CHAPTER – 3

Social responsibility of the museums in West Bengal – Their Role in Providing Education with Entertainment to the Under privileged

The early museums were merely the repositories of objects collected by the royals and aristocracy. Museums acted as the custodians of a few valuable antiquities. They accumulated objects of momentary value and curiosities for their uniqueness. They entertained only practically had no connection with the common masses who seldom or never visited the museums. The aspect of social accountability or responsibility was not a declared objective of museums at their early stage.

The Indian museum at Kolkata was established in 1814 and it marked the pioneering of the Indian museum movement. However it merely began as a house of curiosities that stored the objects pertaining to India’s culture that were thrown open for public viewing. The communicative role of museums was yet to come the result was that people came in large members to see these curiosities and gave the name of Jadughar (house of magic) to the museum which was far away from the modern concept of museums that of a communicator preserver interpreter along with being an acquire of objects.

During the last three decades or so there has been a radical shift in the perception of museum from a centre for appeasing the intellectual curiosity of in educated elite in its quest for academic ivory tourism as well as a place for the reflection of the view of the dominant class, to institutions facilitating social inclusion. The collections were no longer private. Rather they belonged to the public and therefore required to be meaningful for the common masses and become responsible for reflecting their social reality.

The word museum consists of the following alphabets which may be signifying as follows suggested by Charu Smitha in her article “Museum the Ulterior View an Etymology”
M- Man taken as the Homo Sapiens
U- Utilization (Ultimate Primary fundamental)
S- Surroundings (the environment dynamic and static)
E- Exhibition of the selection from collection
U- Understanding (In terms of recreation education and research)
M- Mankind (the Masses)

Hence the museum signifies man's utilization of surroundings through exhibitions for understanding by mankind.

Years ago the museums of West Bengal were limited in their responsibility which included acquisition, conservation, research, and some display. Before proceeding further one needs to elaborate as to what is a community. The word community cannot be accommodated in a restricted definition. Since the community consists of all kinds of people it is absolutely necessary for the museums to see to it that the collections reflect the culture and legacy of every class of people. West Bengal is predominantly rural and therefore, the majority of the people too are simple rural folks who are not always frequent visitors to the museums and its various educational programmes. Before drawing up a policy for education in museums it may be argued upon whether a museum is obliged to educate all its visitors. The answer is obviously in the affirmative.

The majority of the museums in West Bengal are art and archaeology museums which contain beautiful sculptures remains of architectural remains, pottery, and potsherds. There are folk museums consisting of objects of folk art. Biographical and personalia museums are there that showcase the lives of great philosophers, scientists, and thinkers. There are also quite a few science centres under the banner of national council of science museum. Each of these types of museums cater to the public in West Bengal in their own unique way by presenting their collections.

In case of a specialized museums like folklore or folk art or folk culture, the objects of collection might not be so sophisticated or have classical flavour or technological bearings etc. In West Bengal there are a moderate representation of folklore museums or general museums that have in their collections a considerable number...
of folkloric items. The education is imparted in a folklore museum or alike through both tangible as well as intangible cultural heritage of a given country.

Mythology and folk tales have for ever been traditional sources of education especially for the rural folk museums can use toys to depict the different folk tales and epic. The Ramayana and Mahabharata depicted by dolls in the Nehru Childrens Museum fascinate children as well as adults. Such depictions not only teach the masses about the ancient culture through stories but also teach the age old values and deals of their forefathers. These toys keep the epics and folk tales alive or else such tales would fade into oblivion.

The science museums are another source of educating the common man about the marvels of science and technology. The different science museums in West Bengal under the banner of national council of science museum believe in the slogan science for all thereby making sincere education for one and all. The formal education system does not encourage.

There are numerous ethnic group in West Bengal with their own unique lifestyles tradition beliefs practices the anthropological museums provide information that can be utilized with its full potential to generate awareness and harmony among the people who are residing in remote rural areas in West Bengal and not exposed much to the world have very little idea about the diversity in culture of their own state or district. Such people can be fruitfully taught the idea of unity in diversity by the anthropological museums in West Bengal. Further a number of elements of tangible and intangible culture are getting lost in oblivion due to their absence in daily lives. A number of tribal rituals now no longer exist among the present generation. Museums can showcase such practices and traditions successfully and preserve them for future generations so that they( future generations) have ready access to past ethnographic works.)

Museums also have a very significant role to play in case of the health and hygiene of the society. In West Bengal like the rest of India most of the people in remote rural areas where there is total lack of medical facilities and the poor rural folk have little or no knowledge about diseases, their cause and cure. The health museums can
play a significant role in reaching out to the people of such remote rural areas and make them aware of health hazards.

