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Ancient India at the British Museum

Conjuring A Mythical, Harmonious Past

By: Alok Rai

The "Ancient India" exhibition now on show at the British Museum in London is merely the flipside, or perhaps even an implicit legitimation, of the trauma narrative … that is the overriding curatorial paradigm in which most Indian museums are trapped.

Some years ago, I happened to meet the Keeper of the South Asian antiquities in the British Museum. He was in India as part of a U.K. project to initiate Indian museum directors into the mysteries of curating. "Curating" is, ultimately, an intellectual act, an intervention, a thesis even – and different from the regular academic kind because here the "argument" is advanced with the help of specifically selected objects. (It is another matter in that, with us, "thesis" has come to mean merely an object – a certain number of pages of nondescript prose, duly bound, intended for academic certification.) He merely confirmed what I, as a lay person, knew from my limited experience. Indian museums were – exceptions apart, like the new Humayun museum in Delhi – effectively just godowns, warehouses of precious, invaluable artefacts. And while the directors were sharply aware of the value of their invaluable objects – as evident in the obvious and intrusive "security" that attends any visit to an Indian museum, they had little notion of what to do with the artefacts, other than to stick them on pedestals with some minimal information as to provenance, etc - "Abhisarika, 11th century, Mathura".

As for any suggestion of any curatorial idea, any organising principle or narrative thread connecting different, isolated objects, the only idea discernible was the trauma narrative, with "Muslim" villains. Thus, the "pre-Muslim" objects bore signs of iconoclastic "Muslim" violence. Things were going swimmingly, the narrative ran, all was in harmony, and then came "the Muslim" invaders. Once there was an Eden, then came the Fall. End of story. Again and again and, painfully, again.

I was reminded of this, ironically, when I saw the much-lauded "Ancient India" exhibition currently on show at the British Museum in London. It has an impressively large curatorial team backing it, it has been funded by the Reliance Foundation which, whatever its other virtues, doesn't lack for lucre. I was surprised to find that I was disappointed in the exhibition, and this essay is an attempt to explain myself, both to my friends who had sung its seductive praises, and to the reviewers who had reviewed it in such glowing terms.

An Under-curated Exhibition

My broad complaint is that the exhibition was under-curated. It was unclear what exactly the curators were trying to do, beyond displaying some unquestionably beautiful artefacts. Thus, the strains of sitar music that greeted one at the dim-lit entrance to the exhibition, wafting over the images of Buddha, Ganesha, and some Jain tirthankara, were incongruously reminiscent of entering some upscale, even pretentious Indian eatery. This uncertainty as to the intended effect was further underlined by the (mercifully short) video of some Hindu from the Midlands, performing a puja, and another of a lady sweeping the floor at the entrance to what was some, to-me-nondescript and distinctly non-ancient, temple. So we are doing religion, then.

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The first room was thematically Hindu – so lots of Ganesha, and Siva and Parvati, coiling snakes and variously animal-headed divinities who are the incarnations of Vishnu. Goddesses a-plenty, Devi and Lakshmi, and perhaps even a Saraswati serenely strumming her veena. A remarkable Ardhanarishwar with an erect phallus. All very impressive, and suggestive of the pullulating diversity of the various strands and traditions of belief that are conveniently and conventionally grouped under the rubric "Hindu". But hardly sufficient, as I will argue, for an exhibition that is so ambitiously framed.

The other two rooms were populated by disproportionately large assemblages of Jain and Buddhist artefacts. This "disproportion" has something to do with the relative cultural/civilisational significance of Jainism and Buddhism, as against the ocean of "Hinduism" which, in its distinctly non-non-violent incarnations, is believed to be responsible for the shrinkage of Jainism into a relatively small, western part of India, and for the practical disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth. Until its modern reappearance under the aegis of Ambedkar – but that is another story upon which, however, the "ancient" Indian exhibition does not touch, even as it allows the entrance of the entirely modern Lakshmi-worshipper from the Midlands. This feeling of "disproportion" also has, at least for this lay visitor, something to do with the relative bareness of the Buddhist, and even more so of the Jain, aesthetic. There is still a snake that unfurls its hood to protect the meditating Buddha from being disturbed, but the Jain enlightened ones stand, quite often, naked. This relationship between the aesthetic and the underlying metaphysic of different belief systems is philosophically fascinating – but this is not a dimension that the exhibition engages with.

The absence of the philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of the interactions of these great belief systems is only one of several complaints. Thus, both Buddhism and Jainism were born of great dissenting movements, against the prevalent Vedic – and no doubt other – belief systems. That said, there is practically no reference here to the Vedas, the ancient intellectual and supporting leg of Indian thought, that ran parallel with the profusion of the yakshi and the nagini, the asuras and the devas, the nature spirits.

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There were deep philosophical and metaphysical struggles between the belief systems, and also, not surprisingly, within them as well. The deep splits in the Buddhist faith – the fracturing into the Hinayana and the Mahayana – have philosophical roots, and aesthetic consequences. Thus, the starving Buddha of the Lahore Museum, one of the high points of the Gandhara tradition, belongs to a completely different aesthetic world from the ornate and colourful Buddhas of Ladakhi Buddhism. It is hardly surprising that there are osmotic hybridizations in the iconography. It appears curatorially lazy to let it all jostle cosily under some umbrella of "pluralism". Once again, it is good that the pagan and tribal roots of what becomes Brahminical Hinduism are represented, but what one misses is the tension, the dialectic between the proliferating diversity of images and practices, and the deep metaphysical yearning for some underlying essence, some monistic Oneness whose prime exemplar is of course the great Sankara, the propounder of the Vedanta. The drama of the relation between Vedanta and Buddhism – which it both absorbed and suppressed – is something with which even lay students of Indian philosophy are familiar. Again, not a trace, not a mere mention.

