

What Museums Post-Pandemic?

Welche Museen nach der Pandemie?

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Abstracts

The global COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vulnerability of the museum sector across the world. A plethora of reports and a tsunami of webinars by professional and intergovernmental agencies profile the severity of challenges faced by museums globally. New York or London or Paris are not the ones with answers anymore. Systemic discrimination of all kinds and humanity's callous disregard for the climate emergency are foregrounded. A radical rethinking of the museum as an institution and its contextuality are needed. As much as the collections will remain hegemonic and central to museums, becoming relevant to rights holders will determine transformations and new normalities and modalities of sustainability. This discursive essay is an autoethnographic consideration of heritage futures, from the reflexive freedom of the lockdown in village India, after more than four decades of traversing and working with museums on all the continents.

Die Corona-Pandemie hat die Verwundbarkeit des Museumssektors in der ganzen Welt offenbart. Eine Fülle von Berichten und Webinaren professioneller und zivilgesellschaftlicher Organisationen zeigt, wie schwerwiegend die Herausforderungen sind, denen sich Museen weltweit gegenübersehen. New York, London oder Paris sind dabei nicht mehr diskursbestimmend. Systemische Diskriminierung und die Ignorierung der Klima-Krise stehen mehr und mehr im Vordergrund, und ein radikales Umdenken über das Museum als Institution und seine Kontexte ist notwendig. So sehr Sammlungen für Museen zentral bleiben werden, so sehr werden Fragen von Provenienz und Nachhaltigkeit ihre neuen Normalitäten und Modalitäten bestimmen. Dieser Essay entstand in Zeiten des Lockdowns in Indien und ist eine autoethnographische Betrachtung über die Zukunft des Kulturerbes nach mehr als vier Jahrzehnten Kooperation mit Museen auf allen Kontinenten.

Keywords

Museum / Museum, cultural policy / Kulturpolitik, cultural heritage/ kulturelles Erbe

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Introduction

UNESCO posted a reality check film about the perception and perspectives of what is Normal, not Normal and the next Normal (UNESCO 2020a). Watching it from six months of lockdown in an Indian village, one wonders if the world of the establishment and its elite politics of culture and heritage would wake up to contemporary realities. Throughout the COVID-19 incumbency, the triangulation of the pandemic, climate emergency, and Black Lives Matter movement(s) about continuing gross inequalities have confluenced into the vulnerability of museums across the world, irrespective of their form, function, or social value. This year's May reports by professional and intergovernmental bodies profile the severity of challenges faced by museums globally (ICOM 2020; UNESCO 2020b; NETWORK OF EUROPEAN MUSEUM ORGANIZATION (NEMO) 2020). They provide rapidly aggregated statistics, a broad-brush picture of what can be sketched from Paris and its reach. Deeper perspectives and evidence-based studies are awaited.

What is the role of advocacy by professional museum bodies? What about contextual relevance for both the museums and the collections they hold and for the rights-based communities? The reports assist us, with a heightened awareness that is needed, to document in the digital realm the baseline data on museums and their essential aspects. How do we reflect on the essence of the museum, when the long process of revising its 2007 definition, by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) ended in a fiasco at the peak professional body's Triennial General Assembly in Kyoto in October 2019? Its leadership disintegrated, especially when it is most needed during the COVID-19 crisis (FRASER 2019).

Are collections and their journeys largely understood from the vantage point of the establishment? Making collections accessible via digitalization is only a means and not an end in itself. Return, repatriation, and restitution are legal terms in addressing decolonization of heritage collections. They are to be understood with genuine ethical engagement. Relevance is the key word. Relevance is also to key word for political dispensations to support museums in future where the ballot box becomes the ally of the museum. Museums need to, genuinely and ethically, engage with both the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO 2001) and the UNESCO 2015 *Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections* (UNESCO

2019). These two soft law instruments of UNESCO are critical as inter-governmental means for policy-based approaches to envisage the future museum.

Critical Issues

The above-mentioned preliminary reports need to be populated with current issues, cultural borders, and both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Museums need to be considered as living cultural centers as per the 2007 ICOM definition adopted in Vienna (ICOM 2017). It is glaringly obvious that museums must confront the insularity that is akin to being oblivious to their constituencies; become relevant to the people in their cultural and linguistic diversity; and address gross inequities of participation in the museum sector that pervade every corner of the world. While in the affluent localities of the world, museums are rolling out measured approaches to re-openings and enabling digital sprawling, there are many in almost every country that are closed, hopefully not forever. How the institution of the museum can become more relevant, inclusive, and grounded in the social, economic, and environmental realities of their respective contexts continues to be the biggest challenge, more so as we stare into the uncertain post-pandemic futures.