Eco museum acts as a laboratory to conserve to protect and to study the past and present behaviour of a population of a particular geographical area. The eco museum has advantages. Firstly, the scattered units help in decentralizing the museum resources by all units. Secondly it helps in involving the local population of the entire territory in museum work. Further it does not want to grab cultural heritage from various monuments and sites in that area to bring the same to museum building for exhibitions.

Eco museums can prove to be one of the most potent tools to disseminate museum education to the under privileged people who cannot always visit the museum buildings in person. Further, preserving their own heritage would be something dear to their hearts without having to really undergo any kind of training or learning something alien. Such preservation of cultural heritage of the community can take place with the minimum of efforts.

Museums also have a role to play in national integration and communal harmony. At present a number of disruptive forces are in action in the society communal riots bomb blasts terrorist attacks of all kinds are rampant. Political unrest and religious fragmentation are occurring primarily due to lack of education. It is the lowest strata of the society that gets affected the most as they may become easy targets for separatist forces. Museums can help to imbibe the feeling of national integration brotherhood fraternity, secularism and religious harmony by instilling ideas of intercultural and inter religious exchange in the form of similarity of objects and rituals of different religious and cultures. For examples, co-relation between art objects of different religious and cultures can be derived through museum objects and programmes.

As a centre of out of school education, the museums in West Bengal may form an integral part of development of human resources. A country seeking rapid modernisation of its economy but burdened with illiteracy cannot hope to solve all its manpower problems simply by developing its curriculum pedagogy. Out of
school education therefore assumes a particular importance in the speed up process. Young people need to be given chances to learn their own experience by allowing them to create things using their own hands such as modeling painting, scientific models etc.

Another system of education in ancient India, what might be called moral education in the modern concept of education was imparted informally by the bauls and charan (bard) poets and folk scroll painters who used to explain moral values to the simple rural folks. They are now fast fading away from the society under the pressure from industrialization and urbanization. This vacuum may also be filled by extensively distributing museums with screens for projection or television which may provide a common place for rural people in the areas to listen to moral education by means of film shows.

Museums also have the potential to play a significant role in female education. Women are the pivot of a family and have the capacity to play an important role in education of their children. In the rural areas too, they, like their male counter part are a determining factor in the modernisation of agriculture and reform of the entire social and cultural environment for achievement of these goals the education of girls must lay its foundation. However the resistance from the society prevents the development in this field. Museums in this regard can successfully and economically communicate the newly evolved various technical know how in the above disciplines. Further there should also be a conscious effort in the part of museums to include women representations in their displays and exhibitions. Crafts are generally regarded as women’s domain but do not feature very prominently in museums. These need to be focussed by the museums along with the names of the female contributors (if possible) similarly an exhibition on the labour movement or freedom movement needs to include the roles of women in such movements. Museums also need to encourage more women in this profession in order that women’s issues or any display may also be presented including the view point of women.

Museums offer an opportunity to satisfy the curiosity of the people. The collections need to cater to a wider range of general public and not only the scholarly. People can make use of the objects in museums for learning new things by means of visual
education as seeing is behaving. Museums offer the opportunity to know factual information about anything. Mere collection of objects and displaying them by labelling them fails to satisfy all craving curiosities. So the need to collect formidable potential information is vital. It is now an accepted fact that economic as well as political factors cannot be divorced from the cultural context of any society. It is a holistic approach. Again if a museum possess in its collection art objects.

A task of the museum is to give all of us however ill educated or highly educated rich or poor a clear sense of the past and a personal stake in the future by binding the present. Museums are institutions that inspire and give people hope even in times of calamity and catastrophe. Museums can assume a meaningful role by combining instruction with entertainment in such a way that cut across the barriers of illiteracy poverty etc and inspire the various sections of the society including the under privileged to take the service of the museums for the benefit of the society. The effects of cutting down trees resulting is soil erosion, global warming indiscriminate killing of different species of wild animals thereby disturbing the ecological balance are environmental issues that can best be educated through museums. The evils of social issues such as killing women in the name for witch hunting or going to the ojha (witchdoctor) with a patient of snake bite are rampant in the rural areas of not only West Bengal but also other states in India. The knowledge that the people get here in the museums revitalize their conventional wisdom.

More and more museums need to serve the society regardless of their social economic or religious status. Museums are gaining ever increasing recognition as an element of culture in the growing society. Molly Harrison is quite right when she declares education cannot afford to neglect museums. Museums operate as the home par excellence of popular non formal education of the common people to the utility of museum services in community life. The museum can best be utilized in serving the community by organizing indoor and outdoor periodical exhibitions.

