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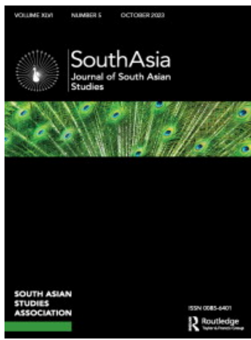

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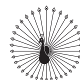

ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

The Slow Death of the Diorama: Tribal and Ethnographic Museums in India since Independence

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ABSTRACT
During colonial times, dioramas were commonly used to portray the diverse peoples of India. They depicted essentialised human types through plaster models in rural settings, engaged in typical activities, and dated back to the exhibition of human beings in universal expositions held in Calcutta, Delhi and London. Since Independence, there have been determined efforts to move away from colonial stereotypes and to decolonise government-funded museums in India. Meanwhile, Adivasi artists are finding their own way out of the curatorial confines of the museum. This paper describes how Indian museology still struggles to exorcise the ghosts of the Victorian museum and India's own internal colonialism.

KEYWORDS
Adivasi; decolonisation; diorama; ethnographic; India; museology; museums; tribal

Introduction

Guided by colonial theories of race and caste and sustained by the sciences of phrenology, anthropometry and physical anthropology, a common method of representing the 'peoples of India' in colonial times was the diorama. These took the form of bucolic rural scenes in which different 'species' of humanity in India were represented by models in physical form, engaged in their habitual pursuits. This style of representation has a long history, beginning with displays of real human beings in international exhibitions hosted in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Delhi, New York and London.[1] A notorious example is the living ethnological display of native artisans at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886.[2] The diorama was also

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1. Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); P. Blanchard et al., 'Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West: Introduction', in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, ed. P. Blanchard et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008): 1–49; Jeffery Auerbach, 'Empire under Glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851–1911', in *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, ed. John MacAlfer and John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015): 111–41; Mary Bouquet, *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* (New York: Berg, 2012): chap. 3.
2. S. Mathur, 'Living Ethnological Exhibits: The Case of 1886', *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 4 (2000): 492–524.

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undoubtedly influenced by the paintings of exotic humans in strange new settings that began to arrive in Britain from the Americas, Africa and Asia during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[3] Observing primitive people in traditional settings came even to be regarded in itself as a source of enlightenment, enabling scholars to chart the evolution of civilisation and of mankind itself.[4] For ethnographers, displays of live humans enacting traditional activities were regarded as the gold standard of authenticity when it came to representation of the other. However, quite aside from the ethical issues involved, exhibits of live humans were costly and difficult to maintain. In the early twentieth century, therefore, ethnographic displays in museums came to be dominated by plaster models, depicting the supposed physical differences between each tribe. An early pioneer of this mode of representation was Franz Boas during his time as an assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in the 1900s.[5] Displays of this sort soon became standard practice in museums in India and are still commonplace to this day.[6]

The imagined physical differences between the peoples of different tribes in colonial museums were depicted not only with reference to their hairstyles and clothing, but also their height, physique and physiognomy. These initial understandings are faithfully reproduced in museums to this day, as if through their physical appearance, some deeper understanding of cultures and societies may be achieved. At the same time, there have been determined efforts by Indian museum curators to move away from colonial stereotypes, to decolonise museums and to adopt a more ‘scientific’ approach. This has been achieved with varying degrees of success.

The colonial and postcolonial museum

There are several common threads amongst many ethnographical museums in India.[7] In colonial times, the entire population of India was subject to various forms of ‘othering’, with supposedly ‘martial’ Sikhs, ‘proud’ Pathans, ‘hardy’ Jats and ‘effeminate’ Bengalis being represented in diverse forms according to the theories of the martial races, castes and tribes of India that were popular at the time.[8] Since Independence, this process of ‘othering’ has shifted, with the focus of the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) and ethnographic museums across India being

3. John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995): chap. 3 on orientalist paintings and chap. 7 on representations of the orient in panoramas, dioramas and the theatre.
4. Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth* (London: Routledge, 2005).
5. Noemie Etienne, *The Art of the Anthropological Diorama: Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).
6. Human zoos, such as the China Folk Culture Villages in Shenzen, are still to be found in the form of ethnic parks and ethnic villages in China and South-East Asia, although untangling the agency of those involved is difficult: see A. Trupp, ‘Exhibiting the “Other” Then and Now: “Human Zoos” in Southern China and Thailand’, *ASEAS—Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2011): 139–49.
7. Jeyaraj has stated that there were about 700 museums in India in 2005, amongst which, 41 were classified as anthropological museums, although he has not listed all their names: V. Jeyaraj, *Museology Heritage Management* (Chennai: Director of Museums, Government Museum, 2005).
8. Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); see also Tony Bennett, Ben Dibley and Rodney Harrison, ‘Introduction: Anthropology, Collecting and Colonial Governmentalities’, *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2014): 137–49.

on those outside of the mainstream of Indian society. This means the so-called 'tribes' of India became their main objects of enquiry. In this sense, ethnographic museums in India have not completely moved away from being a 'Museum of Other People' and have not quite become either national or identity museums yet.[9]

The Adivasi ('original inhabitants'—a term coined by tribal activists in Jharkhand in the 1930s), the *janjaati* ('tribes' in Hindi—the term used in the Indian constitution) or *vanvaasi* (simply 'forest dwellers'—as they are described by some Hindu nationalists) totalled some 104 million in 2011, and 461 out of the 4,635 'distinct communities' identified by the Anthropological Survey of India People of India project in 1992.[10] Most, but not all, fall within the administrative category of the historically disadvantaged and 'backward' Scheduled Tribes (STs). They are sometimes described as separate nations in the Northeast and as the indigenous peoples and precursors of Hindu society elsewhere. Within this category are included some of the 'denotified' (often formerly nomadic) tribes defined as habitually criminal by the British in the late nineteenth century. The artefacts and culture of non-tribals living in rural areas (still the majority of the population), if they are represented in museums, are usually combined together and categorised as 'folk'. Urban Indians are not represented at all, being the perspective from which the anthropological gaze originates.

The typical museum of the colonial era was designed with various themes in mind. Firstly, there would always be depictions of the colonial governors, generals and chief commissioners and usually a vast portrait of Queen Victoria herself. There would also be paintings of famous battles in India won by the British and portraits of 'loyal' Indian zamindars, princes and chiefs. These might then be followed by paintings of the British 'Company' era, collections which sometimes later expanded to include other forms of Indian art. Next there would be collections of arms and armaments and sometimes copies of important European art. In deference to the heroic achievements of the sciences of the enlightenment and Victorian era, there would then be displays dedicated to the sciences of evolution: botany, geology and zoology. The displays on geology would include references to the exploitable resources of the locality, as would the section on botany. The section on zoology would commonly be combined with an outline of the theory of evolution itself with models of dinosaurs, apes and early man. At this point, the diorama of Indian castes and tribes would make a questionable appearance.

