

## HERITAGE MATTERS



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Rosella Namok, "Sunset Rain", 2019, acrylic on linen and dimensions are 174cms x 106cms. Rosella is one of the leading artists of Lockhart River, Australia. Image courtesy of Enoch Perazim, CEO of Lockhart River Indigenous Arts Corporation.



Hakim, the Dorai Gond knowledge man, taken around by his granddaughter. As a young man he guided the late Vishnu Wakankar to the location of Bhimbetka rock art sites. IGRMS worked on the ethnography of the Dorai Gonds. The challenge is to bring archaeological, ethnographic and environmental perspectives together in the interpretation of the Bhimbetka World Heritage site, especially integrating the indigenous knowledge system before it all vanishes.



Veethi Sankul is the indoor facility of the IGRMS on its 200-acre campus. Its unique architecture follows the 17 levels of the slopy terrain with Dholpur sand-stone cladding from all sides. Flooring is made with Kota stones. It is used for the active involvement of different community groups in developing the exhibits.



Warli Painting of tribal people are featured and promoted by the IGRMS. It is one of the first institutions in India to empower tribal groups to create and present their own art and culture beyond the binary of the Self and the Other.



Veethi Sankul indoor spaces created by the primary stakeholder carrier and transmitter communities of living heritage values.

# ART AND ETHNOGRAPHY SELF AND THE OTHER!

International Year of Indigenous Languages is being celebrated across the world. Art and Language have one thing in common. They both communicate. Values. Symbolism. Encoded layers of history and heritage. In India, the debates are yet to focus on the discourses of the binary of art and ethnography/anthropology of Indigenous/Tribal People. They are parallel tracks that never seem to meet. This conundrum is not new in the world. Both in Australia and Canada such a situation was encountered not all that long ago. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia and First Nations in Canada were represented mainly through museums and material culture until about 1980s. Both the countries witnessed a certain decolonising processes - recognising, respecting and honouring creativity and indigeneity in their museums and galleries. India is ripe for such a transformation.

Two major Aboriginal exhibitions were brought to New Delhi from Australia in the past couple of decades. They showcased the incredible transformations of the Australian creative landscapes. Contemporary Indigenous Art at its best. Both were curated by Indigenous People. They came from the National Gallery of Australia. On the host side, the consumption was among elite art circles. It did not include Tribal people. An Indian situation. No connection was made with the creativity of contemporary Tribal India. A missed opportunity for cultural exchange. However, the Australian curators were very conscious and respectful of Tribal Art of India. It was up to the hosts to facilitate the engagement. I still recall almost 30 years ago Judy Watson, a brilliant artist from Australia spent time in Central Western India. She made connections with the similarities between the Tribal art of the Warli

paintings in Western Central India and the Papunya Tula art of Western Central Australia. The former is still managed and represented by non-tribal people and dubbed as folk art. The latter is owned by Aboriginal People and is at the leading edge of Contemporary Art not just in Australia but the world.

This disparity between India and Australia was a challenge for me. As a migrant in mid 1980s, I had the privilege of working under the guidance of the National Aboriginal Educational Committee and funded initially by the then Council of the National Museum of Australia and Commonwealth Department of Education. As the Coordinator/Director of the National Affirmative Action Program based at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education and now the University of Canberra, I ensured that the curricula and pedagogy were informed through Indigenous First Voices of Australia. Visionary Aboriginal educators gave their total and unflinching support. It was within the frame of Australian Commonwealth Government's Report by one of the most well-known Educationalists, Mick Miller: Popularly known as the Miller report, it mainstreamed Indigenous Education. It grounded

Indigenous Voice in a post-colonial context. I relied on both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous expertise to make the program successful. Most of the first Indigenous curators and even National Park Rangers across Australia came out of the program.

Political good will, decolonising moment, an inclusive cultural and educational leadership and an aspirational agenda for Reconciliation across the spectrum of culturally and linguistically diverse Australia helped. India and Australia have different histories. Former with more than 3500 years of inroads from various people and the latter with about 230 years of rapid colonisation and recent transformative and corrective engagement. Population sizes are considerably different. Indigenous is a contentious term in India with the preferred 'Tribal or Adivasi'. But India has one of the first Constitutional agendas in the world for the fundamental rights addressing Tribal people. It



Living heritage from Nagaland is presented as dynamic and living inclusive of its articulation through music - Rock and Jazz

dates back to 1950s. Australia recognised Aboriginal People as citizens only in 1967. Why is India lagging to address Tribal participation in creativity and culture?

Prior to emigrating to Australia in the mid-seventies I was fortunate to be involved at Bhimbetka in the first ever excavations led by Late Professor V.N.Misra, Pune, Deccan College. We were assisted by the Dorai Gonds, a significant tribe of Central India. It was during this time that we learnt about the exciting development of a new National Museum of India for ethnography and museum anthropology, Indira Gandhi Rastriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Bhopal. It has had a series of eminent directors who brought with them a strong research ethic. It is not surprising that IGRMS is the lead publisher of quality material for any national cultural institution in India. Its focus is on understanding and celebrating the cultural diversity and living heritage of India, promoting national integration and bridging the gulf between past and present to create an ongoing dialogue for a deeper and comprehensive understanding of India's civilizational journey.

IGRMS recently convened a national seminar on rethinking ethnographic museums of India. It interrogated ethnographic studies and representation of the cultural diversity of India. Self and the Other, perspectives and perceptions, were discussed in depth. Just how does one understand and represent the enormous cultural and linguistic diversity of

India. Only Papua New Guinea has more linguistic diversity in the world. What is the role of the First Voice in safeguarding the multivocality of heritage interpretation in India? Where is the 8% of Indian population that is Tribal situated in this complexity? What exactly is a national museum in India? There are so many institutions with that national tag! IGRMS is a national network of research and safeguarding activities and partnerships with research departments across India. Smaller establishments are under its imprimatur in Mysore, South India, and elsewhere. More importantly it generates travelling exhibitions and significant inreach and outreach projects. Most importantly it brings in people with diverse ethnicities to make their spaces on the huge landscape of the IGRMS. In fact, it is a campus or landscape museum with so many exciting sites including an extension of the Bhimbetka network of rock art dating back to the Pleistocene or the last ice age. IGRMS attempts to bring scholars from all disciplines, be they historians or cultural ecologists, to scope and present the living heritage of India, especially Tribal People of India. They are NOT presented as 'noble savages in the garden'. Most museums in India still do that, presented as anthropological objects frozen in time. But IGRMS attempts to disrupt this colonial gaze. It introduces different ideas of aesthetics. It does exactly what a national museum should do, to help people explore their sense of place and self-esteem in the contemporary globalising world with all its complexity.



Aal-Villakku, 1001 wicks lamp from Kerala, is lit for all special occasions, often by the visitors and guests.

NEXT  
WEEK

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