

MUSEUM AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURIST DESTINATION –A STUDY IN THE ASSAM STATE MUSEUM

Dr. Madhuri Saikia

Associate Professor, Department of History, Dakshin Kamrup College, Mirza, Assam.

Abstract:

The study focusses on the relation between museum and tourism and how a museum can be considered as a cultural heritage and tourist destination. Museums around the world are a rich source of artefacts of several centuries which speaks about the social, economic, religious, architectural, cultural and aesthetic tastes of different civilisations. Being a source of heritage and unfolding the cultural developments of a region, a museum is a source of attraction for the tourists. A visit to the museum falls within the itinerary of the tourists which is a wonderful way to learn about the origin of the society and culture of the place that is visited. The basic idea of a museum is to preserve the artefacts of yore which is showcased to the tourists. Taking the example of the Assam State Museum, the study focusses on how museums can develop into cultural heritage sites by the application of history, heritage and tourism. Tourism is an excellent way by which the past can be preserved, protected and even popularised. The museums located at various archaeological sites as well as the Assam State Museum is visited by thousands of tourists all the year round as it is representative of the socio cultural aspect of Assam. The study concludes with the understanding that museums are cultural heritage destinations which is visited by thousands of tourists as the artefacts and cultural objects preserved in the museum speaks about remote cultural and civilisational developments of Assam and the North East of India.

Key Words: Cultural Heritage; Tourism; Museum as destination; Urbanisation, Preservation

Introduction:

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2010 has defined museum as a non profit making permanent institution in the service of the society and of its development and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, learning about the material evidence of people and their environment, etc. The historical, cultural and social role of museums is spread between the concepts of conservation of tangible and intangible values, identities, cultural practices, and creates memories and therefore can be said to have a relationship with cultural heritage.

Anything that is inherited is heritage. According to the UNESCO any monument that is hundred years old should be considered as heritage. Heritage is a broad concept and it includes natural as well as cultural environment. The term includes landscapes, historic places, and sites and built environment, biodiversity, cultural practices, lived experiences etc. Cultural Heritage according to the General Conference of the 17th session of the UNESCO includes monuments, architectural works, sculptures, paintings, inscriptions, cave dwellings, groups of buildings,

archaeological sites, etc which are of outstanding value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological, or anthropological point of view.

Natural heritage according to the Convention includes natural features such as physical, biological, geological formations, and habitat of threatened species of animals, plants and natural sites or areas which are of outstanding universal value. Within sites of environmental or scenic beauty includes water bodies, tanks, open areas, gardens, wooded areas, sacred groves etc. Both cultural and natural heritage are important components of the community and it has also been recognised and accepted by the UNESCO to take financial and legal measures and identify heritage resources for proper conservation. A monument belongs to the past, present and future and it does not belong to any one community or region. A monument belongs to humankind and it is shared property. This is particularly in the case of World Heritage Sites which requires collective efforts of the international community for preserving them till posterity particularly at the time of increased globalisation and urbanisation.

Understanding Heritage

Heritage is defined as the elements of the past which is valued. Heritage speaks about our origin, our culture, our identity, the material and industrial life of the people in the past etc. heritage is given priority because it cannot be recreated any more. Hence it is showcased to the tourists to make the community understand about the value of the objects of art and architecture to the society which can help the objects in maintaining a continued existence. Cultural heritage is a priceless treasure handed down from generations. Heritage is a strong part of our identity and to build up our identity archaeology is used. Archaeology can tell us about long period of time and the social and cultural changes brought thereby. Heritage today has come to be associated with tourism. People are drawn towards natural heritage like scenery, flora and fauna, besides festivals, arts and crafts, traditional practices and products, historical monuments and sites, towards signs and symbols, artistic and literary expressions etc.