What is striking is the poverty of policies on museums. Very few countries have national cultural or museum policies, leaving it to the political dispensation of the day to manipulate cultural institutions and museums or ignore them depending on political expediency. The privilege of the countries of the Global North in Europe, North America and East Asia is quite different from the majority of the countries of the Global South. Nearly 80% of the current membership of ICOM is from the former. In the latter, even the small percentage of membership is through senior bureaucrats of government agencies. This situation needs to be understood and new avenues of equitable participatory democracy need to be scoped. It would help to advance national museum policies through intergovernmental agencies and the UNESCO standard setting instruments. These legally honor both the human rights soft law instruments and the ICOM *Code of Ethics for Museums* (ICOM 2004). ICOM is an accredited international non-governmental organization (INGO) of UNESCO. There needs to be seamless collaboration between the two (UNESCO 2019).

How can the post-pandemic museum become a quintessential civic space? How can it be understood both museologically and from a rights-based discourse embedded with accountabilities to race, ethnicity, color, indigeneity, gender, class, age, or sexual orientation (ICOM 2010)? Among several other concerns, how best can we minimize profiteering through illicit traffic in cultural property under the shadow of COVID-19 (UNESCO 2020c)? How best can we ensure that the hard-won rights-based approaches to inclusion, equality, diversity, return, restitution, repatriation, and cultural democracy are not forgotten? How can, once again, the awareness of international financial institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank about the criticality of cultural diversity and museums in UN Sustainable Development Goals be raised? Clearly, we need to rethink valuing culture in a post-pandemic world addressing the triangulation of these issues (THROSBY 2003).

Museum Amnesia

It is not that the call for inclusion, relevance, and change is new. Leading edge museologists of the day such as Duncan Cameron (1971) queried the museum as a “temple or forum.” Steven Weil (1989) argued the museum as an “idea” and object as a “thing.” Participants at the ICOM 2002 Asia Pacific Regional Conference in Shanghai demanded the decolonisation of the museum, calling for rethinking the museum as a dynamic institution that includes safeguarding Living Heritage as part of core museum business (GALLA 2004). It was the only major museum meeting informing the UNESCO 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003). The Shanghai meeting led to the adoption of ‘Museums and Intangible Heritage’ as the theme for the 2004 Triennial General Conference of the ICOM in Seoul. Soon after, in 2007, the current definition of the museum, in its sixth iteration since 1948, was updated and adopted. The ICOM Cross Cultural Task Force (2004 to 2010) was part of the complex negotiation process through the ICOM Reform Taskforce to have ‘intangible heritage’ included in the definition. In 2008, the Inclusive Museum Research Network launched in Leiden, The Netherlands, in partnership with ICOM, a movement to scope as to how the institution of the museum could become more inclusive. The result, the International Institute for Inclusive Museum, is an open-ended research network for intellectual debate and discussion

rather than being prescriptive on what is inclusion (see the network's site at <<https://onmuseums.com/>>). A few years later, ICOM adopted the *Charter on Cultural Diversity* that called for a shift from monoculturalism to cultural pluralism in museums (ICOM 2010).

The *Excellence and Equity* policy of the American Association of Museums (AAM) in Baltimore was historical (AAM 1992). It was the first meeting of the world's largest national museum body to benchmark sessions for their relevance and engagement with middle America or the USA. In the aftermath of September 11, UNESCO adopted the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO 2001). The global insecurities of war and terrorism brought all the members together and the Declaration was adopted unanimously. In contrast, the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* drafted by the United Nations in 1949 is still not accepted by many countries. The AAM Program Committee for its 2002 (Portland) and 2003 (New Orleans) meetings adopted the practice of bringing in international experts to critique their themes and sessions. The 2002 meeting hardly attracted session proposals on African-Americans or on diversity concerns. The then US presidential rhetoric of 'you are either with us or the enemy' sent the wrong threatening message to anyone who questioned the federal authority, and in short, its power of whiteness. As one of the three international experts on the AAM Program Committee for both Portland and New Orleans meetings, I was surprised that the *Excellent and Equity* policy framework did not encourage more session proposals on diversity. It shows that even good policies need ownership before change can take place. It seems that Black Lives Matter will drive change to a certain extent. Only the future will tell about real transformations based on evidence and measurable indicators.

