

Museum-making in Bihar: A History of House of History and How Biharis Contributed to Retelling their own History

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Abstract:

My project will trace the shifting practices of museum-making in Bihar by juxtaposing the history of the Bihar Museum (Estd. 2017) against the history of the Patna Museum (Estd. 1917). In doing so it will locate the Indian museum movement within the identity politics in postcolonial South Asia. The Patna Museum was instrumental in forging regional identities vis-à-vis the anti-colonial national movement in South Asia, while the Bihar Museum was an assertion of a modern Bihari identity in a postcolonial time. Scholars have extensively debated the exhibitionary spaces and collections at the Patna Museum, but the Bihar Museum, including its strategic and controversial overshadowing of the Patna Museum, remain under-discussed in contemporary scholarly engagements. Indeed, much of the new Bihar Museum's collections was made up at the expense of the old collection of the Patna Museum, including the Chauri Bearer or the Didarganj Yakshi, famous for her Mauryan polish and her modern political import.

The Government of Bihar argued that the new museum was necessary to foreground Bihar's history, tradition, achievements, and reinvent Bihari identity for a global age by employing new-age technology and contemporary curatorial practices. The global Bihari identity manifested in the museum in two forms: the organization of galleries, especially the first-ever Indian gallery dedicated to the Girmitiya (indentured laborers who travelled overseas and remains marginalized in Indian history) and in the architectural vision for the museum. The Girmitiya Gallery valorizes the contribution of the Bihari diaspora in their adopted countries, including Fiji, Trindade, and others, and thereby emphasizes the global Bihari presence. The architecture of the museum charts this global connection though

simultaneous usage of traditional building material like terracotta with the Corten Steel, by employing a Japanese firm famous for its contemporary design, and by completing the project in an unprecedented speed of four years.

Juxtaposing the Bihar Museum's twenty-first-century global aspirations against Patna Museum's early-twentieth-century regional-national desires, I will argue that power relations in museums are not limited to exhibitionary practices, but extend to the creation of new museum spaces and in reinventing identities of political boundaries they inhabit.

Key Words:

museum, Bihar, identify politics, post-colonial India

Historic Background of the Patna Museum:

The provinces of Bihar and Orissa were carved out from the Bengal Presidency in 1912 with Patna as its capital. This division was a result of renaissance and a long resistance movement among the Bihari population against the dominance of the Bengalis as before the division the entire territory was governed from the Calcutta.

The most important factor behind the division was the economic disparity between the progressive Bengal and the backward Bihari region. The employment opportunities were heavily dominated by the English-speaking Bengalis. Bihar as compared to Bengal was seriously behind in the field of education and literacy, so much so that by 1913 only four percent of the population of Bihar was able "to read a letter from a friend and to write a reply to it. One out of every twenty who (were) literate (knew) the rudiments of English. In Bengal, on the other hand, persons knowing English (were) 6 times as many"¹

The educated leaders of Bihar such as Sachchidanand Sinha and the Press raised voice against the discrimination against the Biharis in government services and this agitation for the employment took a form of a movement for the separation of Bihar from Bengal. It was due to this movement termed as "Bihar for Biharis", The King-Emperor, George V, in the Delhi Durbar of 1911 announced the separation of Bihar and Orissa from Bengal. On 1 April 1912, Bihar and Orissa were carved out as a separate Province with its capital at Patna.

This pressure of freedom from the Bengal's influence was not limited to the political sphere. Growing regional consciousness also demanded to search for the glorious past of the Greater Bihar to counter the idea of Greater Bengal of the Palas. In 1915, the intelligentsia had established the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, which soon arose as a key forum for the

¹ Chaubey, *Muslims and Freedom Movement in India*, 19.

creation of regional historical identity for Bihar and Orissa. The contemporary archaeological excavations at the Pataliputra and Kumrahar had spurred the sense of antiquity of the region as it took the timeline of the regional history back to the 5th Century B.C. As per the existing colonial practice the antiquities were to be shifted to the Imperial Museum, Calcutta (Later Indian Museum, Calcutta) but the scholars from the Bihar resisted it. The history of Patna Museum begins with these claims for custody of the antiquities which was formally founded in 1916.²

