

Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Barrackpore – Modern Day Relevance

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Introduction:

From the house of wonders to the seat of information and learning and from a secluded existence to community organization, museums have traveled much since a long time. In the year 1915, legendary Educationist Sir Asutosh Mukherjee observed that museums “are adjunct to class rooms and lecture rooms, bureau of information and institutions for the culture of the people” and “they should be properly equipped for accumulation and preservation of specimens such as to form the material basis of knowledge in the Arts and Sciences”. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, after independence, spoke in the same vein on the occasion of the inauguration of the National Museum in New Delhi on the 18th December, 1960, that “Museums are not just the places to see odd things or ‘Ajayabghars’, as they used to be called, but they are an essential part of the educational system and cultural activities of the country. What is more, they are places for public education”. So it can be said that since a long time each and every type of museum had some challenges to convey the particular message according to their nature to our society from their professional view points. As the Science and Technological museums inform about the intricacies of science, objects and resources of nature and their utility in our day to day life, similarly Art and Archaeology or History museums also convey the messages about the progress of civilization in the historical perspective and man’s cultural pursuits, achievements or Man himself.

Like any other museum, Biographical or Personalia Museums have a distinct role to develop the right attitude and approach to life, living and relations apart from the inspiration. The distinct potentiality that marks out the

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biographical museums is their capability to work for the upliftment of the fellow beings, both in developing their human character and broadening their education and culture. In times of moral degradation and absence of moral values in public life museums on such type of our country or the whole world will rescue us from our predicament. So such a museum on noble people of our country or the whole world has great issues and challenges in our community or public life.

Our country, highly developed in all aspects of human culture, both material and spiritual, through history, is not a mute spectator, and has assimilated this outlook in museum-activities long back. With the later development in the museum-movement biographical or personalia museums have been also developed on such a manner so that they can reach the actual inspiration of life to our community. So the issues and challenges of such museums are not limited to only knowledgeable and interested people and again through three-dimensional audio-visual presentations and facility to 'touch', that type of museums are better placed for dissemination of knowledge and education in almost a permanent manner.

Professionally it can be said that Biographical Museums are neither mausoleums, nor an attempt to ancestor worship or meant to show only our gratitude to the personalities who recidivated the greatness of our country. Such museums would perhaps be one of the most effective media, since it has an integrated role and appeals to both our emotions and intellects and brings the necessary confidence which is a great causality today everywhere and at every place. In essence, it is an honest attempt on the part of a modern museum – man to perpetuate the teachings and philosophies of the great Lives in a rational and scientific manner for an all-round and harmonious development of the human world.

The present write-up focuses on the challenging activities presently pursued by the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Barrackpore, as a

concrete example. Since museum activities differ from academic procedure, the thrust here is more of informative nature, to enthuse and inspire the visitors to know by themselves, to bring home to them the capability one has and thereby reap profit from the visit.

The Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya for the Eastern Region came up at Barrackpore in the year 1961 and it was thrown open to the public on the 7th May, 1966. The objectives are to collect, preserve and display materials connected with the memory of the Mahatma, disseminate his life, thoughts, activities and programmes for public benefit through different museum processes.

Collection:

The collections here include huge numbers of photographs concerning Gandhiji's life and activities and our Freedom Movement, a number of things of his personal use, some originally used articles of the Mahatma, rare negatives, some original letters, plaster-cast replica of his used articles, photocopy of his huge correspondence, his notes and hand writing in different languages, sculptures, models, oil paintings, life size portrait of the Mahatma, a continuous panel of coloured sketches depicting the life and philosophy of Gandhiji and different phases of our freedom struggle, specimens of tribal handicrafts, and a very rare and interesting collection of specimen of hand-spun threads by many of our National Leaders including Gandhiji and Kasturba Gandhi.

Tape-Records containing Reminiscences of many illustrious persons who came in contact with Gandhiji, disc-records containing patriotic and devotional songs and some documentary films on Gandhiji and Independence movement are another interesting collection of this museum.

The collections are thus variable and necessary as to highlight upon

the life and the philosophy of the Mahatma Gandhi.

Galleries:

The museum presently maintains five galleries:

Gallery 1:

The first one is the Mural Gallery where the 81 running feet Mural Painting in Indian Style on the life, activities and thoughts of Gandhiji and all the phases of our Freedom Movement, etc. has been kept. Beside this, in this gallery, are displayed Gandhiji's sculpture made of bronze, scale models of the cottages in which Gandhiji lived at the Sabarmati Ashram and Sevagram Ashram and also a plaster cast model of Gandhi Column.

Gallery 2:

In the second gallery life activities and programmes of the Mahatma have been presented through photographs, write-ups, maps and charts, etc. The complementing presentation utilizing running wall-showcases and with some interesting visual aids tried to depict the growth and dynamic existence of a perpetual generator of enthusiasm and action leading countless myriads towards a destination of freedom, fearlessness and glory. Some plaster-cast relics, which were used by Gandhiji, are also displayed in this gallery.

Gallery 3:

A Portrait Gallery has been developed here with oil-paintings of 36 of our National Leaders, who were either Gandhiji's immediate predecessors or his great contemporaries and associates, some of whose lives and thinking influenced Gandhiji, some of whom brought immense glories to our country or some of whom brought about the great Indian Renaissance touching almost all walks of our national life, sustaining and indicating the ancient glories of our Land. Specimens of tribal handicrafts and a very rare and interesting collection of specimen of hand-spun threads by many of our National Leaders have been

displayed here.

