



Mnemoculture and National Museum: Looking at Salarjung National Museum, Hyderabad, India

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Received: 11 Jul 2021; Received in revised form: 20 Aug 2021; Accepted: 25 Aug 2021; Available online: 31 Aug 2021

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Abstract— Considering museum as a public site of cultures of memory, my paper will focus on Salar Jung National Museum situated on the banks of the Musi river, Hyderabad. The museum houses the cabinet collections and curios of the Salar Jung family, primarily of Mir Yousuf Ali Khan also known as Salar Jung III. He was the prime minister to the Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan of Hyderabad in 1914. It reserves its history of inception, culture and both personal and public history. The paper treats it as a cosmopolitan mnemocultural site that overrides the ‘national construct’ and refers to the potentiality of the its materiality to tell tales of many cultures, trade links and most importantly of political friendships and the culture of bestowing each other with rare works of art.

Keywords— *Mnemoculture, Museum Studies, Postcolonial nation, Indian Museums, Salar Jung III.*

Avoid Museum. This might seem to be absurd advice but let’s just think about a little: if you are in a foreign country isn’t it far more interesting to go in search of the present than of the past? It’s just that people feel obliged to go to museums because they learned as children that travelling was about seeking out that kind of culture. (Coelho 2015)

...journey into the past without which there can be no imagining the future. (Huyssen 2003)

Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present. (Nora 1996)

When Coelho wrote famously in 2015 in *Time* on travel tips with mentions of the pastness of the museums, he seems to have missed the vision of Huyssen who had noted a new perspective to viewing museums, mnemoculture and subsequently the past. Materiality, in this paper, is tied to memory and argues how it can tell different stories.

Memory to be articulated or represented requires a site whether written or visual. All representations in

language narrative, image or sound/music are an act of memory conditioned by the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. Memory is alive, fragmentary, plural and mutable by nature and is continuously evolving in time and space. It mediates to the present by being subjective and intuitive. It incorporates traces of the past, self, identity in the context of the present. Modernity has always been engaged in a contestation of the present’s past or traditions. On the other hand, it also laments the loss of the old order due to capitalism or rapid urbanisation. Pierre Nora the French historian discusses in his *Realms of Memory* how modernity in its attempt to maintain newness creates sites of memory, “*lieu de memoire*” and its loci in museums, galleries, cemeteries, monuments, anniversaries, personal connections, sanctuaries and so on as “rituals of a ritual-less society” (Nora 1996). They seem to encompass a vigorous and deliberate thrust—a will to remember and attempt at a coherence to history of families, communities and nations. For him these sites are deliberately constructed and fabricated. With the rise of few nation-states in the 19th century Europe and in the postcolonial countries such attempts were made to valorize and legitimize the nation by monumentalizing national pasts and give a basic form to the political, cultural and social

future of the state. He mentions that, in case of France “the two fundamental idea upon which the nation was built are “glory” both military and civilian, and “words,” France being a country in which the relation between language and literature on the one hand and political power, the state, and the national idea on the other hand has always been close (Nora xvi). Nora follows the *The Art Of Memory* by Frances Yates to establish that since “the classical art of memory was based on a systematic inventory of loci memoriae, or “memory places.”” (Nora 1996).

The museum is a modern project where they wanted to project themselves by re-constructing the past. In the Europe and the west the museum is consciously sought to put its knowledge and power up on display, to represent itself in a collection of objects, images that selectively represents the past and the present. As Huyssen writes “if the Romantics thought that memory bound us in some deep sense to time past, with melancholia being one of its luminal manifestations, then today we rather think of memory as a mode of re-presentation and as belonging ever more to the present, while its referent is of the past and thus absent.” (Huyssen2003) The temporal status of the museum is always the present. A conundrum in itself a museum offers the same objects and artifacts though constantly viewed/interpreted differently by the viewer consumer. So it becomes a burial ground of the past and also its resurrection. The past is pulled to the present by the live gaze of the viewer/tourist/consumer and the past “is intensely located on [his].. side ..and the present as well.” (Hussyen2003)

