



HERITAGE MATTERS



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Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian, is the Chief Curator of Amaravathi Heritage Town appointed by Government Order to guide its holistic development



1. *Ma Vuuru Ma Kodallu* project members, Amaravathi Heritage Centre & Museum, Amaravathi Heritage Town

2. *Nostalgia Cultural Landscapes Residency*, 15-17 May 2016. Reshma Jelly

3. *Abandoned Telugu Ammayi Residency*, 6-8 March 2018. P Farzona Khanon

THE GAZE Whose Pupil Represents the Other

Perceptions, stereotypes and perspectives are once again the popular topics of interrogation or rethinking in museology, the study of the science of museums. Who owns whose heritage and who interprets whose heritage are ongoing questions. In visual anthropology, contestations abound in challenging the hegemonic discourse of representing the other in a range of art forms from photography to painting. Decolonisation of heritage discourse is yielding to multiple perceptions, perspectives and evidence-based interpretations. Artefacts, art works, cultural spaces or the dozens of statues that are emerging across the Indian landscape provide the means to new understandings as to where we are heading in India in the domains of art, culture, heritage and tourism.

Internationally acclaimed art-

ist Sudarshan Shetty positioned the 2016 Kochi Muziris Biennale through his curatorial vision – Forming in the pupil of an eye-inviting us to ponder over the illusion and reality of vision. One of the few curated events in the subcontinent, it calls for a multiplicity of perceptions, intersections of thought and knowledge making that could inform the contemporary museological endeavours. Art can play a significant role in opening up the magical potential of experiences and education in our stored collections. They are yet to be assessed for their significance and heritage values. Moreover, contemporary collecting is still in its infancy in South Asia.

Artists have led the way in opening up dormant museums in many parts of the world. Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* was a seminal project in 1992. American Association of Museums

(AAM) was meeting in April that year in Baltimore. Maryland District Historical Society, one of the oldest in the USA, initiated a project based on the AAM Policy entitled Excellence and Equity. Fred was asked to curate an exhibition and opportunities for acquisitions were offered. He declined to collect. Instead, he literally mined the Society's museum collections and came up with a brilliant show which has become the benchmark for its curation in many parts of North America and Europe. Fred generously conducted a pre-opening tour of the exhibition for me on a sabbatical at the Smithsonian Institution and Naomi Nelson, at that time from the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Inspired by Fred's curatorial finesse, back in Australia I included artists in the new project, Canberra Museum and Gallery (CMAG), for the local people of

the Australian Capital Territory. As the Chair of the Joint Heritage Committee for Canberra, I delivered the Concept Design for CMAG. In the implementation we took advantage of the then Art and Working Life program of the Australian Capital Territory and designated 2% of the capital works budget for engaging artists in all aspects of the interior architecture of CMAG, from artistically designed entrances, to lights and displays. Art was used to create a signature space and it remains one of the unique projects on the Australian cultural landscape.

Historian Romila Thapar argued in her latest publication that we perceive the past and understand our heritage through the contemporary prism of culture in its plurality. Such diversity and its connectedness are located in the power structures in the contextual topographies of cultural systems. In emphasizing the dynamic nature of culture and its ever changing and evolving characteristic, she aptly says in *Indian Cultures as Heritage – Contemporary Pasts*, “Culture is also an agency of struggle especially where the pattern of living can involve forms of dominance and subordination.”

The nexus of power and authority cuts across many cultural borders, especially in the construction of heritage discourse. One of these is gender. If we take it to mean in the minimalist delineation, it would mean men and women. How is this presented in museums and heritage sites? The visitor gaze is informed by interpretations that are authorized by the dominant groups, often from

outside the hinterland of the heritage resources. Much has been written about colonial gaze and its continuity in present day museums. To what extent we decolonize the museum of the colonial legacies or more importantly all forms of dominance and subordination of the narratives presented in museums, will assist the curation of contemporary pasts.

One of the initiatives in Andhra Pradesh is to provide new ways of thinking for transforming museums to international standards. This can be done at one level through sheer design, technological and digital interventions. But in the long term what is the meaning of museums as authorizing agencies of the arts, culture, heritage and environment of Andhra Pradesh. Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum is scoping and interpreting the contextual basis of all forms of heritage from Amaravathi Mandal. This includes the famous Buddhist sites and sculptures as well as the Amaralingeswara Swamy temple and its one millennium of narratives. Added to this the village goddesses with at least one of the shrines dating back to the Kakatiya times are significant and central to understanding rural heritage. The Muslim Kabristan has been restored to its historical cultural landscape of Zamindari origins some 220 years ago. All of this and the Ghats and more of the complex heritage of Amaravathi Heritage Town stand to benefit from the rapid construction of the greenfield capital in its immediate vicinity.

The most absent voice in museums is that of women in Andhra

in general and Amaravathi in particular. It is the male gaze that is present. Female perspectives are absent. In this context, Ma Vuuru Ma Kodallu is an affirmative curatorial project facilitated through a range of museological experiments using objects and stories from the homes of women that came to Amaravathi from other places after marriage. They are the daughters-in-law of Amaravathi. It is essentially a narrative of their experiences of moving to Amaravathi and adapting to local conditions and bringing up children. Their lives symbolize the dynamic and challenging spirit of the contemporary culture of Amaravathi in all its diversity. In scoping contemporary pasts visual arts residencies are convened with artists, both female and male, as a means to rethinking the frame through which we see women in Andhra history and heritage.

Museums are no longer about dead objects nor are they the exclusive and esoteric prerogative of specialists and technical people. What we have now is mostly keepers of collections and sites. The way forward is to develop the curatorial expertise so that museum personnel are able to communicate heritage values, history and associated narratives to the public.

The public is not homogenous. There is a diversity of people that museums must engage with in the future Andhra, so that museums are relevant, educational and experiential. The role of women in these transformations will help us to develop fuller, inclusive and empowering narratives.

Images: Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum & International Institute for the Inclusive Museum



1. **Myth and Reality** Telugu Ammayi Residency, 6-8 March 2018. Vanama Prasanth Babu

2. **Sampradayam** - Agni Parikshalu Telugu Ammayi Residency, 6-8 March 2018. C H Narendra Kumar

3. **Gorantam Parentam** Amaravathi Kodallu welcoming artist Kodallu from the 13 districts of AP

4. **Inclusion or Exclusion?** Amaravathi to Amaravati Residency, 4-8 March 2017. Lakshmi Rekha Korasala

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will focus on Vietnam and its national approach to benchmarking Sustainable Heritage Development against UNESCO standard setting instruments

