

Experimenter Curators' Hub 2018, Kolkata

'India and the World: A History in Nine Stories' opened at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Museum in Mumbai on 16 November 2017 with great pageantry. It marked the first time in history that the British Museum had agreed to loan Indian objects from its collection back to India. By popular request, the show travelled to the National Museum in Delhi in May. Of the objects on display (among which was a 17th-century illustration by Rembrandt of the Mughal Emperor Jehangir), one in particular has become a powerful allegory for how the Indian nation state negotiates its own history. 'Dancing Girl' (c2500 BCE) is a small bronze figurine of a girl with her hand on her hip, first excavated in the 1920s by colonial archeologists in the Mohenjodaro region of Sindh, which is now a part of Pakistan. Colonial archaeologists named the figure 'Dancing Girl', while contemporary historians, including Naman Ahuja, curator of 'India and the World', contend that the girl may be a warrior instead, and that a spear is missing from her closed fist. In 2016, Pakistani lawyers filed a case in the Lahore High Court to have her returned to Pakistan and, in the same year, a Vedic scholar from the Benares Hindu University published a paper that claimed that she is a figure of the goddess Parvati, in an effort to prove that the ancient Indus Valley civilisations of Mohenjodaro were Hindu.

The 'saffronising' (saffron being the colour appropriated by the Hindu political agenda) of both state and private institutions has been a notable project under the Indian central government since the 2014 election, and this blithe and awkward rewriting of history does not come as a surprise. Under this leadership, histories are being revised to assert Hindu dominance over the Indian subcontinent. This couldn't be further from the truth. The Indian subcontinent has undergone immense ideological and religious shifts in its history: from being largely Buddhist under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (268-232 BCE) to Islamic under the rule of the Mughal dynasty (first established around 1562). At the 2018 Experimenter Curators' Hub – an annual event that brings together curators from across the world to Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata – the state of the public institution was a topic at the forefront of many presentations. With conversations about

public institutions, and public knowledge, also came the question of censorship. Kavita Singh, dean of the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, presented a photograph from her visit to 'India and the World' at the National Museum in New Delhi. In the photograph, the naked crease between the legs of the replica of the 'Dancing Girl' on display had been covered up with a tiny Blu-tack bikini.

THE FAILURE OF THE PUBLIC INSTITUTION IS MERELY A SYMPTOM OF THE FAILURE OF THE DEMOCRATIC STATE.

Mario D'Souza, curator at the Khoj International Artist's Association, remarked at the end of Singh's presentation that Indian museums have become sites for a kind of 'double vandalism': first the vandalism of the objects themselves (as in the clumsy cover-up of the 'Dancing Girl's vagina), and second, in the manner in which historical narratives are being deliberately shifted and misrepresented. 'Public institutions have absolutely no relevance to those in power,' said Adam Szymczyk during his closing remarks, giving us a sharp reminder that the failure of the public institution is merely a symptom of the failure of the democratic state. 'Those in power are the perfect products of a global neoliberal economy,' he continued, 'and when public discourse brings with it controversy and conflict, it is not in their interest to create spaces for discourse and sustain them.' This is especially poignant for the context of the Indian nation state, where there is little room for public discourse and protest. In 2017, the vice chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University petitioned to have an army tank installed on campus to 'inspire patriotism' and curb future protests. 'Museum's are intentionally kept in a dormant state,' Szymczyk said, 'and many museums across the world are in a state of inertia where there is a total inability for any real action.'

It could be argued that historical narratives, too, are often kept in this 'dormant state', where it is increasingly difficult to contest their underpinnings (particularly in previously colonised countries, where historical narratives are drawn from ambiguity – the ambiguity of oral histories, and the continuous rediscovery of new objects and narratives). Léuli Eshraghi, curator and critic from the Sāmoan villages of Āpia, Leulumoega, Si'umu, Salelologa and other ancestries, opened their presentation by

asserting that the contemporary imagination must remain cognisant of ancestral practices or run the risk of losing them to contemporary misinterpretations. Particularly in freshly divided nation states, where 'western cartographic practices do not reflect our understanding of boundary and land'. For Eshraghi, opposing these 'contemporary misinterpretations' is largely a question of language: 'I write more poetically now,

whether it is about exhibitions, or about structural violence ... I do not want to use the language of the coloniser. The first people's understanding of life systems surpasses that of the coloniser, and we do not need to fit into a construction that was built upon our exclusion.' Eshraghi is less concerned with languages themselves than with their forced academic and institutionalised structure. This was a thought further highlighted by Szymczyk, for whom 'decolonisation' should no longer hinge its arguments on Enlightenment philosophy or criticism. 'Instead of endlessly being involved in a battle with the canon, which continues to employ a destructive force upon what it itself has decided is the "art world", we must simply move beyond it,' he said. 'It has repeatedly proven itself inefficient, obsolete and harmful.'

This raises the question: how do we actively, and critically, negotiate histories that are entirely ambiguous? Many museums in the Indian subcontinent take a didactic approach to historical telling, but formalising ambiguity is not a simple task, perhaps even impossible. When we assume museums to be institutions of preservation, we slip into the trap: they are proving instead to be institutions of destruction. What is then interesting is how this revisionist approach to history produces new meaning each time an object is so 'destroyed'. The Blu-tack bikini thus becomes as revealing as what it attempts to hide. Sabih Ahmed, of the Asia Art Archive, began his presentation with the statement that 'a river is an archive as much as my grandmother is an archive', and perhaps this provides us with a clue: that history must be continually re-examined, and done so from the most unexpected places. ■

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