Tripartite Division of Indian History

Given the distinction of the curatorial team, and the ambitious framing of the exhibition itself, it seems to me that this absence couldn't be a mere accident. One remarks on the ghostly presence of history here – thus, James Mill's deeply influential tripartite division of Indian history is present in the very name of the exhibition: Ancient, as against Muslim, and Modern. The normalisation of the

tripartite division – Ancient, Medieval, Modern – of history in general, and of Indian history in particular, renders it practically unavailable as an object of enquiry. There is something inherently odd about characterising any period as a "middle age", to be contrasted with some fabled "antiquity" and, crucially, contrasted with something that is self-valorised as "modern". The idea arose in the Italian Renaissance, and sought to identify classical Greece and Rome as an age of intellectual and cultural distinction, which was succeeded by a period – "Middle Age" – of clerical dominance and superstition. A value distinction between bad-medieval and good-modern was integral, as was also the self-congratulation of the "moderns", i.e. wonderful us – who introduced the tripartite division. There are obvious problems with this conception because, for one, the intervening period of alleged "darkness" was precisely the period of Islam's great contribution to the making available, in centres such as Baghdad and Toledo, of that otherwise lost classical heritage which underlay the Renaissance itself – to say nothing of the great civilisations of China and India.

However, this same tripartite division was mapped onto India by James Mill, a Company official who never visited India, knew no Indian language, etc. However, his tripartite division – with an "ancient" and "Hindu" age, followed by a "medieval" one of "Mahometan barbarism" was, inevitably followed by the wonderful and "modern" age of "colonial modernity" under Her Majesty's aegis. The colonial preference for this tripartite division is self-explanatory. But it was, perhaps unsurprisingly, adopted avidly by the Hindu nationalists, not least because it simultaneously enabled them to curry favour with the colonial masters, and lay the blame for the evident and widespread degradation of *colonial* India squarely on the mercifully superseded Mughal and generally Muslim "invaders". The fact that this same period of "Muslim" darkness was also a period of great cultural and intellectual achievement was elided.

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This is, historically, nonsense. The splendour of the high-Mughal age was the "argument", so to speak, of the "Great Mughals" exhibition at the V&A Museum in London last year. This was practically unmatched in Indian, or any other history. And in any case, the so-called "Muslim period" of Hindu-nationalist discourse is characterised by a an irreducible heterogeneity of patterns of governance in this vast land: regional variations, confessionally mixed ruling elites, etc. This is, obviously, an ongoing intellectual debate – conducted sometimes more through ad hominem abuse rather than through the marshalling of evidence and argument. But our "Ancient India" exhibition pays little heed to this – or any other – argument or debate.

However, *within* the "Ancient" period, here, there is no history: the appearance of the temple as against the bare Vedic yagya-altars, the gradual hybridization of "Aryan" and "non-Aryan" elements is all, well, "pluralism". There appears to be – to put it charitably – a deep, and well-meaning, ecumenical impulse at work, that becomes, perhaps unwittingly, a "sanitising" principle. Thus, and others have remarked this, there isn't the merest mention of caste, and of the hierarchical principle without which "Hinduism" is inconceivable. There are, as we know, rich traditions of Dalit and "tribal" - i.e. aboriginal – art. And while it is true that the materials of this subaltern art could not survive the ravages of time and so find a place in an exhibition of "ancient Indian" artefacts – no marble or limestone there - some acknowledgment of these traditions would have been welcome. And what, pray, other than some discreetly prudish impulse can explain the fact that while the lingam that is the central icon of the Saivite tradition is rightly present, there is a conspicuous absence of the yoni, whereas it is the two, *in union*, that are the central symbol of the worship of fertility that underlies the joy in the promiscuous profusion of nature. It is also, as was explained to me by a friend who has made a deep study of temple architecture, the symbol that informs the very design of the temple itself. Because, contrary to popular misconception, the richly decorated exterior, the shikhara, is not the temple – for that, one must enter the channel, to the garbhgriha. So, lingams there are, but divested of their deep, indeed fundamental, significance.

Summing up

In conclusion, then, I am entirely in sympathy with the well-meaning impulse to represent the plural diversity of India's religious traditions – particularly in the face of homogenising drive of the current ruling dispensation. However, dissent, difference, difficulty – all this too is an essential part of the civilisational mix, and it is only through the reciprocal struggle of contending elements that the celebrated diversity emerges, and proliferates. The consequence of filtering these elements out has produced something that is, I believe, but a CAA version of "ancient India". I am referring, of course, to the infamous Citizenship Amendment Act – the one in which *who* is truly Indian and so, may be granted preferential citizenship, is defined in terms of a conception of *what* is *truly* Indian. And this, in turn, is defined in relation to a mythical harmonious past, a Time Before, an Eden. Seen in this way, I fear, the "Ancient India" exhibition is merely the flipside, or perhaps even an implicit legitimation, of the trauma narrative, the Fall – good Us, bad Them - that is the overriding curatorial paradigm in which most Indian museums are trapped.

Alok Rai lives in Allahabad, and is resisting moving to Prayagraj.