Government Museum, Chennai – A Tourist Destination

Dr. A. Arputha Selvi

Abstract

Madras is the fourth largest city in India and it is one of the biggest cultural, economic and educational centres in South India. Museums have an important role to play in preserving, displaying and publishing the different aspects of the cultural heritage of a country. The Government Museum, Chennai is the largest and oldest of the state museums in India. It was setup in 1851 with 20,000 objects. This was first initiated on the upper house in Fort St. George. Later it was shifted to the present place known as Pantheon buildings in December 1854. In 1856 it had a Zoological Garden with 360 animals which was taken over by the Municipality. Initially, the museum had in its collection of antiquities from various parts of the country. The centenary celebration was inaugurated by the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on November 27, 1951. The National Art Gallery was open to the public on that occasion. The museum complex consisting of six buildings and 46 galleries covers an area of around 16.25 acres of land. The objects displayed in the museum cover a variety of artefacts and objects covering diverse fields including archaeology, numismatics, zoology, natural history, sculptures, palm-leaf manuscripts and Amravati paintings.

Key Words: Government Museum, Chennai, St. George, National Art Gallery

Introduction

Tourism is an ancient phenomenon. Man has travelled from the very earliest times. Even in the Roman world, tourism was a special phenomenon with people. In the ancient world, trade and commerce, Religious merits and political operation were the motivating forces for the movement of the people. (Gupta S.P & Krishna Lal, 1974, p. 3) Tamilnadu, the southernmost state of India, is a land of ancient traditions, lagoons, deltaic areas, hills, beeches, temples, monuments and museums. Till 1968, there was no separate department for the development of tourism. In 1971 the Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) was setup with the main object of promoting tourism in Tamilnadu. (Tamilnadu State Administrative Report-1983-84 1985, p.74)

Madras is the fourth largest city in India and it is one of the biggest cultural, economic and educational centres in South India. The pleasant climate, attractive scenery, historical monuments, temples, art and architecture and the traditions of the people makes Chennai as an important tourist centres in Tamilnadu. (Madras-The Gateway of South India, A folder published by Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation)

Museums have an important role to play in preserving, displaying and publishing the different aspects of the cultural heritage of a country. A visit to a museum is the best way to give the tourist an introduction to the country’s history or regions history, art and cultural diversity. India has a large number of museums in large, medium and small ones. Some of these are very old more than 150 years and some are recent origin. They can be classified into national, state, district and site. On the basis of the subjects or contents the museums can be classified as archaeological museums, art museums, folk museums, science museums, industrial museums, military or naval museums, etc. (Madras Government Museum, “Bulletin” 1996, p.7) The word Museum derives its origin from the Greek word Mouseion, which means a building sacred to the muses, the goddess of the arts and science. It is a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited. (Srinivasan S, 1997, p.5)

The Government Museum, Chennai is the largest and oldest of the state museums in India. It was setup in 1851 with 20,000 objects. The building was designed by Edward Green Balfour and built by Henry Erwin in 1909. The framework of a museum was first visualised by the Court of Directors of the East India Compa-
ny in January 1851. This was first initiated on the upper house in Fort St. George. Later it was shifted to the present place known as Pantheon buildings in December 1854. In 1856 it had a Zoological Garden with 360 animals which was taken over by the Municipality. Initially, the museum had in its collection of antiquities from various parts of the country. In 1951, the Government Museum celebrated its centenary having completed hundred years of fruitful service to the public as a pioneer educational institution in the state. The centenary celebration was inaugurated by the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on November 27, 1951. The National Art Gallery was open to the public on that occasion. (Government Museum, 1998, p.1) The museum complex consisting of six buildings and 46 galleries covers an area of around 16.25 acres of land. The objects displayed in the museum cover a variety of artefacts and objects covering diverse fields including archaeology, numismatics, zoology, natural history, sculptures, palm-leaf manuscripts and Amravati paintings.

**Sculpture Gallery**

The first entrance of the main building is the Sculpture Gallery. The Sculpture are arranged according to different period. In early Chola figures are slightly mere formal in pose and moulding them as in Pallava period the face is round. In later Chola period, the poses and the duperies become more conventional and the nose more prominent. Emblems are held gradually on two upraised figures, those of Vishnu being habitually decorated with flames. (Tamilnadu State Administrative Report-1958-59, 1959, p.143)

Early Chalukyan Sculpture also exhibited here and Sculptures from Amaravathi preserved here are world class importance, The Maha Stupa at Amaravathi is 62 feet across and the base of 15 feet wide circumulatory passagge. Height is about 90 or 100 feet with lion pillars. 8 In the Archaeology section inscriptions were displayed and written by Indian Script, Nagari Script, Canarese, Telugu, Grantha Tamil and Brahmi. (Indian Scripts, Bulletin, 1995, p.14)

