



Storytelling and Museums in India: a step towards realising the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education.

Gautam Shruti

Research Scholar *Department of Museology Faculty of Fine Arts*

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Vadodara, India

Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as stated by the United Nations aims to work towards the wellbeing of humanity, environment and climate in a holistic manner. In order to fulfil this agenda, the UN has put forth seventeen Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. The SDG 4 deals with quality education. In India, the implementation of these SDGs is carried out by NITI Aayog. The index present at NITI Aayog website gives a picture of state wise performance of this particular SDG based on several parameters which are also closely connected with the learning outcomes as defined by the National Council of Educational Research & Training (NCERT). The pedagogies associated with these defined learning outcomes also include museum visits. Using the example of miniature paintings based on the *setu nirman* episode of the Ramayana as museum objects, this paper focuses on the possibility of employing the storytelling strategy by museums to supplement the formal school curriculum and inculcate a sense of team spirit, co-operation and how to find solutions in an adverse situation as a part of quality education.

Keywords: *Museums, Quality Education, Ramayana, Storytelling, Sustainable Development Goals*

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nation member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for the wellbeing of humanity and the planet which we inhabit. To fulfil this agenda, seventeen Sustainable Developmental Goals or the SDGs have been laid down by the United Nations. The seventeen SDGs aim to act as a call for action on several pressing issues of socio-economic, cultural and environmental significance which are necessary to address for the optimum achievement of the agenda in 2030. These SDGs are ‘No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-Being, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, Affordable and Clean Energy, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Reduced Inequalities, Sustainable Cities and Communities, Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action, Life Below Water, Life on Land, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and Partnerships for The Goals (United Nations, n.d.)’.

According to the authoritative document by United Nations titled, 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', "This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. (United Nations, n.d.)". The document also states the vision of the SDGs is transformational in nature. The transformation the goals aim for is not only meant for the human life but the entire ecosystem as no being or attribute exists in isolation. The goals take a holistic approach at the interconnectedness of our very existence for a better quality of life and a safer planet. The International Institute for Sustainable Development defines Sustainable Development as "Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)." This implies that the goals directed towards sustainable development concern not only the present generation but also posterity. The transformation they seek is one which has a far-reaching effect and which can be continued and sustained for years to come.

In a rapidly changing global scenario marred with a catastrophic pandemic in the recent times, facing political and economic uncertainties, grappling with the alarming issue of climate change and taking an ambiguous stance on the pervasiveness of artificial intelligence, these SDGs stand as a beacon of light to show path towards a more hopeful future. According to Nhamo et. al (2021), "Society has a pivotal role in changing its circumstances through the implementation of SDGs as these goals are the ultimate guide for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all." Further, The World Health Organization states, "The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to transform our world. They are a call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity. It is critical that no one is left behind. (World Health Organization, n.d.)" As these goals encompass all the possible dimensions of society and nature, it indeed intends to leave no one behind. Therefore, in order to assess the effectiveness of these goals, the United Nations is also monitoring the implementation of these goals and how far these goals have been successful in fulfilling the primary agenda of global sustainable development. This implementation progress is present in the form of annual reports of the same on the website of the United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development for everyone to access.

The annual reports present a comprehensive monitoring and analysis of each of the seventeen goals corresponding to the respective year. A significant goal of not just education but quality education as SDG 4 aims to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, n.d.)" The UNESCO elaborates on this SDG by stating, "Education is the process of facilitating learning or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits. Quality education specifically entails issues such as appropriate skills development, gender parity, provision of relevant school infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and resources, scholarships or teaching force (United Nations

Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).” This definition of quality education takes the notion of education a step further. If knowledge is to be gained and skills, values, beliefs and sound habits are to be inculcated, the concept of quality education lays down a blueprint and sets a standard by which the former can be imparted. Without gender parity, a stable infrastructure and a skilled teaching force, quality in education cannot be achieved for long.

