
Hindu Mythological Stories and Meaning Making of Museum Sculptures

Gautam Shruti¹ and Ambika Bipin Patel¹

¹. Department of Museology, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat – 390 002, India (Email: shrutig-museologyphd@msubaroda.ac.in; ambika.patel-museology@msubaroda.ac.in)

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Abstract: *Museums play a significant role in the dissemination of knowledge about natural and cultural heritage through the display of their collection and educational programmes. This paper delineates how mythological stories can be a tool to make museum collections, especially Hindu sculptures more relevant and communicable for museum visitors so as to understand the objects effectively and enjoy the museum visit. The present paper attempts to reflect on storytelling in general and estimates the application of storytelling in the context of museum visitor experience. It investigates the potential of stories in creating multiple meanings in a museum setting. It discusses three sculptures based on two themes namely Nandi and Shiva and Veenadhar Shiva or Shiva holding a veena or a lute from the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery to illustrate how mythological stories can consolidate the meaning making process in museums.*

Keywords: Museums, Sculptures, Museum Activities, Storytelling, Hindu Mythology, Nandi, Shiva

Introduction

With changes in the social, cultural, political and economic fibre of the society, the role of a museum is also changing. As the world around us is gradually becoming more democratic, more transparent and more vocal via different platforms, museums too are aiming to become more participatory and forthcoming towards visitors by adopting various means. This has multiple implications and prevents museums from falling prey to a state of redundancy where these institutions are seen as passive entities. Primarily, museums educate through their collections and programmes centred around collections. These participatory activities help in establishing a museum as a cultural capital which finds its presence in the collective consciousness of the place and its people. Subsequently, this also helps a museum in being relevant and meaningful for its community. This paper emphasises on three sculptures as collection pertaining to Hinduism and how storytelling programmes focusing on Hindu mythological stories in a museum can be a stimulus to the perpetual process of meaning creation in a museum set up.

Stories and Storytelling

Stories have the power to connect with human emotions and could cater to our emotional, mental, intellectual and spiritual needs. Storytelling, therefore, is an art and a technique. It invites the listener to inhabit the world created by a storyteller momentarily, live the characters and experience their lives. The technique of storytelling requires deep knowledge of human psychology and adept presentation skills for effective reception by the listeners. Ideally, an efficient storyteller in a museum should possess good articulation skill and an ability to communicate with the audience in a simple and lucid language to introduce interesting anecdotes related with the objects. A museum professional in the role of a storyteller makes an attempt to capture the attention of a museum visitor or in this context, by stating the theme, history, meaning and utilitarian aspect (if any) of the object.

In the above context, storytelling plays a key role as museum objects have layers of stories and narratives around them. This makes museums as repositories of stories and storytelling a potent means of museum communication. "Telling stories can enable us to draw link between past, present and future and bring to life the human presence behind any object". "Stories afford deeper understanding of an object's function and meaning" ("Fieldnotes Storytelling" n. d). At this point, before elaborating on storytelling in museums, it is pertinent to understand the nature of storytelling in general.

Berice Dudley (1997), a storyteller and a puppeteer, explains that "storytelling is the art in which a teller conveys a message, truths, information, knowledge, or wisdom to an audience-often subliminally- in an entertaining way, using whatever skills, (musical, artistic, creative) or props he chooses, to enhance the audience's enjoyment, retention and understanding of the message conveyed. Storytelling is an activity as well as a performance where the storyteller takes the centre stage and depending on the context and his/her disposition, a listener is actively or passively engaged in the act. Stories are sometimes told purely for joy and delight." According to a research, the narratives shot on video and character driven stories help in the synthesis of oxytocin, a hormone responsible for human bonding (Zak, 2014). Thus, storytelling as a tool connects and communicates the essence of a museum as a public institution.

Hindu Mythology and Meaning Making of Museum Objects

Mythology is considered as a prominent aspect of storytelling. George M. Williams (2003) argues that, "All myths probe great themes of life such as good and evil, the purpose of living, death and beyond, struggle and suffering, challenge and determination, hope and perseverance" (p.15). He also states that some myths deal with time before the arrival of human species and there are some myths which deal with ambiguity between two absolute themes such as good and evil. Further, he presents a case in favour of the uniqueness of Hindu mythology when he states that to understand Hindu mythology, one needs a lens different from Greek mythology as Hindu mythology is neither dead nor monolithic. The stories of Hindu gods and

goddesses are very much alive in the cultural fabric of Indian society. The traditions of festivals, fasting and feasting are inextricably linked with stories of gods and goddesses in Hinduism. It is difficult to comprehend Hinduism in totality without acknowledging the Hindu mythological stories. The Hindu mythology is a reflection of the best and the worst of humanity and talks about the intermittent moral compass. If there are stories of devotion, piety and idealism, there are stories of jealousy, incest and violence as well. These stories resonate with the core of human values and this explains their timeless appeal and pervasive influence.

