Creating Value for Museums, Academia and Communities: Overview from Sri Lanka

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Creating Value for Museums, Academia and Communities: Overview from Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Digitized museums have overcome the physical barriers and provided a golden opportunity for everyone who wants to access information about the past. New technologies have changed the traditional concept of museums by placing the virtual interaction beyond the physical walls. People could share information and learn more about the past due to this digital revolution. Digitization has facilitated online access of museum objects, images and records. It attracts more audience by reaching out for millions who cannot visit a museum physically. People can access museum collections via social media tools and at the same time they are provided the space to share their narratives, which helps to bridge the gap between information rich and information poor. This dynamic change in culture of museums has supported museums not only to preserve the accessed data but for re-use and re-create data in order to boost economies. Sri Lanka is a country which as a rich history. It has many museums in her soil and thousands of valuable artifacts in other countries as a result of colonization. The local researchers always had difficulties to physically visit the world famous museums at least to study artifacts belong to their own past. A significant change has occurredresearch culture in terms of virtual accessibility to museums due to the digital transformation in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan research community in Archaeology Anthropology and History in particular have benefitted immensely by this new change. This value addition will add more dynamism into the research culture in future.

Introduction

History of museums goes back to the period of Ptolemaios 1(283BC) where they were connected with the royalty and education but not much with the objects of material culture, and at the beginning, religious activities were the primary function of museums (Bhatnagar, 1999). Bhatnagar further stated that museums have undergone greater reforms in the 20th century and site museums were also established in places of importance all over the world, for instance, *Saranath, Taxila, Mohandejadro* and *Harappa* and *Nalanda* in India.

International Council of Museums (ICOM) has defined that a museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment. As defined by the ICOM it is crystal clear how museums support academia and community in general. Merriman (n.d) described that the museum has twin roles, which preserving and making accessible the remains of the past are in a certain degree of tension. As stated by Merriman most successful method of preservation is to store material in climate-controlled stores and allow little or no access to it because total access leads to deterioration in most cases. The material should be preserved for future generation while present generation should be encouraged to use the material and the knowledge contained within it for their education and enjoyment. According to Merriman's exploration the objects preserved in museums reflect its intangible value to the present and future generation, which eventually creates a value to the museums, academia and communities.

Museums in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has various museums, which arecoming under Department of National Museums, Department of Archaeology, Central Cultural Fund, universities, research institutions, religious places, and private companies etc. Some of these museums are

1. National Museum, Colombo

2. National Museum, Kandy

3. National Museum, Galle

4. National Museum, Ratnapura

5. Dutch Museum

6. Maritime Museum

7. Independence Memorial Museum

8. Anuradhapura Folk Museum

9. Martin Wickremasinghe Folk Museum

10. Sigiriya Museum

11. Abhayagiriya Museum

12. Polonnaruwa Museum

13. Dambadeniya Museum

According to Embuldeniya (2014) there are few museums related to the art historical aspect in Sri Lanka and those are Dambulla Painting Museum, National Art Gallery, Art Gallery at Gangarama Temple, Lionel Wendt Art Centre, Mask Museum and Traditional Puppet Art Museum etc.

Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

A significant change has occurred creating value for museums, academia and communities due to digital revolution. Being the guardian of tangible objects they gave knowledge supporting background and as such they became a universal networked technology, which interlinked this knowledge and assured the visitor of its reliability.

Though we are inclined to trust that museums are collections of objects; they are not only about collections; accurately, they are rather less about collections. As such, museums are truly about people and collections, which purely express human desires. Indeed, museums are more flexible in time and space due to human products of different times, places, beliefs, media, cultures and so on. Therefore, change is inevitable in museums.

Transmitting of ICH is most of the time dependent on word of mouth rather than written texts. Therefore, it is important to safeguard them before it dies or disappears from the community. In this context, safeguard means transmitting of knowledge, skills and meaning. It focuses on transmitting or communicating ICH from generation to generation and making sure that it remains as a living heritage. In brief, ICH should be an active part of present generation and can be handed over to future generations. This has been further elaborated by Yin (2006) and Yin divided the ICH into two groups. One is the ICH that used to live and practiced within original natural and social context and due to historical development and changes of social constructions, the original functions of this kind of ICH have entirely disappeared. The other one is the ICH that is still living and being practiced within its natural and social context. This type of ICH is viewed as both traditional and contemporary in the sense that the traditional culture and folklore form a living culture that is still vibrant and self-identified part of cultural communities' lives. Museums can play a major role in this regard by way of identifying and documenting such heritage, and research, preservation, promotion, enhancement or transmission of it to formal or non-formal education activities. According to Yin it is not that challenging for museums to safeguard heritage that won't develop and change. Even if it is ICH without physical forms, museums can employ modern technologies to transform them into tangible presentation. As stated by Yin biggest challenges come from the second group that derive from the contradictory natures of museums and this type of heritage is living and evolving, and not simply about the past, but also about the present, even future. As mentioned by Yin these are the challenges faced by museums when they are safeguarding ICH.