Memory is not always a matter of the individual brain but also lives in material objects. Museum, like the Salar Jung National Museum of Hyderabad is a realm of memory that externalizes and preserves both individual and collective memories; it presents the nation and at the same time life of Salar Jung family. Here memory is animated and a past exists dialectically between what to remember and what to forget. But as noted by Halbwachs collective memory “is not a given but rather a socially constructed notion” (Coser 22). Even though collective memory is created through sites, remembering is done by individuals as group members: “Social classes, families, associations, corporations, armies and trade unions all have distinctive memories that their members have constructed, often over long periods of time” (Ibid.). Traditions are invented and are based on selections and exclusions to shape up military, political, cultural and social life of the past. The government buildings, monuments, museums, galleries are the urban spaces of memory. Today the whole debate of history/memory has

been altered and historical memory has been re-presented as palimpsest:

Whatever the specific content of the many contemporary debates about history and memory may be, underlying them is a fundamental disturbance not just of the relationship between history as objective and scientific, and memory as subjective and personal, but of history itself and its promises...[there is] a fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures (Huyssen 2003)

History no longer gives a stronger and stable relation of a community/nation to its past as argued by Hayden White in his essay *Historical Text as Literary Artifact*. The paper discusses how historical material memory in museums functions or informs? How do we re-present the past? How are time, memory, identity and belongingness related?

Specifically, during 1980s, there has been an upsurge in postmodernism for museum exhibitions and many scholars undertook researches on museum history. By 1990s museum professionals began to publish articles and books on it. One such book, “Rethinking the Museum: An Emerging New Paradigm” by Stephen Weil traces the evolution of the museum from primary collector to museum as educator in service to the public. In another 1992 article Michael Ames wrote about the role of museums in the age of deconstruction. It is now a mass media. Museum theoretically represents an organizational institution that collates and displays information by ordering, arranging and preserving. In an age of citation museum database or archives preserve valuable information that are thought to be important. It affirms and informs of signification. Its evolution is a result of confluences of individual interests and ever widening social demands. Historians have traced the transformation of early modern private cabinet collections to the modern public state museums that had created a public sphere initially in Europe for information, preservation, recording and control of nationalistic power. The beginning of the public museums are commonly traced back to the founding of Ashmolean Museum (1682) based on public viewing or the Louvre Palace’s Garden in 1793 which symbolized national patrimony and political sovereignty. The cabinets/private museums common in the 16th& 17th centuries usually displayed the wealth, education and social status of the owner and his family. They are the predecessors of the modern public museums. The catalogues are not simply a guide to items but often suggest the selection and processes of arrangements.

From the elitist position of high culture, the private collections/cabinets of royal families and patrons have moved to a spectacular mise-en-scene of collective

mnemocultures owned by nation-states in the postcolonial times. Most often it is the state committee that decides what deserves to be kept, remembered and treasured. The past is interpreted for the present particularly for nationalistic discourses. They are great inscribers of history, nationalism and identity. One such museum is the Louvre in Paris which got transformed from a fortress to a museum and it has “witnessed numerous events in French history”. After being the fortress of the royals and later an arsenal and a prison during the hundred years war, the Louvre finally at the end of the 18th century became inevitably linked to the idea of museum. Throughout Europe the idea of exhibiting the large collections belonging to the princes and popes to the general public was being increasingly envisaged. The royal palace was burnt down in 1871 but the project of making it an art gallery survived as Francois Mitterand in 1981 decided to completely dedicate it to works of art and it was rebuilt by the architect Ming pie.

The museum is also an attempt to escape from amnesia and depends on dialectics of production and its reception. It is an experience of memory for both the museum maker and viewer. For instance, Julia Adeney Thomas informs in her essay in “Power Made Visible: Photography and Postwar Japan’s Elusive Reality” how the images of the second world war are everywhere and “photography in Japan sought to establish political, social, and aesthetic norms that were taken for granted elsewhere” (Thomas 2008). On the other hand the Cambodian state museum documents the traumatic phase of the communist regime during Pol Pot. In both these cases sites of memory organize the past creating certain meanings of material objects.