Occasionally colonial museums might include displays describing famous Mediterranean civilisations of the ancient past—Greek, Roman, Egyptian—in imitation of the 'trans-national tale of the history of Western civilisation' found in European museums.[11] There would then commonly be found (as also in modern

9. Adam Kuper, *The Museum of Other People: From Colonial Acquisitions to Cosmopolitan Exhibitions* (London: Profile Books, 2023); Benoît de L'Estoile, *Le Goût des Autres: De l'Exposition Coloniale aux Arts Premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007). Les Musées des Autres is now an established meme in France.
10. The second draft of the National Tribal Policy for Scheduled Tribes in July 2006 estimated the number of STs at more than 700, totalling 8.6 percent of the population: V.K. Srivastava, 'Tribes in India', in 'Symposium on People of India', ed. P.C. Joshi, The Eastern Anthropologist 68, no. 2&3 (2015): 437–39.
11. Kavita Singh, 'The Museum Is National', in *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, ed. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (London: Routledge, 2017): 107–31; 107.

Indian state museums) a large collection of coins (numismatics) and archaeological relics from India's ancient past, combined with maps and drawings of local archaeological sites, later replaced by photographs.

The museums of the former princely states were similar to those in British India, and in some cases have survived almost unchanged, apart from repainting or reroofing, since the 1940s. An example of this (although certainly not the only one) is the Watson Museum, located in the Queen Victoria Memorial Institute buildings in the Jubilee Gardens at the centre of Rajkot, the capital of the former princely state of the same name. Established in 1888, this small state museum was named after Cornell John Watson, a British political agent of the Kathiawar Agency from 1881 to 1889. The museum was constructed using funds donated by the chiefs of Kathiawar. On the ground floor is a display devoted to the chiefs themselves, including portraits and coats of arms, and paintings of the British political agent to the Kathiawar Agency and the governors of Bombay (now Mumbai). There are copies of artefacts from Mohenjo-daro, thirteenth century carvings and a vast statue of a very fat and grumpy Queen Victoria, unveiled in the museum by Lord Curzon in 1897. On the first floor we then enter the ethnographic and zoological sections. The display cases contain dolls depicting the particular costumes worn by each of the tribal communities in the region. The tribes depicted are recorded as the Rabari, Ahir and Satwara, as well as the (apparently more civilised) Maher of Saurashtra. There was no indication of where these communities lived or when the various tribal artefacts were collected (Figure 1).

Amongst other items on display are the turbans and embroidery of Saurashtra, the embroidery of Kutch and traditional musical instruments, including a painting of the goddess Saraswati playing a veena (an ancient Indian plucked instrument), placed inside a display case with a stuffed peacock. This looked like a recent addition. There followed many more displays of stuffed birds, animals and reptiles, as well as insects arranged by type and pinned into display cases in the classic fashion of nineteenth century collectors. Tiny scale models of dinosaurs complete the show. Next came a large section in the museum devoted to the geology and resources of Kathiawar, which seemed to have changed very little, if at all, since colonial times. Other parts of the institute, accessed via the main entrance, serve as government offices.

The overarching ethos of the Watson Museum is functional: it explains the hierarchy of political authority and the economic resources of the Kathiawar region, including minerals, handicrafts and textiles, with a nod to the insights derived from European zoological, botanical, anthropological and archaeological inquiries in the region. The museum thus provides a fixed and permanent variation of, albeit on a much smaller scale, the Imperial Assemblage and Delhi Durbars where Indian chiefs and communities were ordered and displayed in order to represent the vast expansion of the empire.[12]

A more sophisticated approach to museology is to be found in the Indian Museum in Kolkata (also known locally as 'Jadughar'), the National Museum in New Delhi and the various state museums established by postcolonial governments. The latter includes the

12. See Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 164–209.

Figure 1. Miniature diorama in the Watson Museum, Rajkot, Gujarat.

state museums of Guwahati, Bhopal, Nagpur and Chennai. The Government Museum in Chennai, or Madras Museum, is located in Egmore, after which it is sometimes better known. Established in 1851, it is the second oldest museum after the Indian Museum in Kolkata, which was founded in 1814.[13] The State Museum of Bhopal is the most modern of the four museums, having been founded by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in 1964 and relocated to its current innovative but sadly leaking building in Shyamala Hills in 2005. In all of these museums, the functionality of the colonial museum has been displaced in favour of the celebration of Indian art and archaeological artefacts. The most up to date example of this is in the National Museum in Delhi, which was founded in 1949. It was established as the national repository of objects first assembled for a temporary Exhibition of the Art of India and Pakistan organised by the Royal Academy of Arts in Burlington House, London, in 1947–48; it was the first major exhibition to accord Indian historical artefacts the status of high art.[14] It moved to its current location

13. Soumitra Das, *Jadughar: 200 Years of the Indian Museum: 1814–2014* (Kolkata: The Indian Museum, 2014).
14. See National Museum, Delhi, 'History', accessed May 28, 2019, http://nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/en/history; and Singh, 'The Museum Is National'.

Figure 2. Empty display cases and bemused students in the Physical Anthropology Gallery of the Government Museum, Chennai.

on Janpath in 1960, where Grace Morley (formerly founding director of the San Francisco Museum of Art) served as its first director.[15]

The focus in the National Museum on Janpath in New Delhi, as in the Madhya Pradesh State Museum in Bhopal, is thus on prehistorical and historical archaeological artefacts as forms of art displayed in streamlined cabinets with minimal contextual information (although attempts have been made to overcome this lately with holograms and 3D displays combining texts and images). The colonial sciences of zoology and botany are entirely absent, as are the colonial exhibitions on Indian anthropology. This attempt at the rethinking of the museum is most conspicuous in Chennai, where, although efforts at the modernisation of the Government Museum are less comprehensive, a gallery on physical anthropology has been stripped bare and left entirely empty (Figure 2). It was deemed out of date and unsatisfactory, but

15. Kirsty Phillips, 'Grace McCann Morely and the National Museum of India', in *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, ed. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (London: Routledge, 2017): 132–47.

Figure 3. Postcard of former life-sized diorama of the Onge of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Anthropology Gallery, Indian Museum, Kolkata.

no one has yet decided what should take its place. In Bhopal, there is no anthropology whatsoever in the state museum. In the National Museum, anthropology is represented mainly by a collection of artefacts collected from the Northeast and donated to the museum by the British anthropologist and former advisor on tribal affairs for north-east India, Verrier Elwin (Figure 2).

In Kolkata, there were originally 16 full-size dioramas on display, made with plaster of Paris during 1963–65. These models were converted to fibreglass during 1996–2004 and depicted the peoples of India (the majority tribal) in poses associated with their 'traditional' occupations. Although postcards of these dioramas are still sold in the museum shop, they were closed in 2014. A new gallery depicting the story of human evolution has been opened, but the fate of the anthropology gallery has hung in the balance ever since (Figure 3).[16]

The shift in focus in these museums towards Indian archaeology as art is typically accompanied by galleries of bronzes, sculptures, Tanjore paintings and Mughal miniatures. Only in Kolkata is there an extensive collection of modern, nationalist and contemporary paintings, which in Delhi is confined to the National Gallery of Modern Art, established in 1954 in Jaipur House and reinaugurated in 2009 with an impressive new wing which combines sculpture and painting. However, the legacy of the colonial museum persists in extensive galleries devoted to the instruments of trade and rulership: coins, weapons, textiles and (in Bhopal) postage stamps. The Bhopal state museum also foregrounds contemporary nation-building with a gallery devoted to archival material and a gallery of photographs depicting scenes from the Freedom movement.