A successful museums often fascinate visitors and successfully persuades them to come back to it by means of its display. They come back once again to museums for viewing the material artefacts for building up a body of national knowledge and
wisdom. As it is based on real objects, therefore it is correct. But with the change of time it grew as an institution to impart knowledge open to all, which ordinarily is a non-profit making organization that acquires, conserves, communicates, researches, communicates and exhibits for the enjoyment of the people of the society, as a result of which the visitors could get pleasure and profit according to their inclinations. Because a conscious society always advocates that its people need to know about their history, geography and also their own behavioural patterns and diversities. The social responsibility of museums flowered after the Second World War (1939-1945) and people became more conscious of the dictum- ‘Museum for all.’

Democratization of museums is assign of social consciousness at present and the museums are acting as the bridge linking the past to the present. Collected museum objects are no longer considered as lifeless, but these are seemingly lifeless specimens speaking of their value to the audience. Their social accountability is thus an accepted concept of the society.

To fulfill this new concept of the role of museums the term Neo-Museology as its corollary and it attains a great success to this point of view. Neo- Museology is trying to involve people in planning and running a museum and consequently it provides scope to the local community to get involved in its function as does an eco museum. Cultural heritage, religion, faith, belief, rituals, customs, inanimate and animate biological items in their innate surroundings prevail around them for study and enjoyment. Museums can cater edutainment. For proper understanding keen observation and inspection of original material evidences of man and nature is indispensable. Of course for the fulfillment of these requirements there are formal institutions such as schools, colleges, universities libraries etc are there, however diverse the subject may be. However for visual experience one has to visit the museums. Of course, only the visit to museum collections may fulfill one’s knowledge only partially and studying in an educational institution, partially. So, the museums and the educational institutions can jointly work together can result in understanding the significance of any object and this entails a complete knowledge at large about the objects. Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee had explicitly pointed out in his inaugural address in the centenary celebration of the Indian Museum, Kolkata on 28th November, 1913, “ the museums may be regarded at first as an adjunct to the
classroom and the lecture room; secondly, as a bureau of information and thirdly, as an institution for the culture of the people”. Again it is unquestionably our duty to do our best for the culture of the public, through the display of attractive exhibition series, well planned, complete and accurately labeled and thus to stimulate and broaden the minds of those who are not engaged in scholarly research. He further mentioned “A National or Imperial Museum must, consequently, be equipped adequately for the fulfillment of three principal functions namely first for the accumulation and preservation of specimens such as form the material basis of knowledge acquired thereby, secondly so collected and for the diffusion of the knowledge so acquired thereby and thirdly to make suitable arrangements calculated to arouse the interest of the public and to promote their instruction”.

Neo Museology is trying to involve people and running a museum and consequently it provides scope to the local community’s involvement as does an eco museum. This branch is integrated to the life and becomes a useful cultural centre of the people, playing appositive role, facilitating people to understand well the society and their social behavioural pattern. As a result the mobility makes it more dynamic to solve the aspirations of the people. For example, when a museum has exhibited the traditional and modern agricultural implements the on-lookers can view for themselves the different varieties of native plough, harrow, sowing machines, harvesting equipments such as weeder, sickle paddy thrashing and husking lever, friends and foe of cultivation such as locusts and earthworm, etc. They can select their own improved methods of cultivation by comparing the merits and demerits of the traditional and modern developed methods. The community can adopt the improved agricultural tools and the experiences they gain after using such tools usher economic progress of the community as a whole.

Now a new concept of eco museology has evolved which concerns the dying material culture of a particular region. This branch of knowledge aims at giving training to artisans, craftsmen etc to revive the traditional arts and crafts of which a particular locality and to preserve these for the future generations. Earlier temples were the centres of activities of the entire community. Religious discourses, recitation of the epics in which the rural people participated and gathered, musical
soiree, dance, drama etc were the usual features of these temples and shrine complexes. These the museums are rising to play that role.

While the museum collects objects it records the style iconographical features, socio-religious context etc of the object. These informations will help one to know about the item fully and its culture in oblivion, thus bridging the people to their distant past. These data cater to the requirements and lost clamouring demands of the wider range of candid general public. Exposition is the way of making a didactic use of quite an extensive collection of museum objects for learning new things to them. People make use of them as part of their visual stimulation. The principal tool of an educational institution are abstract words whereas visual, tangible and concrete objects are the principal tools of a museum for serving the cause of education among people more effectively and make people museum minded. Museum offers an opportunity to satisfy their curiosity for knowing the factual informations about anything for which detailed recording of objects is essential. Mere collection of objects in isolation fails to satisfy all craving curiosities. So the need to collect formidable potential information is necessary. These days it is a known fact that economic as well as political factors too are not divorced from the cultural context of any society. It is thus a holistic approach. Peasantry consists of the main bulk of the population of India as well as West Bengal. They live in the rural areas in mostly without proper living conditions. Education apart from other problems of such a huge mass of people that include factors like health, sanitation, dowry etc. is a baffling task. Museums may make a pioneering attitude to preserve diverse topics and to mingle these together and present it before the public in a more comprehensive manner. Museums are the mirrors of the heritage of humanity and cultural plurality of the Indian societies. West Bengal is a cultural melting pot of diversity of multicultural communities of diverse people, fosters intercultural exchange in order to develop the spirit of building bridges among people.