In a similar conundrum, I was invited to rethink my approach to drafting national guidelines for capacity building for Australian museums (GALLA 1993). In the lead up to it, I negotiated a framework to travel extensively to all parts of Australia, metropolitan and regional, to facilitate workshops and meetings bringing museums to open up at the local level to the Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse community groups. The idea was that the national guidelines from the highest administrative body need to have local ownership and that the learning outcomes would be locally translatable and enduring. The focus was not on the actual report, but on the process and enabling sites for inclusive discourse rather than oppositional discourse. What I found was that most Australians were 'fair dinkum,' or open to change for the

better, if only they knew how to go about it. It worked to a large extent in Australia. But it also revealed the challenges of closed intellectualism and professionalism of the museum leaders.

As part of the process, I convened two national symposia with senior museum leaders, directors, and curators. A two-day event entitled *Issues in Multicultural Heritage Management* focussed on diversifying collections; developing collaborative exhibitions and educational programs; and the praxis of community engagement. However, Australia did not have a national museums policy at that time. So, a third day was convened entitled *Towards a National Museum Policy*. Surprisingly, Indigenous or multiculturalism were not mentioned once on the third day. Yet, the participants were the same on all the three days. This included the president and all the members of the Board of Council of the then Australian Museums Association. Two outcomes were that the third day led to the subsequent formation of a Heritage Collections Council of Australia. The second was a realisation that our approach must be to diversify the mainstream Anglo-Australian establishment at the three levels of government: local, state and territory, and national. I then worked with the Australian Local Government Association on a policy document entitled *Services for All* (1999). The idea was that if you provide a service for health or education or whatever, you must provide similar service for culture. It was the culture in development approach that UNESCO has been advocating. We brought the advocacy for policy-based transformations to the neighbourhood level where the people live in their Indigeneity and cultural diversity. We consolidated this momentum at the national and state/territory levels and developed *A Plan to Diversify Australian National Cultural Institutions*. It was endorsed by the Cultural Ministers Council of Australia in 1993 (KOLETH 2010).

As with the transformations of the demographics and social developments of Australia, political interventions forced museums, galleries, libraries, and archives to adopt and experiment with new ways to become relevant. However, both *Excellence and Equity* in the USA and the *Plan to Diversify Australian National Cultural Institutions* remained overarching frameworks without teeth. Black Lives Matters is inevitable, all over the world, as the COVID-19 lockdown and its siting in the global climate crisis opened up the ugly face of inequities and all forms of discrimination. In addition to the above, a global survey would reveal more transformative engagements. Yet, the Kyoto rhetoric of ICOM in 2019 invariably talked about the Eurocentric nature of ICOM. During the past three decades, major museum professionals from the Global South be-

came the Presidents of ICOM. In this period, Alpha Konare from Mali became the President of Mali and the Organization of the African Union. Followed by Saroj Ghose from India, who was the founding Director General of the National Council of Science Museums, the largest science museum movement in the world. Alissandra Cummins from Barbados became the first Black woman to become the President of the Executive Board of UNESCO. My purpose in enunciating all of the above is that the Kyoto fiasco of ICOM, on the definition of the museum, was the cultural amnesia and obliviousness to the past leadership and achievements of ICOM. The central concern missed, and that which could have been addressed, was the imbalance of museological positioning between the Global North and the South.

'Marshal Plan' for the Inclusive Museum

One of the most enduring nostalgia of the German half of my family is the Snowy Mountain Hydro Scheme, often touted as the birthplace of Australian multiculturalism. Beginning in 1949, about 100,000 immigrants from over 30 countries, mostly white, many who had escaped the horror of post-war Europe, came and built the greatest European public project in Australian history. It now consists of nine power stations, 16 major dams, 80 kilometres of aqueducts, and 145 kilometres of interconnected tunnels and pipelines (PETERSEN/THOMSPON 2011). The immigrants caused a great disjunction in Australian history – it could no longer be mono-cultural and Indigeneity and immigrant signatures would be inscribed in the Australian historical cultural landscapes writ large. Immigrants continue to change the very identity of the country and its liberation as the lone Eurocentric country in Asia. The majority of the elderly Europeans now long for Alpine memories and for snow and all the romanticism it brings. It was very much the nostalgia for a golden age that, irrespective of their location, every culture in the world longs for when culture informs our heritage, health, and wellbeing.