Gallery 4:

This gallery depicts Gandhiji's relations with the Bengal. Through the photographs and write-ups, it is evident that Gandhiji had a very deep connection with and great respect and appreciation for Bengal. Some materials like Bed Cover, Wooden Spoon, Palm Leaf Bolepuri Topi, Desk, Lantern, which were used by Gandhiji in Bengal, are also displayed here.

Gallery 5:

The Noakhali Peace Mission 1946-47 constipates one of the many glorious events in Mahatma Gandhi's eventful career. This gallery has been presented in a slightly played up manner his "Historic Experiment" through some dioramas. Distressed conditions of Orissa and her people moved Gandhiji. On many occasions he expressed his desire to stay in Orissa to serve the poor. The incidents of Orissa have also been highlighted in this in this gallery through some original photographs.

Panel Exhibitions:

On the corridors the chronology of Indian Independence, a short glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi's last peace mission and the highly eventful, inspiring and dynamic life of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, have been exhibited in photographs and write-ups through panel exhibitions.

Library:

To supplement the exhibits and for interested readers and research scholars the Sangrahalaya maintains a well-organized library with around eleven thousand volumes at present on Gandhiji, Gandhi lore and allied subjects and also all the journals edited by Gandhiji.

Educational Programmes:

This museum takes some real challenges to convey the purposes of a biographical museum to all type of visitors through some educational activities beside the in-house display techniques.

1. Programmes of permanent nature:

Apart from guide-lecture service or temporary exhibitions, this includes regularly arrangement for seminars, lectures, workshops, symposiums, etc., film and video shows, loan of museum-material to interested organizations, etc.

2. Programmes on special occasions:

Programmes are arranged to attract the public on special occasions or for celebration of notable day in Gandhiji's or other Great Men's lives and historic occasions and Days of our Freedom Movement and National Life.

3. Extra-Mural services:

The third type of programme that the museum organizes, is known museum-parlance as Extra-Mural Services – that are carried on outside the museum-boundary, usually with assistance of or in collaboration with different organizations and such programmes are galore here.

Publication:

The Sangrahalaya feels that earlier paths or courses or ideologies followed by the museum have failed to ameliorate people's conditions and an Alternative Path or Ideology is to be found out. The museum has published several books and has brought out reprints of some rare books. Recently a bi-

lingual quarterly journal – ‘Gandhi Sambad / Gandhi News’ and a Folder have been launched.

Research:

Various researches are undertaken from time to time. An action research programme undertaken by this museum is the unique museum-parlance – ‘Balwadi’, a Children’s preparatory school with Children belonging to both economically and culturally povertied families living in the slum-areas near the museum, to experiment with Gandhiji’s idea of cultural change.

Conclusion:

Museums in fact are not looked upon as an isolated entity in our social life presently. Museum-personnel are aware of this and try to redeem them. So being a professional in this field it is not completely believed that Gandhi Memorial Museum, Barrackpore has fulfilled their goal in our society. It must be confessed that this museum does not claim all the activities either to be exhaustive or exemplary. So, we are trying to develop some new ideas in this museum, so that we can be able to reach the best ideologies of such a Nobel Man to this critical situation of our present society. Some future developmental programmes which this museum intends to take are as follows:

- (i) The museum has already decided to develop a new gallery on the Satyagraha Movements of Mahatma Gandhi by using the application of multimedia and animation. This type of presentation is bound to generate much interest to visitors and it will be easier to make them aware about the philosophical concepts of Gandhiji.
- (ii) The museum intends to create an audio-visual ambience where visitors will be able to hear the speeches of Mahatma, various patriotic songs,

bhajans of Mahatma and also the recorded demonstrations about the exhibits of different galleries. It may perhaps create a more peaceful environment in the museum during the visit and it will generate self-confidence in the mind of the people.

- (iii) In future, we intend to develop a User-Friendly Software where all the documented records of objects of this museum may be kept and by using this software people can also get the real information about this great man.

In the present world scenario, the general trend is for better development. This leads to unbalanced growth and a sense of insecurity among nations and people which culminate into different types of violence. One of the solutions in this situation is to look for alternatives, for redress and betterment. Gandhiji's Life, Activities, Thoughts and Programmes and their successful applications by him in our lives and living, in different states, situations and times, have been found to provide us a new direction for experimentation.

The concerned museum depicting Mahatmaji's life and philosophy in totality is perhaps most organized in this part of our country and has been in limelight since a long time back. It may not be possible to change the whole society within a day by highlighting the Mahatma's concepts through a museum only. However, that does not mean that we, as museum professionals have no role towards the betterment of our society. The actual challenges to develop the proper social accountability have not ended for this museum till now. So by keeping this fact in our minds, we are taking and also will take the challenging issues for creating the non-violence, peaceful, balanced growth of the society. If Gandhi Memorial Museum is able to take up all the works left unfinished by the Mahatma in accordance with its capacity and carry further the works held by him for public benefit and to involve itself in creating opinion in matters of social and public interest, then it may be said that this museum has been quiet successful in

its challenges for developing a proper social accountability.

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