

# Using artefacts to tell stories

How India's ossified art museums can reorganise their galleries



Walking along a corridor in Berlin's Pergamon Museum lined by tiles from the city walls of ancient Babylon, I recently found myself in the company of visitors from all over the world. Street smart people threaded through crowds and reached the Ish-tar Gate, the museum's crown jewel. As one less skilled in this enterprise, I found my movement temporarily obstructed by a humped bull encased in glass. As my gaze came to rest upon its form, I realised that the bull was no ordinary bovine: it was a car-pisoned wooden sculpture of Nandi from south India. I asked myself, 'Is this Nandi's home? Doesn't Nandi largely divide his time between Kailash's slopes and the pillared halls of Shiva's palatial residences in the country? And doesn't Nandi mostly venture out on festival days when he conveys Shiva in grand processions?'

**The place of cultural property**  
In Berlin, Nandi is hardly out of place. Across the Berlin State Museums, there are dozens of temporary displays featuring artefacts set in astonishing configurations. The immediate purpose of these displays is to alert visitors to the Humboldt Forum's opening later this year. This new museum devoted to world cultures will be housed in a reconstructed palace in the city centre. Equally, these displays are nudging visitors to rethink the place of cultural property and inspiring them to reconceptualise their own sense of self and national identity as new immigrants settle into life in Germany, the European Union's boundaries change, and the Asian century gets underway. Berlin's curators are hardly alone in stimulating these negotiations. A high-level commission recently recommended to French President Emmanuel Macron that all artefacts separated without consensus from sub-Saharan Africa and sent to France be returned if countries of origin ask for them. Experts in Paris are now struggling to identify the provenance of thousands of objects, even as a montage of voices in Africa



"At Amritsar's Partition Museum, through the juxtaposition of refugee artefacts, archival materials and oral histories, staff are concurrently preserving the memories of those who lived through the days that followed Independence and nurturing the formation of fresh perspectives on the period." ■ NYT

have begun to assert their claims as rightful owners. New disputes on the role of art museums in shaping memory are unfolding across the continent, where many institutions already bear the scars of earlier struggles. Following the signing of the Franco-German Treaty of Cooperation and Integration in January, central Europeans are inquiring whether Mr. Macron's gesture will reverse France's waning influence in sub-Saharan Africa and trying to gauge directions their own careers will take as the world order shifts. Except for sporadic calls for the Kohinoor's return, in India, national and State art museums are undisturbed by these developments. Geographical distance is hardly a plausible reason for their stasis. Perhaps the real reason is that the curatorial tactics of our government-run museums are more or less ossified, even if physical infrastructure, visitor amenities, and staffing levels have improved since the unflattering reports of vigilant journalists and the Comptroller and Auditor General. Emblematic of the stasis is a presentation of culture as internally consistent, ethnically bound, and contained within a territorial frame. At the Indian Museum in Kolkata, a constricted vision of colonial administrators who classified objects to suit their needs has mostly been retained. In the National Museum in New Delhi, no clear approach is apparent. For instance, on the second floor, objects are somewhat arbitrarily dispersed in galleries bearing the

following names: 'Costumes and Textiles', 'Pre-Columbian and Western Art', 'Copper Plates', 'Tribal Lifestyle', 'Musical Instruments', 'Wood Carving', and 'Arms and Armour'. At Sarnath, the Archaeological Survey of India's flagship museum, staffers have installed baggage scanners and air-conditioners but missed the spirit of exhibition guidelines collaboratively developed in 2013 by some of the agency's far-sighted officers and international experts. At State museums too, the status of objects either as artworks or ethnographic objects, sacred or profane, remains indisputable. Where radical individuals challenged epistemologies and nomenclatures by establishing their own organisations – as Dinkar Kelkar did in Pune – the Maharashtra government, its current custodian, has left certain objects in configurations in which he placed them.

