Mumbai museum challenges India's self-image, rising intolerance

"There is no such thing as a singular Indian identity," says curator Naman Ahuja.

by Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar in the December 20, 2017 issue

A 17th-century decorative cloth on display at a Mumbai museum showing the cosmopolitan world of the Deccan Sultanates, with a ruler in Persian clothes accepting wine from a woman in a European hat. Some rights reserved by Nomu420.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) In a gallery at Mumbai's premier museum, visitors admire a 17th-century cloth painting depicting characters from a Muslim court in south-central India. An Ottoman trader feeds a bird; a Central Asian merchant holds a Chinese vase; and in one corner, a yogi sitting cross-legged on a deerskin contemplates a wondrous new object: a pineapple brought to India from the New World by the Portuguese.

Such intriguing juxtapositions, unexpected stories, and global connections form the essence of a new exhibition that recounts India's history and its engagement with the world through 200 objects. In doing so, it offers a counterpoint to rising

intolerance and nationalism in India and elsewhere.

Its purpose is “to present India’s glorious past through iconic objects . . . while allowing people to become partners in a world narrative,” said Sabyasachi Mukherjee, director of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, which is presenting the exhibition India and the World: A History in Nine Stories.

Rukhsana Tabassum, a children’s filmmaker visiting the new show one recent afternoon for the second time, said the exhibit helped her see history as a whole rather than in fragments.

“When you read textbooks, you don’t see these connections,” she said. “We see the global context, how people were doing similar things in different places.”

Celebrating the 70th anniversary of India’s independence, the show chronicles nine important moments in the subcontinent’s history from the Stone Age to the postindependence period.

The exhibition is a collaboration with the British Museum in London; roughly half the artifacts came from around India and the other half from the British Museum’s global collection of treasures. Items are paired to create a dialogue that speaks to the present moment of political strife.

“The show highlights what unites people, what is at the heart of human development: exchange,” said Hartwig Fischer, British Museum director. “Yes, there were obstacles, differences, conflicts, but this exchange kept going on. The history of humankind is that of openness.”

One of the items is especially resonant in the context of racist attacks on Africans earlier this year in New Delhi. It is a portrait of Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian who was brought to India in the 16th century as a slave and rose to become a military leader.

The exhibition comes at a time when Indians seem increasingly polarized over questions of history, identity, and religion. In the past year, conflicts have erupted over the use of Hindi as a national language, the consumption of beef, and even the status of the iconic Taj Mahal.

These arguments have flared up since the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who took office in 2014, giving his right-wing allies greater influence in Indian affairs.

Many of those allies see India as a fundamentally Hindu nation beset by foreign cultures; one BJP leader caused a furor in June when he said that the Taj Mahal—a 17th-century Muslim mausoleum built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, which is the country's top tourist attraction—did not represent "Indian culture."

Such views are more than a matter of academic debate. Mobs of "cow vigilantes" have attacked Muslims several times in the past year for eating beef or allegedly slaughtering cows, animals that Hindus consider holy. In April, a mob beat a Muslim farmer to death for transporting cows.

In early November, paramilitary troops were called in to ensure there was no violence during protests at the birth anniversary celebrations of Tipu Sultan, an 18th-century Muslim ruler in the southern state of Karnataka. The sultan has been hailed for battling the British but is reviled by the BJP for having destroyed Hindu temples.

"What is going on is a resort to instrumental uses of history in the service of religious majoritarianism," said Sugata Bose, a member of India's parliament who is also professor of history at Harvard University. And there is a global trend toward nationalism, he noted.

That has not escaped the notice of J. D. Hill, head of research at the British Museum and a cocurator of the Mumbai exhibition. The first curatorial meeting was held the day after Britain voted to leave the European Union. He heard the news while at the airport in London before flying to Mumbai.

Curators everywhere must choose which story to tell, he said.

"Connection is the human story," he said. "You have to tell that story in Britain as much as here."

The exhibition offers a vision of India as a cosmopolitan crossroads culture at the center of ancient trade networks. The objects on view include a splendid pillar from India's Mauryan Empire (326–180 BC), decorated with Persian-style rosettes and Greek motifs, and seals from the Indus Valley civilization, located in what is now India, that were found in distant Mesopotamia.

Cocurator Naman Ahuja sought to find a way for Indians to feel "self-pride" while respecting others.

“We are a composite people,” he said. “This exhibition shows that at every step of the way, India has been a creation of multiple forces. There is no such thing as a singular Indian identity.”

An especially thought-provoking display is the juxtaposition of a 16th-century wooden Christ next to the Hindu god Ganesh. Subverting expectations, the Christian art was made in India and the Hindu art is from Indonesia.

“Gods, like people, have always been on the move,” Ahuja said. “The marker of your identity, whether that’s religion or cuisine, may be something that’s not necessarily born in your land but may have come from somewhere else.”

One way to help people to understand their culture in relation to others, said Mukherjee, the museum director, is simply to provide an opportunity to see the cultural treasures tucked away in the British Museum and in other collections around India. The Mumbai museum receives thousands of visitors from smaller towns and villages, including many who may never visit London’s museums, he noted.

Vinod Mehra, from one of Mumbai’s satellite towns, said he was proud to see India’s ancient empires on the same map as the great Greek and Roman ones. He and his wife, Geetha, were also impressed by the gallery that explains humankind’s African origins.

“We all come from the same place,” Geetha said. “So what are we fighting for?”

A version of this article, which was edited on December 20, appears in the December 20 print edition under the title “Museum in Mumbai reveals India’s complex, global, multicultural past.”