16. Badal Mandal, anthropologist, Indian Museum, Kolkata, interviewed by authors, January 10, 2023.

Post-Independence museums, although they inherited most of their collections and methods from colonial museums, acquired a new role in the project of national integration. The research on tribal communities has thus aimed to both demonstrate the diversity of the peoples of India and to narrate the story of the integration of these different peoples into a nation. In this seemingly contradictory challenge, the theory of social evolution remains as a core ideology within the museums.

The ethnographic museum

The Anthropological Survey of India commenced life in the Zoological and Anthropological section of the Indian Museum, out of which developed the Zoological Survey of India in 1916. The anthropology section was carved out of this in 1946 to form an Anthropology Department, the nucleus of the Anthropological Survey of India, with B.S. Guha as its first director.[17] A new government-sponsored body was thus born with responsibility for research and the curation of museums concerning the social, cultural and physical anthropology of the people of India. Offices and museums were accordingly established in eight regional centres. The focus in all of these centres was on the minority communities, predominantly those considered tribal or Adivasi. Their research methodology was classically colonial: physical anthropology seen as the clue to cultural difference, albeit with some modernisation in the methods of anthropometric measurement.[18] The constitution of the tribal communities of India were considered as fixed and predetermined, and the ASI simply responded to whatever developmental agenda the central government directed towards it.

Following a decision of the Government of India in the Third Five-Year Plan, a Tribal Research Institute (TRI) was then established in each state where the tribal population was one million or more. The objective behind the creation of the TRIs was to contribute towards the Government of India's policy of 'upliftment of the Tribal and the Scheduled Castes people to the status of the general categories of the population'. Initially, the TRIs were centrally sponsored and funded on a 50:50 basis with the state governments, but latterly became the exclusive responsibility of the relevant state governments (Figure 4).[19]

Typical of the first generation of state government museums is the one belonging to the Tribal Research and Training Institute at the Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad. This is a characteristic post-Independence anthropological museum still heavily influenced by colonial methodologies. It thus has dioramas containing human-sized models of each of the tribespeople of Gujarat as essentialised objects situated in a typical dwelling, wearing typical clothes and engaged in a typical daily

17. Verrier Elwin, 'The Anthropological Survey of India: Part I, History and Recent Development', *Man* 48 (June 1948): 68. Elwin was the first deputy director of the ASI.
18. C. Bates, 'Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry', in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995): 219–59. Projit Bihari Mukharji, 'From Serosocial to Sanguinary Identities: Caste, Transnational Race Science and the Shifting Metonymies of Blood Group B, India *c.* 1918–1960', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 2 (2014): 143–76.
19. Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, accessed May 28, 2023, https://airtsc.assam.gov.in/frontimpotentdata/asssam-institute-of-research-for-tribals-and-scheduled-castes#.

Figure 4. Life-sized diorama of a Bhil house, Gujarat Vidyapith Ethnography Museum.

activity, all of an indeterminate time period. The communities represented are: Bhil (a male is depicted spinning and the mother nursing a child), Garasiya (engaged in domestic chores, cleaning plates, tending a baby in a swing), Kathodi (a man is wearing a *panche* and grinding spices, and a second man handling large containers for storing grains: a woven fishing net hangs on the wall), Halpati (a man is naked to the waist and making a fire, a mother is fully dressed and grooming the hair of her equally well-dressed teenage daughter), Kolgia (who are wearing T-shirts), Rathwa (whose women are wearing beautiful saris made with gold thread), Kotwalia (two naked children, a child, a baby, and a father and mother weaving bamboo baskets), Ghoda (a male is depicted in a turban, making toddy), Dangi Bhil (who have cows), Nayakada, Padhar, Siddi (the Siddi man is working with wood), Dhodia (who are feeding cattle in a cattle shed), Vasava Bhil (who are depicted making a charpoy), Chaudhary (male playing a musical instrument, described as 'fair skinned', and clearly wealthier and more Hinduised than the others as he is dressed in a white khadi hat, shirt and pants), and finally Gamit (another wealthy tribe, the male of the household is depicted wearing the same clothes as the Chaudhary and is sewing cloth). There is a notice providing a detailed description of each tribe in Hindi and English. Proceeding to the first floor, we find an attempt at a more scientific approach with a series of displays showing objects by type: fishing nets, necklaces, clothes, pots, hoes, children's toys, etc. There is also a miniature model of children at play. The objects had no apparent labelling indicating which tribe produced which product and where exactly they came from, nor by whom they were collected.

In the Museum of the Cultural Research Institute of the Government of West Bengal, Backward Classes Welfare Department and Tribal Welfare Department, located in Ambedkar Bhavan on V.I.P. Road, P.O. Kankurgachi, Kolkata, there is no room for full-sized models. Instead, there are black-painted plaster of Paris heads,

representing each of the tribal peoples of West Bengal, giving the idea of head-collecting an altogether new meaning. There are also display cases filled with objects by type. These are all clearly labelled, naming the community that produced each, although there is no other contextual information.

The Don Bosco Museum at Mawlai, Shillong, carries the diorama concept to its extreme. The museum was opened in 2003. It is a privately owned museum under the control of the wealthy Salesian order of the Catholic church and is a veritable diorama heaven. It has seven floors oriented around a central spiral staircase and 17 galleries. Almost every gallery has full life-sized male and female statues representing each of the 46 principal tribes of the Northeast. The themes covered focus strongly on social and material culture addressing 'Our Neighbours', 'Pre-History', 'Land and Peoples', 'Language, Religion and Culture', 'Housing Patterns', 'Hunting and Gathering', 'Agriculture', 'Traditional Technology', 'Fishing', 'Costumes and Ornaments', 'Basketry', 'Musical Instruments' and 'Weapons'. There is also a gallery devoted to the 'Don Bosco Mission and Culture'; the exploration of space; photographs and the 'Art of the North-East' (the most ephemeral offering) (Figures 5 and 6).

The Don Bosco Museum is attached to a research centre, the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, which regularly publishes developmental, anthropological and archaeological research papers. There is a constant flow of parties of schoolchildren passing through the museum. Notwithstanding the immense effort that has gone into the museum, there is an apparent lack of reflection on its purpose, other than to emphasise the serious interest of the Don Bosco order in the indigenous peoples of the Northeast, presumably in order to catalogue and identify them for the purpose of their upliftment and perhaps, ultimately, religious conversion. However, it is apparent

Figure 5. The Land and People Gallery of the Don Bosco Museum, Shillong, with life-sized models and heads.