Tourism- a new beginning

Tourism is an ancient phenomenon when people used to travel long distances in search of knowledge, for purposes of business, for religious purposes, for enjoying games and sports, for exploring etc. Travel during the ancient times was not associated with leisure. Travel and tourism have taken a new turn in the second quarter of the 20th century particularly after the IInd World War when new aircrafts were introduced and people desired a renewed interest in travelling. New patterns of ships were built. Cruise travel which are of 5 star categories appeared in the horizon of tourism which led to the increased advancement of tourism. Income of people increased and various categories of travellers started travelling across the globe. Travel from now onwards became more convenient with the increase in the number of aircrafts, fast moving trains and improvised buses for long distances. Electronic system for booking tickets and online booking for accommodation has become the new norm. Package tourism offered to the tourists, which includes booking of tickets to various destinations, inclusive of the itinerary which plans for the accommodations, food, visiting different places of historical

and archaeological importance, arranging for the fun and recreation, has enabled the tourists to combine leisure, pleasure, education, participating in the community activities which in the true sense is all about tourism.

Relationship between Heritage and Tourism

There is a strong connection between heritage and tourism. The heritage resources have led to a thriving tourism industry. Tourism on the other hand is a leisure activity ranging from its association with adventure, eco-tourism, adventure, wildlife, sports, religion, culture, archaeology etc. Development surrounding the heritage resources is primarily through the internet which develops electronic brochures to advertise the potential to visit these places. Besides the community, entrepreneurs, Tourism Offices also advertise these places through brochures and hoardings, electronic media, making documentaries, videos etc. Tourism is a great revenue earner for each state and country at large.

The heritage assets may be lost in the sands of time but the ruins remain and the tourists visit them to identify themselves with the heritage which can tell us about long periods of time and the social and cultural changes brought by them. Heritage has the ability to include and value the past, the people and the environment. These attract the tourists and bring them to the various destinations where our past is located around us. Apart from the historical past other attractions which invite the tourists are the climate, scenic beauty, wildlife, vegetation, villages, cities, etc which are popular with the tourists. Tourism is a powerful economic activity which generates revenue, creates jobs, introduces new business opportunities and strengthens local economy.

As heritage is considered as a resource its importance increases when the object or monument is considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. This is followed by protection, conservation, and preservation of the heritage. Heritage assets are of two kinds- tangible and intangible. Tangible heritage are man made monuments which are of outstanding universal value. They are what the built environment is composed of. These monuments speak about our past and our identity and therefore they are our heritage. People place value on both forms of heritage and therefore visit destinations to enjoy the archaeological sites and architectural edifices and also to take part in the fairs and festivals. Culture has always been the reason for travel. The Grand Tour from the 16th century onwards has seen the movement of people for the sake of travel, knowledge, recreation, rejuvenation of health etc. Cultural attractions are unique to each destination and they are one of the most appealing factors of the tourist destination. Herein comes historic preservation of the heritage sites so that the fascinating monuments which tell the story of every dynasty, culture, fairs and festivals continue to exist till posterity and showcase the heritage assets to the tourists.

Tourism is an important vehicle for managing cultural and natural heritage. In the case of heritage tourism cultural or cultural heritage festivals have become a major focus (Duffy, N, 2009). Culture and heritage tourists usually visit cultural heritage attractions, archaeological sites, art galleries, museums, concerts etc. Heritage tourism has been growing in the recent years with the increase in the attraction towards ancient history, forts, palaces, and monuments. During 2021 the Ministry of Tourism of the Government of India had organised various

programmes under the banner 'Dekho Apna Desh' to create awareness about India's rich heritage and culture. States like Gujarat introduced Heritage Tourism Policy 2020-2025 under which financial assistance would be provided for converting heritage buildings built before 1950 into hotels, banquet halls and restaurants. Besides the Government of some other states are building heritage circuits.

The various forms of heritage which attracts tourists to a destination are (i) tradition and festivals, (ii) art, music, carnivals, concerts, paintings, and sculptures, (iii) architecture, (iv) handicrafts, (v) temples and religious places, (vi) natural heritage, (vii) food, (viii) indigenous technology etc. Though with the increase in the number of tourists the beauty of the place is destroyed, tourism is also known for saving many of the world cultural treasures. It preserves local traditions and historic landmarks, and keeps alive local craft industries by their constant demand of the indigenous products. As tourists are attracted to the heritage centres the state protects them.

How is museum a cultural heritage site and a tourist destination?

History, heritage and tourism are of utmost necessity for developing a destination. Every nation promotes its history and heritage for attracting tourists to the destinations whether international, domestic or local. The effort of UNESCO in developing certain places as World Heritage Sites has done wonders in popularising different destinations around the world and in uplifting various sites. As a result people develop an interest in seeing and understanding the various heritage sites and promoting these places as well for the sake of boosting tourism.

