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# Museum Security: Study Based on a Tour of Some American Museums

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Vinay Kumar Gupta\*

My present paper is based on my observations in various American museums and heritage sites which I visited while participating in a Cultural Heritage Workshop organized by American Institute of Pakistan Studies in collaboration with Smithsonian Institution and University of Wisconsin from 17<sup>th</sup> July to 16<sup>th</sup> August 2012. The places visited in the US were: Washington DC, Williamsburg (Virginia), Mt. Vernon (Virginia), St. Louis city and Chahokia Archaeological Site (Missouri), Chicago (Illinois), Beloit (Illinois), Madison (Wisconsin) and Milwaukee (Wisconsin). The Museums which I could visit in the US were:

- National Museum of Natural History, DC
- National Air and Space Museum, DC
- National Gallery of Art, DC
- Freer and Sackler Gallery, DC
- Holocaust Museum, DC
- National Postal Museum, DC
- National Building Museum, DC
- Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum, Virginia
- National Museum of American Indian, DC
- National Zoological Park, DC

- Museum Support Centre, Smithsonian Institution
- Mt. Vernon George Washington Memorial Museum
- Williamsburg Memorial Museum, Virginia
- Memorial Museum, Castle Town, DC
- Metropolitan Museum, New York
- Field Museum, Chicago
- Oriental Museum, Chicago
- Beloit Museum, Beloit
- University of Wisconsin Museum, Madison
- Anthropology Departmental Museum, Madison
- Milwaukee Museum, Milwaukee

## MUSEUM SECURITY

For a museum, security is as important as its collections. Museum security is thought of and dealt with even at the initial stage of conception and planning of a museum. The nature of security required varies as per the nature of collections. Unlike India, in the United States the concept of museums is much more prevalent and popular and so is the variety of collections. The security aspect

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\*Assistant Professor, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Central University of Sagar, Madhya Pradesh

of museums is divided between internal and external security and both are interdependent and complimentary to each other in nature. For simple security reasons, a museum is built in an area which is in the center of a town and is near to administrative offices. It provides better facilities for policing as well as augments the number of visitors by providing easy access. In District Columbia (Washington D.C.), there is only one museum under the Smithsonian Institution which is situated in a peripheral area at Anacostia and because of that there are some external security concerns for the visitors and that's one of the reasons for low turnout of visitors in this important Neighbourhood museum. To counter some external factors like rain water and flooding, most of the museums are built on an elevated surface from the surrounding ground level. To enhance their appeal, museums generally have unique architectural style and look (e.g. see Figures 1 & 2).

Overall approach of a museum and its employees plays an important role in the security arrangements of a museum. In the U.S., museums have their specific goals, target audiences and a dedicated and capable staff. The professionalism amongst the museum employees makes it much easier for them to plan their internal and external security issues.

### INTERNAL SECURITY ISSUES IN DISPLAY

Arranging display is a very important aspect of museum functioning. The American museums have a very exhaustive planning for museum display and many times it takes years to plan a gallery. Different galleries have different planning for their display depending on the nature of exhibits. The most important points which are to be kept in mind while planning display are the total safety of the exhibit and the best viewing experience for the onlooker. For a powerful display the fiber glass showcases are made total transparent to the extent possible and that helps in maintaining a particular distance between the exhibit and the visitor. When the lighting is made perfect, the

visitor enjoys viewing an object and does not have a desire to touch upon the showcase. Other aspects are proper maintenance of temperature and relative humidity which are well taken care of. When the display is made a bit dynamic, more security concerns arise and there the museums like National Museum of Natural History present an amazing example. The displayed objects are set in such a way that the onlooker is not able to identify the means of holding it together and on the other hand the museum staff is sure of its safety, i.e., the object is not going to fall under any circumstance (for example see Pls. 3 & 4). Such display arrangements can only be made with the help of professional designers with inputs from senior museum professionals. The National Museum of Air and Space displays a variety of heavy objects and it is simply amazing to observe aircrafts hanging from the roof of the museum (see Figure 5). Similar remarkable display is observed at National Postal Museum, Washington D.C. (see Figure 6). The visitor has the best of viewing experience after looking at these objects and at the same time because of the great pains the museum personnels took at the time of planning of this display, there is no danger of safety to these objects. Very thin strings have been used which do not hinder the view of such objects and it is also with much focus that one is able to observe such strings. Here one has to understand that the roof having iron rods must have been planned in such a way that it is capable of bearing such a weight which is continuously hanging from it. So, a better planning at the initial stage helps in future planning of display without much alterations to the pre-existing building. During the planning of a good display, each and every object needs to be looked at differently. So we see the Statue of Eater Island kept quite differently from other museum exhibits in National Museum of Natural History (see Figure 7).

### CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION

Another important aspect related with internal security is of conservation and preservation of

museum objects. The American museums have big conservation laboratories (see Figure 8). There are different labs for different type of objects, that means there are separate laboratories for metal objects (see Figure 9), for textiles (see Figure 10), for pottery (see Figure 11), for sculptures and terracottas, for paintings (see Figure 12), for once living beings, for papers and manuscripts, for gems and minerals, for ethnic collections etc. Each and every laboratory has a trained professional staff which is often from science background having research abilities and aptitude unlike India where mediocre science graduates or sometimes even people from humanities background pretend to be good conservators. The laboratories have the most advanced equipments and chemicals for use. These also possess the ultra-modern equipments required for the movement of objects, so that there is no chance of physical damage. For research purpose, these labs have XRD machines, mass spectrometers, the most advanced cameras to name a few.

### DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Arrangements for a sudden disaster mark an important feature of planning of American museums. All the museums have certain disaster management plans in force, especially keeping in mind the outbreaks of flooding, heavy snowfall, fire and storm. In spite of frequent natural calamities, one cannot observe any fissure or crack in museum buildings. At roof tops, the museums have few specific arrangements to prevent the water seepage and moisture problems occurring because of heavy snowfalls. Almost all the museums have basements but in none of the museums, moisture problem was observed. Museum Support Center has specific arrangements for preventing a disaster (please see Figure 13).

### STORAGE

A very important role in museum security is played by storage. A small part of the total museum collection can be displayed in permanent exhibitions, so the majority of collection is kept in

storage. The museum storage in the U.S. is utterly different from Indian museums. The storage is well planned with different types of storage facilities for different collections (please see Figures 14-15). No object can ever be found lying on the floor. Every object is kept in special shelves (please see Pls. 16-18) and different boxes are prepared for each and every object if required (please see Pl. 19). There must be a big company in the U.S. which prepares different storage racks for different objects. All the sections in the museums including the storage are fully air-conditioned with all the maintenance of relative humidity and temperature (please see Figure 20).

The storage does not have traditional locks like in India rather there are computerized locks with a censor hidden inside the individual cards. Each and every entry is recorded in the computer. The museums do not need much manpower to keep vigil of the storage. The computerized security system also helps in better use of museum collection in godowns by researchers since two-three officials with attendants are not required to enter inside the storage as such a security arrangement prevents a lot of research in Indian museums. The government policy in India many times prevents scholars to work inside the museum storage by arguing for the lack of museum staff or for absence of some important museum officials who hold the keys of locks. The museum storage in the U.S. museums has the best of the facilities for research purpose by the scholars as well as museum professionals.

### BEHAVIOUR OF SECURITY STAFF

Behaviour of museum security staff of American museums is remarkably different from the Indian museums. Firstly, the approach of all the museum employees is welcoming and the security staff also is welcoming. The security check up in no way appears displeasing. Inside the galleries one does not feel like being under close watch of some security personnel. There is total freedom. It was only in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York that I felt the security staff behaving in a similar

manner as in Indian museums. Security personnel were present everywhere in the galleries of Metropolitan Museum and were watching every single movement of the visitor. Such security behaviour in some way poses a bit of problem in the overall pleasant experience of a museum visitor. Security needs of a museum should only be fulfilled keeping in mind the experience of a visitor and not in contradiction of that.

### MUSEUM SUPPORT CENTRE

Since most of the big museums have to deal with lack of space, the best way to counter it is to develop various museum facilities at some other space. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. has developed a huge Museum Support Center in a peripheral area of the city. There they are housing the majority of museum collections in the best possible environment. A whole lot of research and conservation and preservation services are being done there without any problem. Even when a displayed object needs specialized treatment, it can be sent to the Museum Support Center and after all the necessary treatment can again be called back for display in regular museum galleries.

The overall approach of the American museums is too different from the Indian museums. The overall approach also includes the aspects

related with museum security. When the most professional and dedicated museum professional are chosen for museum jobs, then one can be sure of the best upkeep of the museum objects. The dedicated and deserving staff also negates the chances of internal thefts. Since the museum buildings are constructed in such a way that these don't require openings, chances of external thefts are also reduced. Such solid constructions can only take place when one can have resources for full air-conditioning inside but in India because of lack of resources many of such things are not possible. But we have a great scope for improvement and the best step in that direction would be the selection of dedicated and deserving museum professionals, creating a sense of belonging among the museum staff for the museum so that their attitude is always welcoming towards the visitors instead of being lethargic. Better planning of museum galleries and storage would further strengthen the security of objects. To be true, lack of funds cannot always be cited as a cause of poor condition of our museums, we do need to have proper planning and corruption free utilization of all funds. A radical change in our mindset towards our working would bring a lot of good change in our museums which need to be made more and more interactive with society and people.