Figure 6. The Weapons Gallery of the Don Bosco Museum.

that while the museum of the University of Guwahati's Anthropology Department (described later), called the Professor Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum, often uses 'north-east Indian' as an identifier in its displays of tribal culture, ignoring the specific origins of artefacts, the Don Bosco Museum is intensely interested in highlighting the 46 distinct tribal 'nations' of the Northeast. The University of Guwahati thus seeks to explore the Northeast as part of a national ethnographic vision, while the Don Bosco Museum emphasises the sub-nationalist identities of tribes in the Northeast and their remoteness from the 'mainstream'. In common with other museums, the meta-category of the 'adivasi' (first advanced by tribal activists in Jharkhand in the 1930s) is not mentioned anywhere.

The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, Bhopal

Immediately next door to the state museum in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, is an altogether different museum, which might be judged to be by far the most successful state-sponsored tribal museum in India. When we visited on a cool Wednesday morning in late December 2022, there was already a long queue of young people (over school age), including young couples, waiting for it to open at 11 am. At the entrance was a plaque announcing that the museum had been inaugurated by President Pranab Mukherjee on Thursday, June, 6, 2013, in a ceremony presided over by the governor of Madhya Pradesh, Ramnaresh Yadav, in the presence of the state's chief minister (Shri Shivraj Singh Chauhan) and minister of culture (Shri Lammikant Sharma). This high-level backing shows that both national and state governments are keen to make this a museum of national significance.

A notable feature of the museum is that it lacks any rationale for the development or 'upliftment' of tribal peoples. Nor does it focus on their progress in terms of their

biological evolution or their cultural growth, according to the Victorian stadial theory of human civilisation.[20] Instead, the museum's unique feature is the attention it pays to the mystical views of tribals (contrasted with the 'scientific' views of modern urban life) and the ways in which this was expressed through their culture and art.[21] Tribal (Adivasi) religious ideas are thus celebrated as an important and original indigenous belief system within India. This contrasts markedly with colonial and Nehruvian era views on tribal religions in India as backward and anachronistic. The museum brochure goes on to describe it as a 'museum for living aspects of tribal life, indigenous knowledge systems and aesthetics'.

Another key feature of the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum is the attempt to make it a participatory experience in which the visitors are encouraged to view tribal culture from the imaginary perspective of the tribals themselves. The museum thus has six galleries showcasing the traditional arts, crafts and cultures of the various tribes of Madhya Pradesh: Gond, Bhil, Bharia, Sahariya, Korku, Kol and Baiga. The galleries are called 'Jeevan Shaili' (gallery of dwellings), 'Sanskritik Vaividhya' (cultural diversity seen through weddings and festivals), 'Kalabodh' (tribal lifestyles in the form of art) and 'Devlok' (the house of gods, containing exhibits explaining different myths and beliefs. There is also a gallery devoted to the tribes of Chhattisgarh (which formerly used to be a part of Madhya Pradesh until 2000) and another, the Rakku gallery, devoted to the games of children of various tribal communities. There are no glass display cases. Instead, each of the galleries is dominated by a fabulous array of tribal paintings, designs and sculptures alongside realistic life-sized reconstructions of dwellings and places of worship, through which the visitor is guided. The architect of the museum was Revathi Kamat (1955–2020), based in Delhi. Kamat was a pioneer of modern mud architecture in India, which is very evident in the museum. A lot of tree trunks covered with tribal carvings are integrated into the structure of the building, and tribal paintings cover the walls in the passages between the galleries and in the galleries themselves. The museum itself is thus a part of the display, helping to contextualise the artefacts rather than being merely an architectural show case: a key idea of the 'new museology' movement.[22]

The museum houses a library and an amphitheatre which hosts scheduled plays, musical performances and folk dances. There is also a retail outlet of handicrafts and artefacts, called Chinhari, and the museum publishes an in-house magazine, *Choumasa*. Uniquely, the museum houses an 'exhibition gallery' called Likhandra where tribal artists (mostly painters) can sell their own work. Every month, a different artist exhibits their work. We were told that there are about 20 artists living locally who take it in turns to show their art here.

20. On theories of the history of civilisation and the Darwinian revolution, see George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
21. Adivasi Lok Kala Evam Boli Vikas Academy, 'The Idea Resonates Within', in *Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum* (Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, 2019).
22. Philip Wright, 'The Quality of Visitors' Experiences in Art Museums', in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989); see also Ivan Karo and Steven Lavine, *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1991); Stephen Weil, *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1990). The approach of making the museum itself part of the display was adopted controversially (decried by some as orientalist) in the *Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac* in Paris, which opened in 2006 to house art collections from the *Musée de l'Homme* and the former *Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*.

The tribal beliefs and practices described (e.g. moveable shrines, the ladder to heaven and the *ghotul*) and the religious items displayed in the museum were fascinating and informative. There were not just written explanations but displays which offered an immersive, hyper-real experience, employing imaginative lighting, carved doors and walls, and sculptures, to give an idea of what it might be like to live within the imagined world of the Adivasi. There were interactive screens in Hindi and English which provided further information, and scannable QR codes offered access to virtual tours that visitors could share with their friends. People came not just to see but also to take pictures as the whole museum is highly Instagrammable. There was even a popular decorated chair designed specifically as an Instagram spot.

Aside from the focus on the inner, spiritual world of the Adivasi, the evident ambition within the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum is to foreground tribal arts and to raise them to the same level as the exhibits in the National Museum in New Delhi, and it owes a great deal to the work of the visionary Bhopal artist Jagdish Swaminathan (1928–94). Swaminathan, a Tamil Brahman born in Dehradun, was a member of the Congress Socialist Party and then of the Communist Party of India from 1948. A renowned artist in his own right, he was involved in the establishment of Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal's first art museum in 1982. Swaminathan did not wish to simply fill the museum with works from established artists, instead he employed scouts to seek out local talent. It was one of his scouts who discovered the young Pardhan Gond artist, Jangarh Singh Shyam, in the village of Patangarh in Dindori tehsil, Mandla district (where the anthropologist Verrier Elwin had once lived). Swaminathan invited Jangarh Singh to Bharat Bhavan, where he and other artists were invited to stay and to paint their traditional wall paintings onto canvas and paint using brilliant acrylic paint. It is thus that the world famous 'Jangarh Kalam' (Jangarh school), or tribal art of the Gond, was born.[23]

Jangarh Singh became a permanent employee of the Graphics Art Department of Bharat Bhavan but committed suicide in 2001 during a residency at the Mithila Museum in Niigata, Japan. Subsequently, Chandan Singh Bhatti became the artist in charge of the Graphics Art Department. According to Anil Kumar, the deputy director of the museum, it was Bhatti who then played a central role in the design of the Madhya Pradesh Museum and put 'modern' tribal art at its centre.

