

Museums of Varanasi Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: *Heritage embraces not only the collection of objects but also includes intangible manifestations of the living expression. At the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris, from 29th September to 17th October 2003, “The Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” was adopted. Museums as guardians of tangible heritage were looked upon, to participate in this initiative. ICOM immediately responded to the call and declared “Museum and Intangible Heritage” as the theme of its 20th General Conference that occurred in Seoul in 2004. Museums were re-defined, from the traditional role of collection of objects to the dynamic role of documenting and exhibiting the intangible aspect of the object as well. This paper seeks to explain what intangible heritage is and how digital implication in museum exhibition can be an aid in preserving the intangible aspect of the object by citing the example of two unique museums of Varanasi i.e., Virtual Experiential Museum and Kashi Dham, which is established to showcase the culture of Varanasi. This paper will further discuss the changing role of museums and the importance of digital heritage preservation.*

Keywords: Intangible Heritage, New museology, Digital implication, Digital heritage preservation

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the ‘Convention for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage’, was adopted. The convention marked an international desire in the context of rapid post-war economic and technological change and development to save material culture perceived to be at the mercy of a range of environmental, political and economic threats. According to the convention, the intangible heritage encompasses all those practices- including rituals, tales, performing arts, crafts and ceremonies that are transmitted orally from the past and act as symbols of identity in the present. (National & Pillars, n.d.) Intangible cultural heritage by definition is people-oriented rather than object-centred. The UNESCO Convention recognize five key domains in defining intangible heritage: -

- Knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts
- Social practices, rituals and festive events.
- Performing arts.
- Oral tradition.
- Knowledge and practice concerning nature and the universe.(Boylan, 2015, p. 2)

In the twenty-first century, ‘the role of museums in the society’ – a phrase that sits at the heart of ICOM’s definition of a museum, and shapes its existence as an organization was continually discussed among museum professionals, politicians and owners or boards of museums, to ensure that museum strives to be front-runners in promoting knowledge and dialogue about history, culture and nature, as well as fostering sustainable practices and ongoing educational enrichment through the use of their resources.(Heritage, 2016, p. 3) ICOM in 2004, adopted ‘Museum and Intangible Heritage’ as the theme of its 20th General Conference that took place in Seol in 2004. It encouraged countries, cultural authorities and museums all over the world to pay attention to intangible heritage and to include it in a broader framework. Museums, particularly in times gone by, collected objects from the past while neglecting to record related knowledge and insights. Even though in museological terms many aspects of intangible heritage have been part of museum work for a long time, through concepts such as ‘New Museology’, ‘Ecomuseum’ or ‘Everyday life’, ICOM urged its members to extend knowledge beyond documentation of museum objects and present a complete picture. (*Intangible Heritage - International Council of Museums - International Council of Museums*, n.d.)

The emergence of new museology started with the intention of highlighting a changed relationship between the museum and their communities, making use of collective memory, letting more emphasis on people's participation and intangible heritage and making the museum more inclusive. This shift includes: -

1. A drive for wider access and representation of the diverse group.
2. A more active role of the public as both visitors and controller of curatorial function
3. An active role in tackling discrimination and inequality within society.

Envisioned like a cultural centre a public space for sharing ideas and bringing people together, the new museums are based more on dialogue rather than on dimensional dissemination of knowledge. The idea of concept or story-driven displays was a significant characteristic of the permanent exhibition now. Objects were taken off centre stage or used as side illustrations to enable broader themes or personal and communal stories to be told. A new concept of museology that is not only about the preservation of collections but rather more ambitiously is also about the safeguarding of traditional knowledge and the expression of local identity. (Marstine, 2006)

The implication of digital technologies and interactives have given a new dimension to museum exhibition and made it easy for curators to not only highlight the tangible aspect of the object but also includes the stories related to it. Stephanie Koester (1993) has said that computer-generated technologies can incorporate multiple media, such as text, sound, video, or graphics, into an integrated computer system, which can then serve as an exhibit that can inform the visitor on a relevant museum topic using the most appropriate communications media. (Witcomb, 2003, p. 131) Based on this new concept Varanasi has two unique museums i.e., Virtual Experiential Museum and Kashi Dham.

