CHAPTER-7

CONCLUSION

The educational role of museums has undergone a sea change in the recent years. Whereas, formerly museum education was restricted to providing specific provisions for primarily the elite class or the school children the educational role of the museum has attained a wider connotation now-a-day. The role of the museum now includes reaching out to the community at large and include those groups who were hitherto unrepresented in the museum both in terms of contents as well education. The museum now needs to be seen as one of the many institutions within the social framework that encourages social inclusion.

In spite of the change in the global concept of the museum worldwide the museums in India are yet to reach the high water mark of social inclusion. The question arises as to what may be termed a proper educational policy for the community at large especially those who are deprived and are lacking in the privileges of life. These people who are below the poverty line in society struggling for existence every moment, rarely have a clue as to the role the museums might have in their lives. Museums are still a luxury in country like India where nearly 28% of the population is still lying below poverty line. In such a case it may seen that the concept museums for all is an enigma.

In spite of the change in the global concept of the museum worldwide the museums in India are yet to reach the high water mark of social inclusion. The question arises as to what may be termed a proper educational policy for the community at large especially those who are deprived and are lacking in the privileges of life. These people who are below the poverty line in society struggling for existence every moment, rarely have a clue as to the role the museums might have in their lives. Museums are still a luxury in country like India where nearly 28% of the population is still lying below poverty line. In such a case it may seen that the concept museums for all is an enigma.
From the previous chapters it is clear that education for the underprivileged cannot be successful unless it is imparted by visual stimulation and is essentially participatory.

It is the duties of the museum to make every section of the society recognize the museum for what it is. In order that every section of the society recognize the museum for what it is. In order that every section of the society is catered to by the museum need to change their outlook towards the visitors. These days even the people belonging to the grass root level are not prepared to be mute audience.

In order to cater to the requirements of the deprived and underprivileged a few modifications may be suggested very humbly. Education for the underprivileged the educational programmes needs to be presented through fun and recreation. These days the museum forms a part of the leisure industry and has to compete with the shopping malls, multiplexes, video game parlours etc. The challenge for the museum will be to keep its attraction alive to the society.

Audio visual elements have been discussed in the previous chapters but most of them are for the educated visitor. The question of communicating with the poor rural folk who might be unlettered at times. In this vast country apart from children there are a considerable number of adults who are unlettered. The problem needs careful planning after a lot of thought. Through guided tour, gallery talks or lessons in participatory exhibits these people require a little bit of extra attention on the part of the museums.

The very first aspect that every museum requires to look into is the presence of trained educational personnel for the department of education. A team of trained guides is essential for proper interpretation and communication with the visitors by their verbal explanations. The guides require to be efficient, knowledgeable persons preferably adept in more than one language. In West Bengal the guides need to know English (the official language) along with Hindi and the local vernacular i.e. Bengali. In that case a visitor cannot speak in English it would not be difficult for him or her to converse with the guides and put forward their problems if any. Thus, the purpose of feedback is served to some extent.
In a gallery talk or a demonstration lecture, a guide or a lecturer can throw more light; give more information than the displayed objects or the related, audio-visual aids. The voices of the guides need to be loud and clear so that everyone is capable of hearing him or her.

While preparing film shows or presentations for them a museum needs to keep working films on the different subject matter along with the time taken for a theme to be explained, the points discussed and what documentary can go with the theme. These fills need to be kept on record for future use.

Temporary exhibitions have immense scope for educating not literate but also the unlettered visitors. A museum cannot display all that it has in its collection. A number of objects have to be kept in the store due to lack of space. Some of these objects may be used for arranging a temporary exhibition on special occasions. It is seen that maximum number of unlettered and underprivileged visitors visit museums during some religious festival such as Makara Sankranti, Janmashtami, Durga Puja etc. Survey has revealed that nearly 50% of the underprivileged visitors have visited the Indian Museum during Makara Sankranti visit the Indian Museum because while going back home after bathing at Sagar they undertake a city tour to see the different places of interest and the Indian Museum falls in their tour itinerary.