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Figure 2: Terracotta Horse Figurines in the National Museum

Vinay Kumar Gupta



Figure 1. Smithsonian Administrative Office

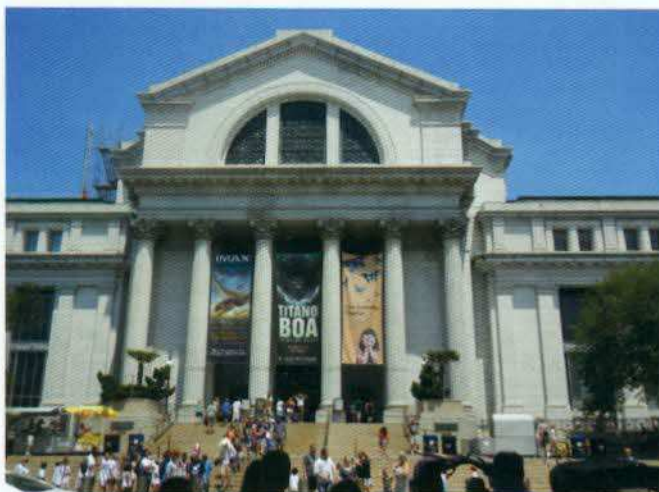


Figure 2. National Museum of Natural History



Figure 3. Display in National Museum of Natural History



Figure 4. Jaw of Blue Whale displayed in National Museum of Natural History



Figure 5. Hanging aircrafts displayed at National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC



Figure 6. Old aircrafts at display in National Postal Museum, Washington DC



Figure 7. Statue of Easter Island in display at National Museum of Natural History



Figure 8. A Conservation Laboratory in Smithsonian Institution



Figure 9. A Conservation Lab in Smithsonian Institution



Figure 10. Pottery Conservation Lab at Museum Support Center



Figure 11. Textile Conservation Lab at Museum Support Center



Figure 12. Lab for painting restoration, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 15. Museum storage at Museum Support Center



Figure 13. Various mechanisms at place at Museum Support Center



Figure 16. Ethnic artefacts stored in Museum Support Center



Figure 14. Museum storage at Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 17. Animals stored in Museum Support Center

Rudra Prasad Behera



Figure 18. Pottery storage at Museum Support Center



Figure 19. Plaster of Paris boxes for keeping objects in museum storage



Figure 20. Basement facilities at National Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C

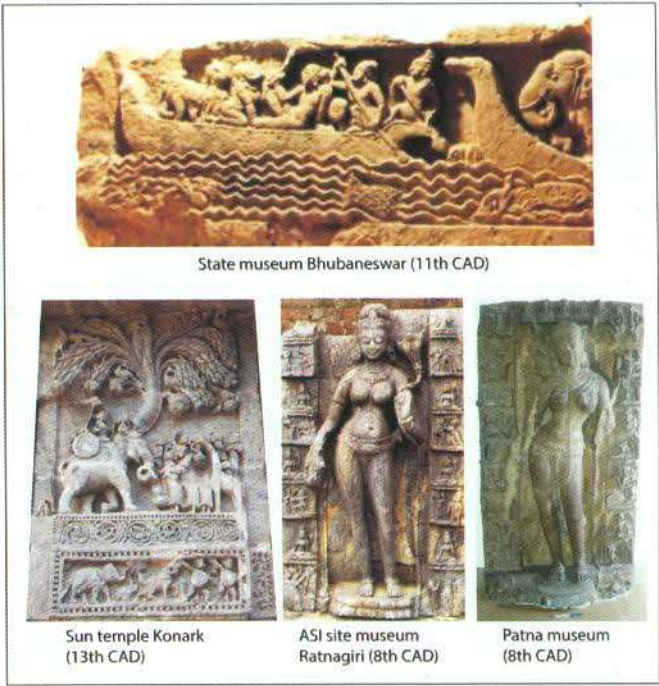


Figure 2: Iconographical depiction of maritime activities of ancient Odisha.



Figure 3: Porcelain and celadon ware from Khalkatapatna.