

The Case of Fake Relics

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Working in a Personalia or Biographical Museum for around five (5) decades and building it almost from the scratch have caused many a headache to me and one amongst many till now is genuinity or authenticity of a Relic that comes for collection by a personalia or biographical museum. This, of course, is true for other museums who deal with archaeological antiquities or sculptures, even paintings, etc., till methods of dating were not discovered. Still fakes are galore, whether due to infra-structural difficulties, lesser number of good laboratories or unscrupulousness of Curators, etc. A Curator, of course, never wants to dupe his visitors, but this has come to stay. A few years back (3rd January, 2010) the Gandhi Museum, Barrackpore, Kolkata, received a gift of a big and heavy wooden Charka or Spinning Wheel that was used by Mahatma Gandhi in the year 1938 in Kolkata as informed by the Donor. After enquiries, however, no definite information about the authenticity of the Charka could be obtained. Gandhi Museum, still put this on display with the information as provided by the Donor, but has written on the label – ‘supposed to have been used by Mahatma Gandhi’, to avoid any confusion or apprehension.

Relics are articles or personalias or memorabilias associated with a great Personality who is commemorated through a personalia or biographical museum and these could be locks of hair (of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore), teeth (of Mahatma Gandhi), dresses, used articles, furniture, writing materials, letters, manuscripts, books, to automobiles, etc. These are usually known as personalia or memorabilia and where greatmen were concerned the manufacture of fake relics has always been a profitable business. Experiences do hold that fakes greatly outnumber the genuine or authentic ones.

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And the most fake relics are to be found about the great British Admiral Nelson now in the National Maritime Museum, London. The great numbers of Nelson relics are really staggering. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that there are enough locks of his hair in existence that can thatch a small hut. We have again a great many number of Queen Elizabeth I's cots. To keep in all the beds in which she was supposed to sleep. Elizabeth I would have spent every night like 'Iser rolling rapidly' from bed to bed in order that all the personalia beds might be properly authenticated.

So far Nelson relics are concerned we know very well from Sir Harris Nicholas how those were being deliberately manufactured in large quantity. Unhappily in so many cases the genuine is obliterated by the fakes. Undoubtedly some locks of hair of Nelson must have been genuine. Some could be true of materials used by Nelson or board the Victory. However, if all the furniture and other impediments which he supposed to have on board the Victory at the time of his death were genuine he could have required a ship almost as big as the liner Queen Elizabeth.

So the first duty of a Curator of a personalia museum is to know thoroughly about an object before accepting this as donation or purchase and necessarily research about it before adding it to his collection. We can cite in this connection the Crimson Velvet gown embroidered with pearl-beads, belonging to one of the gentle women Attendant or Elizabeth I at the time of the Armada. Actually it was passed out as a costume belonging to the Queen herself who wore it, during the thanks giving ceremony at St. Paul's after the defeat of the Armada. The truth could only be ascertained after a thorough, patient investigation.

Experience again speaks that fakes would be of many kinds in proportion to one genuine. The first one such fake is which is deliberately manufactured. For instance there are two examples of the Telescope which Nelson is supposed to have put to his blind eye at Copenhagen. One is in the National Maritime Museum, London and the other in another museum, but both are so big that these cannot be used by a one-armed man, and we all know that Nelson was one-armed person. Even the legend which the faker has put upon the instrument now in the other museum contains interesting information which came into being after Nelson's demise.

In the same museum are fourteen (14) swords reputed to have belonged or associated with the great Admiral and his Campaign of which only one is found to be genuine. It is, in fact, the sword he had made shorter than usual after losing his right arm. His Dress-Sword, on the other hand, was actually made by Messrs. Wilkinson, who are able to provide the name of the actual Admiral to whom they supplied it in 1856.

The next case of bogus relic is 'Wrongman' relics. These are cases of perhaps innocently mistaken identity. For example a portrait reputed to represent Capt. Masterman Handy, Nelson's Flag Captain, was few years ago considered by the National Maritime Museum, and it was then quite clear that it did not represent the Flag Captain. Actually there were three (3) Captains Handy and so the portrait became problematic.

Third class of fake-relic is the traditional relic. As example the Saw exhibited in Royal United Service Institution was said to have been used by the Surgeon who amputated Nelson's right arm. According to family – tradition it belonged to the Royal Navy Surgeon who came of this family and who amputated Nelson's Arms. Actually the Saw belonged to the same man, but he did not amputate Nelson's arm.

Sometimes, however, the evidence points the other way. A dress, said to have belonged to Marie Antoinette, turned to belong to more than half a century later when properly examined. Actually, as found out, a family member wore it in the character of Marie Antoinette in a fancy dress ball, and family hearsay had done the rest.

The last class of bogus relics, according to Mr. Carr, Director of National Maritime Museum supposedly in the sixties of the last century, who worked on them earlier, were 'snowball' relics. These would be which somebody starts off with a wrong description to which something is added with each transfer of curatorship until an almost unassailable weight of tradition had been accumulated. An example about such relic occurred when an American Museum purchased a Settee from Nelson's cabin in the Victory. After a search it was found that the dealer, from whom the museum bought it, purchased a pair of such Settees many years ago at a Sala in Scotland when informed that these had come from a house where an Admiral had lived. Naturally with time this Settee may assume an unassailable authenticity.

What all these boil down is that only proven relic should be accepted by a museum and put on display. In the early nineties an Artist with much enthusiasm presented a cement – bust of Mahatma Gandhi to the Gandhi Museum, Barrackpore. It resembles more of Lord Pethic Lawrence than Gandhiji. Knowing well that if refused to accept it would affect the emotion of the Artist, I accepted it and has placed this in a corner of the museum's front garden instead of in any gallery. This, of course, is not an example of fake-relic, but it has a different dimension.