In the Indian context, the museum movement started in 1814 initiating the socio cultural and scientific achievements of the country. It is also considered as the beginning of modernity in India. Sir William Jones, a profound scholar of the 18th century devoted his life to the service of India and founded the Asiatic society in 1784 in Kolkata. However, the foundation of a museum as part of the activities of the society was never conceived then. In 1796, the members of the society thought of establishing a museum for the reception and preservation of objects and finally in 1808 the society found a place at the corner of Park Street on a land granted by the government to set up a museum. The early museums in India consisted of objects categorized under geology, botany, zoology, archaeology anthropology and art. Among others the Indian museum in Kolkata, the Madras museum in India and the Albert hall in Jaipur promoted this ideology. But the ideas of a museum preserving cultural heritage were brought in by the princely families in India and several of them instituted

private cabinet museums of art. It was in fact a colonial gift that infused a European flavor to their aristocratic lifestyle. The national museums in post-independent India offer what colonial past has left behind. They speak of India’s cultural past for the present viewers. One such museum in India that presents the political and also the cultural past of Hyderabad is the Salarjung museum established in 1995. It houses private artifacts of a single person who happens to be the prime minister to the Nizam. Initially like the history of Louvre it was situated in the residential palace of Salarjung III and was later opened for public viewing by the then PM Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951 through a deed. The private collection became a part of national identity, history and culture. It shows artifacts that unveils the interests, movements, political meetings and activities of the minister. It consists of 40 galleries of rich material artifacts and documents on aristocratic life and politics along with objects of everyday. Spread over 10 acres of land, the museum has 9,000 manuscripts, 43,000 art objects and 47,000 printed books. Galleries exhibit objects that date back to the 4th century. It displays art forms and sculptures of India, Far East, Europe Middle Eastern. There is a Founders' Gallery where the photographs and documents tell the story on the Salar Jungs. It has divine figures belonging to the period of the Gupta Kings, Pallavas and Cholas. Salar Jung III has also acquired old weaponry and remarkable among them are swords of by Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Tipu Sultan. Utensils and costumes of 18th and 19th centuries which adorn the walls of the museum tell tales of culture, art and artisans. Carpets from Middle East, marble statues from Italy, France and England are kept in the museum which belong to the large collections of the third Salar Jung PM. While some are original works of artists like ‘Night Watchman,’ there are also replicas of famous works of painters and sculptors. The ivory gallery and the objects displayed links India to China and Japan. It also reveals the various connections between these nations in the past. Objects and jewelry made of Jade, which was initially used by the Chinese are laid out along with a Russian coffee set, glassware of Medieval Europe and Mughal meenakari utensils. A gold hookah talks of the culture and affluence of India. Dutch paintings and porcelain from Europe speak of travels and vibrant political exchanges between India and other countries of the world.

The nineteenth century British Musical Clock with tiny mechanized figures that emerge through a door to strike the bell every one hour is a star attraction for all types of visitors. Few other prized possessions are the veiled marble statue of Rebecca created by an Italian sculptor G.B. Benzoni. We can also see ivory chairs presented to Tipu Sultan of Mysore by Louis XVI of

France. As stated in an article published in *Business Standard* on 20 January, 2019 the collection is safe in the museum:

If the collection was distributed among shareholders, one day or the other it would have been sold off or may have even gone out of the country. The most important thing was to see that it remained in India and in a museum where it could be displayed," said Ahteram Ali Khan, whose grandfather Nawab Mir Turab Yar Jung was the first cousin of Salar Jung III.