Tourism is an excellent way by which the past can be preserved, protected, and even popularised. It is the largest revenue earner for most countries of the world. And in many countries the "heritage industry" as it is called today is a highly significant part of the tourism prospect. Preserving and showcasing the past is an industry which produces and markets the various tourism products. Heritage has become a big business and part of the entertainment sector. Tourism is useful to heritage just as heritage is useful to tourism. History, heritage and tourism are of utmost necessity for developing a destination. Every nation promotes its history and heritage for attracting tourists to destinations whether international, domestic or local. The effort of UNESCO in developing certain places as World Heritage Sites (WHS) has done wonders in popularising different destinations around the world and in uplifting various sites. As a result tourists are increasing to witness these wonders of art and architecture located across the globe. Though urbanisation is fast expanding nevertheless laws are being introduced so that the tangible features of the world are saved from the wrath of rapid urbanisation.

Tourism means moving outside the place of residence to a different place. The host country or state which is visited welcomes the tourists. "Aththi Devo Bhavo" or Treat Guests like God is the primary objective which keeps the vehicle of Tourism alive. Tourism means going away to come back.

Within the umbrella of the term tourism there are many sectors without which the entire wheel of tourism will never move. The hospitality sector is closely associated with tourism. Hospitality is a huge business and with the increase in the number of tourists over the past

decade more and different types of hotels are developing in this sector. Other sectors which are associated with the multi-dimensional aspects of tourism are the environment and climate, recreation, leisure, community, culture, music, cuisine, festivals, transportation, handloom and handicrafts, etc.

So far as museums are concerned those tourists who visit a museum are motivated solely by their interest in historical, artistic and scientific or lifestyle of a community. Museums reach the audience through blogs, portals, twitter, Facebook, You Tube etc. In this way the museums establish contact with those interested in cultural heritage objects and can attract the tourists. Tourists visiting a particular destination visit the museum of that place and get acquainted with the culture and custom of that place. Every place have their own historical and cultural background and the museums provide a great academic benefit for those interested in understanding the art, culture and custom of the place.

The primary role of a museum is to protect the cultural heritage and attract more tourists. Visitors to a museum participate and learn about the culture and heritage of the destination they visit (Perara, K). Museum is a way of how the past is used. The idea of visiting a museum is to create awareness of the past and of the society and civilisation which in the long run can create lifelong learning (Aziz, Q, 2005). Museum visit may be understood analytically as a cultural destination in which people seek to have their own views, sense of self, and social or cultural belonging reinforced (Smith, 2006). Museum is a place where people create an understanding of the past and reconnect with the culture. The different items of cultural products found in the galleries create an identity and a sense of place. People visiting a museum actively engage themselves with the cultural products. Visit to the museum gives a tourist a great opportunity to see, learn, analyse and understand about the past, particularly they can learn about the society and culture of any particular region.

Cultural heritage is defined as entire corpus of material signs- either artistic or symbolic- handed on by the past to each culture and therefore to the whole humankind. As a constituent part of the affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities as a legacy belonging to all humankind, the cultural heritage gives each particular place its recognisable features and is the storehouse of human experience. The presentation and preservation of the cultural heritage are therefore a cornerstone of any cultural policy (1989, UNESCO 25 C/4, 1989: 57). Museum is a cultural heritage site where identity is created and recreated as people and communities reinterpret, remember, forget and reassess the meaning of the past in terms of the social, cultural and political needs of the present (Smith, 2006, pp 44-45). Objects of art belonging to several previous centuries are identified as representative of our past and our heritage. The past cultural heritage is represented and properly documented in the Museum so that people visiting them can view and understand mankind's linkage with the past.

Over the centuries museums have remained as an educational establishment. The connection people establish with a museum is besides being cultural is also educative where people learn and engage themselves with the objects of art and culture that is displayed and thereby museum becomes a destination in itself. Museum is a place where the stone objects of past centuries are

conserved and preserved and showcased under one roof. As education is a primary take from a museum visit, everyone who visits learn something (Falk, 2005, pp 266).