**Reorganising galleries**  
Sheldon Pollock, a scholar of Sanskrit, has observed that culture is "something always in process and not a thing with an essence." His insight has implications for how our art museums might reorganise their galleries. Instead of casting objects as the nation's peerless accomplishments, our museums might begin to tell stories of how objects are about resistance and creativity. Like bullocks and vahanas, objects have wandered in different directions. Well before the dawn of electronic commerce and communication, they have goaded inventions, conveyed

messages, and changed lives. In addition to using objects to tell such narratives, our public art museums can begin to become more vibrant spaces if they acknowledge their location in particular landscapes. For example, before installing new shows, curators might gauge public interest in particular objects through focus-group testing, revise groupings based on feedback received from stakeholders, and develop appropriate interpretative materials. Many of India's museums that are run by non-profit institutions can also serve as models for museum practice and stratagem for government-run establishments. With its self-conscious reconstructions of vernacular homes and imaginative placement of artefacts and poems within them, Dakshinachitra in Chennai is simultaneously inviting visitors to see art as a flow rather than a product. Special exhibitions, dance performances, and lectures at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya are highlighting our subcontinent's historical ties with other regions and how these associations have promoted the exchange of ideas. Temporary exhibition spaces at this institution are offering schoolchildren and seasoned connoisseurs with opportunities to share their creations and collections with the public. These spaces are catalysing new conversations on ways of seeing. At Mehrangarh Fort, curators are exhibiting cradles, chandeliers, paintings, and palanquins to tell fascinating stories of how Jodhpur's residents and rulers turned their desert town into a cosmopolitan city by amalgamating beliefs and revelling in hybrid beauty. At Amritsar's Partition Museum, through the juxtaposition of refugee artefacts, archival materials and oral histories, staff are concurrently preserving the memories of those who lived through the tumultuous days that followed Independence and nurturing the formation of fresh perspectives on the period. When our public art museums begin to re-engage our pasts, bring together diverse cultures, eras, and perspectives to offer new insights on current issues, then we might also be able to find a new home for Nandi in a new India.

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# Is there a problem with the 10% quota?

Data show that economically weaker sections in the general category are already well-represented in higher education



SUNNY JOSE & BHEEMESHWAR REDDY A.

In January, the Rajya Sabha passed the Constitution Amendment Bill guaranteeing 10% quota in education and employment to economically weaker sections in the general category. Families that earn an annual income of less than ₹8 lakh and do not possess agricultural land of five acres or above are eligible for the quota. This includes 95% of Indian households. Isn't it strange that in a country which claims to have lifted millions out of poverty, so many households fall in this category? What is more is that these households require reservation, nothing else, to enable them to be socio-economically better off. The Bill has served an unintended purpose, though: Reservation is no more the preserve of the so-called merit-less. The proposed quota has transformed cynics of the reservation policy into champions of it.

**Examining two aspects**  
We examine here the empirical foundation of two aspects which are central to the policy but are absent from discussions on it. The first is the rationale underlying the policy that economically weaker sections from the general category remain "excluded from attending the higher education institutions" in India "due to their financial incapacity". Is that really the case? The second is the fact that the Bill also brings private educational institutions under its ambit. What is the representation of reserved category students in private educational institutions? We try to answer these two questions by analysing data from the National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF). The Ministry of Human Resource Development introduced a ranking of higher education institutions in India in 2016. A total of 445 institutions were ranked under the NIRF in 2018. The NIRF data provide the composition of 'economically backward class' (EBC) students and 'socially challenged category' (Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes) students. The data reveal that of the 16.09 lakh students enrolled in the 445 top institutions in 2016-17, about 28% (4.55 lakh) belonged to the EBC. The share of EBC students was about 30% in private educational institutions. If we consider institutions as the basis of analysis, the facts are self-explanatory.

About 66% of the 445 NIRF-ranked higher education institutions had more than 10% of students from the EBC. Interestingly, 68% of private educational institutions also had more than 10% of EBC students. EBC students had already secured about three times the proposed quota of 10% without any reservation in top higher education institutions. This is despite the fact that the income criteria used by most of these institutions vary from ₹2 lakh to ₹5.5 lakh annually, which is far less than the proposed eligibility criterion for the reservation quota, which is ₹8 lakh.