The early history of the Patna Museum was marked by the struggle by Monoranjan Ghosh, the curator and Justice John K. Bucknill, head of the Patna Museum Committee, to create an institution without much of a collection as a large portion of antiquities excavated from the region were already with the Indian Museum. They strived to turn the museum into a major museum. They acquired objects from outside the Bihar as they got a few Buddha images from Allahabad and Gandhara sculptures from Taxila and Peshawar. While Patna Museum was trying to expand its collection, it was opposed by the personnel at the Indian Museum as they believed in their right over antiquities from other regions due to its status as the Imperial Museum. Still, in 1924, the Patna Museum claimed a fraction of the Indian Museum's collection. It was bitterly countered by Ramprasad Chanda, curator of archaeology at the Indian Museum. There was an exchange of letters establishing and countering the right of the opposite institution and these became an important part of museum-making in the first half of the last century. Therefore Museum-making apart from being an intellectual endeavour was also very much a political quest for competing for regional identities.³ As Dr. Salila Kulshreshtha has rightly summarised that "the founding of the Patna Museum thus marked an important moment in the politics of provincial reconfiguration, Bihari nationalism and heritage making."⁴

The conception of the Bihar Museum-

It was back in December 2009 during one of his official visits to the Patna Museum, CM Nitish Kumar, surveyed the museum and its storages. He was reportedly not happy with the upkeep and that is when he expressed that he wants to bring large scale changes in the

² Mukherjee, "New Province, Old Capital: Making Patna Pataliputra."

³ Roychowdhury, *Displaying India's Heritage: Archaeology and the Museum Movement in Colonial India*, 169–74.

⁴ Kulshreshtha, "Curation at the Cost of History: A Tale of Two Bihar Museums."

museum. The main point that he had mentioned was that the museum was unable to show more than 5 percent of its entire collection of more than 50,000 objects.⁵



Where on one hand it seems entirely reasonable criticism and somewhat necessary, it is the later actions of Nitish Kumar's government that caused people to raise the eyebrows. Initially the plan was to develop and upgrade the Patna Museum itself. However, a workshop conducted by the Bihar Government

for brainstorming the redesign of Patna Museum on September 23, 2009, witnessed that Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi announced that a new museum and a huge convention centre would be constructed near Patna Women's College. He said the old museum would be given a face-lift fulfilling the norms of international standards. He also informed the crowd that "the project has already been approved by the cabinet and internationally acclaimed architect Karna Grover will do the job."⁶

Image

01: Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi at the Workshop on "Redesign of Patna Museum" in Patna on September 23, 2009. Image By: Aftab Alam Siddiqui ⁷

It is clear from this incident that the idea of having a new museum created and possible people involved in the project such as the architects mentioned by Mr. Modi, all these details were well discussed by the government officials and administrative measures were taken well in advance for their approval.

The newly constructed Bihar Museum has been registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860), which denies it the status of the government body. It is owned and run by the Bihar Museum Society – which is sort of an NGO with the board appointed by the government. This means that the Bihar Museum will be not funded entirely by the government and will have to take care of its expenses, which will eventually increase the cost for the visitors. The Bihar Museum is also outside of the reach of the public inquiry of its usage of the funds.

According to Dr. Shankar Suman, Assistant Curator, Patna Museum, the change of the proposal to upgrade the existing Patna Museum into that of creation of a new museum

⁵ Dr. Shankar Suman (Asst. Curator at Patna Museum) interviewed by Ajay Salunkhe.

⁶ Modak, "New Museum in Patna Soon."

⁷ Modak.

altogether was pre-planned and fixed and at the centre of this change was Mr. Anjani Kumar Singh, (IAS), then the chief secretary of Bihar Government.⁸

Construction of the Museum:

Mr. Singh himself has on many occasions committed to the fact that it was his dream project as much as it was of the CM. In 2010 he was appointed as the Nodal Officer of the entire Bihar Museum Project. Mr. Anjani Kumar himself is an art collector and has a keen interest in curation. He was also a member of the jury that judged the Architectural Competition held in November 2011 to select the design for the proposed museum. Maki and Associates of Japan along with their Indian partner Opolis, Mumbai was declared the winner of the coemption. The Cabinet of the Government of Patna approved the selection of Maki & Associates on 24 January 2012, after which the contract was signed in Patna on 25 January 2012. Canada based firm; Lord Cultural Resources was appointed as the Master Planning consultant for this project in 2011.⁹

What is important about these developments is the main issue this paper is trying to address, of the up gradation of the Patna Museum and the creation of the Bihar Museum together. The key to understanding it is in the following paragraph which is a selection from the press release by the Lord Cultural Resources on 17 February 2012.

“The preliminary project budget for this world-class museum is estimated to be INR 350 crores (inclusive of construction, exhibits, landscaping, and all soft costs). The awe-inspiring permanent collection at this new museum, based on the holdings of the present Patna Museum, will be complemented by unique audio-visual and interactive attractions that will appeal to all age groups and socio-cultural backgrounds.”¹⁰

Debates on Museum Collection:

The permanent collection of the Patna Museum was being repurposed for the creation of the new Bihar Museum. All the collection from the Patna Museum that dates belong to the pre-1764 A.D. era; around 3900 objects out of 51000 were shifted to create the collection of the Bihar Museum.¹¹

⁸ Dr. Shankar Suman (Asst. Curator at Patna Museum) interviewed by Ajay Salunkhe.

