

An Ethnographic Account of Indian Museum, Kolkata

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How to cite this article:

Prasant Kumar Sahoo and Gourab Grahacharya, An Ethnographic Account of Indian Museum, Kolkata. *Ind J Res Anthropol* 2024;10(2):155-159.

Abstract

Museums are about the tangible objects, portraying the hidden intangible thought process of the people or cultures concerned. While curators, explorers and anthropologists collect antiques from various ethnic groups, museums can too be studied ethnographically. An ethnographic account of a museum transcends the typical museum review, offering a rich tapestry woven from the social and cultural experience of being within its walls. Unlike a traditional review that focuses solely on the objects on display, an ethnographic approach delves deeper, examining the museum as a cultural institution itself. This paper, as part of a routine museum tour at undergraduate level, is an ethnographic effort to study the Indian Museum, Kolkata. It highlights the perceived experiences of the staff, visitors and even the vendors on the streets outside the museum. The study intends to bring out the essence of museum as a dynamic space for cultural exchange, learning, and even critique. Hence, it conceives that the specimens in the selves of the museum speak to the spectators creating a social space and leaves a long term memory of cultural explorations and experiences.

Keyword: Ethnography, Indian Museum, Culture, Specimens, Kolkata.

INTRODUCTION

A museum reflects the cultural manifestation of people. Hence, 'museums are about real things' (Pearce, 1994). Though the material cultural heritage is portrayed in the selves of the museum, it necessarily brings out the underlying thought processes of the people involved in creating and crafting those specimens. Thus, the non-material culture is the driving force behind all these items beautifully showcased in the racks of the museum. Similar definitions are given by Pearce (1994) where

he said 'Museums are places in which the material evidence of human and natural history is collected, cared for, interpreted, and made available to the general public through exhibition and a wide range of other projects'. The major role of museum is to educate and make the wider audience aware that culture exists in various forms as viewed from the myriad specimens exhibited in the museum and that one's own culture is not the only one that the visitor experiences. This introduces the important anthropological concept of cultural relativism in that many cultures are there for us to see, experience, imbibe and tolerate as well. This can be

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Received on: 16.09.2024 Accepted on: 17.10.2024



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put a different way as held by Place et al (1974). According to them, 'the museum, as a repository of cultural artifacts – objects and documents – remains for the most part a rich untapped lode of valuable learning experiences'.

The Indian Museum, Kolkata is one of the most fascinating places in India, and it's much more than just a building filled with old things. It is the oldest museum in the country and the largest in Asia, established way back in 1814 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Originally called the Imperial Museum of Calcutta during British colonial rule, it has grown over time to become a place where people from all walks of life come to explore India's history, culture, science, and nature. Not only does it house countless treasures from India's past, but it also serves as hubs where people can learn, reflect, and connect with one another. To really understand the significance of the Indian Museum, we need to look beyond the objects it holds. We have to consider how people interact with these objects, how they engage with the museum space, and how the museum connects with the broader city of Kolkata. In this account, we'll explore how the museum has evolved over time, how it serves its visitors today, and how it continues to play a crucial role in preserving and sharing India's rich heritage.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the title, this paper employs ethnographic methodology as the primary approach to study the museum. An ethnographic examination of museums incorporates analysing the curatorial choices – how artefacts are grouped, information is presented, and the overall flow of exhibits. By dissecting these choices, the ethnographer uncovers the museum's narrative about the cultures it represents. Furthermore, the ethnographic lens extends beyond the exhibits to encompass the museum's social ecosystem. According to Tucker (2014), ethnographic method can be applied to understand the perceived experiences of the audience including participant observation, interviews, content analysis of the museum documents (brochures, catalogues, galleries etc.), and visual displays and so on. This involves observing the visitors – their backgrounds, interactions with exhibits, and each other. The ethnographer considers these interactions, along with the sights, sounds, and even the atmosphere of the museum, to understand how visitors engage with the cultural narratives presented. This immersive approach allows the ethnographer to

capture the essence of the museum as a dynamic space for cultural exchange, learning, and even critique.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Indian Museum is housed in a grand, old colonial building in the heart of Kolkata. The architecture of the building is a mix of European and Indian styles, reflecting both its colonial past and its role as a repository of Indian culture. The museum is divided into six main sections, each dedicated to a different aspect of India's heritage: Indian art, archaeology, anthropology, geology, zoology, and economic botany. Altogether, there are thirty-five galleries, each one filled with fascinating antiques that tell the story of India's past and its connections to the rest of the world. When one first enters the museum, one will be greeted by the Entrance Foyer, which is decorated with large, impressive sculptures that give one a sense of the grandeur and importance of what lies inside. The museum's long corridors are lined with statues and sculptures from different eras, acting as a visual timeline that takes one through India's history. Each gallery within the museum acts as a unique stage and offers a different perspective on the country's heritage, whether it's through art, archaeology, or natural history.