The Tribal Museum clearly shows us a new direction for museums that conserve and display the 'tribal' cultures of India. Indeed, we are told that many state governments now hope to establish something similar to the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum within their own states in order to attract more visitors. Although some critics have described the museum as 'Disneyeque', the museum clearly marks a turning point—ethnographic museums can now cease to be places for observation as an

23. John Bowles, 'Introductory Essay', in *Painted Songs and Stories: The Hybrid Flowerings of Contemporary Pardhan Gond Art* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009); Kodai Matsouka and Bhajju Shyam, *Origins of Art: The Gond Village of Patangarh* (Chennai: Tara Books, 2019); Udayan Vajpeyi and Vivek, *Jangarh Kalam: Narrative of a Tradition—Gond Painting* (Bhopal: Vanya Madhya Pradesh Tribal Welfare Department, 2008); Prana Padak and Rajesh Prasad Mishra, *Gondwani: Stories and Paintings of Gond Culture* (Hindi) (Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Culture Council and Folk Art and Language Development Academy, 2020); Alka Pande, *Jangarh Singh Shyam: From Mud Walls to Paper and Canvas* (Noida: Ajay Kumar Gupta, 2021); Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals and India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2014): 129.

outsider but can instead be spaces in which one can immerse oneself in tribal culture from the inside. However, this does not immediately mean that tribal cultures have been integrated into the 'national' culture. It is arguably more an indication that the tribal 'exotic' has gained much wider audiences by being made easier to consume.

ASI zonal museums

The centrally funded ASI zonal museums attempt to project themselves as more up to date and scientific than the state museums. In both the Mysore and Nagpur zonal museums, dioramas and models of different peoples have almost completely disappeared. The focus instead is on densely written, English-language information panels. The ordering of the displays and information panels is revealing of the stadial theory, entangled with race and the theory of evolution, characteristic of pre-Independence colonial anthropology.[24] They are therefore worth describing in detail.

The Western Zonal Museum in Nagpur is located in a historic building and pressed for space. The exhibits therefore include a limited number of carefully chosen information panels beginning with the Geological Time Scale (this panel can be seen in Mysore as well). There is then a locally-made panel comparing evidence of early human settlements from the Shivalik hills in the outer Himalayas and excavations in the central Narmada valley, the skull of 'Narmada man', then a familiar panel telling the story of human evolution, from small ape to erect homo sapiens. Next the development of bipedalism (with a little diorama to illustrate it), then a panel on the 'biocultural evolution of mankind', a display case showing changes in the skull and brain, and a panel on global ABO blood distribution. An anachronistic panel on 'Modern Humans and Variation' follows, apparently again locally made, which invites generalisation based upon superficial physical appearance. Next is a huge panel on 'Ancient Human Migrations based on Mt [mitochondrial] DNA'. After that, 'The Study of Human Biological Diversity', which states the obvious: that humans do not all look the same (without attempting to draw any conclusions from this).

Instead of the displays of models of tribal peoples with clothes and artefacts seen in colonial era museums, the approach of the ASI museums is to collect artefacts together by 'type'.[25] Essentialising and categorising objects has thus become an important part of their curatorial mission. So, in Nagpur, we have displays of weapons, fishing nets and traps, agricultural implements, ornaments, wood carvings,

24. The four stages preferred by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, later elaborated by Henry Maine, were: (1) Hunting (savagery); (2) Pastoralism and the development of animal property (barbarism); (3) Agriculture and the rise of landed property (civilisation); and (4) Commercial society, characterised by contemporary Europe: Karuna Mantena, 'Social Theory in the Age of Empire', in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, ed. Sankar Muthu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 324–50.
25. Displays of objects grouped by type are also seen in some smaller private and state museums. Thus, the former palace of the princely ruler of Janagarh has been turned into a museum. Instead of trying to recreate something of the lifestyle of the historical residents (a common approach to heritage in Europe), many of the former rajas' possessions have simply been piled into different rooms according to type: palanquins in one room, weapons in another, glass and porcelain in a third. Only the Durbar room betrayed some hint of its original purpose, although no explanation was provided. The most impressive private museum we visited was the renovated Shreya Folk Museum in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. This museum was stunningly beautiful, but display was mainly by type, with a strategic decision being made to focus on the aesthetic and not to clutter the displays with information about the provenance of the items.

bronze castings, terracotta elephants (from Bastar) and musical instruments. At the same time, the unique dwellings of different tribal peoples are considered to be of significance. The Nagpur museum contains a model of a Bhil house and photographs of typical Gond tribal buildings, along with photographs of festival and market scenes from Abujhmar, Bastar and photos of Bhil from Jhabua. Two tiny models show how baskets from Bastar are carried on the head and photographs show the festival of the Narmada in Hoshangabad, Dussehra in Bastar and the Mahadeo Temple in Pachmarhi. These images and displays of village life are no doubt influenced not only by colonial obsessions,[26] but by Mahatma Gandhi's similar idealisation of 'village India' and the now contested post-Independence Indian sociological focus on village studies.[27] Overall, it is an engaging and compact exhibition that does not overwhelm the viewer with technical detail. An attempt to argue the usefulness of the physical anthropological work of the ASI is made through displays on fingerprinting, criminal DNA analysis and physical human variations.

In Mysore, the ASI museum is altogether more spacious and reflects the strong interest of the staff in genetics. Dr. Mithun Sikdar, the helpful head of office, explained that the ASI's aims these days are problem-solving and being action-oriented, and that the meaning of physical anthropology has lately been reoriented towards health. He himself has been working with his colleagues on the health and hygiene of nomads and semi-nomads, and 3–4 of the 15 research staff in Mysore work on biological anthropology. He confessed that the reason the ASI studied mainly tribal communities is that they are assumed to be underdeveloped and the ASI only receives funds for work linked to development. The ASI is thus driven entirely by a developmental and sociological agenda coming from the centre. Despite this, the museum admirably eschews any hint of colonial racial categories and uses the science of genetics to argue that humans are all genetically similar, having evolved from the same stock, which migrated from Africa 85,000 years ago, and that the major variations between different tribal 'communities' are all environmental in origin (a position taken by many contemporary historians).[28]

Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya

Following the successful establishment of the zonal museums, the central government established the Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (National Museum of Man) in Bhopal in 1977. Renamed the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) in 1993, it initially came under the direction of the Anthropological Survey of India before being separated to become an independent subordinate office under the Ministry of Culture (although the ASI continued to supply many of its staff). The

26. Clive Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology', *Modern Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (1972): 291–328.
27. Crispin Bates, 'The Development of Panchayati Raj in India', in *Rethinking Indian Political Institutions*, ed. C. Bates and S. Basu (London: Anthem Press, 2005): 169–238; Manish K. Thakur, 'Of "Village Studies" and the "Village": A Disputed Legacy', *Sociological Bulletin* 62, no. 1 (2013): 138–51; E. Simpson et al., 'A Brief History of Incivility in Rural Postcolonial India: Caste, Religion, and Anthropology', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 1 (2018): 58–89.
28. See Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

IGRMS occupies a huge 200-acre site on the barren Shyamala Hills. Its most impressive and original feature is its outdoor technology park, which contains full-sized working models of 'traditional' tribal and folk technology, such as oil pressing, spinning, weaving, pottery and iron firing and irrigation equipment dating from 'the dawn of culture', meant to 'broaden the perspective of the visitors by emphasising the fact that traditional technologies continue to be an important background to the technological splendour of the contemporary world … a celebration of the intangible heritage of India' (as explained in an introductory panel). Workers from villages were invited to stay at the IGRMS, build the machines and demonstrate how to operate them, somewhat akin to a 'living museum' when the park first opened. Many workers and artists were accommodated and contributed to building another feature of the museum: its open-air exhibition of tribal, coastal, desert and Himalayan villages. This included impressive features, such as a massive gateway leading into the Naga village ('tribe: Chakhesang Naga, Area Phek, Nagaland') and numerous imported doors, pillars and wood carvings carrying representations of head-hunting.

