

An Emerging Field of Museum Anthropology

Museum anthropology is a subfield of anthropology that focuses on the study of museums, their collections, exhibitions, and practices, as well as the cultural, social, and political contexts in which they operate. It includes the research work of ethnographic museums and their role in shaping cultural knowledge, representation, and identity. It encompasses various aspects, including museum history and development, collection and exhibition practices, representation and interpretation of cultural artifacts, cultural heritage preservation and management, community engagement and participation, decolonization, and repatriation.

According to the most recent definition of Museum approved and declared by ICOM on August 24, 2022, "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."¹

I tried to understand the concept of a Museum with changing times and attempted to describe museum in the Indian context². In my view, precisely in simpler words, a 'Museum' is a service sector institution that preserves the past and present knowledge and heritage, both tangible and intangible, through research, acquiring collection and related information, documentation, conservation and it disseminates knowledge, generates awareness and provides informal or practical education with amusement by means of exhibitions and activities with active public involvement for greater social benefit to the posterity.³

Museum Anthropology includes collecting, preserving, and displaying cultural heritage; representation and interpretation of cultural artifacts, history, knowledge and identities; studying and establishing relationships between museums, communities, and societies; Critical analysis

of museum practices and representations; consideration of the ethical and moral implications of museum practices; exploration of the role of museums in shaping cultural narratives and politics; cultural consulting and policy development. Museum Anthropology is closely related to cultural studies (especially material culture studies), museum curation, collection management, exhibition designing and interpretation, museum education and outreach, cultural heritage preservation and management, Critical Museology (a concept introduced at the Reinwardt Academy in Leiden, Holland for the transformation of traditional museums into socially relevant applied museums and preservation of cultural heritage), New Museology (initiated by French museologist for development of new types of community-led museums - ecomuseums, open-air-museum and community museums), New Ethnography, Anthropology of art and aesthetics, Indigenous Knowledge studies, science and technology studies and postcolonial theories. The core terms and concepts related to Museum Anthropology are cultural representation, power dynamics, identity formation, material culture, cultural heritage, repatriation, decolonization, and community engagement.

"From the late nineteenth century, museums with ethnographic collections, particularly those based in universities, were core institutions in the development of anthropology as a specialist discipline. While anthropological interests in museums and material culture studies waned from the 1920s, over the last few decades, there has been a remarkable revitalization. On-going changes have been prompted by new approaches to museum theory and practice: the development of an anthropology of museums; a renewed academic concern with objects, materiality, and the relations between persons and things; the interests of 'source' communities; and a growing recognition of the potential of museums as central institutions in universities and civil society."⁴



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Museum anthropology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by Critical Anthropology, Cultural Studies, New Ethnography, Critical Museology and postcolonial theory. The concept was further promoted and influenced by some key publications, such as, "Writing Culture"⁵ by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, "Exhibiting Cultures"⁶ by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, "Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge"⁷ by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and "Decolonizing Museums"⁸ by Amy Lonetree.

"Museum anthropology refers to the work that anthropologists do within museums as well as the anthropological study of museums as important institutions within modern society. It encompasses a broad range of academic and professional concerns. In both theory and practice, museum anthropology straddles overlapping interests in field research and public outreach, metropolitan centres and (post) colonial peripheries, diverse international communities and local audiences, material culture studies and artistic sensibilities"⁴.

The popular research methods employed for conducting studies in Museum Anthropology and Ethnomuseology are ethnographic research through fieldwork, historical analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, observation, interview, schedule and visitor survey through a structured questionnaire. Collaborative and participatory research work is done with community engagement and in collaboration with cultural centers, research institutions and museums. Such studies help in critical analysis, strategic development, improvement of museum practices, promoting diversified and inclusive representation, fostering community participation, cultural sustainability, establishing cultural and social dynamics of museums, and overall better cultural heritage preservation and management.

By examining museums through an anthropological lens, museum anthropology provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between culture, history and identity, and informs innovative and inclusive museum practices. Museum anthropology is an interdisciplinary field that combines anthropology, museology, and cultural studies to examine the cultural, social, and political contexts of museums and their collections.

'Participation of Communities' is one of the key components in Museum Anthropology. Museological practices in the 1980s were greatly influenced by the New Museology Movement which stressed the social role of museums in

the development of its respective societies in contrast to the old classical model which gave greater importance to collections. As a result, several variants of new museums began to emerge namely; Integral museum, Neighbourhood Museum, Community Museum, Social Museum, Eco-museum, open-air museum, Home Museum, Living History Museum, Artist Village Museum, heritage village Museum, Tribal Museum and so on. These museums are mostly established, administered and run by members of a community within their own territory to fulfill their social, cultural, economic or environmental needs. Such museums are best suited and successful in small territories. Community museums place more emphasis on research to know the past and present of the community and its cultural ethnography. Thus, it provides better foundations that will help in the development of the new cultural identity. In India, New Museum Movement started in the form of Open-Air Museums developed with partial community involvement. An open-air museum is an institution spread over a comparatively larger territory that includes one or more buildings in its collections. It specializes in the collection and re-erection of multiple old buildings or habitats at large outdoor sites having recreated landscapes. Museum of Mankind (IGRMS, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh), Dakshin Chitra (near Chennai, Tamilnadu), and Big Foot Museum (Goa) are a few good examples of new types of open-air museums in India.

Major institutions and organizations working in the field of Museum Anthropology are Council for Museum Anthropology (CMA) as a section of American Anthropological Association (AAA) and various international committees of International Council of Museums (ICOM), such as International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography (ICME), International Committee for Social Museology (SOMUS), International Committee for Regional Museum (ICR) and so on. A Few popular journals related to the field of Museum Anthropology are 'Journal of Museum Ethnography', 'Cultural Anthropology', 'Museum International' (ICOM) and 'Museum Anthropology'. As a specialized field, Museum Anthropology continues to evolve, addressing the complex relationships between culture, history, and identity, exploring the role of museums in addressing social justice and inequality, and informing innovative and inclusive museum practices. Currently, Museum Anthropology research works are focused on reconnecting existing ethnographic museum collections with their present-day source

communities and the development of local cultural centers cum museums by Indigenous people in their own territories. Now, it is also evolving over digital platforms in the form of virtual museums.

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*How to cite this article:

Amit Soni. An Emerging Field of Museum Anthropology. *Ind J Res Anthropol* 2024;10(2):111-113.