Museums are visited by well-educated College, University, School Teachers and students. It helps public to learn and understand and rethink about the past lineage and feel the strength and beauty of the heritage and culture behind us and how we can take these forward. Museums can help in reinforcing people's sense of identity and pride in being a part of the community. Museums have played a role in curating and preserving cultural heritage. Museums are always products of particular historical and cultural contexts and are thus unique cultural expressions (Kreps, C, 2003). They incorporate the fields of architecture, anthropology, art, history for identifying preserving, and representing art and heritage materials of a particular region and therefore museums are cultural heritage sites. Increase in the number of visitors can lead to the understanding of how cultural heritage can be sustained. Museums play an essential role in comprehending the sustainability of cultural heritage, preserving the heritage and presenting it to the next generation (Barrio, D, et al, 2009). As the objective of a museum is to protect the community's culture through educational activities, giving value to heritage which would gradually lead to sustainable development, the museums all over the world make a concerted effort to protect cultural heritage. Wherever an object of art is discovered it is brought to the museum for preservation. The world has now become more concerned about the heritage materials of the past and also the works of art.

How is Assam State Museum a cultural heritage site and a tourist destination?

In the state of Assam besides the Assam State Museum, there are places where ruins of temple architecture have been found. Museums have been constructed in the spots and the ruins of statues, doors jams, panels, temple plinths etc are stored and opened for public view. Examples of such museums from across the state of Assam are the Museums of Merghar, in Chaygaon in South Kamrup, Sri Surya Pahar in the district of Goalpara in West Assam, Madan kamdev in Kamrup district, in Deo Pahar in the district of Golaghat in Upper Assam, Bagheswari near Mirza, the rock cut sculptures at Janardan Devalaya at Sukreswar Temple Complex at Panbazar in Guwahati, the ruins of the great Ahom rulers in the district of Sivasagar, the museum at Mayong in Morigaon district, at Nazirakhat in Sonapur in Kamrup district are all under the surveillance of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). These museums which are in the temple complexes, in the open air of the campus of the temples, are visited by thousands of people, researchers, students etc all the year round. The ruins speak about the social, economic, cultural, religious condition besides the artistic and architectural expertise of the people of Assam since the ancient times. Though today mostly monuments, ruins, and artefacts of early mediaeval, mediaeval and colonial architectural remains, exist.

Tourists visit these sites and establish connection with the history and heritage of these resources. The Assam State Museum is located at Dighalipukhuri in the heart of the city of Guwahati. There are several galleries related to the cultural, social, ethnographic, war, freedom fighters gallery, costume gallery, the gallery consisting of stone statues of the deities and apsaras, broken pillars of temples, metal and brass equipment, coin galleries, etc. Besides the

most wonderful attraction of the Assam State Museum is the beautifully designed Assamese village and lifestyle, besides the huge copper and bell metal vessels used for distribution of Prasad in the Vaishnava Satras (monasteries) of Assam. An attraction of the museum is also the Mukha or mask representative of the socio cultural aspect of Samaguri Satra of Majuli which is the largest river island in the world and located in Upper Assam. (Mukhas or masks are used during performance of Bhaonas or musical dance dramas of Assam). All these art objects are located under one roof. Apart from the galleries there is also a rich library where books are stored a sale counter is also located within the premises. Near the Museum is also located the Assam State Directorate of Archaeology. An excavation site wherein have been unearthed the ancient city of Pragjyotishpura (Guwahati) is visited by many tourists and people from the academic circle. A museum in the excavation sites stores and preserves the valuable stone images of the Hindu deities besides other art objects which have been extracted during the excavation. A library in the excavation site speaks volumes about the excavation site.

A museum is a cultural site and a tourist destination. When a tourist from outside come to visit a particular place, a visit to the museum is in the itinerary. A museum represents the social, cultural, economic, religious, aesthetic facets of a society, civilisation and a region. A tourist can learn a lot from the visit to the museum to have a holistic understanding of the heritage of a state. Museums are representative of collective and community memory. It creates identity and awareness about our past ancestors and makes people “feel”. The Security Guards inside the galleries, the surveillance cameras, the museum officials, are all part of the exercise aimed at preserving the cultural heritage.

In some countries like France, Canada, Greece, Sweden etc, the visitors actively participate in learning about the history, science and artefacts through seminars, exhibitions, guided tours within the galleries and also films and documentaries that are screened inside the museum. All these keep a museum alive and help in sustaining the cultural heritage of a museum. For the continued existence of the Assam State Museum can adopt policies from the perspective of the audiences as a pivotal part of the museum’s progress (Ozer, F and Nazil, M, 2018).