The summary at the entrance to the tribal habitats reads: 'The tribal populations of India have varied models of subsistence. Some are still in the hunting gathering and foraging state while others follow nomadic mode of life, including nomadic pastoralism and transhumance, yet still others practice rudimentary agriculture, including swidden cultivation. The two factors of external environment and subsistence technology determine the character of tribal dwelling and architecture'. Stadial theory and social Darwinism are thus foundational to the conception of the display.

The outdoor displays of the IGRMS include a large pottery park—the Kumhar Para—which further underlines the evolutionary philosophy behind the exhibits. The introductory panel explains that the invention of pottery is 'the next revolution in history after man's appearance on earth. It is considered as one of the most tangible and iconic elements of regional and cultural art. The occurrence is generally attributed to the beginning of settled life. It is considered to be an important index, not only to date the ancient cultures, but also to identify them. Therefore, the study of pottery through the ages is considered to be an essential requirement to identify, understand and characterise the ancient civilisations'. The display goes on to summarise the history of pottery making and states that it continues in contemporary India, tribal and folk communities clearly being considered as the preservers and embodiment of these ancient cultures.

Information panels go on to explain that the open-air pottery exhibition is an outcome of workshops organised by IGRMS over the course of ten years: 'In different phases, potters from different parts of India were invited to IGMS and asked to present their skill and make traditional pottery and terracotta which is now part of an open air exhibition "Khumhar Para" (potters village). Data is collected from primary sources through direct interviews of potters and audio-visual documentation of pottery making processes. The exhibition endeavours to give a brief ethnographic account of pottery traditions of different parts of India [and] explains about the community, knowledge system, beliefs, rituals and techniques of production and their consumption in terms of continuing tradition'. This highlights persistent ideas found in the work of the ASI: the commitment to extending the history of evolution to the

study of human culture, the idea that evolution is something that does not happen to tribal people, who remain stuck within a purely subsistence economy, and the benefits of studying tribal peoples within the context of the museum itself.

In the interior museum, the first exhibit is based on human biocultural evolution. There is an explanatory panel on Charles Darwin. The evolution of cells into life forms is explained. Gregor Johan Mendel—'founder of modern genetics'—gets a panel. There is an explanation of human chromosomes and the human genome, then blood types (including distribution of sickle cell anaemia, which coincides with forested highlands). A panel on 'Variations' has been inserted, apparently to challenge prejudice about inheritance. There then is a confusing panel on 'Meiosis: the Grandest Part of Biological Evolution'. This is immediately followed by a display of a typical dwelling of the Birhor: 'a hunter gatherer community found in Singhbum and elsewhere'. This organisation of display panels highlights more vividly than anywhere else we have seen the connections in the minds of ASI curators between the biological, technological and cultural evolution of humankind.

An interesting panel describes how 'a Birhor's whole life, economic, domestic and socio-political is influenced by his belief in super-naturalism .... Bir-hor means literally Forest men. Based upon their economic preferences they are classified into two groups: the wandering Birhor or Uthlus and the settled or Jaghi. The Birhors of Singhbhum mostly belong to the former class'. Subsequent panels with photographs and text are devoted to Rabari camel herders, then the Dewar, a nomadic community of Chhattisgarh. Next to the Rabari is a panel which states: 'Pre-agricultural communities, for whom the quest for food remains the major occupation, cultivated a strategy of living in total harmony with the rhythm as well as periodicity of nature'. Then there are the Gaddi of the Himalayas—pastoralists who have only recently discovered terrace cultivation. Mention is made of upper castes who live close by and have a 'traditional economic relationship' with these communities. Lastly, there are the settled agriculturists, for whom there are examples of some of their dwellings.

The most intriguing house was that of the Rajwar of Chhattisgarh: like many in this section, the outside of the house was covered in decoration, only in this case the decoration was so spectacular it hardly seemed authentic. The decoration manically extended even to the ceiling and walls of the museum, provoking many questions about the work of the 'tribal artists' on display. Most tribal people do not have the time to create so much art. If you are a designated 'tribal artist', however, you are able to devote your entire time to it. Is what results truly authentic tribal art? Who decides? Clearly many of the artists employed at Manav Sangrahalaya transformed their techniques with the introduction of acrylic paint and more time to dedicate to their craft, but is the work that results still 'traditional'? (Figures 7 and 8)

Other galleries we saw were devoted to masks, ornaments, storage baskets, musical instruments, the house of a Chettiyar and cultures of Northeast India (an impressively detailed exhibition). There was also a reserved collection/research gallery in which a mass of objects was collected according to type and material. Gallery No. 10 was devoted to 'visual storage' and was full of paintings, including one by the famous Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam. His name was not on the descriptive panel, but he had signed it (1997) and there was a faded label with his name on the frame (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 7 and Figure 8. House of the Rajwar, Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal.

A few days after our initial visit, we were privileged to meet with the acting director, Dr. Praveen Kumar Mishra,[29] who is also regional director at the Archaeological Survey of India, Central Zone, Bhopal, and several of the senior staff at Manav Sangrahalaya. Dr. Mishra (an archaeologist by training) recounted how the plan for Manav Sangrahalaya was born in a lecture given in 1973 by Professor Sachin Roy at the annual meeting of the India Science Congress. His proposal was approved by then prime minister Indira Gandhi and a committee was formed to establish it. Bhopal was chosen as the location due to the very high number of Adivasi in the erstwhile Madhya Pradesh state (which then included Chhattisgarh). The chief minister at the time was Arjun Singh and the very first curator was Professor R.S. Negi from the ASI. The professor struggled to decide how to curate living cultures. He began by constructing houses of tribal peoples with the help of the tribal peoples who lived in the houses while constructing them, bringing the necessary materials from their villages. They lived, cooked and 'performed' (he said) in the houses. These projects are still going on. Presently they are working on a Himalayan village and a coastal village. (We noted that someone was living in one of the Santhal huts at this time.) The technology exhibition within the outdoor museum was begun by Negi in 2007 and the potters' section was started in 2017.

Dr. Mishra explained that many tribal artists worked in both the Bharat Bhavan art museum and Manav Sangrahalaya. When asked about the massively over-decorated house of the Rajwar in the museum, we were told that the Rajwat tribe and the Gond lived side by side and have influenced each other. We asked about

29. Dr. Praveen Kumar Mishra and colleagues, interviewed by authors at Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, December 31, 2022.

Figure 9. Gallery of Masks, Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal.

Figure 10. Painting by Jangarh Singh Shyam, Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal.

how the work of Manav Sangrahalaya compared with that of the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum. Dr. Mishra replied that both museums were scientific, but the mandate of the Tribal Museum was to show mostly art, whereas their own remit was much broader. 'They beautify objects. We put objects in proper context. We have a more holistic approach. We have a deeper understanding of how they live their lives. The Museum of Mankind is the only one of its sort in India as it shows the diversity of all the cultures of India'. But not apparently, we noted, any of the higher castes, urban dwellers, or non-Hindu minorities such as Sikhs, Muslims and Christians.