During such a visit if a temporary exhibition is arranged pertaining to the occasion then it would prove to be appealing for the unlettered visitors. Makara Sankranti according to Mahabharata is the day on which Bhishma breathed his last. If the museum has anything pertaining to the Mahabharata especially Bhishma such as any plaque or sculpture then it can be used to organize a temporary exhibition. Again the occasion of Janmashtami celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna. If a museum organizes a temporary exhibition on Krishnalila paintings then it would appeal even to the unlettered visitor. A serious visitor might be interested in the artist who painted the painting, its characteristics and how artists of different schools worked on them. However, for the unlettered visitor it is Krishna that is important and is revered by the visitor. Similar temporary exhibitions may also be arranged during Buddha Purnima and Durga Puja using images of Buddha and Mahisasuramardini such exhibitions need to be advertised well by placing festoons on the roads and
streets, slides in cinema halls or through radio and television. In case of unlettered visitors radio and television can prove to very important.

In order to make the unlettered visitors feel comfortable then it is of utmost importance that these visitors do not perceive the museum as being intellectually challenging. If these people perceive the museum visit as requiring serious mental engagement then they would prefer to go elsewhere. Museums today require multi-tasking which includes comfort, eating, resting and engaging the visitor. Some of the basic needs are for a comfort break, food and drink, a suitable temperature in the galleries, seating arrangements etc. If these basic physiological needs are not properly catered for by responsive and courteous staff then it might repel the visitors.

A museum might receive visitors from all strata of the society starting from the elite to the grass root level. They might have different interests and levels of intelligence. It is thus extremely important that each of these visitors feel welcome as they enter the museum and not a sense of exclusion. A very significant barrier to communication is the visitor feeling unwelcome and being embarrassed as they do not know where to go or what to expect. This is especially true in case of the unlettered visitors who cannot read signs.

The first impression is vital. A disoriented visitor will surely feel embarrassed and intimidated. The orientation process by means of pre-visit information has to be done that it includes a feeling of welcome as part of experience rather than a sense of being intimidated or of being to feel inadequate. It needs to continue with ready access to information only in terms of needing to know where the visitor is and where he or she would proceed but also to allow each visitor to decide on the best use of his or her time.

It is absolutely necessary that the signs showing directions to galleries, museum shop, toilet and cafeteria etc. are clearly displayed and for those of who are unlettered or semi-literate the role of the staff becomes even more significant. An attitude of help and assurance plays a key role in such cases. A label placed at eye
level and their being bilingual or if possible trilingual helps better viewing and comprehension.

Security is no doubt important especially for those that house objects pertaining to art and archaeology where valuable sculptures and works of art are vulnerable. However, security should not hamper the process of communication between the object and the visitor. The simple and unlettered visitors are not always conversant with the rules and regulations of the museums and might also lack civic sense. They might be prostrate in front of the statue that might be considered to be a god or offer flowers at the feet of the image to pay reverence or even throw away food packets after having their food in the gallery.

If a visitor feels being watched and is made to feel very inadequate, he or she experiences discomfort. It becomes very annoying to have someone breathe down the shoulder all the time to supervise the activities of the visitors. If the visitor is made to feel that he or she is being watched and monitored throughout the visit, then he or she would vote with his feet and leave. Security though important can be discrete. The idea of a stark uniform is intimidating in every sense. In the past a number of museums were renowned for their scowling, old fashioned attendants in quasi Victorian uniforms.

Fortunately, much has improved. Such uniforms can be replaced by more informal dresses. The chief idea behind such a strategy is to make the visitor feel more relaxed and enjoy fully what the museum has to offer.

Same goes for the guide lecturers. They may always assume a more cheerful and friendlier attitude, more of a friend ready to satisfy the visitor’s curiosity rather than a person who is simply content to give dry and monotonous lectures on the display. Many a times it so happens that the staff develop a take it or leave it attitude which serves as a source of repulsion especially if the visitor is unlettered. Much of what the staff takes for granted might be absolutely new to a visitor who is generally a novice. A little bit of perseverance, a welcome smile and a laid back attitude on
the part of not only the guide lecturers but also the other staff might work wonders in such cases.

