

BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY AND ART: THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM

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INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a landlocked country between two big countries in Asia: India and China. It is known throughout the world as the home to the world's highest peak, Mt. Everest, and as the birthplace of the light of Asia, Lord Buddha. This country is rectangular in shape and is surrounded by India to its East, West and South, and by China to its North. From North to South, it descends gradually and, as such, is regarded as a paradise for the ecologist who specializes in various branches. Its total area is 1,47,181 sq. km. It is five hundred miles long from East to West and one hundred to one hundred and forty miles wide in breadth. Geographically, it is divided into three parts, including the Himalayan region, Mountain region and Plain (Terai) region. Along with the diversity in the geographical structure, it is also rich in bio-cultural diversity. Nepal is known world-wide for its tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The Himalayas and mountains, valleys and gorgeous geographical scene make Nepal an "ornament of nature".

Over the centuries, Nepal has provided a haven for people from the North and South, such that the present racial makeup of the country is a mixture of various Asian elements, lending to Nepal being called the "ethnic turntable of Asia." With the rich heritage of culture and wealth of diversity in religious and ethnic variation, Nepal has been greatly enriched by valuable arts and antiquities of historical and archaeological significance. Even the process of

globalization in modern times could not erode the glory of these cultures and civilizations. The National Museum of Nepal is a leading institution invested in protecting cultural assets.

After revolutionary change in 2008, Nepal was declared as a federal republic and religiously secular country.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NEPAL

Opened in 1938, the National Museum was the first public museum of Nepal. However, it was initially not open to the general public. It was an arsenal museum, a repository of weapons. It was also home to the private collection of the Royal family and Rana Prime Ministers.¹ It was established in 1938 with the name *Chhauni Silkhana* and opened to the public. It was renamed "Nepal Museum" in 1942 and renamed again, "National Museum" (*Rastriya Sangrahalaya*) in 1967.

Since its inception, the museum has collected thousands of pre-historical, archaeological, historical and culturally important objects. Thus, it occupies a very prominent position as a repository of ancient Nepalese art and culture, including sculpture and painting etc.

The National Museum has three exhibition buildings in its complex: the Historical building, Juddha Jatiya art gallery and the Buddhist art gallery. Its collections are of political history, diverse ethnic groups of Nepal and art objects represented in a multidisciplinary way.



Showcase of the various ethnic groups of Nepal
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Nepal

Therefore, the National Museum is popular among researchers and the common people.

HISTORICAL BUILDING

The building that hosts the historical gallery was built in 1829 by Bhimsen Thapa, the first Prime Minister of Nepal. During this time, the building was used as a barrack to house weapons kept. The architecture is inspired by French architecture. The museum's galleries are made up of many sections. They are as follows:

NATURAL HISTORY GALLERY

This gallery is extremely important and rare objects such as various taxidermied animals are displayed in a lifelike style. Mandibular bones of whales and a Moon rock stone are part of the collection of this gallery.

ETHNOGRAPHY SECTION

This section of the gallery showcases the lifestyle and attire of different people of the world. The main objective is to show their ethno-cultural background.

PRE-HISTORIC STONE TOOLS

This section of the gallery provides information on human existence in Nepal in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods. The gallery uses fossilised bones of cow, buffaloes and elephants to illustrate the lifestyle of these periods. Different stone tools and artefacts are also part of the collection and displayed in this section.

WEAPONS AND ARMS GALLERY

This gallery includes the weapons and guns used by Kings, Prime Ministers, nobles and brave warriors. They date from the 15th century CE.

Nepal's history has also been narrated and presented in the gallery. Napoleon III's sword presented as a gift to Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana (1851) is one of the key pieces in the gallery's collection. This object proves the influence of Nepalese diplomacy in international relations at the time. The gallery includes a leather canon seized in the war of Nepal-Tibet (1855-1856) and a machine gun (*Bir Gun* in Nepali) invented by Nepalese scientist Gahendra Shumsher Rana (1896-1897), which add grandeur to the collection.

¹ Rana Prime Ministers were powerful Prime Ministers who ruled Nepal for 103 years from 1847 to 1950.



