

Museum Documentation with Community Involvement with special reference to ANTRI Museum – A Case Study

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Introduction :

In place of a long talk on museum movement and revolution, we can say that there has been a PROGRESSIVE SHIFT from conventional museum to presentday museum. Heritage defined in this way is always dynamic and social, while the 'Benefit of People' has been tossed up as central ingredient. This PROGRESSIVE SHIFT and efforts of several big and small museums stand as inspiring examples behind the establishment of **Andaman Nicobar Tribal Research Institute (ANTRI) Museum** at Port Blair, capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (India) in Bay of Bengal in January 2012.

The ANTRI Museum is at infancy stage and dedicated to the rare Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of the islands. The islands are the abode of world's rarest vanishing Central African negrito tribes viz. Great Andmanese, Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese and two mongoloid tribal communities viz. Nicobarese and Shompen. They are at different levels of transformation with basics varying between extreme isolation and assimilation.

Before constructing plans, the authority of ANTRI Museum communicated (later documented) with all the community members, local experts, renowned citizens, anthropologists, and historians to receive their ideas and vision. Remembering the disastrous tsunami 2004, the communities expressed that their intangible assets if safeguarded, cannot be destroyed by tsunami, cyclone, fire, and accident and they can help build back their destroyed tangible assets.

The ANTRI Museum created a holistic plan not only to safeguard their tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage but also to have authentic documentation in core to be verified not only by experts but also by the community. A clear strategy and policy for documenting the diversity of local culture and their updating will enable to have in bag – the authenticity of data, possibility of multiple narratives and viewpoints; and these can be reflected in exhibitions.

THE CONCEPT & PRINCIPLE: ANTRI Museum was founded in recognition of the rights of indigenous communities as custodians and curators of their own culture with the aim to involve members of these communities as collaborators and co-curators. The International Council of Museums advocates that respecting and recognizing the ‘First Voice’ should become the leading ethical principles guiding museum practices.

The incorporation of indigenous voice and agency in artifact collection, display and interpretation are therefore deemed to be of primary significance in any museum seeking to represent indigenous cultures. This focus on ‘indigenous voice and agency’ it is argued, is critical to an understanding of these cultures as dynamic and contemporary. There has been a move from displaying ‘primitive cultures’ as frozen in time towards an acknowledgement of the ceaseless changes undergirding these communities’ contemporary existence. Scholars have argued that the modernizing agenda of the museum continues to be heavily embedded in the belief that traditional cultural beliefs, practice and material manifestations are ‘dying’ and hence need to be ‘saved’. In other words, exhibits on indigenous people fail to show them as dynamic and living cultures. This is particularly true if we examine the ways in which Andamanese exhibits are displayed in various museums across the world.

In most cases material cultural artifacts are randomly put together to suggest the image of a community caught in a time warp. Similarly material manifestations of each community are decontextualized from their sites of use and function or from their social relations or cultural meaning and itemized as being iconic representations of an entire culture. For e.g one can think of the Andamanese arrow and Nicobarese Kareyu often displayed as artifacts signifying the cultural ‘essence’ of each of these communities.

This is precisely a pattern of representation that the ANTRI museum seeks to critique and discard. The indigenous communities of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands cannot be represented as a people 'knowable' through a random collection of decontextualized artifacts. Neither can they be shown to be living outside of 'history'. The ANTRI museum seeks to recognize the indigenous communities as a people not merely with a 'culture' but with a sense of 'history' and hence with a changing sense of themselves over time. The most challenging task for this museum therefore is to be able to make the link between the past and the present or use its objects of display in ways that emphasize the capacities of these people to negotiate the shifting conditions of their lives and express their experiences in their own terms.

VISION, MISSION, PURPOSE : ANTRI Museum, hopes to function both as cultural institution addressing the needs of both civic pedagogy as well as indigenous empowerment.. Apart from the inclusion of 'indigenous voice' as its guiding principle the ANTRI museum will seek to generate new forms of cultural dialogue between the various ethnic communities settled in the Islands. In other words, the museum will try to develop through visual and other modes of display the history of the 'entangled relationships' between the indigenous communities and the non-tribal settlers.

PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES : The ANTRI Museum will follow procedures of collection, conservation, curation, documentation and display that are in accordance with the basic ethical premises of an 'inclusive museum'.

DOCUMENTATION : The ANTRI Museum documentation will follow procedures of collection that would allow the acquisition of contemporary objects, visual material, artifacts from indigenous communities through their active participation and consent. The museum will enrich itself with proper documentation of all possible tangibles and intangibles. The Museum could also negotiate the repatriation, borrowing, copying and acquisition of material belonging to Andaman and Nicobar Islands from existing, museums, repositories and libraries both in India and in other parts of the world. Rules and regulations for repatriation etc need to be worked out in consultation with relevant Government of India

ministries and departments. The Principle, vision , mission, purpose and guidelines will always be kept in functional mind while documenting.

FURTHER AREAS TO BE DEVELOPED in the documentation are

- Explore the social, linguistic and material exchanges that have occurred and continue to take place between indigenous communities.
- Objects that are not of indigenous origins but have influenced and impacted on indigenous communities.
- Non-indigenous archives, manuscripts, and other objects that contain representations of indigenous practices.
- Developing themes for both the Andamanese and the Nicobarese sections.

CURATION : The ANTRI Museum will curate both permanent displays and temporary exhibitions. The structure and narrative content of these displays will seek to elaborate themes that reflect the vision and purpose of the museum. The overall purpose of the Museum is to develop an understanding of the indigenous communities not as ‘primitive’/ ‘exotic’ cultures frozen in time but as ‘continuing cultures’ that have negotiated their lives through creative engagements with land, sea and the other settler communities of the Islands. The ANTRI museum in other words should be regarded as a vibrant ‘contact zone’ between the various communities on the Islands rather than as a space for displaying isolated, primitive or dying cultures.

To develop this theme, the Museum will follow the principle of ‘co-curation’. This means following a practice of curating in close collaboration with the communities represented whether indigenous or settler to furthest extent possible.

Conclusion : Thus, the ANTRI Museum came up, as has been thought out. The ANTRI museum desires for future to obey the international standards and also to carve out a distinctive identity for itself.