The most updated progress report of SDGs available on the official channel gives an overview of the action made in this regard till May, 2023. The report points out that even before the coronavirus pandemic, the targets related to education were not fully met globally. If no additional measures are taken, only one in six countries will be able to meet SDG 4 by 2030 and millions across the world won't have proper access to quality education (UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council, May 2023). Thus, according to the report, in order to deliver the goal, there is a need to re-imagine education systems and education financing and investment related to educational sector should be made a national priority. As highlighted by the report, the need to re-imagine education systems is the fountainhead of bringing desired change in the education system to make it more effective, accessible and locally as well as universally relevant. In this regard, it is also worthwhile to consider different institutions with whom educational institutions can collaborate to provide quality education. Museums are one such institution which can aid in accelerating the efforts to accomplish SDG 4 through storytelling.

Museums and The Sustainable Development Goals

Museums are centres of lifelong learning. According to Brüninghaus-Knubel (2004), “Museums add special values to the formal school and college system, as part of the informal sector of education. They enlarge the formal education and offer different ways of learning, enjoying and discussing.” Through their collection of objects related to diverse academic disciplines and associated programmes for different age groups, they impart non formal learning which supplements school and university level curriculum. Hooper-Greenhill (1999) states the educational role of a museum is the demonstrable and visible social use of museums where the educational role of a museum not only covers exhibitions but also other aspects of public provision such as events and publications. In the context of the sustainable development goals, the educational role of a museum and programmes associated to it take prominence as this aspect imparts the museum sector an opportunity to be a stakeholder in the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development.

International Council of Museums (ICOM) states that museums are closely linked to some of the targets of the SDGs such as safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, supporting education, research and cultural participation for sustainable development (McGhie, 2020). According to ICOM, SDGs need museums to play a part in fulfilling Agenda 2030 and on the other hand museum sector needs SDGs as these goals can help museum to connect with other sectors, allocate their resources for a good outcome and give an avenue where

museums can demonstrate their relevance and impact. Further it states, “They help us focus our activity to help address poverty and inequality, marginalisation of communities and groups, climate change, use of energy and waste production, conservation of species and habitats, all through a collaborative, far-sighted agenda (McGhie, 2020).” Thus, the museum sector acknowledges the significance of the SDGs and its own role in fulfilling them.

Taking a proactive step in this regard, Curating Tomorrow, a consultancy firm for museums and the heritage sector owned by Henry McGhie, has prepared a guide titled ‘Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: A how to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners.’ The guide enlists seven key points on how museums can play an affirmative role in achieving the SDGs. These key points are “protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage both within museums and more generally, support and provide learning opportunities in support of SDGs, enable cultural participation for all, support sustainable tourism, enable research in support of the SDGs, direct internal leadership, management and operation towards the SDGs and direct external leadership, collaboration and partnerships towards the SDGs (McGhie, 2019).” Regarding education, the guide states that educators and staff working directly with the visitors can come up with educational programs directly related to the SDGs and provide opportunities to visitors to encounter intangible heritage, promote cultural participation to all, promote sustainable tourism and educators can conduct research which aims to advance education for sustainable development and activities which can stimulate actions for the SDGs. The guide deals with how museums can contribute in the achievement of SDGs systematically and has a pragmatic approach to the issue.

In India, prominent voices in the cultural sector recognise the implication of the SDGs in the context of museums. Tejashvi Jain, Founder Director of Rereeti Foundation, an organisation working with museums and cultural institutions and active in areas concerning operations and strategic planning, audience development and outreach, education programmes and capacity building, shares her insight on the common factor which SDGs and museums share. According to Jain, both practice the 5ps namely people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership with perspectives relevant to them. Underlying most of the activities carried out by the museums which are also pertinent to the SDGs, education is a prominent theme as museums aim to provide people with meaningful activities and varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing among diverse communities (Jain, 2022). Museums in India hold the potential to contribute to the nation achieving success in realising the SDGs and meeting the Agenda 2030. The educational aspect of museums can play a pivotal role in advancing SDG 4 with its several parameters.