Sculptures, miniature paintings, paintings, ritual objects, architectural elements, textile art and decorative objects are the tangible expressions of aspects of visual culture of Hinduism which is profusely based on Hindu mythology. It will not be misleading to say that a majority of Hindu households have some of the elements of this visual culture in their possession. The same also finds a place of prominence in museums across the globe. Transformed into a material object, Hindu mythology, thus, enters a museum premises.

Why should museums pay attention to Hindu mythology? The simplest answer is; the artifacts based on Hinduism in museums are not passive objects but have multiple layers of stories around them. One such layer is the theme on which the object is made. What is the story behind that particular artefact based on Hinduism? Why does a sculpture with label *Ganesha* has an elephant head? What is a miniature painting based on the theme of *Radha* and *Krishna* trying to convey? What is unseen behind what can be seen? Hindu mythology is a major cultural force which helps in answering these questions. The mythological stories in Hinduism have a universal appeal which can entertain and educate museum visitors across different segments of society. Museums can aim to harness the universality of Hindu mythological stories to make meaning around these objects.

John Falk (2009) describes a museum as a centre of free choice learning where learners have a significant choice and control over their decision making and experience. He further says that when meaning making occurs in a free choice setting like a museum, a few cases investigated have revealed that visitors tend to exhibit greater interest, motivation, self-esteem, attribution and locus of control. The creation of meaning or meaning making is a process which differs from one visitor to another as different individuals relate to experiences, past and present differently thereby making meanings relational in nature.

The Case Studies

The Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery located in Vadodara, Gujarat is one of the largest museums in the western India. The Museum was built in 1894 CE, commissioned by the famous ruler of the erstwhile princely state of Baroda, Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III and designed in Indo-Saracenic style by Major Mant and R. F. Chisholm. Today this encyclopaedic museum houses antiquities collected by the

Maharaja from all over the world and collections acquired henceforth which are relevant to the museum's profile. Located in the serene Sayajibaug, a public garden, the Museum commands a handsome footfall of domestic and international visitors owing to its fame and accessibility of location. The opulence of the collection coupled with a promising flow of visitors makes the Museum an ideal ground to experiment museologically.

The Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery has various sculptures of Hindu gods, goddesses and guardian angels associated with Hinduism on display. To illustrate how mythological stories and storytelling can facilitate meaning making process of museum objects, a case study of three sculptures based on two themes associated with *Shiva* from the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery is attempted in this paper. The paper has selectively chosen episodes from the corpus of mythological stories associated with *Shiva* to study the mentioned objects. *Shiva* belongs to the holy triumvirate of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva* in Hinduism where *Brahma* is associated with creation of the Universe, *Vishnu* is responsible for the sustenance of the creation and *Shiva* destroys the creation in a cyclical manner so that a new chapter can be started. Telling the mythological story from the *Puranas* to the visitors, imagining and sharing stories either verbally, in writing or digitally based on the original story, encouraging visitors to share their experiences and anecdotes related to *Nandi* and *Shiva* will help the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery in generating multiple meanings around the three sculptures, bringing dynamism to the exhibition and by encouraging participation considering the sentiments of museum visitors from all walks of life, create a safe and welcoming space where visitors can relate to the museum object. Thus, storytelling is one of the pathways through which the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery can fulfil its mission of being a public institution dedicated to enjoyment and learning.

Nandi and Shiva

Nandi, the sacred bull, vehicle and the companion of *Shiva* also symbolises eternal waiting, subsequent meditative stage and essence of receptivity (Ramakrishna, 2016). In every *Shiva* temple one can find a sculpture of *Nandi* sitting in front of the sanctum sanctorum facing *Shiva*. According to the beliefs *Nandi* is not sitting passively even though it appears so. *Nandi* is always in a state of alertness, vitality, strength and meditating. While *Nandi* in temples is worshipped routinely, the same *Nandi* as a sculpture in museums needs to be brought to life as the sacred bull is not only a crucial thriving aspect of Hinduism but a cultural icon which has found its presence in the texts and the visual arts since ages. Figure 1 shows a sculpture of seated *Nandi* displayed at the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery.