For portraying the heritages of this state as well as country the museums have great responsibilities. They need to fulfill the objective of social accountability especially in the areas of education and raising public awareness of its true value and significance in preserving cultural tradition for the future generations to come. Cultural plurality has made the task more daunting. Yet, museums in India as well as
West Bengal are ideal launching pads for creating an ambience with their potential tools whatever at their disposal for education. Museums are the best agencies to perform this role.

The museums need to adopt contemporary problems according to the changing needs of the society. The pedagogic role of museums to society is universally recognized and opens up several key issues recognized and opens up several key issues of inter and cross studies and multi-disciplinary researches and museums are urging on these. This would be a key vehicle in catering broad-based education for all, irrespective of rural and urban, rich and poor, educated or unlettered. Museums are basically aiming at about this vital role of education and they have greater role to complement, to revitalize, whenever and wherever necessary and in filling up the lacunae in the storyline. These museums show films on diseases and how to prevent them by necessary precautions. Such education helps to eradicate the ignorance of the masses about health hazards. Such museums could become vibrant organs for reshape of knowledge of the society. The museums will not be confined only for collecting, preserving and exhibiting all mysterious objects but making living organisms of the society, and try to solve the problems. Museums are to be people-minded and people’s institutions. Museums have to be very effective in contributing to people’s education and are best for breaking the barriers to impart education with their original contents. They can open a new vista before us. Education is the primary goal of all formal institutions, but in case of museums the medium of education is different. Here the medium of education are the objects which stimulate the visitors to education. Museum objects inculcate educational faculty among the visitors’ minds. The museums are called as the temple of the muses.

Usefulness of herbal medicinal plants with their local names, diseases to which these are used, methods of drug preparation, doses, diagnosis. Symptoms, cause of the disease, the side-effects may be enumerated and the public encouraged to cultivate these medicinal plants for the benefit of the society. Ayurvedic medicines have no side effects. These are and less expensive age old indigenous traditional knowledge of the villagers. Since the independence the government and a handful of local bodies have been imitating rural welfare schemes, aiming at socio-economic upliftment of the rural people. The science and technological museums o a long way
taking various programmes beneficial to the society and they are pioneer to create a scientific temper among the rural masses. Education plays a useful and significant role in such schemes.

Indian economic structure is mainly based on agriculture. West Bengal too is primarily rural. Indians still pursue cultivation in traditional methods. They have very little idea about the improved agricultural methods, which are followed at present in other developed countries. Agriculture being the primary mainstay, so museum exhibitions on agriculture showing details of scientific agricultural produce and equipments, friend and foes of agriculture will prove to be beneficial. Harmful and useful pests and insects of cultivation need to be shown through colourful photographs, charts, drawings, sketches cartographs, models etc. The concept of seeing is believing works best for the rural folk who might be unlettered and uncomprehending. Visual aids appeal to them and may present to them in a very simple form. Such illustrations will accentuate the interest of peasants. Laboratories in museums especially the agricultural ones may analyze the soil, water and suggest their suitability to cultivation. Discussion on the usefulness of soil items, soil conservation may be broadcast through the radios as well as televisions especially majdoor mandali asars and krishi darshan. The present Kissan call centres may be linked to the museums.

Food processing and traditional storing systems of food stuffs from hygienic ways may be shown to sensitize the villagers. Effect of drinking polluted water, living in unhygienic conditions, unclean clothing, better housing, soil erosion, adulterated milk should be highlighted to generate awareness about the evil effects of these to the village masses.

In the context of apathy and indifference, museums can assume a meaningful role. They can combine instruction with entertainment in such a way that cut across the barriers of illiteracy and inspire the rural folk to take the services of the museums for the benefit of the society. Cutting down of trees of the forests and consequently soil erosion, aorestation may be shown to the public through museum exhibitions. Social evils like dowry, apartheid and other burning issues need to be highlighted by museums.
Thus in a museum people perceive, receive and respond to information and can reconsider wisdom through museum various expositions that widen their perceptions and enrich their knowledge.

Since the society in India including West Bengal is heterogeneous in composition and has many demands which no single museum can fulfill so it is necessary for the museums of a particular area to address such issues as they are best equipped to do so knowing the local population better.