The most famous part of the museum is the Archaeology and Art Galleries. These sections hold an incredible collection of artifacts from ancient India, some of which are thousands of years old. One of the most important exhibits is the remains of the *Bharhut Stupa*, a Buddhist monument that dates back to the 2nd century BCE. The *Stupa's* railings and gateways, made of red sandstone, are covered in intricate carvings and inscriptions written in the ancient *Brahmi* script. These pieces give us a glimpse into the early days of Buddhism in India and help us understand the religious and artistic practices of that time. In addition to the *Bharhut Stupa*, the museum also has panels from the *Amaravati Stupa*, another important Buddhist monument, as well as a large collection of sculptures from the medieval period. These sculptures, many of which depict Hindu and Buddhist deities, showcase the incredible artistic skill of the people who made them. One of the most significant artifacts is a replica of the Lion Capital of Ashoka, which has become the official emblem of the Republic of India. This symbol, which originally appeared on top of an Ashokan pillar, represents India's ancient heritage and its enduring cultural legacy.

The coin gallery, a treasure trove whispering tales of economic history, attracts history buffs and curious persons alike. While doing ethnography, we have minutely observed of elderly gentlemen meticulously examining ancient coins, their fingers tracing the worn inscriptions; Docents, students brimming with historical knowledge, patiently were answering their barrage of questions, the exchange - a testament to the museum's role in igniting young minds. The diverse viewing habits of visitors offer a fascinating glimpse into their individual journeys through the museum. Some move swiftly through the galleries, their eyes flitting from label to artefact in a quest for quick bursts of information. Others, captivated by a particular piece, linger for extended periods, their furrowed brows and pursed lips suggesting deep contemplation or discussions with fellow visitors. In contrast, a group of senior citizens participating in a special program specifically designed for visually impaired visitors use their hands to explore tactile replicas under the guidance of a specially trained educator; their expressions are a mix of concentration and newfound understanding.

The Art Galleries are equally impressive, offering a wide variety of artistic treasures from different periods of Indian history. The museum has a remarkable collection of Mughal paintings, which were created during the Mughal Empire and are known for their intricate detail and vibrant colors. These paintings provide a glimpse into the luxurious lifestyle of the Mughal courts and their patronage of the arts. In addition to Mughal art, the galleries also feature a widerange of Hindu and Buddhist sculptures, many of which are revered for their fine craftsmanship and spiritual significance.

The Anthropology section of the Indian Museum is another scintillating part of the institution. The section is dedicated to exploring the diversity of human cultures, both within India and around the world. One of the highlights of this section is the Mask Gallery, which features a stunning collection of masks from different parts of India, including West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and Karnataka, as well as masks from other countries like New Guinea (exact state-wise and species-wise date could not be detailed due to paucity of time). These masks are more than just beautiful objects—they are important cultural artifacts that were used in religious ceremonies and festivals, and they help us understand the spiritual beliefs and practices of the communities that made them. The Human Evolution Gallery takes visitors on a journey through time, exploring how humans

have evolved over millions of years. This gallery features fossilized remains, ancient tools, and skeletal structures that provide insight into the biological and cultural development of early human societies. By studying these artifacts, we can better understand how our ancestors lived, adapted to their environments, and developed complex social structures. The most popular exhibit in the Anthropology section is the Egyptian mummy. This 4,000-year-old mummy, along with a mummified hand, offers an enchanting glimpse into the funerary practices of the ancient Egypt. Although Egypt and India are separated by vast distances, the presence of the mummy in the Indian Museum serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of human civilizations and the global reach of the museum's collection.

In addition to its cultural and historical exhibits, the Indian Museum also has a vast collection of natural history specimens. These exhibits are particularly popular with children and young students, as they offer an exciting opportunity to learn about the natural world. The museum's natural history section is divided into four main galleries: the Botanical Gallery, the Insect Gallery, the Mammal Gallery, and the Bird Gallery. The Mammal Gallery is another most impressive parts of the natural history section. It features the fossilized remains of prehistoric animals, including a massive dinosaur skeleton that towers over visitors. This gallery also displays the bones and fossils of a wide variety of animals from across South Asia, helping us understand the region's evolutionary history. The Insect Gallery becomes favorite among young visitors, as it showcases a diverse collection of insect specimens from around the world, including butterflies, beetles, and other fascinating creatures. The museum also has a significant collection of rocks, minerals, and meteorites in its Geological Gallery, as well as a wide variety of plant specimens in its Botanical Gallery. These exhibits are not only scientifically valuable, but they also help visitors appreciate the incredible diversity of life on Earth and the ways in which humans are connected to the natural world.