According to the *Shiva Purana*, a pious sage *Shilada* performed a severe penance for *Indra*, the god of all the heavenly gods and goddesses, desiring a progeny (Shastri,1950). *Indra* was delighted and asked *Shilada* to choose boons. The sage eulogised *Indra* with hymns and humbly asked for a son not born of a womb and free

of death. *Indra* said that it was not possible for him to grant such a boon as birth and death were laws of nature. Only Lord *Shiva* if delighted could grant such a boon. The sage then started propitiating Lord *Shiva* by doing a tough penance. The Lord was mighty pleased with him and along with his wife Goddess *Parvati*, he appeared in front of the sage. As a boon, he granted the sage a son who was an incarnation of *Shiva* himself and not born of a human womb. Lord *Shiva* with his consort *Parvati* then blessed the sage and disappeared. The sage *Shilada* went to his hermitage and started doing preparations for a sacrifice. Before the sacrifice began, the son who was a form of *Shiva* himself, was born with a lustre of a fire. His birth was celebrated by the sages, gods, goddesses and all the celestial creatures in heaven.



Figure 1: Seated Nandi (Courtesy: The Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery)

The boy was born with a heavenly lustre, three eyes, four arms, matted hair and a coronet. Seeing his divine form, the sage was jubilant and named the boy *Nandi*. When father and son reached the hut, *Nandi* cast aside his divine form and attained a human form. The sage lamented at this but performed the prescribed post-natal rites. Within five years the sage taught *Nandi* all the Vedas and other sacred literature. When *Nandi* was seven years old, two sages named *Mitra* and *Varuna* came to see *Nandi* at the bidding of Lord *Shiva*. The two sages were welcomed by the sage *Shilada*. After looking at *Nandi*, *Mitra* and *Varuna* said to the sage that even though *Nandi* had mastered all the scriptures, he would not live beyond a year. The sage was grief-stricken after hearing

this. *Nandi* saw his father and asked the reason. The sage told his son that he was distressed at the thought of his early death. *Nandi* replied that he would not be short lived. His father asked how *Nandi* proposed to ward off this misery. *Nandi* replied he would do so by worshipping Lord *Shiva*. *Nandi* then left to undertake a severe penance.

Pleased with *Nandi's* penance, Lord *Shiva* along with his consort *Parvati* appeared before *Nandi* and asked for his desire. *Shiva* also said that *Nandi* would be free from birth, old age and death. He would be the leader of *Ganas*, the attendants of the lord. *Shiva* blessed him with infinite strength and said that *Nandi* would always be on his side and would be his favourite. In another version of the story, when Lord *Shiva* appears before *Nandi*, an exhilarated *Nandi* requested *Shiva* to grant him the boon of always staying with the Lord (Krishnan, 2018). Lord *Shiva* then said to *Nandi* that he had just lost his bull on which he used to travel. He said that from then, *Nandi* would have a face of a bull, he would stay in *Kailasha* Mountain which was the abode of Lord *Shiva*, he would be his vehicle, his companion and his friend. *Nandi* as the vehicle or *vaahana* of *Shiva* is very popular in sculptural representations. Figure 2 shows one such sculpture of *Nandi* and *Shiva* displayed at the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery.



Figure 2: Shiva with Nandi



Figure 3: Veenadhar Shiva

(Courtesy: The Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery)

The stories and the beliefs associated with *Nandi* and *Shiva* can play a significant role in bringing more dynamism to the two sculptures related to *Nandi* in the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery. Storytelling offers an opportunity to museum professionals to highlight their object or objects. To execute this, museum programmes centred around storytelling and the concerned object can adopt various strategies. There can be a one programme for visitors from all walks of life. There can be specific programmes targeted towards a specific segment of museum visitors. The story of *Nandi* itself can be told in more than one way. It can be told through traditional museum exhibition text which is didactic in nature. It can be narrated by a museum professional or a volunteer in a guided tour of the museum. It can be told through digital means of storytelling. While these methods are successful in conveying the story, they do not ensure active participation of the visitors. What is more participatory in nature is sharing stories so that through these stories a plethora of meanings concerning the object is brought forward which can enhance the relevance of the object for different visitors.

According to Maia Elisabeth Sirnes (n.d.), storytelling in museums facilitate aesthetic and learning experience. Sirnes further states the work of Vayanou and Ioannidis where a case is made for generic storytelling games where players make up stories about something and share it with the group. This process involves active engagement in triggering story elements, observing and reflecting on its possible meanings. Sharing personal viewpoints lead to discussion which further enhances players connection to story elements.

Traditionally, there are five basic elements of a story namely characters, setting, plot, conflict and resolution (Leinaweaver, 2015). Characters are the individuals a story is about. Setting denotes location of the action. A story revolves around a plot which has a beginning, a middle and an end. As essential elements of a story, conflict and resolution imply opposition and solution to the problem or opposition by which it is resolved respectively. The story of *Nandi* in this case study offers all these elements along with multiple characters to playing variant roles such as gods, goddesses, divine figures, sages and the *Nandi* himself. This mythological story is set in the periodic setting of ancient times which has forests, rivers, mountains and hermitage as locations and the story has a distinct beginning, middle and end. Conflict here denotes the two sages *Mitra* and *Varuna* warning sage *Shilada* about the short life of *Nandi*. When *Nandi* goes for a penance and Lord *Shiva* appears to grant him the boon of immortality and eternal companionship, the conflict is resolved.