**Under-representation of SCs/STs/OBCs**  
The share of 'socially challenged category' (SCs/ STs/ OBCs) students in these 445 institutions was 38%, only 10 percentage points more than the share of EBC students. Surprisingly, the share of SC/ST/OBC students stood at only 44% in public institutions, which are mandated to implement 49.5% reservation. In private educational institutions ranked by the NIRF, their share was as low as 30%, which was similar to the share of EBC students. Here too, only 19% of private higher educational institutions ranked by the NIRF had more than 49.5% of SC/ST/OBC students. Thus, SC/ST/OBC students remained greatly under-represented, especially in premier private educational institutions. This is despite the fact that the SC/ST/OBC population constitutes about 70% of the total population of India (NSSO, 2011-12). Our analysis is confined only to the top 445 higher education institutions. However, if the share of EBC students was as high as 28% in these premier institutes, their share would have likely been larger in other higher education institutions which were not ranked by the NIRF. This could be due to a number of reasons, including lower fees. The EBC students have already secured more than 10% share in these institutions without any reservation. Hence, the proposed policy seems to be empirically unfounded. By contrast, what emerges from the NIRF data is the under-representation of the 'socially challenged category' in premier education institutions. It appears that the government is going to extend reservation for SC/ST/OBC students to private higher education institutions. This would certainly bring the much-needed diversity in premier private higher education institutions in India.

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## SINGLE FILE

## The right to criticise

The Manipur High Court's seditious judgment on Kishorechandra Wangkhem sets an example

MARKANDEY KATJU



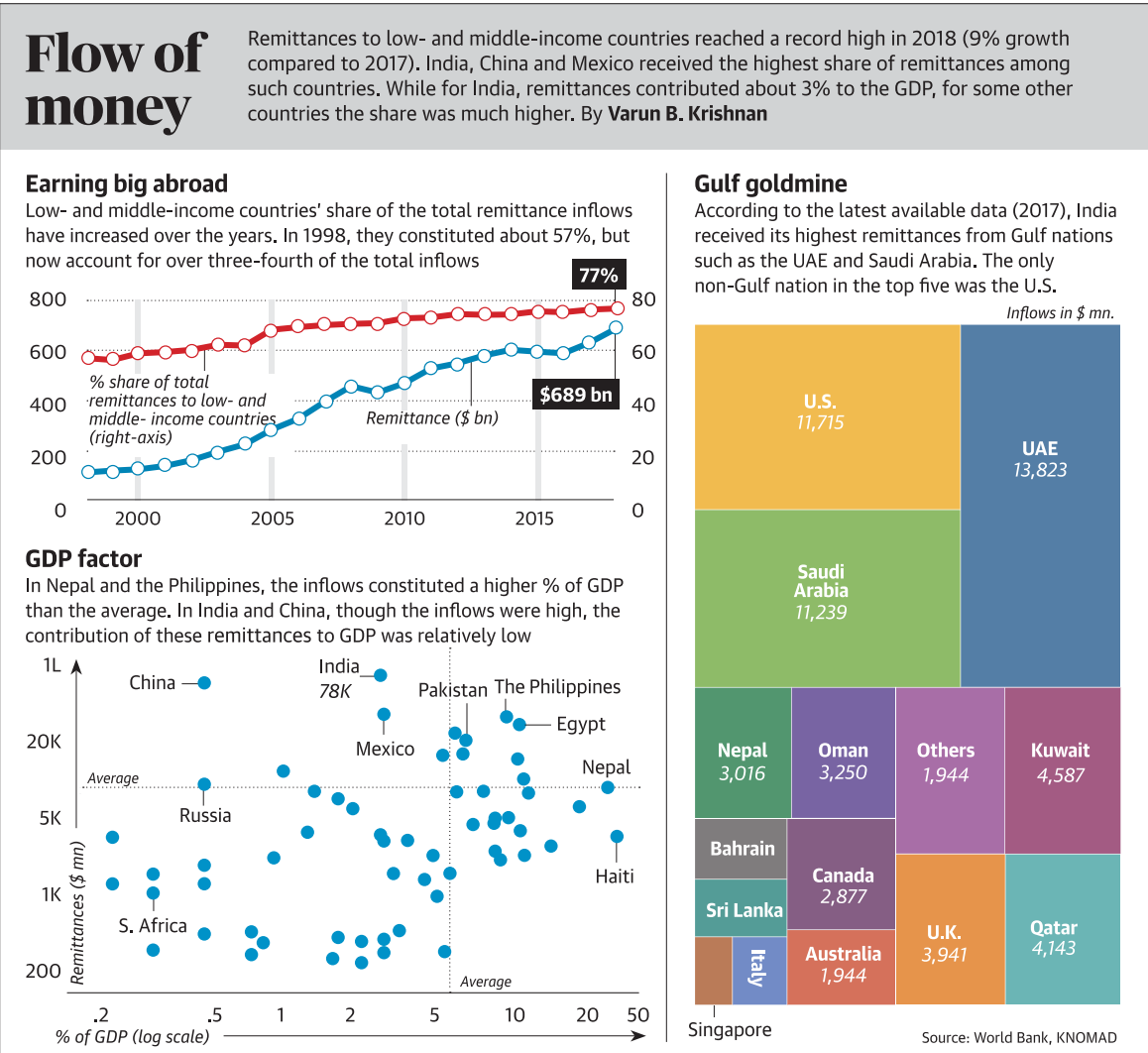
In its judgment dated April 8, the Manipur High Court ordered the release of journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem, who was charged with sedition under the National Security Act for criticising the Chief Minister. Though the petition was allowed only on the technical ground that certain material mentioned in the detention order was not supplied to the petitioner, it could have also succeeded on the ground that in a democracy people have a right to criticise the government. Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Romesh Thapar v. The State of Madras* (1950).

