

The Museum in India: Nation State, Historiography and Marginalized Histories

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative study of the national history museum and the tribal museum in post-independence India, to understand how the Indian nationalist history was shaped within the museological space and how the emergence of tribal museums sought to archive the omitted/marginalized 'small' histories of the subcontinent.

The first part of the paper studies the establishment of the National Museum, New Delhi in 1949-soon after the Independence of India. The making of the National Museum was an act of self-referentiality, a space for reclaiming and shaping its own history by a nation that was colonized politically and epistemically. The invariable predilection of any nationalist historiography is to homogenize its subjects and to that effect, carry out selections and omissions in the writing of the past. Thus, the Indian nationalist historiography and its offshoot-the Nation Museum overlook diverse, rich and often conflicting histories of the subcontinent.

The past of various tribal communities in India was certainly omitted from the nationalist idea of history. Tribal museums were established during the last decades of the 20th century with the ostensible purpose of housing hitherto un-archived heritage of tribal communities. The second half of my paper looks at the Nehru Centenary Tribal Museum of Hyderabad as a case study to understand the following:

- Socio-political changes that led to the emergence of tribal museums in India.
- The alithic, performative nature of the tribal memory and the inadequacy of conventional museography in archiving tribal heritage.
- How, in spite of the supposed purpose of preserving tribal heritage, the Nehru Tribal Museum is a mainstream narrative driven by the rationale of the nation state.

My paper critiques how the rationale of the nation state and its homogenous, linear history have erased diverse, small, marginal histories of the land.