In 1958 the Indian government took over the museum through a compromised deed and later by an act of parliament. The museum along with its library was declared as an institution of national importance. It travelled further to its present building in the year 1968. It houses the cabinet collections of Salarjung family though major portion of the collections was acquired by Mir Yousuf Ali Khan, Salarjung III, who was an art connoisseur and had collected rare relics, antiques, artifacts some of which were gifted to him during his official visits to Europe and other parts of the world over a period of 40 years. He not only was a collector of antiques and art but also patronized poets, writers and artists encouraging literary and cultural activities.

The collections range from 2nd century B.C. to 20th century A.D. and have exhibits of Indian, middle-eastern and European art. Carpets, paper, glass, ceramics and furniture belonging to the Middle East particularly Persia, Syria and Egypt are displayed which were mostly mementoes received by Salar Jung III. It also boasts of an extensive collection of far eastern art represented by Japanese objects of porcelain, bronze paintings and wood and inlaid works. The 38 galleries with collections from various parts of India and the world produces an aesthetic, educative and informative site upholding the cultures and histories of various locales. The portrait gallery presents the rows of portraits and the other personal belongings of the family displaying their political life and social status. On the other hand Indian sculptures, textiles, minor arts of south India, south Indian bronzes are placed along with various urns and statues, clocks from abroad. Among the collections a set of ivory chairs presented by Louis 16 of France to Tipu Sultan of Mysore has also been displayed. The arms and armour collection display the country's Mughal regime. They reflect the lifestyles not only of India but also of various places outside the political boundaries of the Indian nation state. Objects from different parts of the world in this museum coexist and find their places side by side challenging the viewer to move through events and histories of a large geographic area. It is this space that goes beyond frontiers and to

borrow Rushdie's expression in *Step Across This Line* transforms us. It defies our ordering of the world by going across territorial boundaries. It celebrates heterogeneity and speaks for the collectors' interests, political activities, mobility and personal friendships. Although a state museum it intensely inscribes its own history and its appeal lies in charting of a new map of cultural past through the familial activities and involvements of the Salarjung family members, in this case as mentioned above, it is Salar Jung III's personal passion and love for aesthetics that had been displayed along the nationalistic discourse.

Functioning as a museum of national importance, it holds exhibitions in schools, villages and other public places. An attempt has been made to coningle the personal memory of the family with the collective shared cultural memory of the state. Cultural memory refers to the symbolic order, the institutions, media and practices of a community by which the state try to display a shared past. Memory here is used metaphorically. Societies or communities do not remember literally but it reconstructs the past through some site. This construction depends on the need of the moment. As Halbwach in his book *Collective Memory*(1992) shows how memory as constructed by institutions must be actualized by individuals, who are conceived of as the actual agents for remembering the past. These exhibits project a nation's version of its past and also its version of national identity. Memory and identity are closely linked and identities are to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting the past self with the present. This is true not only in case of national identities but also in terms of individual identity formations.

The Salarjung museum with its collection of works of art from both India and other parts world resonate the interests, status and intentions of the family of prime minister to the Nawab. The viewer/consumer approaching the museum as a nationalistic site often will be overwhelmed by the extensive collection of one man particularly and also confront the variation as s/he looks at the artifacts and the various body of display in each gallery. The past is interpreted and categorized for the present following its own requirement in time and space but here the pasts despite being strategically constructed speak of an individual's, Salar Jung III's massive collection and effort to celebrate art and culture. As a rich site of mnemoculture this museum resists a state-power-knowledge apparatus and compliments it with the role of the viewer/researcher/consumer. This state apparatus attempting to reconstruct official memory of the nation creates a mobile critical space as its epistemic value and

purpose is charted by readings and un-readings by viewer-consumers. It provokes a potential and polemical engagement and is always a present's past; in addition to a 'national' aspect added to its image, there remains the references to the 'individual'--his love of art, political relations and friendships, aesthetics and travel of the art connoisseur. It is a cosmopolitan site that shares histories of many trade links, political friendships, cultures of many nations of the world. It is indeed an inheritance of the past for the present.

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