Whereas in a monarchy the king is supreme and the people are his subjects, in a democracy this relationship is reversed: the people are supreme, and state authorities are servants of the people. In *Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar* (1962), the Supreme Court held that mere criticism of the government is not sedition unless it is an incitement to violence or breach of public order. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), laid down the 'imminent lawless action' test, which says that free speech is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution unless it incites imminent (not remote) lawless action. This judgment was followed by the Indian Supreme Court in *Arup Bhuyan v. State of Assam* (2011) and in *Sri Indra Das v. State of Assam* (2011), and hence it is the law of the land in India too. Surely Mr. Kishorechandra's statements would not have provoked an immediate violent uprising against the government and hence they were protected by Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Unfortunately, what has often witnessed in India is that political functionaries get incensed and cannot tolerate criticism. Then they slap sedition charges or preventive detention laws against their critics, as the Maharashtra government did in the case of the cartoonist Aseem Trivedi, or the West Bengal government did in the case of Professor Ambikesh Mahapatra of Jadavpur University, or the Tamil Nadu government in the case of the folk singer Kovan. To speak for the poor or marginalised sections of society has become particularly dangerous, as was seen in the cases of those accused of inciting violence in Bhima Koregaon. By enacting the Fundamental Rights of the people in Part III of the Constitution, and by making the courts the guardians of the rights of the people, a solemn duty has been cast on the judiciary to uphold democratic principles. The Manipur High Court therefore deserves to be commended in this connection (though one wishes its judgment had come earlier and saved the petitioner four months of jail time). It is hoped that other courts in India, too, will follow its example.

The writer is a former judge of the Supreme Court



## DATA POINT



## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 10, 1969

Opposition leaders not for separate Telangana

The Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi to-day [April 9, New Delhi] told the leaders of Opposition parties that there was no question of partitioning Andhra Pradesh to create a separate Telangana State. The Government was against the arrangement now contemplated for the Hill Districts of Assam being extended to any other State. Leaders of all Opposition parties except Swatantra, were not in favour of splitting the State. Mr. N.G. Ranga, (Swat.), spoke in favour of a separate Telengana. Mr. T. Viswanatham (Ind.) suggested the appointment of a high-power committee, preferably of judges, to determine the extent of revenue surplus of Telengana spent in the rest of Andhra Pradesh and the unemployment situation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 10, 1919.

Mr. Gandhi's Arrest.  
(From an Editorial)

The arrest of Mahatma Gandhi on his way to Delhi and the feverish haste with which he has been hurried away by special train to Bombay marks a significant stage in the agitation against what has been universally condemned in this country as a most iniquitous piece of executive legislation. No true Satyagrahi will complain or ought to complain against any sufferings which he has of his own accord brought on himself by his determination to stand by the principles which the country has pronounced to be right as well as lofty and Mr. Gandhi – and, with him, his active followers – will be the last person to complain of the action that has now been taken against him. The issue, then, so far as the Satyagrahis are concerned, is a simple one; their task is solely to do their duty which their conscience – and with it the conscience of the bulk of their countrymen – has marked out for them, irrespective of the sufferings which its discharge might involve.

## POLL CALL Voter turnout

Voter turnout refers to the number or percentage of eligible voters who cast their ballots. A high turnout is indicative of the vitality of democracy, while a low turnout is associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process. Since the 1980s, voter turnout has come down across the world, especially in Europe, though it has been more or less stable in Asia and the U.S. India has seen voter turnouts increasing in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, largely due to the Election Commission's efforts to enhance voter participation in the country. In 2014, the country recorded the highest voter turnout in a general election since Independence (66.38%).

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