At the same time Europe was rebuilding through the Marshal Plan. It needed a think tank of ideas that would underpin the post-World War II social and cultural fabric of Europe. It called for innovation and bold initiatives. That is exactly what the Salzburg Global Seminar provided. It was established in 1947 as the Marshal Plan of the mind. Rebuilding communities needs serious intellectual engagement that respects and honors the history and diversity of the places where the rebuilding is

taking place. Moreover, the end of World War II saw the beginning of the process of political decolonization across the world. It was the beginning of the end of Europe as we knew it, a hub of metropolitan colonial powers that became opulent extracting resources and wealth from the rest of the world. It was also the start of the end, a rather reluctant and slow one, of the museum as a colonial project.

COVID-19 has highlighted the cross roads of psychological decolonization; reconciling fractured identities; searching for models and modalities of inclusion; transitioning from the disappointment of the inaction of the UN Millennium Development Goals to rethinking the UN Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals; and dealing with digital tsunamis that drown out the collective consciousness to the I – the individual. In this context, it is significant that the March 2019 Salzburg Global Seminar program focused on *What Future for Cultural Heritage? Perceptions, Problematics, and Potential* (SALZBURG 2019). It was a dialogue enabling new forms of networking and collaboration that aimed at developing strategies for raising greater awareness of the unique and often poorly understood role of cultural heritage. The drafting and widely disseminating of a Salzburg Global Statement on the problematics and potential of cultural heritage in the 21st Century was important. The seminar continues and hopes to inspire, incubate, and catalyze several creative and unorthodox or unconventional cultural heritage projects and networks, across generations, regions, disciplines, and sectors.

One could locate the seminar's aspirations within the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, and especially Goal 11: *Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*, as it provides a framework with measurable outcomes (UNITED NATIONS 2016). The agenda needs new partners to minimize established coteries of influence and opportunism from past relationships. One challenge is to understand why so many museums struggled even before the pandemic in Small Island Development States, over fifty countries. These are devastated from the pandemic and the decline of tourism, which was their main stay. New relationship building is at the heart of the UN Agenda. It is needed to genuinely locate culture at the heart of sustainable development. We need to go beyond the binaries and the tyranny of stereotypes to be inclusive, holistic, and sustainable in our responsibilities to posterity. Post-pandemic, while standard setting instruments and definitions have a role to play to facilitate shared professional practice, one should be careful not to homogenize the diversity of discourses.

For museums, decolonization of the mind is an ongoing process. Legacies of the past have two sides. Colonization and its imprint and diverse formations of resistance. The dialectic of coloniality and contextuality is an ongoing negotiation to move forward. Inclusion and relevance as the aspirational heritage futures have become non-negotiable (GALLA 2016). What do inclusion and sustainability mean in the immediate and long-term futures? It is based on a ‘fingers in the dirt’ understanding of the world of collecting, conserving, interpreting, exhibiting, and managing heritage in all its manifestations. Collections can no longer be strangers in storage or on display (GALLA 2015). It is within this decolonizing frame that digital affordances were used to convene a global forum through the *Heritage Matters Webinar Series* and other interactive engagements to roll out and interrogate ideas, emergent and enduring (INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE INCLUSIVE MUSEUM 2020). Over 5,300 participants from 129 countries from all the continents of the world joined. The resounding direction is that a Marshal Plan type post-pandemic think-tank is needed to rethink the institution of the museum. In all the webinars the key concern continues to be honoring the ‘first voice’ of primary stakeholder groups (GALLA 2008).

Decolonizing the British Museum

In her TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) eloquently argues that single stories diminish the dignity of people and places. Her talk has many lessons for post-pandemic museums. Single story interpretations are a major cause of the marginalization of heritage values and layers of significance in many places. For example, the Amaravathi Gallery in the British Museum (UK) ignores the source place of the collection (GALLA 2019). Amaravathi School of Art is well known. Its sculptures from the Satavahana and Ikshvaku periods, from 2nd Century BC to 3rd Century AD, are well studied and analyzed, most of them in the colonial collections of the British Museum, Chennai Museum (India) and Musée Guimet (France). They continue to be presented within a Western hegemonic colonial aesthetic. What is missing is the understanding of the contextual place for such internationally acclaimed creativity. Object centeredness, a legacy of colonial extractive heritage resource agency, has resulted in serious neglect of the contextual historical landscapes, including the largest Buddhist Stupa in India and the most sacred for Mahayana Buddhists

the world over. It is a common malady of former colonial collections in both Europe and the source countries. Decolonization of such legacies has often been through show and tell episodes.

