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**ETHICS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY**

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Museologists are at present concerned with exploring, developing and redefining concepts that can give solutions to the problems confronting museums in their quest for a balance between the past and the present. These problems are particularly acute in the museum's presentation of historical material conveying a specific reading of history.

Two concepts will be important here, the museum as an environment for education and the interpretation of reality. The museum provides a stimulating environment which is an excellent informal channel of communication and learning. The museum is a place where you learn from the past, assimilate the content and go back to think about the present and probably re-plan the future; a place where people feel they can debate, discuss and create meanings for themselves.

The museum is a specific phenomenon of man's approach to reality. Museology fulfills its role as a specific science by evaluating what impact the museum as a whole can have on the social consciousness of its audience. For the museum to have an impact on its audience it has to 'handle' the tangible and intangible heritage it wants to portray in a sensitive fashion. Interpretation of historical material is not always straight forward. The value of the object is not intrinsic to it, but is highly dependent on the object-subject relation that is brought out by the museologist. The presentation of objects has to be synchronized with the process of musealization of objects; otherwise the museum value attributed to the object would lose their true value dimension. The work of presentation is closely related to visual language of grammar, syntax and its intuitive appeal. The creation of the museum medium must be based on the scientific explanation of historical, cultural, religious, social and aesthetic values and the decoding of symbolized philosophical concepts attributed by the given culture to the object. Success lies in how creatively the museologist presents this insight to the public so as to capture his attention, imagination and eventually pierce his understanding.

To achieve this very fundamental goal museums and museum professionals all over the world would benefit greatly by following a standardized code of ethics. Our basic aim would be to promote the norms of cultural diversity as a natural phenomenon, and as an integral aspect of the fundamental rights of human beings. An important objective of the museum, as a social institution, is to work towards global peace and understanding.

The cultural diversity of India is proverbial and it stretches the boundaries of one's imagination. The Indian Constitution has accepted the ethnic and cultural plurality of India as a fact of reality and therefore guarantees equality of rights irrespective of caste, creed, sect, religion, gender etc. Thus coming from a country with cultural diversity of immense dimensions I put before you a set of ethics which I think are relevant to present times. However, the following points have to be discussed and deliberated upon.

Museums are windows of society and strive to present the experiences of people the world over. To achieve its goals effectively, to reach out to the public, to touch the relevant chords, to trigger attitude change and better understanding of various cultures, museologists have to take up intensive research

into the cultural material that they are going to exhibit focusing on its social and cultural significance. Inter disciplinary approach and the close involvement of the people to whom the culture belongs can broaden the scope and dimension of the exhibition. Failing to consult with the community, whose traditions and history is being exhibited may cause complications leading to misinterpretation and defeating the very cause of the museum. The method by which material culture of a society is displayed, the reactions of the public and the repercussions are the most sensitive issues of museology today.

Prejudices and stereotyping arise among people because of misconceptions and lack of understanding of culture properly. India was misconceived by people of other countries, in spite of its five thousand years of continual civilization and a very rich cultural heritage. India, prior to the 1970s was conceived by the common people abroad as a country of snake charmers and Indians were basically perceived as superstitious, backward, ignorant and poverty stricken. However, well planned exhibitions of Indian culture organized by the Government of India and Indian museums abroad helped to clear out these misconceptions.

Another very important point I would like to put forward is the issue of 'branding' cultures. Museums and museologists must refrain from branding cultures as 'exotic', 'dominant', 'fundamentalist' etc. these adjectives promote stereotyping of cultures, which could lead to stimulating negative reactions.

Another important issue is the sensitivity involved in exhibiting sacred objects and cultural material of indigenous cultures. Museologists have to respect the fact that every culture has the right to decide what is 'good' for itself. This fundamental right must be respected in all its aspects. Tribal communities and indigenous people become a target of misconceptions even in India.

They are presumed to be exotic, apparently devoid of rationality and having little awareness about realities of life. They are by and large projected on the basis of the image portrayed by the non-tribes. They are hardly given the opportunity to have any self-image. There is a general tendency to view their customs and traditions as queer, and to regard their culture with skepticism.

There appears to be an inclination to transform or reshape their customs, practices and culture, and to amalgamate them into the mainstream of society. This attitude totally disregards their right to live with what they have inherited, and their right to decide what is 'good' for them. They are put under pressure to give up their customs and traditions and reorganize their lives to 'fit' into the mainstream of modern man. Thus a sort of unseen hierarchy gets established between cultures, relegating the tribal and indigenous cultures to relatively inferior positions.

Museologists must therefore apply caution and examine the tribal and indigenous cultures as objectively as possible, at the same time applying a humane sensitivity to understand their cultures as intimately as possible. The main strength of an exhibition would rest on the spirit of mutual tolerance and demonstration of respect communicated through it as a whole.

Cultural diversity as the strategy of interest alliance is likely to be seen differently in the context of mono-ethnic and pluri-cultural countries. Mono-ethnic countries profess emphasis on the attributes of uniformity, setting their goals towards consequential homogenization. However, pluri-cultural countries and also in the global context we have to accept cultural diversity as the order of the day. Museums and museologists have to face the challenge of cultivating an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and acceptance. Thus the concern for protection of culture, language, traditions, customs, identity and resistance against oppression and overexploitation should be conspicuously manifest in the museum's policies, keeping always in mind that the main goal of the museum is to promote global peace and harmony.

Another sensitive issue is the presentation of socially sensitive historical material. In the year 2000 I had the opportunity to set up a small museum consisting of a collection that belonged to the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad State. The Nizam, a Muslim ruler, ruled Hyderabad before India became independent. The collection consisted of silver models of various buildings the Nizam built during his reign in Hyderabad. During his reign as a king he had held together a fragile social and ethnic balance between the various communities of the region. This balance of social harmony was very superficial, and the Nizam's administration committed atrocities on the majority of the Hindu population. This disharmony came out into the open when the 7<sup>th</sup> Nizam refused to join the Union of States of Independent India and started the Razakar movement unleashing a reign of terror on the Hindu community for 13 months. Eventually, the Government of India sent its troops and Hyderabad state became a part of independent India in 1948. The citizens of Hyderabad state were unable to erase

the terrifying experiences from their collective memory, especially the events that occurred between 1947 and 1948.

The question that arises here is how do we interpret this negative reality?

Do we manipulate history to achieve our goals or do we present reality in its true form?

How can we interpret this reality?

The above experience is not exceptional in the museum world. There have been many such historical events that are difficult to portray in the museum environment.

Thus interpretation of reality and the transmission of memory with high ethical standards is not as simple as it may seem in the museum context. The learning gradient of experience, interpretation and understanding is not a gradual one. Past and present experiences together with projected meanings interact to give a complex understanding. Expectations, past experiences of the visitors, projections, and identifications are all implicated in the total museum experience. What the visitors bring with them and will take back, both have to be carefully pondered upon.

The role of the museum is to build bridges and open dialogues between cultures working towards reducing ethnic strife at the same time preserving the delicate fabric of cultural diversity of mankind, thus enriching the quality of human life on earth.