India and SDG 4: Quality Education

NITI Aayog, the premier policy think tank of the Government of India is responsible for ‘...coordinating the SDGs, mapping schemes related to the SDGs and their targets, and identifying lead and supporting ministries

for each target (United Nations India, n.d.).’ The 2022 data available on the website of SDG India: Index and Dashboard gives an overview of the performance as far as SDG 4: Quality Education is concerned in the Indian context (SDG India Index and Dashboard, n.d.). This goal wise performance takes the states and union territories into account and the performance is assessed on the basis of parameters such as percentage of persons with disability 15 years and above who have completed at least secondary education, percentage of students in grade VIII achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in terms of nationally defined learning outcomes to be attained by the pupils at the end of the grade, percentage of schools with access to basic infrastructure (electricity, drinking water), percentage of trained teachers at secondary level (class 9-10), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education (18-23 years), percentage of persons 15 years and above who are literate, Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio (ANER) in elementary education (class 1-8), average annual dropout rate at secondary level (class 9-10), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher secondary (class 11-12), Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education (18-23 years) and Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) at secondary level (class 9-10). Here, from the museum point of view, special attention can be paid to the parameter of percentage of students in grade VIII achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in terms of nationally defined learning outcomes to be attained by the pupils at the end of the grade.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) as an organisation under Ministry of Education, Government of India has defined learning outcomes at primary stage and secondary stage. Museums find a mention in the suggested pedagogical processes and learning outcomes at the primary as well as the secondary stage. The document titled ‘Learning Outcomes at the Elementary Stage’ covers the primary stage and the upper primary stage (class VI to VIII). The document mentions visit to museums as a part of pedagogical process leading to various learning outcomes. These outcomes are related to knowing different facets of nature, ways of living, history and culture (National Council of Educational Research & Training, 2017). A visit to a museum supplements the school curriculum. A child is able to have a better understanding of Harrapan Civilisation after coming across a Harrapan pottery in a museum. Similarly, a visit to a natural history museum makes a child more aware of the richness of flora and fauna present in the country.

The Scope of Storytelling

Museums utilise various methods to convey information related to an object to a visitor. These methods range from a simple label to gallery text and from a physical medium to a digital medium. Storytelling, physically or digitally, is one such method which incorporates both the elements of education and enjoyment which makes it a worthy tool to engage the interest of young visitors in museums. What makes storytelling so effective? According to an experiment conducted by neuroscientist Paul Z. Zak and his team, engaging narratives cause an increase in the level of oxytocin, a hormone associated with empathy, trust, childbirth and relationship building. Zak states that, “If you pay attention to the story and become emotionally engaged with

the characters, then it is as if you have been transported to story's world (Zak, 2015)" Thus, this study of Zak establishes a scientific relationship between storytelling, stories and its effect on human brain. Since time immemorial, humanity has been fascinated by different kind of stories. Stories foster human connection and fiction or nonfiction, they carry a kernel of truth about humanity, universal values and the evolution of myriad facets of society. Neil Gaiman, a bestselling author states that human beings are storytelling creatures and even though, there is an element of fantasy or 'lie' in a story especially fiction, stories express truth (Carnes, 2019). The United Nations also recognises the potential of storytelling as for one of its projects related to the SDGs, it has developed a story about a young Namibian girl named Frieda where Frieda is shown exploring the seventeen SDGs and learning about them. Discussing the significance of storytelling, the apex body says, "Story telling is a powerful communication tool, children's stories help children remember lessons and virtues that they will use in everyday life. The idea behind the production of the story book was to simplify the lesson of the global goals so young children can relate to and better understand the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals, 2017)". Once the importance of storytelling is established, the challenge ahead is how to use this powerful communication tool.

The delivery of a story depends on the skill of the storyteller. When museums become storytellers, the stories need to be relevant to the collection of a museum and should reflect the mission and vision of a museum. According to Salort-Pons (2018), "...museums are evolving into places to gather and share human experiences. They are establishing themselves as community builders that emphasize our rich, diverse cultures as a bonding medium for society." Stories facilitate sharing of human experiences and by this virtue they are crucial for museums as community builders. Stories are also connected with the educational role of a museum. According to Bedford (2001), 'Stories are the most fundamental way we learn. They have a beginning, a middle and an end. They teach without preaching, encouraging both personal reflection and public discussion.' Thus, Bedford calls stories as the real thing in museums. Museums in India are also gradually embracing storytelling strategies.