II. VIRTUAL EXPERIENTIAL MUSEUM

Located in Man Mahal ghat. This is an initiative by the Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India, with the creative team of the National Council of Science Museum and INTACH. The museum was inaugurated by P.M. Narendra Modi on 19th February 2019. It has introduced the technology of virtual reality, the high-performance graphic engine to render photorealistic scenes in real-time and in three-dimensional graphics (3D) perspective, combined with associated surround-sound audio and multimedia kiosk. The user interacts with the virtual environment through a variety of input and output devices. Like the digital ringing of the bell, laser light shows on Descent of Ganga, Documentary film on Varanasi, which give details about the history of its origin and culture and traditions which still practised. Gallery through virtual reality showcases the narrow lanes of Banaras and Food culture. Virtual Havan Kund denotes the yajna tradition in Banaras. Multimedia kiosk records tune the various instruments and represent musical Gharana of Varanasi, Digital book which records the literature and eminent poets of the city. There are also galleries dedicated to eminent persons like Annie Besant, Madan Mohan Malviya Ji and many others who contributed to the development and upliftment of the city. Virtual content has provided an opportunity to record the intangible aspect of the object and easily make visitors' experience enriching. (*The Virtual Experiential Museum at the Man Mandir, Varanasi | INTACH Intangible Cultural Heritage*, n.d.)

2.1 Kashi Dham

Located in Brahma Ghat, this is a private museum, created in the memory of godman Sanjeev Janardan Kini. This unique museum was inaugurated on 13th April 2014, by Jagatguru Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati, Swami Avimuktेश्वaranand Ji, Princess Krishna Priya Ji of Banaras, International Athlete Neelu Mishra along with Senior Advocate of Mumbai High Court Jayesh Kini and his wife Radhika Kini, who also laid the foundation stone of Kashi Dham. The museum was specifically built to answers questions like What is Kashi? How was Kashi Created? And What is the real meaning of Kashi? This is a museum incorporating myriad topics in Hindu Culture & spreading the knowledge embedded in the glorious texts of Sanatana Dharma. The unique door at the main gate of Kashi Dham itself narrates a story of Indian art and symbols. It has twenty-eight segments with each column denoting Indian symbols like Swastika, Om, Snake Shivling, Simba, Hexagon, Nandi, Crab, Ensign, Lamp, Nagada and Varada Mudra. On entering the museum, there is a beautiful tableau of the Twelve- Jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva, presented around the ancient Laleshwar Mahadev temple, which is very adorable. Through 3-d paintings, the galleries of the museum narrate stories and tales from Indian mythology, various rituals performed in Sanatana Dharma and their significance, and the Vedic astrology and astronomy. There is also a room in the museum where revolutionist Sahadev was hiding during the freedom movement. Kashi Dham is an effort that cherishes the religious and cultural aspects of Kashi. (*Kashidham Museum Varanasi*, n.d.)

The idea of the museum as a repository of material culture, a space dedicated to the preservation and display of artefacts and specimens is now changing. Museums are moving towards a more dynamic engagement with communities and extending their activities beyond the museum. The participation of community groups in museum work has meant that oral histories and traditional knowledge and beliefs are gradually incorporated into official museum narratives.

Digital heritage preservation is the need of time. It has its unique manner of conveying the content and in doing so influencing the reception and understanding of the concept. It potentially allows for a holistic virtual re-creation, re-enactment and expression of a culture where the tangible aspects of cultural heritage are shown as inter-relating with the intangible aspects. The museum does have a tool kit. They are now encouraging and promoting cultural diversity, the continuity of tradition and ongoing cultural creativity by making use of new technologies. Museums are now changing from their traditional role of object preservation and tangible aspect to a more dynamic role of people-centric and people's participation. But the major challenge for museums in documenting the intangible heritage is that it deals with people, their traditions and beliefs and are totally under the control of the people and community who can talk back and even complain when they think their traditions are mistreated, unlike objects which do not speak or complain about the treatment done on them.

To conclude in words Richard Kurin, "*Culture is not preserved because someone puts it in a museum or an archive. It is preserved because it lives in the society*" (National & Pillars, n.d., p. 34). More community-based museums are needed which can showcase the intangible heritage of the region, illustrating the larger whole and inter-relationship of the tangible feature of our country.

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