In order to make the museums more acceptable to the underprivileged section of visitors the museum needs to be distributed as wide as possible in the remote corners of the villages of West Bengal and make it active in the development programme of the country. It is in the rural areas that a sizeable section of the population resides below the poverty line many of whom are also unlettered or semi-lettered. Rabindranath Tagore after visiting Russia remarked in his letter from Russia, “The educative system here is so much well distributed that museum here is very active and not passive like ours”

The museum visits have become very much city centric. Even the unlettered visitors only know about Indian Museum Kolkata, BITM and some of the other big museums but probably not their neighbourhood museum. The museums in the rural or suburban areas too have beautiful collections but are languishing due to lack of visitors.

The scope of museums in cities and villages should be different considering the different cultural milieu in rural and urban areas. Though many years have passed since passing of the above mentioned remark by Tagore museums in our country still remain passive regarding education and are yet to utilize their potency to the fullest extent. Like their European and American counterparts they need to come forward in solving the country’s various problems through their own way of working in the field of education. They need to extend their scope for adjusting themselves to the developing human society.

A few examples may be cited here. For instance if agricultural and crafts museums are set up in villages they will become another organ for communication of up to date knowledge in the field of agriculture, agricultural implements, live-stock development, soil chemistry, village crafts and even elementary biology and public health etc. without the help of literacy in addition to the present media like television, newspaper, internet. The proposed museums in villages will prove to be highly efficient medium of communication as they will be physically present among the villagers for serving them and because they will work through visual powers.
Museums can also give practical training to the villagers in the above disciplines through practical training units comprising of workshops and fields. In recent years some city museums in India have started their own mobile exhibitions to the rural area. The village folk would greatly benefit from such Museo-bus if there are exhibits and information pertaining to their requirements such as agriculture, soil erosion, rain water harnessing, alternative sources of fuel etc. from which they can derive practical help. Thus museums to be widely distributed on the basis of different social and cultural milieu of urban and rural areas. Towards visual culture of the coming years the museums assume a great significance in the speed up process of education.

The museums of the 21st century have shifted their focus from the collections to communication. This move towards visitors is understood as the only way forward for the future. For a very long period of time museums have given priority to the value of scholarship, research and collection at the expense of the visitors. The challenge today is to preserve these traditional museum concerns but to combine them with the educational values that focus on how the objects of the museum can add to the quality of life for everyone in the community down to the grass root level.

Museums for all or social inclusion in the museums essentially implies that every individual segment of the society must gain access to the museums - its collections, exhibitions, programmes and services for individual and collective benefit. Access is considered to be a matter of universal right, no longer a privilege reserved for selective individuals. There are several barriers in the path of universal access – physical, mental, social as well as economic.

The target group in this research faces the barrier of socio-economic deprivation. They need to be made to come to the museums regularly. For this educational programmes suitable to their requirements need to be devised so that they are attracted to such programmes. Although there are sporadic visits during festivals, regular visits throughout the year needs to be encouraged.

Museums act as a surrogate for the collective right to the society to receive and spread information. Museum personnel, as a group are generally committed to the call of the society, bringing facts to the people in an impartial manner. They have
primary accountability to the society as a whole. By society one means members from the cradle to the grave. Thus, undertaking programmes for the less fortunate such as the street children, the wage labourers, domestic helps, children from the orphanages, a prisoner etc. justifies the accountability to society.

From social and cultural benefit the museums ensure the preservation and conservation of the communities’ cultural and natural heritage. Museums being accountable to the society need to focus on its evils also. Evils such as dowry, honour killing, rape, murder are rampant in the society today. These are more glaring the rural areas where more social evils such as witch hunting, black magics, untouchability. Such burning issues need to be addressed. Museums need to highlight such burning issues through their educational programmes. Social problems process of such problems, their irradiation, ethnic conflict and overall developments of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, other backward communities and minorities need to get added value in the field of responsibility of museums to the society.

The education imparted by the museums need to be pragmatic and proactive to help the underprivileged people understand their basic problems. As life becomes more and more complicated, the impact of museums tend to be more and more useful and welcome in a society, which is becoming ever keener in order to visualize life and environment around. It is becoming a social centre where people assemble on their own and the exhibits serve as a link in order to bind the visitors with a common chard of realization.

Museums are gaining recognition as elements of culture in the growing society. Museums operate as the home par excellence of popular non-formal education of the common people to the utility of the services of the museums in community life. The museums collect the antiquity and preserve the cultural heritage for future generations to come and chemically conserve the damaged and worm infested objects. In pursuance of such activities museums can best be utilized in serving the community by organizing periodical indoor and outdoor exhibitions.