The Children's Museum, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai has storytelling sessions throughout the year in addition to a storytelling festival. The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi organises workshops for children to develop the skill of storytelling (Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, n.d.). To boost the oral tradition of storytelling, The National Museum in New Delhi hosts Dastangoi performances, a classic Urdu tradition of storytelling. The online introductory text of 'Story of Stories' a storytelling session for children conducted by visual artist and performer Malavika P C in Museum of Art and Photography in Bengaluru reads, "*A Story of Stories*, presents a unique chance to listen, imagine and participate in uncovering a tale about how stories came to be. Thinking of museums as story keepers and how art can store our memories, beliefs and creative ideas, this session includes an image hunt through MAP to explore the representation of stories across cultures. And an immersive storytelling exercise that allows participants to not

only learn the story, but co-create it! (Museum of Art & Photography, n.d.)” Museums are increasingly digging deeper into the power of stories around their collection to enhance and create a more meaningful visitor experience where visitors can relate to the artifacts displayed in museums. Stories enable museums to become a more dynamic and lively space rather than four walls with objects displayed passively.

Employing storytelling strategies in museums aids the implementation of the SDG 4 in India as museums are a critical part of nationally defined pedagogical processes and learning outcomes. The application of storytelling-based approach itself finds a mention in the New Education Policy (NEP) as the Policy advocates employing stories and storytelling for teaching the nuances of language to children and as a pedagogy for continuous professional development of teachers (Ministry of Human Resource Development, n.d.). Artifacts and scientific specimen showcased in museums are best understood when they are appropriately contextualised in their socio-cultural and scientific milieu. These museum objects stand as a testimony to the developments in the field of arts, culture, society, economy, polity, science and technology. To illustrate how storytelling can be an effective mode of supplementing education imparted by the formal school system, a storytelling session in museums where miniature paintings based on the Ramayana are displayed, can be proposed for instance.

Learning from museum objects based on the Ramayana

The Ramayana is one of the most significant epics of Hinduism. The great epic commands supreme respect and unconditional devotion in the Indian society. The timeless saga of victory of Lord Rama over Ravana is celebrated as the victory of good over evil in the Hindu community worldwide. Museums across the world house various illustrated manuscripts of the Ramayana and miniature paintings depicting different episodes from the epic. These manuscripts and miniature paintings were prepared in the script and style specific to the particular region of origin. As museum objects, these paintings and manuscripts are studied by scholars and appreciated by visitors for their appealing visuals and narrative quality. While the entire epic exemplifies idealism, morals and value system, there are certain episodes which may spark an interest in children and can also demonstrate certain ethics and values essential for a virtuous, joyful and contented life. One such episode is that of the construction of *setu* or bridge over the ocean which we now understand as the Indian ocean to reach the island of Lanka.

According to the Ramayana, once Hanumana, the monkey god, found the whereabouts of Sita, wife of Lord Rama in the Ashok Vatika of Lanka, in order to defeat Ravana, the demon king of Lanka who had abducted Sita, Lord Rama along with his brother Lakshmana and the *vanar sena* or the monkey army led by Hanumana, Sugreev, Angad and Jambavan, had to cross the mighty ocean to reach Lanka. Crossing the ocean was a herculean task. The ocean god suggested to Lord Rama that in the monkey army there was a skilled monkey named Nala who could create a bridge on the ocean so that everyone in the army could cross the ocean without

harming the numerous beings living in the ocean. Nala was the son of Vishwakarma, the divine architect of gods and was endowed with the skills just like his father. Lord Rama entrusted Nala with the construction of the bridge.