Heritage and urbanisation

Urbanisation is a major change taking place globally. The 21st century has seen the destruction of the archaeological resources exponentially. At the heart of urbanisation are cities. A major challenge worth mentioning is mismanagement and lack of proper management schemes which cause damage to archaeological sites. When the world has entered a period of rising economic globalisation, there has been an increasing effort to integrate past heritage with present developments. This new trend has led to the rise of heritage conservation as a necessary tool to preserve both heritage sites for economic growth and for strengthening national cultural identity.

The city of Guwahati is facing the similar global threats with the growth in urbanisation. The more the city is growing vertically and horizontally, the more the threat from urbanisation looms large. Therefore the establishment of museums in the site of the ruins can help preserve

the roots of our past which represents the culture of Assam and the North East of India before it is lost.

Conclusion

Tourism is useful to heritage just as heritage is useful for tourism. It is the largest revenue earner for most countries of the world. By encouraging heritage tourism the public can be made to understand that heritage has the ability to value the past, the people and the environment. Tourists contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage through visitors entry fees, of what have been inherited, historic buildings, art works, natural beauty etc (Dangi, V, 2017). Most of the heritage sites are protected by the Government. By respecting the heritage resources the tourists would be able to accept that cultural heritage is fragile and that it is disappearing all the time. Cultural heritage belongs to the whole humanity. Together conservation professionals, media, archaeologists, environmentalists and the public can preserve the cultural heritage for the future. People participate in preserving the assets of a destination through their very involvement in the tourism industry. Heritage resources play a significant role in the upliftment of the destinations through the tourism activities.

Our heritage is our asset. It's time we realise the importance of the heritage around us which is a strong expression of our identity. The idea of heritage is a universal one and it will flourish only if people act as its steward. In 2006, "Your Place or Mine" was organised jointly by the English Heritage and the National Trust of England. The issue that was discussed was "how do we reach out to wider audiences and tell the stories of the diverse communities who make up our society". This is the essence of heritage; it is the ability to include and value the past; the people and the environment. Conservation of the heritage sector is to preserve the stories of everyone and everything (Saikia, M, 2010).

In countries like Great Britain museums play a crucial role in the success of United Kingdom's tourism by attracting millions of international and domestic tourists. They captivate the imagination of the tourists with various objects that tell the stories of the world and thus the museums become a sense of place (culturehive.co.uk).

A museum as a centre of cultural and heritage attractions are key to attracting tourists and offer them lifetime experience with the ability to tell them the story of everyone through the presentations of the artefacts in the galleries and other educative and cultural activities like exhibitions holding, screening of movies, teaching about preservations, understanding about the remote history of mankind etc. As the visitor experience will be enriched they will enjoy paying value for their visits and the number of tourists to the museum will increase (Herreman, Y). In the present millennium tourism is booming. It is known that tourism would not grow without culture which is the principal motivator for travel. Tourism is a cultural activity which can be directly connected to museums, the heritage sites etc. Museums are important icons and tourist attractions and are tourists' guides to the history and geography of the cities or nations they represent. They are symbols of civilisation and storehouse of humanity's heritage. Heritage is not only about personal, local, ethnic and national but the heritage of other people and nations of the world.

Built heritage or archaeological heritage is one of the most important tangible cultural assets which speak about our cultural development. The artefacts found inside the galleries of the Assam State Museum reveals about our civilisational background and our shared history. The artefacts are the link of our past and who we are today. The archaeological wealth in the form of sculptures, structural remains, stone and copper plate inscriptions, signify the rich cultural heritage of the entire North East Indian region and exhibits common cultural bonds with neighbouring countries. Museums can be considered as a cultural heritage site and a must visit site for the tourists. 20 students, who were interviewed inside the North East gallery of Assam State Museum on 21st November, 2022 admitted that they were enjoying every bit of their stay inside the museum. They appreciated the aesthetically kept objects and statues within the galleries, besides they were learning from the nomenclature and the dates as to which period of civilisation the sculptures belonged, and established that the museum is an essential part of the cultural heritage site under one roof.

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