developed with expertise, fresh ideas and new thought. The use of digital technology to enhance user experience is not limited to the use of Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality, but to widen public access through modernisation and digitisation of collections and exhibitions. This is now a work in progress and is visible in the museums that have been recently inaugurated such as the Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya.

In all these efforts, there are challenges, but none of them are insurmountable. Breaking down silos to forge a whole-of-government approach in such a specialised domain requires new skills and perspectives and these are being developed. Human capacities and domain knowledge require continued upgradation, and the new Indian Institute of Heritage that is being set up as a world class university aims to address these challenges. There are also challenges in modernising our traditional museums from display spaces of past glory to making them more interactive, immersive experiences through technology interfaces, innovative curatorial skills and imaginative storytelling. Compared to new museums, successfully repurposing existing museum spaces needs more imaginative thinking and has a different set of challenges. The efforts in digitisation and reprography are painstaking processes that can take several years to complete.

With this renewed mandate of modernisation, upgradation, and establishment of new museums, we are bringing our institutions closer to international standards of museology in the 21st century. As a firm step in this direction, the Ministry of Culture organised a first-of-its-kind Global Summit on 'Reimagining Museums in India' in February this year. The learnings from the summit are being incorporated to devise a blueprint for the development of new museums, nurture a renewal framework, and reinvigorate existing museums. It is said that there is nothing more important than an idea whose time has come. Re-imagining museums in India is such an idea.

G. Kishan Reddy is the Union Minister of Culture, Tourism and Development of Northeastern Region, Government of India

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