Sage Valmiki's Ramayana gives a vivid description of the construction of bridge. It describes how the humungous task of constructing the bridge was divided amongst the monkey army. While some uprooted huge trees, boulders, rocks and mountains to be used as materials for making the bridge, some held threads and some took care of equipment to measure. As the narrative goes, on day one, the construction was completed till fourteen yojana or one hundred seventy nine kilometres as one yojana equals 12.8 kilometres approximately, on day two, the construction reached further till twenty yojana or two hundred fifty six kilometres, on day three, they reached the target of twenty one yojana or two hundred and sixty nine kilometres, one day four, the construction reached further till twenty two yojana or two hundred and eighty two kilometres and one day five, finally the construction was completed after the army constructed the bridge further till twenty three yojana or two hundred and ninety four kilometres. Thus, within five days, by the order of Lord Rama and under the technical guidance of Nala, the monkey army constructed a bridge of hundred yojana or one thousand two hundred and eighty kilometres to cross Lanka. This episode of *setu nirman* owing to its visual quality of energy and activity, has inspired artists since generations.

Museums such as National Museum, New Delhi, Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum, N. C. Mehta Gallery, Ahmedabad and Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia to name a few have miniature paintings based on this episode in their collection. Through museums, these paintings can be a good source to teach the young minds about the value of team work, and how any task, no matter how easy or difficult, can be achieved with proper guidance. Value education is a critical aspect of learning in early years. The story of the construction of bridge in the Ramayana teaches about co-operation and how the monkey army made best use of the available resources to complete the task. It teaches about acknowledging the unique skill and talent of an individual in the group. Nala was recognised for his special ability and was entrusted with guiding the rest of the army for the task. It teaches about team spirit and how the entire army divided the task amongst itself and with co-operation, rigour and enthusiasm, the goal was achieved. It teaches not to lose hope when faced with difficulty but find a feasible solution and work accordingly. Museums can convey these perspectives through a well-planned storytelling session physically and on their respective digital medium where these stories can be presented in the form of a blog or a reel.

A storytelling session based on the *setu nirman* episode of Ramayana also resonates with aiming for SDG 4 in order to fulfil the agenda of sustainable development. It was important to construct the bridge over the ocean for the sake of victory of good over evil. In the same manner, to make this planet, a better place to inhabit, the agenda needs to be fulfilled. The goal of quality education is one of the ways by which the agenda can be realised. Storytelling sessions imparted by museums can stand as a metaphor for an individual monkey

working with his full potential within the monkey army so that collectively the construction of bridge could be completed on time. Museums showcase the rich cultural and natural heritage of the nation. Conducting research and developing relevant programmes around museum objects which have a narrative and didactic element supporting the aims and objectives of the SDG 4 are means by which the school education can be supplemented as well as complimented. At the same time, care should also be taken that these programmes are ethically sound, the information presented is correct and should not be offensive to any individual and community in any manner. Therefore, storytelling and story-based programmes, if designed carefully, have the potential to connect with visitors across demographic segments. At a broader level, they also give museums a good opportunity to contribute to the fulfilment of SDG 4 in India.

Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as set by the United Nations is ambitious in nature. A complete fulfilment of it, will make the world a better place to inhabit not only for the present generation but for the successive generations as well. Each of the Sustainable Development Goal aims to bring the agenda in fruition. The SDG of quality education or SDG 4 is a goal which lays down a foundation stone for many other goals. It is only through quality education that young minds can be made aware of issues such as economic inequality, gender disparity, climate change, gradual destruction of natural resources and how important it is to take affirmative action regarding these issues if humanity wants to see a better future. Policy makers in India too have understood the significance of this SDG and the goal is assessed based on certain parameters. Museums as public institutions dedicated to lifelong learning with the help of their objects, can aid institutions providing formal education such as schools in imparting quality education. Through their collections, museums can tell stories which focus on certain virtues and attributes essential in our holistic understanding of quality education. Museum objects such as miniature paintings based on the great epic Ramayana can be a tool to convey important themes connected to quality education. The episode of *setu nirman* or the construction of bridge from the Ramayana can be utilised to make children aware of team spirit and co-operation. Designed creatively and conducted ethically, story-based programmes in a museum space can contribute to SDG 4 and accelerate sustainable development at a broader level.

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