Dr. Mishra summarised the galleries of the museum: 'the first gallery concerns human evolution, plus hunter-gatherer cultures. The second is the human odyssey: which focuses on nomadic peoples. The third gallery is on Gond people, particularly the Koitur (this contains model houses, including that of the Rajwar, covered in

traditional designs). The fourth gallery concerns the Mandor and Bhil tribes. The fifth gallery is devoted to ethnic arts. The sixth gallery is devoted to cosmology and religion. The seven is ethno-musical. Eighth is Indian masks. Ninth concerns culinary culture. Tenth is a storage area containing numerous objects by type. The eleventh concerns the North-East. The twelfth concerns island cultures and is under renovation'.

A unique feature of the museum is that they have established 'demi-gods' (tribal gods) in the museum, and museum staff conduct annual worshipping ceremonies and they invite villagers to 'perform' at them. 'They have one small guest house, but villagers can also stay in their tribal houses … . We have a worship calendar according to their traditions. They choose the date, and we follow. They can receive travel expenses, plus a per diem of ₹1,000. The villagers sometimes bring with them more objects and they provide space for them to do new paintings. The length of their stay depends on the scale of the new exhibition they are working on. Sometimes this requires them to stay longer'. Twenty anthropologists are currently working full time in the museum. There are also around 60 daily workers who mostly belong to tribal communities. Their wages are ₹695 per day, but the rate is reassessed every six months. Dr. Mishra explained that the staff are funded purely by the central government under the Ministry of Culture, and that the museum is financially and managerially autonomous of the ASI, although there are close links.

Dr. Pandey said that the uniqueness of the Manav Sangrahalaya was that 'objects come here but the ownership remains with the tribes. Tribal communities often ask how their house is being maintained. And they want to come to the museum to maintain and repair the houses. Some communities even request they want to build their own house in the museum to represent their own culture'. Many people thought that the IGRMS museum was a tribal museum, so there is no need for one more tribal museum in Bhopal. 'But IGR is curated by anthropologists whilst the tribal museum is made by architects and artists. We provide the main course', he suggested, 'while they provide the dessert'.

Decolonising the museum: Interpreting and labelling

The debate about decolonising museums is wide-ranging, extending beyond repatriation and restitution to include the democratisation of institutions.[30] Especially in the former settler colonies, North America, Australia and New Zealand, the question of who has a right to represent the cultures of the First Nations has become highly contested. However, to even begin such a discussion there are arguably three basic key pieces of information that need to be provided about any item in a museum. These concern its identification (what is its purpose), an explanation of its attribution (who made it), and an explanation of its acquisition (where it came from and how and when it was added to the collection). At the same time, sensitivity and respect need

30. For recent contributions to the debate on decolonising museums, see Sara Waji and Rachael Minott, *Detoxing and Decolonising Museums* (London: Routledge, 2019); Danah Abdulla et al., *Decolonising: The Curriculum, the Museum and the Mind* (Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2020); Shimrit Lee and Bhakti Shringarpure, ed., *Decolonize Museums—Decolonize That!* (London: OR Books, 2022).

to be given to its cultural role and significance, contemporary or otherwise. Without this basic information, little else can be achieved. The absence of such information implies disrespect and invites theft and misrepresentation. Colonial museums, and their successors, are commonly lacking one or more of these elements. An overriding concern has been to essentialise and generalise from items, as if they were geological specimens. This has led ethnographic museums in India to collect display cases full of arrow heads, baskets, fishing nets, toys, masks (a particular fashion of late) and other items, as if simply aggregating will expose some hidden evolutionary secret. They are often improperly labelled or not labelled at all.

An example of inadequate labelling is in the museum of the Anthropology Department of Guwahati University, Assam, named after the founder of the department in 1948, Professor Madhab Chandra Goswami. Most of the objects are in cabinets with broad, generic names like 'Textiles of the North-East', 'Silk Products of Assam', 'Spears from North-East', 'Fire-Making and Tobacco Pipes from N-E India', 'Cow Bells of North-East India', 'Bell Metal Receptacles Assam' and 'Musical Instruments Assam'. These labels are typed onto pieces of paper glued to the cabinets. Most of the objects are not individually labelled, although some bear tags saying what they are and where they originated, along with an accession number. There is no information on how they were collected, and the specific makers are never named. At best there is the name of a tribal community, but these tags are not easily readable. The objects collected are nearly all practical. Very few have spiritual significance or, if so, that is not explained. One hopes and assumes that the context for the objects on display is provided verbally to the students by the staff.

A far more heroic effort at labelling is made in the Purbajyoti (Cultural) Museum of the Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra (SSK), commonly known as Kalakshetra, a cultural institution in the Panjabari area of Guwahati, Assam, named after the mediaeval poet-playwright and reformer Srimanta Sankardev, who preached pure devotion (bhakti) to the god, Krishna. This large centre, consisting of a museum, park auditorium, study centre, doll museum, portrait and art gallery, library, convention centre and much else, is run by a registered society and is currently being reconstructed with funding of ₹20.15 crore from the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It rivals the Don Bosco Museum in Shillong in the size of its collection of tribal and 'folk' artefacts. According to its website, SSK is 'conceived as a grand exposition of the life and culture of the people of Assam, of its diverse ethnic groups and sub-groups, the people who have created the cultural mosaic which is the essence of the state'.

On the ground floor of the museum is a huge and extremely colourful collection of wood and *papier mâché* 'Sattriya masks' and giant *papier mâché* images of gods. These are all very clearly labelled, but many are made by just two artists. It is unclear therefore whether this represents a tradition or the creative efforts of two prolific contemporary individuals. On the upper floors, there are brightly lit cabinets containing musical instruments and implements by type. Most but not all of these carry tags with detailed legible information. As we move toward the top floor, the enthusiasm for labelling begins to evaporate and information is sacrificed in favour of entertaining displays, with dioramas showing rural occupations, such as sericulture. Others show an Assamese bride and groom, the Bagurumba dance, the Jhumur dance of the

'tea community' and the Bihu dance of Assam. There are unattributed objects collected from different religious communities including a huge shrine (*Guru Ashan*) in which neo-Vaishnavite scriptures are kept, brought here from the holy island of Majuli. Lastly, a giant *jaapi* or *japi* (a conical Assamese hat made from tightly plain-woven bamboo and/or cane and palm leaf) hanging from the wall provides a photo opportunity.