In this context, Amaravathi in the state of Andhra Pradesh, focusing on contextual heritage could emerge as India's first Ecomuseum. A much-neglected village until 2016, its 300 acres of built environment has layers of cultural significance from the Megalithic or *Pandukal* times from about 900 BC. The intensification of agriculture around the 4th Century BC, with the introduction of iron ploughshares, radically transformed the landscapes into fertile tracts resulting in the birth of the first historical urban center in Andhra, then known as Dhanyakataka or emporium of grain. It is this wealth that enabled traders to flourish here with networks connecting to the rest of India and beyond in the Mediterranean. Patronage for Buddhism and other faiths and especially the creative genius that was sustained for almost four centuries is evident in the Buddhist sculptures. Now, the place is slowly being reanimated through safeguarding intangible heritage across 20 cultural spaces. Co-curatorship of these civic spaces considers that the past is always perceived through the present and that all interpretation must be evidence-based.

Amaravathi Ecomuseum has been a systematic methodological approach to map the 300 acres of Amaravathi Village. The local people are inducted to interpret a range of thematic episodes, as part of the landscape narratives for educational purposes and experiential tourism. Recent focus in Amaravathi has largely been on recreational tourism. But the use of heritage resources, that are non-renewable, through systematic mapping, studying and conserving before using them has been progressive. It takes time to build up competent personnel, mostly volunteers, with appropriate skills and knowledge. This approach informed one of the opening projects, entitled *Maa Vuuru Maa Kodallu*, 'our village and our daughters-in-law,' as a project curated by local women who opened up the local places for renewal.

Another example of local engagement is the thousand-year-old temple. It is the most prominent in the *Pancharama* (five sacred sites) pilgrimage with the Lingam or phallic representation of Shiva as the central focus in all of them. A scientific analysis of the structures, with impacts of time and poor human interventions, was recently completed by the International Centre for Inclusive Cultural Leadership, Ahmedabad in collaboration with myself and will be published in the next months. It analyzed the history of the temple to unravel periods of growth and development from the Reddy kings in the 14th Century AD to the 19th Cen-

tury renovations by the local Zamindar/ Rajah. Visitor needs were analyzed. Circulation and comfort of pilgrims was considered. The adjacent bathing Ghats and water usage were analyzed. Encroachments removed systematically revealed hither to unknown elements of the temple. It was an entirely place-based approach, based on comparative experience from other similar projects internationally. Now the temple itself has been developed as a living museum and heritage tourism destination.

In Andhra Pradesh it is estimated that there are over 140,000 mother goddesses and temples waiting to be safeguarded. Several of these mother goddesses are remnants of the later day Tantrayana Buddhism. Each is a site for safeguarding local intangible cultures embedded with heritage values of several centuries, dynamic, transforming, and informing the lives of village populations. What is significant is that the local community groups provide most of the resources in such initiatives. In short, new museological approaches to holistic and smart heritage tourism need to be creative and implemented with integrity to make a difference in the borderless marketplace, here encapsulating the British Museum as the place of one of the biggest colonial collections on early Buddhism. The paradigm shift I am suggesting is from the London/Paris/Chennai/Urban centric single story to a more inclusive trans-border understanding of collections and contextuality.

Re-Imaging or Re-Imagining

The cry world over is the demise of humanities and liberal arts. Arguments abound – disappearance of funding to reactive governments; inertia of bureaucracies to the class mobility of the once subaltern into compromising and aspiring middle-class establishments; replacement of creativity by show and tell presentations; frozen in time cultural representations at festival performances; proliferation of conferences for ticking the boxes in academic scoring and hierarchy to academic indexing controlled mainly from the hegemonic Anglophone world. In this circus of contemporary world, who are the puppeteers? Who are the performers? Does orthodoxy stand in the way of creative freedom? How do we interrogate propaganda and the press? Has individualism become dominant in the digital domain? How well can we interrogate, via evidence-based and informed deep research, all the things that add value to creativity and freedom? Where are the safe places for unsafe ideas? What has happened to the creative and intellectually engaging public

spaces? In India – the *Adda*, the *Rachhabanda* – traditional places of public gatherings for dialogue and discussion have been decimated by political dispensations but also by poor design and architectural outcomes for neighborhoods. Festivals and extravaganzas that consume most of the funding are often ‘flash in the pan’ events providing photo ops for politicians. No outcomes analyses and statistical profiles based on scientific methods are provided.