The Sri Lankan ICH environment is facing many challenges since the colonial times. Tangible and intangible heritages were subject to plundering and looting of the colonial masters. They also took an interest in recording monuments and social factors like rituals they discovered during their unofficial duties. Henry Parker, Major Forbes, and Emerson Tenant were among them. Details of these are recorded in the books published by them. H W Cave has published a large collection of photographs on various monuments. In Recent years Dr. Siran Deraniyagala, former Director General of Archaeology, Sri Lanka has emphasized the importance of making inventories for heritage management in Sri Lanka. Inventories are used as a tool for heritage management. It provides necessary information about heritage resources such as size, location and its significance to the particular community or to the country. Thus, inventories of heritage are valuable piece of document for research, heritage tourism and for general public, which provides information about cultural heritage. Inventories are playing a significant role by way providing accurate, accessible and complete information of archeological sites, historic buildings, museums, archives and libraries. It facilitates to protect the cultural heritage legally during armed conflicts, natural and human made disasters. In general, inventories provide accurate identification of the heritage sites, its boundaries and clearly express the values. Problems can arise if these values are incorrect. Therefore, it is important to maintain clear, accurate inventory data for heritage management.

Protecting the identity and authenticity (when it becomes universal knowledge) of these traditional sources is the main problem before Sri Lanka. A few years ago the government took the initiative to form an institute to protect traditional knowledge including ICH related knowledge and practices. Due to lack of coordination and enthusiasm among the bureaucratic bodies, the suggestion died at very initial stages. However there were a few concerns raised when those initial discussions took place to establish this said institute with industry stakeholders. A few of those could be listed as follows.

1. The traditional knowledge in medicine, healing rituals and their subjective traditional herbal materials are at the risk of theft by certain international R & D establishments. There should be a local body, which could fight for the

property rights of the state.

2. Many traditional schools possessing traditional knowhow are at a natural death since they are not profit conscious. There should be a considerable allocation of funds from the state to support these schools in order to protect ICH.

3. There are Tangible Cultural Heritage (TCH) & ICH belong to Sri Lanka in other countries due to the colonization. Accessibility to this cultural heritage is limited to locals of the country of origin of that respective culture. The origin state should try to establish the real identity of this cultural heritage overseas and the easy accessibility to the real owners.

With regard to documentation archaeologists reveal that the tropical climate of Sri Lanka makes it an even bigger challenge to preserve the historical documents. In such environments climate control and storage facilities need to be kept under close surveillance. During the last few years, experts from countries like Netherlands have worked jointly with Sri Lankan experts, in order to establish and maintain sufficient conservation standards. Digitization has emerged as a good solution for this problem.

Creating Value for Museums - Sigiriya Museum

The Sigiriya Museum is known to be the most attractive museum in South Asia. The entrance to the Sigiriya Museum (Figure 1) is through a brick tunnel that is designed in the same way as the archway of Water Garden of the Sigiriya Royal City (Kodithuwakku and Katupotha, 2014). In keeping the archaeological and environmental imperatives, the museum can be seen as a building merged with the forest (Bandaranayake, 2011). Sigiriya Museum is a unique example, which creates value for museums in Sri Lanka and has become a treasure house that preserves archaeological materials, which found from Sigiriya site and its surroundings. This has been clearly stated by Ellepola (2009) and according to Ellepola by adopting the eco-focused design concept, the Sigiriya museum hasnot only become a contemporary "Green Building" in vogue but also successfully conserves the

archaeological material found from Sigiriya site and its surroundings.

Figure 1. The Entrance to the SigiriyaMuseum

(http://www.sundaytimes.lk/091108/FunDay/fut_01.html)

Conclusion

Sri Lanka wants to lay the solid basis for sustainable museological development in the future. There are many major museums that play a key role in the public understanding and awareness of cultural heritage. Working together with developed nations provides a solution for most of the financial and technological problems that Sri Lanka face. Sri Lankan museums planned and implemented mutual cultural heritage projects in collaboration with countries like Netherlands.

Technology has created a value to the local museums, academia and communities by way of providing golden age of opportunities to limitless access of museum objects enhancing learning and teaching skills beyond its walls. It also facilitates to upload individual stories to museum collections and to interact via social media tools. Technology bridges the information gap, enhances all forms of literacy, and facilitates to access hidden documents on demand. There are museums that provide access to their high definition digital images online. Most of them are providing documentary videos about their objects, stories with interactive sessions. They attract millions of millions virtual visitors and at the same time increase their physical audiences too. In this manner, physical museums offer visitors to gain experience on real objects and sharing their knowledge among families and friends

while museums in cyberspace provide limitless access to their objects to enhance lifelong learning.

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