

Standardization of museum documentation in India: A case study of recent government initiatives

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Abstract:

Standardized documentation is essential for effective curation of museum collection. Museums of India are known for rich and varied collection but, in most of them, the documentation is stereotyped for a long time. Hopefully, Government of India has taken some proactive initiatives towards standardizing documentation procedure for its museums in recent times. Ministry of Culture, (MOC) has already established “National Mission for Manuscripts” (NMM) (2003) and “National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities” (NMMA) (2007) for developing comprehensive documentation system compatible with digital technology in the form of national database of all Indian manuscripts and tangible heritage including antiquities respectively preserved in our museums and alike institutions. MOC for the 12th Plan period has introduced new schemes for development of specific areas, as identified in the 14 point Museum Reform Agenda. “Museum digitization” is such a new scheme which aims to develop a national database of museum collections at various levels and to provide enhanced accessibility to users. Another new scheme is “Capacity building and training” which aims to fulfil an urgent need in our museums for trained professionals on various aspects of museum management including documentation. JATAN: Virtual Museum Builder, a comprehensive software developed by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune has been selected as the standard software for all museums under the purview of MOC. Very recently MOC with collaboration of C-DAC has made “Museums of India”, an online national portal and digital repository which provides access to heritage antiquities from national museums using JATAN software.

Keywords: comprehensive documentation, digitization, standardization, national database.

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Introduction:

Collections are cornerstones of museum organization and need to be documented in suitable ways to meet the existing and emerging needs of the professional practices and the diverse users, making use of the systematic procedures and contemporary technologies of information and communication. In this context, Stone (1984, p.127) remarked that:

Comprehensive documentation is the pivot on which curatorship depends and it is essential:

1. For effective management of collection encompassing storage, security, auditing and insurance.
2. To formulate acquisition policies by identifying the scope and limitation of the collection.
3. To enable the collection to be researched and published. The value of publications and the presentation of the collection through displays and educational work is related to the quality of the documentation.

With the passage of time and the progress made by the museums in different spheres throughout the world, the documentation methods have undergone considerable changes and have assumed greater importance. A number of professional agencies already formulated standard and guidelines for improving museum documentation like the International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CIDOC), Paris (International Guidelines for Museum Object Information: The CIDOC Information Categories; 1995), the Museum Documentation Association (MDA), London, (SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard; 1994, 1st ed. and onwards), the J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles (Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA): Art Information Task Force (AITF); 1996, Introduction to Object ID: Guidelines for Making Records that Describe Art, Antiques, and Antiquities, 1999, Cataloguing Cultural Objects (CCO), 2007 etc.) and the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), Quebec (Data Dictionaries for the Humanities and Natural Sciences, 1981, last updated 2010) etc.

Unfortunately the rich and varied collection of museums of India is not well documented for a long time. Hopefully, Government of India has taken some proactive initiatives towards standardizing documentation procedure for its museums in recent times. Some of these are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Government initiatives towards standardized documentation:

The mandate of Ministry of Culture (MOC), Government of India is to preserve and disseminate all forms of art and culture of India.

The MOC has established the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) in the year 2003, aiming to safeguard and disseminate our rich cultural heritage contained in more than five million manuscripts in several languages spread across the country and abroad. The most ambitious project of this mission is to create a national database of all Indian manuscripts in the country and abroad, kept whether in a museum, library, temple, madrassa or in a private collection. The National Database of Manuscripts known as *Kriti Sampada*, is available on the internet through the NMM's website. Under the NMM studies have been done on several digitization projects at national and international level for best possible practices to be adopted. It has formulated the 'Guidelines for Digitization of Archival Material' and developed a new software, based on the electronic format of IGNCA, called 'Manus Granthavali' which is based on Dublin Core Metadata Standards that are universally accepted.

The National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA) was launched on 19th March 2007 for a comprehensive documentation system compatible with digital technology in the form of national database on tangible heritage of our country. The NMMA proposes to launch its activities throughout the country with independent functional strategy in each state and union territory. It produces guidelines for documenting built heritage and sites and antiquities of our country. For the creation of National level digital database, NMMA has defined certain benchmarks to maintain overall uniformity such as digital photography of the objects should be taken in uncompressed TIFF (Tagged Image File Format) format in 300 dpi resolution; the

antiquities should be photographed with appropriate background for better output, the documentation of built heritage, sites and antiquities should be computed in MS Excel format, provision should be made to give the photographs both in documentation sheet as well as separately as master image etc.