**Zoology, Botany and Geological Galleries**

Zoological Gallery has in it many existing features which are really rare treasures bagged by Madras Museum. Many skeleton structures of birds, a male specimen of Indian tiger, Indian bear, snakes and other notable additions are displayed in this section. Skull of elephants and horses also kept there. The botanical specimens are arranged in two galleries. First, Plant Morphology gives information about leaf and its parts. Plant fossils, Marine Vegetation, Rose Wood, South Indian Timbers, Parts of Teak Wood and the root of sandal wood also displayed there. In Geological gallery they displayed the model of the earth, solar system, rivers and the impact of volcanoes and earthquakes. (Government Museum, 1998, p.7)

**Arms and Bronze Gallery**

Specimens of cannon balls, stone shots, chain shots and coats of mail armour are kept in the corner of the gallery. A set of olden weapons like Soulayutham, Bitchara swords are kept. Pistols ans machine guns also displayed there. The whole collections of Hindu sculptures in stone were arranged in a geographical basis. Numerous copper coins, pieces of pottery and bronze images were restored and treated against further deterioration. (Report on the administration of Madras Presidency, 1938-39, p. 101)

The oldest metal image of Indian mother goddess found from Tirunelveli is one of the one of the prestigious anthropological collections of this museum. This museum has about a dozen of good Nataraja Bronzes of Chola period. The Seated Buddha and Standing Buddha are the best Chola images in this museum.( Raman, Select Bronzes in the Chennai Museum-A Descriptive Catalogue, 1998, p. 10)

**Numismatics and National Art Gallery**

The Chennai Museum is noted for its large and unique collections of coins particularly of South Indian and Mughal coins. The fifty engold and three swamipagodas of the English East India Company were found as treasure trove, seven from North Arcot district and eight from Salem districts. They displayed different types of silver coins. (Madras State Administrative Report-1955-56, 1985, p.129)

It had a good collection of traditional and modern paintings.

**Children's Museum**

In April 1988 a new children’s museum building was inaugurated by the then Governor of Tamilnadu, his Excellency Dr. P. C. Alexander. This museum has galleries such as Civilization Gallery, Costume Dolls Gallery, Science Gallery, Transportation Gallery and Technology Gallery. (Museum Journal, p. 63) Museums have a significant role to play in preserving the anthropological re-
cord. In our society today, museums must promote exhibitions that are topical and challenging. They must broaden their scope and not restrict themselves solely to objects and materials in their collections. In a changing world, museums have become very important institutions that are respected and valued.

The Museum celebrated its Centenary on November 27, 1951 AD which was inaugurated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In order to display the exquisite rich collection of bronzes, a separate building was constructed in 1963 AD. In the same year, a new block was added to the Chemical Conservation Section to cope with the increasing work of preservation. A new building for the Birds Gallery was also opened in 1963 AD. A separate building for Contemporary Art was opened in January 25, 1984 AD and a new Children’s Museum building was opened in April 1988 AD. The Raja Ravi Varma paintings, which are considered as National Treasures, have been placed in a gallery with Fibre Optic lighting. This system of lighting gives a dramatic lighting effect. The Contemporary Art Gallery has been lit using Dichroic Halogen lamps. These lamps reflect back the heat. They also have a pleasing visual effect. These lighting methods are technology demonstrators and a first for museums in India at the time of their installation in 2001 AD.

Notable collections in the Museum are the world famous South Indian bronzes, Amaravati sculptures, Tanjore (Thanjavur) armoury, inscriptions on stones and copper plates, the Dowleshwaram hoard of gold coins of Raja Raja I and Kulothunga I, the Chengam hoard of copper coins, artifacts from the Megaliths of Adichanallur, the Bruce Foote Collection of prehistoric stone implements, Roman and other artifacts from the famous site of Arikamedu (near Pondicherry), the exquisite crystal reliquaries from the Bhattiprolu Stupa and the enormous skeleton of the whale obtained on shore near Mangalore. (http://www.govtmuseumchennai.org) Hence museums can be considered as an important tourist destination and it attracts domestic and foreign tourist to understand the history of the past.

*****

References

Tucker, Robert C. (Ed.). (1972). The Marx-Engels reader. New York: W. W. Norton. This volume, edited by one of foremost scholars of Marxism, provides almost 700 pages of the works of Marx and Engels, showing the evolution of their thought.

*****