In early February 2019, a much-needed two-day international think tank, *Reimagining Museums*, addressed some of these concerns in Delhi, at the India International Centre. It was a brave, inspirational and much needed engagement, a rare gathering of deep-thinking minds in 21st century India focusing on creativity and freedom. It was important that, at the think tank, the Secretary of Culture for India acknowledged the need for strategic and collaborative policy development. India works *ad hoc* in the cultural sector without reliable cultural statistics. This is different from the product driven cultural industries such as music and film sectors. In tourism, ‘manufacturing’ of data has become common. Pilgrims are cast as tourists. Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) coming back to see families are counted as tourists and not as Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR). Such distortions skew upwards any potential planning that could genuinely contribute to India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on creativity and responsible tourism. Museums remain at the margins in all planning and are in dire straits during the pandemic.

Untouchability and castes and racial bigotry is that intangible heritage that we do not want to keep, just as we do not support female genital mutilation. But we need to understand their existence to abolish them. Mandela said that nobody is born to hate or discriminate. If they have learnt to discriminate, they could also be taught to love. But if they can be socialized into bigotry, they can unlearn and perhaps museums can become, not rhetorical, but practice-based sites of love and intercultural engagement to build a better world for posterity. Understanding the abominable intangible legacies of caste, race, ethnicity, dowry, child marriages, and discrimination is a way that we can decolonize Indian heritage and build inclusive and resilient communities. Most of the museum discourse on inclusion, as elsewhere in the world, has become rhetorical and repositioning a ‘Self and the Other’ engagement. Reinventing the colonial ‘white man’s burden of civilizing the natives,’ ‘them’ as the objects of our interpretations continues in the renaming of colonial museums of ethnology as in the case of Museums of World Cultures (AMES

2000). It is not that there have not been critical thinkers in museums, but they were lost to the corporate practice of selective hearing in board rooms and corridors of curatorial power from the establishment (MACK 2003: 11-23).

Future Imperfect

One of the harshest realities for the museum sector is that employment is dependent on tourism. Most unemployed people in the cultural and tourism industries are in the informal economic sector. In India they are lower caste people and Dalit (so called “Untouchables”) at the bottom rung of the caste system and classes. My reading of the hundreds of webinars during the pandemic in India among the museum and heritage sectors shows that the content is essentially about the cultural reproduction of the upwardly mobile urban middle classes. Elite politics and control of the majority is well learnt from the colonial times. It is deeply embedded in the Indian psyche and continues. While their ‘hearts go out’ to the suffering of the mass national movement of workers in India called ‘migrants,’ most museum sector people complain about the loss of domestic maids, cooks, and drivers. In all of this unravelling, gender is lost to the patriarchy of the discourse.

Can we innovate and inspire for posterity a brave new world of museums walking through the pandemic portal?

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (ROY 2020)

Could the museum become “a sort of emotional and spiritual historian” as we go through the portal (HOWARD 1963)? Are we allowed and “endowed to create dangerously,” the old argument that museums are safe places for unsafe ideas (CAMUS 2019)? Could we use the frames of the “accidental critic” in museology and museography learning through accidental discursive encounters (SCHJELDAHL 2020)? The resilience of the rights holder communities provides for the curatorial enrichment or museological agency.

In this context it is significant that, in August 2020, India launched a very progressive National Education Policy (NEP) (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA 2020). It forefronts arts, culture, and heritage as important in all forms of education. Hopefully, this will result in progress towards a na-

tional cultural policy and one that would lift museums out of their colonial slumber. NEP provides for the frame enunciated by eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar's "contemporary pasts," that we continue to use the prism of the present to rethink and reimagine the pasts but based on evidence (THAPAR 2019; ROY/DAYAL 2019). Thapar has advocated for evidence based rigor in historical writing as an antidote to populism and communal writings. She asks historians to keep an open mind to revisit and revise their interpretations as new evidence is found and for being open to multiples perspectives as long as they are evidence-based. We could rethink the way we approach the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with culture in poverty alleviation as the cross-cutting theme through demonstration projects (GALLA 2012). NEP 2020 provides for capacity building, and educational institutions could lead.

The new Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Lonnie G. Bunch III, historian and founding Director of the iconic and phenomenal, National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., offers three suggestions for museum transformations when and where appropriate. First is "a community-driven model of interpretation, collecting, and relationships that might assist them in navigating the tensions between history and memory" so that "museums matter." Next is

"help audiences find the contemporary resonance of a museum's efforts," and then "reposition cultural institutions as sites of value that are the centers and not peripheries of their communities" (BUNCH 2019).

I, for one, look to the optimism of the teenager Anne Frank to navigate the current sea of negativity and doom – "How wonderful it is that no-body needs wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

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