Portrait of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Nepal



Statue of King Jaya Burma dated 185 CE as inscribed
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Nepal

PORTRAIT GALLERY

The colourful paintings of Malla and Shah kings, Kaji, Bhardars and Rana Prime Ministers along with the portrait of international personalities like Queen Victoria and Prince Albert reflect the sheer talent and genius of Nepali artists of the period.

ILLICIT TRAFFICKING GALLERY

The art works and masterpieces of Nepalese history which have been illicitly trafficked and have been successfully retrieved are displayed in this gallery.

JUDDHAJATIYA GALLERY

The next building in the museum complex is the first structure ever built for museum purposes. Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher Rana (1932-1945) constructed it in 1944, with

his personal funds. Decorative wood, bronze, stone, scroll paintings, decorative art forms, terracotta etc. are displayed in this gallery. The items in this gallery date back to 3rd century BC.

BUDDHIST ART GALLERY

The third gallery in the museum building was inaugurated in 1997. The artefacts related to Buddhism are displayed in this gallery. There are three sections in this gallery based on geographical areas. One of them is related to the Southwest part of Nepal where Lord Buddha was born and lived. Another area contains the objects from Kathmandu Valley, the supposed centre of Buddhist philosophy and art. The third area relates to Himalayan cultures.

From the description above, it can be seen that the museum's collections and how they are displayed illustrate how the National Museum of Nepal maintains a balance between how the

various people of Nepal are showcased and an unbiased representation of the long history of the nation.

Since the National Museum plays a parental role in the development of museums throughout the country, it plays a significant role in the balance of political history, ethnography and art. Its role can be broadly summarised as:

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM FORMULATES NATIONAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

The National Museum as a mirror of the nation represents the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of the nation. Various political events arising out of different political circumstances and cultural dimensions have created different communities that form the national identity of the country and its society. However, over time, changes in the perception of human thought, technological inventions and other developments etc. have affected tangible and intangible culture.

In every historical period, political situations are experienced, which call for vivid historic change in the world. Politics is the backbone of a country. With the change in the political, social and economic spheres of a country, its international diplomacy also changes. The National Museum plays a vital role in the writing of cultural and political history by conducting deep research and studies of political philosophy and ideology of different time periods in Nepal. Recently, Nepal experienced a great political revolution in 2008, which saw the end of 240 years of monarchy. Nepal was declared a democratic republic and a federalist country in 2008. The National Museum has incorporated these changes and disseminated this new information to society as well as developed documentation for future generations. While most museums

have recorded only the ruler's history, the National Museum should put effort into equally representing all political events. For this, a detailed study of how such events form a national history is needed. The National Museum should represent not only rulers and elites but equally incorporate those philosophical and political leaders, revolutionists and martyrs, whose contributions are equally valuable for the sovereignty and prosperity of the country.

Regarding politics, national and international relations should be studied in detail and incorporated into the museum. In Nepal's context, after the 2008 declaration of federalism, which addressed the people's demands, the royal palace was transformed into a museum. The people and society's interest should be taken into consideration.

Regarding art, culture and indigenous perspectives, Nepal is termed "a garden of various tribes." A recent survey carried out by the Nepal Government shows that Nepal has 125 ethnographic groups and 102 linguistic groups. Many are indigenous and on the verge of extinction. The cultural aspects of these groups should be identified and addressed properly in society. The National Museum has an important role to play in this. After Nepal became a republic, ethnic groups realised the importance of the museum in understanding their cultural identities and developing their historical representation. Thus, many groups are quickly establishing museums to represent themselves. In such a context, the National Museum should research and study the cultural aspects of these groups and help them institutionalise their actions. In providing all ethnographic groups tribal identification and ensuring their cultural protection, the National Museum enhances social unity, cooperation and brotherhood between people.