⁹ “Press Release- Results of Lord Cultural Resources -Led Architect Selection Process.”

¹⁰ “Press Release- Results of Lord Cultural Resources -Led Architect Selection Process.”

¹¹ “CM for Expansion of Old Patna Museum.”

The artifacts being transferred include one of the most important artifacts from its collection such as the *Didarganj yakshini*, Kurkihar bronzes, and 18th century Daniell prints.

This selection of artifacts of only pre-colonial times will present a partial history. The present exhibition at the Bihar Museum is aimed at showing the “glory of Bihar” through a chronological arrangement of artifacts as Prehistory and Protohistoric objects- Buddhist-Mauryan-Gupta-Pala-Sena-Mughal and so on. The history of the region has been reduced to a succession of dynasties, fragmented histories, and linear evolution of its artistic and cultural heritage.

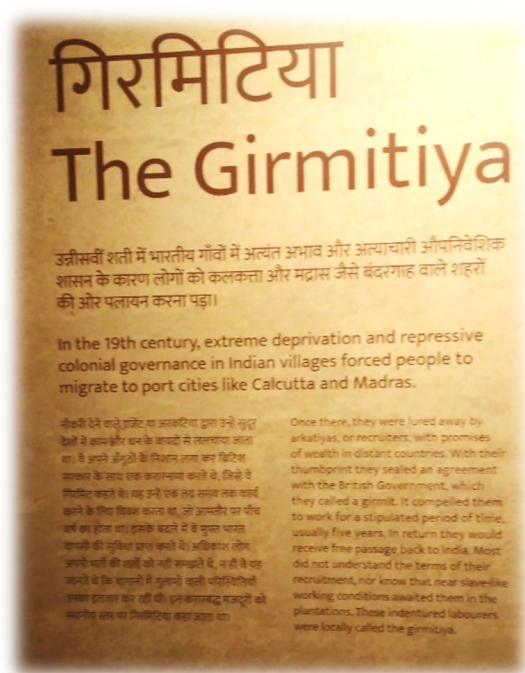
A glance over their arrangement at the Patna Museum would give us the idea of how they were displayed on the same line. What both museums, created a century apart, are doing the same is that they are presenting a narrative pre-decided for the political purpose as the selection of artifact generates the idea of ‘Glory of Bihar’ and to use them to support the regional pride and agenda.

In 1917 it was archived by new explorations, excavations and competitive research by the academia, whereas a hundred years later its been achieved by creating an institution that houses not only ancient artifacts but also the contemporary art and crafts created by the renowned artists especially for the collection and by the creation of a gallery dedicated to the Bihari Diaspora – ‘Bihari Diaspora Gallery’- Telling the story of Girmitiyas- the indentured laborers from Bihar that migrated to countries like Mauritius, Bangladesh and beyond and how the population through cultural practices has kept their association with their original land intact for generations. The gallery, as described by the museum, ‘It continues the narrative beyond the History Galleries taking the story of Bihar into the modern world.’



View of the Bihari Diaspora Gallery, Bihar Museum, Patna. Photo by the Author, 2019

People's Role in the Museum Making



Patna's intelligentsia including writers, poets, historians, social activists, and students protested the plan to shift prized artifacts a century-old Patna Museum to the newly created Bihar Museum.

They wrote letters to Chief Minister Nitish Kumar against the shifting of invaluable artifacts to the Bihar Museum from Patna Museum. Including historians, like Romila

Text Panel, the Bihari Diaspora Gallery, Bihar Museum, Patna, Photo by the Author, 2019

Thapar, Irfan Habib, and Nayanjyot Lahiri signed a petition against the decision of the state government.

Eminent sociologist late Hetukar Jha, historian Imtiaz Ahmed, Prof. Arun Kumar Sinha Hari Kishore Prasad, former Director of Museums, Prof. Rajendra Ram, Padma Shri Usha Kiran Khan, Prof. Shatrughan Sharan Singh, and Jaidev Singh, had appealed to the Chief Minister to save the Patna Museum.¹²

Jaya Sankrityayana Parhawk, daughter of renowned Buddhist scholar Rahul Sankrityayana, who had donated numerous priceless Thangka paintings, Buddhist manuscripts, and books from Tibet to the Patna museum, has voiced her skepticism over the government's decision to move these artifacts to a new museum "without her knowledge". Condemning the move she said that "My father's paintings and Buddhist manuscripts, books were not sold to Patna museum but given as a provisional grant...our family should have been informed before shifting all these heritage stuffs from Patna museum".¹³

Local activists including students of the Patna Arts College, launched a campaign, as well as a sit-in near the Patna Museum, in opposition to the moving the artifacts to the new museum. Pushpraj, an activist and convenor of "Save Yakshini and Save Patna Museum", is

¹² Tewary, "Closure of Patna Museum Sparks Protests."

