COMMUNITY MUSEUMS IN INDIA: ROOTED IN CARE

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Abstract This reflection explores the role of community based museums in India through two communities- the folk artists from Kathputli Colony in Delhi, and the fishermen communities in Mumbai. It illustrates the identity struggles of folk and tribal artists in India, their marginalisation in urban development and the precariousness of their livelihoods, and advocates for community-rooted museums that have a grounding in social justice, enabling ownership and active engagement of these communities. The emergence of community-based museums and grassroots initiatives in India, such as the Tandel Fund of Archives in Mumbai, is presented as a caring and hopeful response.
Keywords: community, museums, identity, ownership, care

"Are we folk artists, or are we poor people?"

A traditional Rajasthani puppeteer, Puran Bhaat would often ask me this question. It was 2013, and I was working with him and his neighboring communities in Delhi's Kathputli Colony. Kathputli Colony was a unique complex of more than twelve communities of indigenous performers and artists, as well as miscellaneous professionals from around India. This included puppeteers, dancers, acrobats, musicians, magicians, bangle makers, rope makers, toy makers, healers, poets, embroidery artists and glass designers, among others. Once nomadic, some of these communities had settled there more than seventy years ago. It was thus an ecosystem enabling continuity of skills, as well as exchange and collaboration. This continuity was supported not only through practice and proximity of diverse communities, but also the contextual architecture. The residents' requirements such as storage, and space for exhibition, practice and performance were met through the functional architecture of houses built by them.

Puran Bhaat's question resonated with the dilemma of the entire Colony. Kathputli Colony's residents represented India in festivals and cultural institutions around the world, but their home was identified as a slum by the city authorities and therefore illegal. Due to this lack of legal status as residents, but with official recognition as heritage practitioners, the Colony found itself in a tangled web of culture, profession, land and urban dwelling identities. Laws against busking in the city further added to their anguish. The artists' struggle for recognition and dignity intensified when the colony was slated for demolition due to a Public-Private Rehabilitation Project supported by the Delhi Development Authority. The proposed

rehabilitation did not consider the residents' particular needs of architecture and open space, and was enacted without any community consultations. I joined the residents as founder of Friends of Kathputli Colony Delhi, a voluntary initiative that brought together diverse stakeholders to understand and support the residents in their demand for a fair rehabilitation. Workshops, lectures and demonstrations were organized so that the Kathputli Colony residents could connect with and share their narratives with the wider public in the city. The initiative also facilitated collaborations and employment opportunities for the artists. During several engagements and community meetings the residents of Kathputli Colony voiced a desire for a museum or museum-like-space at the Colony that would offer work and affirm their place in the city and the nation, recognizing them as official living heritage. Despite many attempts at dialogue with relevant stakeholders, Kathputli Colony was demolished in 2017. The residents now live in transit camps, still awaiting rightful rehabilitation.

"Are we folk artists, or are we poor people?" is not a question that echoes in the transit camp alone, it encapsulates the everyday complexity of folk and tribal artists across India. They navigate through economic and social barriers, market trends, ethnographic studies, a sense of otherness represented in cultural institutions and design and craft development initiatives. They exist somewhere in between these demands and their deeply rooted cultural responses intertwined with their individual perspectives. From dressing in traditional attire to questioning their positioning as frozen heritage1; from wanting to be recognised as contemporary, yet the value of their work derived from being seen as authentic and traditional; from entrepreneurial pursuits to history of patronage, India's landscape of heritage is complex. They are professionals, they are also poor and struggling. They require newer skill sets, such as internet education, marketing and communication, intellectual property rights, creating digital content, yet often they are expected to be grateful for philanthropy that is not responsive and considerate of changing needs. Where can they express their needs?

Meanwhile state-run museums in India are often negligent, even when dedicated to the welfare of particular communities. In 2015, Mithila artist Ganga Devi's mural paintings at Delhi's National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum were mistakenly painted over during renovation. What is the impact of such a loss on current artists who might be exhibiting their work at the museum? How does it position them in the cultural industry? During Covid 19, an eco-museum in Bhopal dedicated to different tribes and their cultures laid off the very artists from these tribes who depend on it for identity and employment. Where are the museums that can respond ethically and responsibly toward these communities? Where can folk and indigenous artists find reciprocity?

As a researcher, I find possible models in emergent community-based museums in India, such as The Tandel Fund of Archives. Representing the Koli (fishermen) communities of Mumbai, this institution documents and exhibits the community's indigenous knowledge and

sustainable practices. Envisaged as a socially relevant archive, it was initiated because the Kolis did not find representation in the city's official museums. As a grassroots initiative situated within the community, the archive functions with a genuine intent to care, and fosters a sense of pride and belonging, while providing a place for education, conservation efforts and advocacy. It serves as a site for dialogue and solidarity, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming a place for its communities in the city. Perhaps a similar model of rootedness could be relevant for the Kathputli Colony artists. As they search for their social and professional identities, a museum of this type could offer support by enabling ownership and community cohesion, and providing a sense of belonging and dignity. Perhaps this rootedness in care is what could untangle Puran Bhaat's question by understanding the communities' complex lived realities as a whole, by reclaiming their place as residents and professionals with aspirations.

Notes

1 Often folk and tribal artists are represented as frozen in time, instead of looking at their practice and their lives as responsive to their changing contexts.

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