Traditional ornaments of Newar Community of Kathmandu gifted by local community and collected in National Museum
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Nepal

TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR THE COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL ASSETS

There should be due consideration paid to equal representation. The collection should be built with the intention of equal representation. Without the collection, a museum's above mentioned role as balancing ethnography, art and culture cannot be achieved. Again the museum cannot proportionately represent all 125 ethnic groups in Nepal at the same time. Due to this, prioritisation is necessary. The National Museum, through direct collaboration with society, should encourage communities to contribute to and enrich the museum's collection. Annual acquisitions by a museum alone cannot contribute to striking a balance. Culture is being threatened by modernisation. As a result, the National Museum should put effort into protecting its deep relations with society. Collections from communities should be included in the museum through gifts, loans or purchases. The National Museum should create a con-

ducive environment for these items. The collection of art objects, tangible and intangible and other cultural assets should be brought to museums where the objects' security can be assured.

NATIONAL MUSEUM EXPANDS THE MODALITY OF EXHIBITION

The National Museum is a multi-disciplinary museum. It displays every aspect related to its theme on permanent display. However, having only permanent displays cannot meet the expectations of every community. The above mentioned balance cannot be assured through permanent exhibitions. As with contextual changes over time, themes should also change. For example, from ancient times to today's federalism, public interest has changed with time. The National Museum in creating a balance should also consider the public interest. For this, temporary exhibitions, mobile exhibitions, cultural villages, home-stays, cultural expos, etc. should be used as mediums to promote culture and art.

NATIONAL MUSEUM STRENGTHENS PUBLIC RELATION

To balance these categories, methodologies should be applied. The museum's friends, schools, institutions, museum councils, museum associations, different age groups, volunteers, colleges, etc. should participate. The National Museum not only includes the elites. Grass-roots level people are also equally encouraged to associate themselves with museums. This gives them a sense of belonging in the museum and a place within national mechanisms. Through its programmes like school students memberships, the National Museum maintains a public relationship not only with students but also with their parents. It is also broadening its relationship to the world outside Nepal through international organisations like ANMA, ICOM, etc.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS IS ESSENTIAL TO ASSIST A NATIONAL MUSEUM IN ASSURING BALANCE

For a balanced environment for creation, programmes that build awareness are essential. Until a society is well aware of their social and cultural identification, and there is political stability, tangible and intangible heritages will not be protected and preserved. For this, society should be aware of the important role of a national museum. Through its activities, technological innovations, documentation and outreach programmes, society is made aware of how to implement a balanced policy for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

CHALLENGES

In the Nepalese context, museum development was only recently initiated. Public interest towards museums is not well-developed. In such dire circumstances, the National Museum, being the first museum in Nepal, faces

many challenges in the field of management in the technique and economic aspect of museum management. Yet, laws and bylaws still have not been formulated for cultural heritage and the museum. There is a lack of skilled manpower. Due to the influence of Western culture and civilisation, new generations are fed up with their own culture. Traditional skills are slowly abandoned. In spite of these challenges, the National Museum has successfully and continuously conducted its responsibilities. It has been doing its best to develop the museum in spite of the hindrances mentioned. In order to do this, the collection and display has been broadened. Last year, in 2014, the illicit trafficking gallery and portrait gallery were opened. These galleries brought a new dimension and added more value to Nepalese art. The collection donated by indigenous communities is protected and represented. Communities are very keen to donate their cultural and historical artefacts to the museum for preservation. Inspired by the museum's programmes that build awareness in different communities, many communities have donated their cultural items to the museum for safeguarding, which they return after use in their rituals.

Educational programmes run by the National Museum have earned 7000 schools and colleges student membership with the museum. Through students, families and the general public, the museum has been able to maintain its collaborative effort in sharing knowledge of *thanka* paintings. Contemporary art, writing and sculpture moulding are also taught by the museum. This will contribute to the preservation of Nepalese art and culture.

In April 2015, a huge earthquake added more challenges and opportunities. Tangible assets destroyed and dismantled by the earthquake have been collected by the National Museum. From one perspective, managing these assets has been challenging for the museum.



*Tempera wall painting of Vishwaroopa dated 19th century rescued from residential palace of Prime Minister General Bhimsen Thapa
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Nepal*

However, it has also been an added opportunity for further research and study, from which additional information about Nepalese culture can be developed. The tempera wall painting of

Vishwaroopa has been successfully restored in the gallery of the National Museum after the earthquake of 2015. This was a great achievement after the disaster.

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