The success of the Indian Museum would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of its staff. Curators, educators, and security personnel all play an essential role in making sure the museum runs smoothly and that visitors have a meaningful experience. Curators, in particular, are responsible for researching and organizing the museum's exhibits. They carefully select artifacts and create narratives that help visitors understand

the historical and cultural significance of the objects on display. Educators are another vital part of the museum's team. Their job is to engage visitors, especially children, and help them learn about the museum's collections in a fun and interactive way. Many of the museum's educational programs are designed to appeal to different age groups and learning styles, ensuring that everyone who visits the museum can have a rewarding experience. The museum also offers special programs for people with disabilities, such as tactile exhibits for visually impaired visitors, which allow them to explore replicas of the museum's artifacts through touch. Security personnel, while often overlooked, are equally important to the museum's operation. Their job is to ensure that the museum remains a safe and welcoming environment for all visitors. Whether they're helping visitors find their way through the galleries or keeping a watchful eye on the exhibits, the security staff plays a key role in creating a positive experience for everyone who walks through the museum's doors.

The Specimens, the Spectators and the Social Space: an ethnographic encounter

The Indian Museum is not just a place to look at old objects and antiques – it is also a social space where people from different backgrounds come together to share ideas and engage with culture. The museum's cafe, for example, is a lively spot where visitors can relax after exploring the galleries. Here, one might see foreign tourists discussing their favorite exhibits over cups of tea, or local students debating the historical significance of a particular artifact. This kind of social interaction is an important part of the museum experience, as it encourages visitors to think critically about what they've seen and share their perspectives with others. Outside the museum, local artisans sell miniature replicas of some of the museum's most famous artifacts, such as statues and sculptures. These handmade items are not only beautiful souvenirs, but they also help spread awareness of the museum's collection to a wider audience. The artisans who create these replicas are part of Kolkata's rich tradition of craftsmanship, and their work adds another layer to the museum's cultural impact.

The Indian Museum is further deeply connected to the city of Kolkata, and the relationship between the two is mutually beneficial. The museum draws visitors from all over the city and beyond, while also offering educational programs and cultural events

that serve the local community. School children from nearby neighborhoods often visit the museum as part of their studies. These visits help bring history and culture to life for young minds, sparking their curiosity and encouraging them to learn more about India's rich heritage. The museum also hosts a variety of cultural events, including performances by local artists and screenings of documentaries about Kolkata's history. These events strengthen the museum's ties to the community and help transform it from a static repository of artifacts into a vibrant hub for cultural exchange. By offering a space for local artists, performers, and scholars to share their work, the museum fosters a sense of ownership and pride among the people of Kolkata.

Besides, beyond the just a collection of objects, the Museum is also the place for learning, reflection, and personal growth. Visitors leave the museum not only with new knowledge about India's history and culture but also with a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. For example, a young girl who is inspired by the intricate textiles on display in the museum's Textile Gallery might dream of becoming a fashion designer, while an older visitor reflecting on the ancient sculptures in the *Bharhut* Gallery might feel a renewed connection to their own cultural heritage. The museum's ability to inspire and engage people from all walks of life is very convincing to its importance as a cultural institution. It is a place where the past and present come together, where history is not just something to be studied but something to be experienced. In this way, the Indian Museum continues to play a vital role in shaping the intellectual and cultural landscape of India.

In recent years, the Indian Museum has made significant efforts to embrace modern technology and make its collections more accessible to a broader audience. For example, many of the galleries now feature interactive touch-screens that allow visitors to learn more about specific artifacts. These digital displays are particularly popular with younger generations, who are accustomed to engaging with information technology. The museum too offers audio guides in multiple languages, which are especially helpful for international visitors and people with visual impairments. By incorporating these technological advancements, the Indian Museum ensures that everyone, regardless of their background or abilities, can have a meaningful and enriching experience.

CONCLUSION

The Indian Museum in Kolkata is a truly unique institution, offering visitors the opportunity to explore India's rich history, culture, and natural heritage all in one place. From its impressive archaeological collections to its vibrant natural history exhibits, the museum provides a window into the past while also remaining relevant to the present. Through its educational programs, technological advancements, and commitment to inclusivity, the museum ensures that people from all backgrounds can engage with its collections and learn from them. Ultimately, the Indian Museum is more than just a place where artifacts are stored – it is a living, breathing institution that connects people to their history and to each other. It is a space for learning, reflection, and personal growth, where visitors can come to explore not only the history of India but also their own place in the world. As it continues to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of society, the Indian Museum remains an essential part of Kolkata's cultural fabric and a testament to the enduring power of museums as places of discovery and transformation.

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