The issue of attribution has been particularly fraught in the museums of Bhopal. When the Bharat Bhavan art museum was opened in 1982, tribals artefacts and paintings were displayed without any labelling at all to explain who had made them or where they had originated. It was made clear to visitors that these items were to be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities rather than as cultural objects. At the same time, the names of the artists were absent.[31] Since then, this omission has been remedied and the names of artists appear on almost every object, as well as the name of the district from where they came. How they came to be in the museum though is still not clarified. In 1986, we were clearly told that the artists were invited to Bharat Bhavan and asked to paint in situ. A similar practice was followed in the development of the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum. The deputy director, Anil Kumar, confessed that when construction of the museum began, artists lived on site and were paid as daily labourers at a rate of ₹150 per day. This still happens, although the price is now ₹500. Most Gond were not 'painters', we were told, but merely labourers. For them, he explained, painting was 'a day to day job, not work to sell'.

Kumar went on to explain that at the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, tribal artists normally stayed for a month or two in the guest house where accommodation was provided. There is a small locality in Bhopal where 50–60 artists, who are all Gond and Bhil, stay permanently,. He introduced us to one of these artists, Venkat Ram Singh Shyam, a nephew of the famous Jangarh Singh Shyam. Venkat Ram was critical of the policies of the museum, saying that contributions to the design by artists such as himself were insufficiently acknowledged. Although labelling in the Madhya Pradesh museum was excellent, there were paintings on the walls and carved pillars in which the artists were unacknowledged. He felt that as a tribal artist, he was always treated differently. Whereas mainstream artists would be accommodated in five-star hotels, not so the tribal artists. He was also critical of Bharat Bhavan, saying they used tribal artists as labourers. Artists and artisans stayed at the back of the museum in houses they built themselves and did their own cooking. In the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, he felt that the work of the tribal artists should be displayed in a less cluttered and more realistic environment.[32]

Always there is a struggle between informing and entertaining visitors and between artefacts as art or as examples of a living culture. The SSK and especially the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum seem to achieve both, as they attract a great many visitors, although critics might argue they do not pay sufficient respect to tribal culture or

31. Bates visited Bharat Bhavan in 1986 and met at that time with the museum's original designer, Swaminathan. We paid a return visit in December 2022.
32. Tilche describes very similar dissatisfaction amongst tribal artists in the IGRMS when she visited there in 2008–09: Alice Tilche, *Adivasi Art and Activism: Curation in a Nationalist Age* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022): 39.

compensate their tribal artists appropriately. For many anthropologists, although hard to achieve, the living museum in which tribals perform their work and make their own huts, shrines, paintings and utensils is still the gold standard. This is clearly the view at Manav Sangrahalaya. Failing that, the diorama in which models of tribal and folk people are depicted surrounded by objects from their material culture is the best alternative, ideally organised according to their level of civilisational development. However, according to Badal Mandal of the Indian Museum, Kolkata, this approach fell out of favour following a meeting of the International Council of Museums in Paris. Emphasis thereafter shifted away from dioramas of different 'racial groups' and communities to displays of masks, which are 'relatable' as they are found in every human culture, and towards a focus on environments and the characteristic dwellings within each—e.g. hills tribes, plains tribes, coastal tribes, etc. This shift in approach was underlined in the proceedings of the National Seminar on Present Trends in Museology, convened in Chennai in December 2003. At this meeting, the conception of the museum itself as an art form came to the fore, along with the environmental approach.[33]

Despite the change in fashions, the traditional diorama still has its advocates. As Alice Tilche has recently described, the display of tribal populations through dioramas remains prevalent and continues to be regarded as scientific.[34] In the Indian Museum in Kolkata, Badal Mandal believed that the idea of organising dioramas by environment rather than individual tribes was an acceptable innovation, but they should still be organised according to who is the most ancient, who is the most primitive, and who is the most modern according to social Darwinism. Following the closure of the anthropology galleries of the Indian Museum in 2014, and the 'de-accessioning' of the diorama models, Mandal was involved in a complete redesign of the galleries with displays grouping material objects by type: fishing implements, measuring pots and weights, domestic implements, writing implements, ink pots, printing blocks, narcotic implements, looms, bark cloths, ornaments. religious artefacts, hats and headgear. Full-sized outrigger canoes were suspended from the ceiling. Unfortunately, this was considered too dull and conservative (perhaps in comparison with what had been achieved elsewhere?) and the redesigned galleries were never opened to the public. The matter is presently still under discussion with the Ministry of Culture, but there are promises of exciting and entirely new galleries in the near future, although no date has been decided yet.

A similar uncertain fate may have befallen the ethnography galleries in the Assam State Museum. These are now closed and under renovation. Originally, we were told, there were dioramas of 16 tribes, but currently only six remain, depicting the Hajong, Miri (Mising), Lalung (Tiwa), Rabha and Boro-Kachari. There was also a walk-through, life-sized model showing 'Assam Village Life', a Shankar Dev theatre diorama, a huge plaster model of Ravana from Nagaland, miniature dioramas of traditional occupations and a diorama on the 'Panchayat'. Although still intact,

33. K. Lakshminarayan et al., *Present Trends in Museology* (Chennai: Government Museum, 2004): 90.
34. Tilche, *Adivasi Art*. Tilche visited a small tribal museum in Chhota Udaipur, Gujarat, which was inaugurated as recently as 2004 and which proudly displays dioramas of tribal communities in a museum with few visitors.

none of these exhibits are presently open to the public. Whether any will survive renovation remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This article has considered a selection of state and central government funded museums in India, including the zonal museums of the Anthropological Survey of India, along with a handful of conspicuous ethnographic museums funded by religious organisations. We have not considered community museums (a future project) where no doubt different paradigms emerge, depending on the extent to which the communities themselves have been involved in their creation. However, amongst government-funded institutions, a crisis is apparent. Thirty years after debates on new museology first erupted in North America, government museums in India are still grappling not only with questions of decolonisation and the most effective way to display artefacts, but with parallel concerns about reservation, development and scientism. The slow death of the diorama could be read as a sign of the slow but certain transformation of the ethnographic museum in modern India. The cataloguing of tribals according to the stages of evolution has clearly lost its scientific credentials and many of its supporters. Instead of dioramas, modern, nationalist and romantic idealisation of the village have brought tribal communities back into the museum to display their art and craft in 'authentic' conditions. This could be regarded as an effort to restore the agency of both tribal people and objects. However, as recent discussions on indigenous agency in the museum have shown, indigenous or tribal agency itself is neither unchanging nor uncontested.[35] The tribal agency we have seen in many ethnographic museums in India was often co-opted into the project of nation-building. Tribal artists have also on occasion inserted their own agenda which could be regarded as disruptive to these ideas. This is particularly noticeable in the highly innovative Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum in Bhopal. Tribal arts and culture thus cannot continue to be defined as a naïve authentic repository for something modern high castes have lost. They are instead influencing and borrowing from each other, bursting out of the confines of the traditional museum, and constantly creating new forms of indigeneity. To truly decolonise Indian ethnographic museums, this voice needs to be attended to closely along with the solutions found to these problems of participation and representation in other parts of the world with large indigenous populations.[36]

35. Rodney Harrison, Sara Bryne and Anne Clarke, ed., *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2013).
36. A full global comparison is beyond the scope of this paper, but studies that explore the scope for Indigenous curatorial agency in the Americas include Bryony Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2015); Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Thea Pitman, *Decolonising the Museum: The Curation of Indigenous Contemporary Art in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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