¹³ Tewary.

leading a campaign against the shifting of the precious artifacts, sculptures, and rare manuscripts from it to the newly constructed Bihar Museum.¹⁴



Image 03: Historians and civil society members staged a sit-in against the proposal to shift historical heritage items like manuscripts and sculptures out of Patna Museum. Photo Credit:

Ranjeet Kumar¹⁵

Ashok Kumar, a professor at Patna University, filed a PIL in the Patna high court in December 2011 seeking to stop the construction of the new museum. The case was concluded only in 2015, when the new museum was nearing completion, with the high court ruling that the new museum was not in the public interest. The statement read:

“We, therefore, dispose of the writ petition holding that the project of construction of world class museum in Patna at the cost of about Rs. Five hundred crores in a prime land of 17 ½ acres between the Secretariat and the Patna High Court is not at all in public interest and that the manner in which the contracts of consultancy etc. were awarded is far from transparent and objective. However, we are not intending to stall the project which is nearing completion. We direct that in case the museum becomes unviable, the building and other infrastructure shall not be alienated to private firms, but shall be utilized for public institutions or purposes.”¹⁶

The Report of the case explains the discrepancies in the usage of funds-

“Even after M/s Lords Cultural Resources was appointed for the entire project, in the manner referred to above some more consultants such as Maki & Opolis Mumbai, M/s Kingsmn Fairtech, the Fabrications Agency India, and M/s Lopage Design were awarded contracts worth Rs.41,28,00,000/-, Rs.31,36,82,100/- and Rs.2,65,87,764 respectively. The

¹⁴ “Man Campaigning to Save Patna Museum ‘Threatened.’”

¹⁵ Tewary, “Closure of Patna Museum Sparks Protests.”

¹⁶ Ashok Kumar vs The State Of Bihar & Ors on 26 June, 2015.

construction contract was awarded to M/s L & T. Chennai at Rs.280 crores. In other words, for construction of buildings worth Rs.280 crores, the Government spent about Rs.220 crores towards consultancy and other such activities.”¹⁷

The State Government’s only reply to it was an Affidavit stating that the statements made in the writ application are not true.

In 2014 a comptroller and auditor general (CAG) report found that the already existing museums in Bihar were lacking in the conservation of artifacts and their accessibility. It also stated that in the Patna Museum at least 20 manuscripts from the R. Sankrityayana collection were torn and no effort was made to restore those despite the availability of funds. Even in terms of cataloging and documenting antiquities, only 41% of the artifacts belonging to the Patna Museum had been documented properly as of 2014. The number is 34% for all the artifacts in all the museums in Bihar.¹⁸

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had laid the foundation stone of the Bihar museum on July 9, 2013 and it was inaugurated on October 2, 2015. This must be one of the fastest completed government projects. It became a matter of sarcasm in the state judiciary as evident from an incident in mid-2019 as the State Government of Bihar, in its answer to a PIL, had stated that it will need the extension of 22 months to complete construction of very much needed jail. A division bench of Justices Jyoti Saran and Anjani Kumar Sharan rapped the state government by asking them how come an international standard museum that required glass windows, tiles, and marbles be constructed within a year where whereas a jail requires none of these, and still is difficult for the state to manage to construct in two years.¹⁹

Conclusion:

The whole process of the creation of the Bihar Museum has made us aware of the internal fissures and tensions and dichotomous pulls that are part of art and Museum practices today.

The creation of a new Museum space raised the question of the possession, protection, and care of objects. Where the Museum is a custodian of objects, but it is owned by the government. If ownership is with the government then does the neglect towards the collection became an issue of politics? The work of arts in the museum got enmeshed in this web of

¹⁷ Ashok Kumar vs The State Of Bihar & Ors on 26 June, 2015.

¹⁸ Sen, “Patna Museum Being Eclipsed by Swankier Bihar Museum.”

¹⁹ Karmakar, “How Much Time Was Taken for Construction of Museum: Patna HC.”

contending claims and practices where scholars and officials, and the people get entangled in the discourse of the right and values.

Museum-making in India has a completely different scope today than when it commenced in the colonial times. The Patna Museum, when founded in 1917, was aimed at asserting and discovering the past of the province and to present it to the people. The aim of the Museums now, as it is with many public spaces is to be relevant.

The fact that the scholars, officials and the people tried to voice their opinion, concerns and take part in the process through a public movement, petitions, and PILs says a lot about the way public spaces has changed into the public sphere in the 21st century.

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