Veenadhar Shiva

Stories can be musical too. The Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery can play with storytelling and music to accentuate a sculpture of *Veenadhar Shiva* in the Museum collection. Figure 3 shows a sculpture of *Veenadhar Shiva* which depicts *Shiva* holding a *veena* or a lute in a sitting position. *Veenadhar Shiva* is a benign form of *Shiva*. The *Krishna Yajurveda* has an *Upanishad* named *Dakshinamurti Upanishad* which has the

Dakshinamurti Stotra in which *Shiva* is mentioned as the one holding a lute (Sastry, 1978). In the *Vayu Purana*, the Hindu god *Vishnu* pays obeisance to *Shiva* by eulogising him with different epithets which also includes one who indulges in dance, is fond of music and sings excellent songs (Tagare, 1987). Using the narratives present in the Hindu texts as a source, the Museum can develop programmes for the various segments of visitors.

In comparison to the story of *Nandi*, the story of *Dakshinamurti Shiva* is more philosophical in nature. The narrative talks about sage *Sanaka* and other sages approaching sage *Markendeya* and asking about his longevity and blissful happiness. As a reply *Markendeya* emphasises the need of knowledge of *Shiva* by elaborating the divine qualities of *Shiva*, his physical appearance and the metaphysical aspects of *Shiva*.

The above-mentioned narrative from the *Vayu Purana* and other texts where *Shiva* is associated with music and dance can be employed to develop storytelling sessions for adults and elderly visitors where in addition to this narrative being told, the visitors can also share their stories of their experiences with *Shiva*. For example, visitors can be encouraged to tell their experiences with *Shiva* which can be the first childhood memory of the god, first story heard, prayers recited, spiritual experiences, how a visitor perceives the god, scholarly approach to the god, how non-Hindus perceive the god, how international visitors perceive the god and many more such possibilities. Storytelling sessions tailored for a particular audience can include discussions on the philosophy of Shaivism with relevant stories of *Shiva* interspersed. In addition to this, storytelling session can also include visitors' experience with classical Indian music and especially the musical instrument *veena*. These sessions can conclude with an Indian classical music performance based on ragas associated with *Shiva* such as raga *Bhairav*.

For children, stories centred around music can be helpful in creating meaning about this sculpture. Asking children to observe the sculptures, describe it and if they have ever seen a *veena* and encouraging them to tell their experiences with music, creating stories around music or gods and music, sharing anecdotes and putting up a musical performance where children can see how a *veena* is played.

Iconographically, the description of the image of *Veenadhar Shiva* can be found in texts such as the *Kamika*, *Amsumadbhedagama* and the *Karanagamas* where according to the *Amsumadbhedagama*, *Shiva* should be depicted with his left leg in the posture known as *utkutika* and the two front hands should hold the *veena* (Rao, 1916). Further, the *Kamikagama* describes that in *Veenadhar Shiva*, the right palm should face below and the left palm should face above, the left arm should be lifted up and the right arm should be lowered below so as to hold the *veena* properly (Rao, 1916). Museums can explore this aspect of iconography while developing storytelling programs for both children and adults. After informing the targeted audience about the significance and rules of iconography in Hindu art with reference to *Veenadhar Shiva*, visitors can be encouraged

to draw their perception of *Shiva* as the god of music and dance, *Shiva* holding a *veena* and develop a story about their drawing. Visitors can also be encouraged to create a graphic short story where they can incorporate *Veenadhar Shiva* and their perception of *Shiva* as the god of music and dance.

The beauty of storytelling is that a number of mediums can be used to convey the story ranging from the oral to the visual to the digital. Storytelling in museums can be used as a stand-alone method to create multiple meanings for the object or can be combined with other methods as well.

Conclusion

The examples mentioned in this essay discuss some of the possibilities by which a museum can highlight its specific object and provide a superlative visitor experience. Museum objects are enveloped with strata of significance, symbolism and meanings. Stories act as an instrument to reveal the significance, symbolism and multiple meanings of a museum object. The process of meaning making through stories in a museum space allows a visitor to connect with the museum object in a personal manner and it is this connection which helps in creating relevance of the museum object to visitor. In the case of museum objects related to Hinduism, using mythological stories as a trope to engage visitors and invite participation helps in facilitating the process of co-creating meanings.

In listening to Hindu mythological stories and sharing one's experiences with them, there is a sense of nostalgia, fun, curiosity, awe and adventure. For museums aiming to create connections and thus, staying relevant in twenty first century, these stories can prove profitable when contextualised with concerned museum objects.

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