In the 12th Plan period (2012-2017) some new schemes are introduced by MOC to improve museum functioning by reducing fundamental obstacles as well as the development of some specific areas of management as identified in the '14 point Museum Reform Agenda', 2009. Such a new scheme is "museum digitization" which is introduced in order to develop a national database of all art objects and antiquities available with the museums at various levels including national, state, regional and local museums and to provide enhanced accessibility to diverse users including scholars, researchers and informed visitors. This scheme has two components, one related to establishment of infrastructure by linking central server to museum level server and computers through dedicated channels and another one is related to digitization of all collections, summary catalogues and cross-indexed with fuller details on a template basis. Limited accessibility to this database to be provided through internet based on lower resolution images and full accessibility through nodes to be provided at each national level museum of our country, additional nodes can also be considered for provision in universities, research institutions and other organizations (such as the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), the National Research Laboratory For Conservation Of Cultural Property (NRLC) etc.) where such information need exists. Under this central scheme funds will be provided by the Ministry of Culture in the form of grants to various museums under the state governments, registered societies, voluntary institutions, trusts and NGO's, which are registered under the Indian Societies Act of 1860 or a similar legislation. This scheme focuses on scientific documentation work for the museum collection and includes following (Ministry of Culture, Scheme, Digitization):

1. Digitization of collections management system of the museum by procuring and using an appropriate standard software being used by renowned Museums in the country.

2. Photography of art works of museum for digitization purposes.
3. Creation or upgradation of website of a museum.
4. Creation of a digital catalogue of works available in the museum for public dissemination through the museum website.
5. Procurement of hardware like servers, clients, LAN, scanners, cameras etc., for digitization works for the museum.
6. Development of an online museum library.
7. Development of interactive information kiosks for the museum.

There is another new central scheme under the MOC in the 12th Plan period, namely “Capacity building and training” which has been developed aiming to fulfil an urgent need for trained professionals at museums at various levels such as national level, state level, regional and local level museums all across the country. The scope of this scheme will be to support institutions who wish to depute their professionals for intensive capacity building, training programmes in order to upgrade their expertise in specific areas of museum management such as collection management including documentation, preventive care and storage and many other functional areas etc. in collaboration with national and internationally well-known museums and institutions. Recognizing the reality that capacity building is a slow process, sustained efforts will need to be made in all museums related disciplines, throughout the 12th Plan period, in order to ensure comprehensive development of museum practices in accordance with the best international practices.

Very recently the MOC in collaboration with the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune has made a national portal and digital repository of Indian museums namely “Museums of India” which can be accessible online through the website www.museumsofindia.gov.in. It was inaugurated on 21st October 2014. The portal provides access to heritage antiquities from 10 national museums using JATAN; Virtual Museum Builder, under the Ministry of Culture. These are:

1. The National Museum, New Delhi
2. The Allahabad Museum, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh

3. The Indian Museum, Kolkata, West Bengal
4. The National Gallery of Modern Arts (NGMA), New Delhi
5. The National Gallery of Modern Arts (NGMA), Mumbai, Maharashtra
6. The National Gallery of Modern Arts (NGMA), Bengaluru, Karnataka
7. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Museum, Goa
8. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Museum, Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh
9. The Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh
10. The Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, West Bengal

The National Digital Repository of Museums is being managed using Sanskriti Digitalaya (Open Archival Information System) and e-Sangrahan (Data Acquisition Tool). The C-DAC organizes special training programmes for the museum curators and staff involved in the documentation activities of these museums in which they were trained to use JATAN software and digital technologies.

Conclusion:

A comprehensive museum documentation system with its multifarious scope is the key tool of museum management for transforming an object into a working artefact, conveying a significant message or messages on various aspects of our society, like; aesthetical, historical, religious, economic, technological, and so on. Therefore the rich and varied Indian cultural heritage preserved in the museums of our country not only should be documented using a standardized format but should also be studied, analysed and made comparisons with similar collections held elsewhere and built up collaborations with other great museums whose collections reflect and shed light on our cultural resources. Some initiatives taken by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India towards standardized documentation system of museums and alike institutions of India are mentioned in the above paragraphs; hopefully it will attempt more proactive measures towards a comprehensive museum documentation system in near future.

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ANTIQUITY DOCUMENTATION SHEET NATIONAL MISSION ON MONUMENTS AND ANTIQUITIES ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA		
S. No. 432		
1	Name of the Museum/ Institution	Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh
2	Title of object	Hariti
3	Type of object	Sculpture
4	Date /Period	c.2nd century A.D.
5	Dynasty / style	Kushana
6	Provenance	Skarah dheri
7	Material	Schist stone
8	Measurement / Weight	H132*B54cm
9	Description	Goddess is shown with three children,two of them perched on her shoulder and the third rests on her left hand. This sculpture is dated with an inscription on the left side of the front.
10	Identification marks	 Feet of the figure are lost.
11	Condition	The lower portion on the left arm is broken at 2 points and has been joined at some earlier stage with plaster of paris in an uneven manner. Also along the lower left breadth base area object is broken in 2 pieces and has been joined at some earlier stage with plaster of paris.
12	Photograph	
13	Location at the museum	On display
14	State / UT	Chandigarh
15	Accession / Registration No.	1625
16	Source of acquisition	Central Museum, Lahore
17	National Documentation No.	
18	Published References	1. Bhattacharya, D.C.(ed) (2002)."Gandhara Sculpture in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh". 2.Paul, Suwarcha (1986) "Gandhara Sculptures in Chandigarh Museum"
19	Remarks	It is inscribed
20	Date of recording	9/10/2011
21	Recorded by	G.M.A.G, Chandigarh

Fig: A filled-up datasheet of the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities, recorded by the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.