The heterogeneous composition of the Indian society has many demands. No single museum can hope to meet all the demands of these various strata starting from the
very affluent down to the lowest strata consisting of the people in the below poverty level. The particular requirements of a particular community of the people of the area where the museums are situated and the museum personnel will be able to formulate a conducive educational policy consistent to the requirement at the right time in the right way.

In the present times the educational role of the museums has been gaining preponderance over other things. Museologists have realized that education can be named above all the other functions. Education cannot only the prerogative of the bigger museums.

Smaller museums in the districts of West Bengal have the potential to educate its visitors. Yet, most often it is the visitors that elude them. The rural folk need to be made aware of the existence and significance of the museums in their neighbourhood in addressing their immediate requirements. West Bengal like the rest of India is predominantly rural. The rural museums under many of the rural panchayat exist and at times have a rich collection but due to paucity of fund, lack of visitors and infrastructure they fail to reach out to the rural visitors.

Museums in the rural area need to adopt a proactive and aggressive role in the community. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India Opined in his message to the commemorative volume published on the occasion of the inauguration of the new building of the National Museum, ‘Museums are not places to see odd things or Ajayabhgar, as they are used to be called. They are or should be an essential part of the educational system and cultural activities of a country. What is more, they are places for public education. Private houses may have works of art and beauty, but they are not open to the public. It is important every city possesses a museum and I, would add, even villages have their small museums wherever possible.”

The infrequent visitors who are deprived from every privilege of life need their problems to be highlighted and the museums that are more successful are the ones that successfully provide multiple experience for all their visitors not excluding any of them. The unlettered visitors need to be made to feel that they too belong to the
museum and vice versa. It is the sacred duty of the museums to welcome the visitor and making the logistics as smooth as possible to make the collections as enjoyable as possible.

Museums have the potential to help erase erroneous impressions and ease tensions. Each and every person in the society has the right to education, knowledge and information. Museums must give access to all without discrimination whether physical, social, economical, cultural, linguistic, geographical, and religious or gender. It can be hoped that in near future, museums would become truly accessible for all cutting across all the barriers.

Museums have not just a role, but a special role to play in learning.

Their collections, be they dinosaur eggs, medieval kitchen implements, the first maps of the world or local textile designs, and the scholarship and expertise surrounding those collections, offer an invaluable, original and thrilling learning resource. In addition, museums offer a hugely valuable ‘third’ space between school and home, in which it is safe intellectually and physically for everyone to learn, where different relationships are forged between children and adults – whether parents, grandparents, teachers, or museum educators. But museums have two big challenges to face if they are to deliver learning for all. The first – for some museums, at least – will be to make learning a core priority for museum leadership, funding and structure. The second will be to do this in a way that reaches out and has an impact for everyone, including children and young people living in poverty, and those who have been excluded from school or marginalized otherwise.

At least three issues must be addressed:

• Leadership by museums and policymakers
• Positive action by government, local authorities, and schools
• An understanding of what makes successful learning programmes
Under-resourced local museums without dedicated learning staff can struggle. Support for these museums, in terms of resource and expertise, can be provided via partnership and support from larger museums and local authorities to reach out to wider areas.

The informal learning that takes place in museums can develop, support and enhance learning by children and young people, in and out of school, whether they are flourishing within the education sector or not. Museums provide a safe and neutral ‘third space’ – which may be marginalized from formal education – and different ways of learning and different relationships with those who are particularly beneficial for those disenfranchised or teaching. To take full advantage of informal learning opportunities, museums need to engage the visitors more and more making the most of family visits to museums and not focus solely on school trips. After all, the majority of children visit museums with their families, rather than in school groups. These visits, with a smaller child to adult ratio and the ability to focus on the special interests and needs of the family, provide rich and valuable opportunities to every visitor in the museum experience. The ‘family offer’ should therefore feature strongly in museum learning programmes with consideration given to engaging harder to reach families. Museums do not just support learning outside the classroom, they can provide learning outside the museum too. Outreach programmes are an important part of the learning opportunities museums provide, working with schools, charities and community groups, and these too should form an integral part of a museum’s learning programme. These initiatives can be particularly important for engaging children in the lower socio-economic groups and those outside formal education.