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*The traditional Indian perception of museums is of musty spaces filled with dust covered images of artefacts and artworks, poorly displayed on moldy shelves*



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By Ananda Shankar Jayant

The word museum seems almost to be an anathema to the young. On a recent performance trip to Bhopal, I proposed a morning visit to a museum to my teenage students. After a few inaudible groans, rolling of the eyes, and I exercising my guru diktat, we landed at the beautiful Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum.

However, the subtle opposition of my students changed into energised excitement upon entering the sensitively created space, housed in an attractive building designed by Revathi Kamath. The museum

celebrates the everyday life and culture of the seven major tribes in the state—the Gond, Bheel, Korku, Baiga, Sa. comprehensive world view

The traditional Indian perception of museums is of musty spaces lined with dust-covered images of artefacts and artworks, poorly displayed on moldy shelves. However, the MP Tribal Museum does not conform to this obsolete stereotype. The roofs of many galleries have been designed to soar high to replicate the atmosphere of forests. All exhibits here are arranged in contextual reference. One courtyard is dedicated to the lifestyle of the seven tribes. Walking through the sample dwellings, the rustic simplicity and delicate architectural designs of each tribe are an introduction to a hidden existence.

A dramatically lit replica of Gond fort is an arresting installation. Colourful galleries project tribal life, art and spiritual beliefs. Festivals, songs, stories, and rituals come alive, through different mediums such as iron, brass, wood, bamboo, clay, and contextual display. Prominently displayed in the gallery hall is a model of a bridal gift: an iron bangle with exquisite reliefs representing various cycles of life.

A carved mangarohi wedding pillar of the Gond and Baiga community created without using joints, occupies the centre of the gallery. The stunning visual of the marriage of the earth and sky, and stories of creation are brilliantly depicted in the three-storey Vivaha Mandapa. As we walk in the shade of the trees, my students and I are beamed into another world. At a time when we see neighbouring states, sparring on issues of ownership and control, it was a pleasant surprise to see a gallery recognising the cultural continuity between people. Kudos to the imagination and aesthetic vision of H S Bhatta, who has designed this exquisite space, which is a treasure house of original art created by 1,500 tribal artists. In almost every part of the museum, beauty and art coexist as one. You can see it strung from the trees, leaping out from the walls, surrounding you in the corridors, and even on the chairs you sit.

The MP Tribal Museum is created and managed by the state government. If Madhya Pradesh can do it, so can others. I urge urban planners of other states to visit the museum and draw inspiration to create more such oases of beauty—an imperative in India's culturally starved cities. The happy smiling faces of my young students was proof of how a replication of this successful template, across the urban landscape, will connect the youth with the country's abundant cultural diversity.

*(Jayant is a bureaucrat, classical dancer, choreographer and dance scholar)*  
*ananda.jayant@gmail.com*

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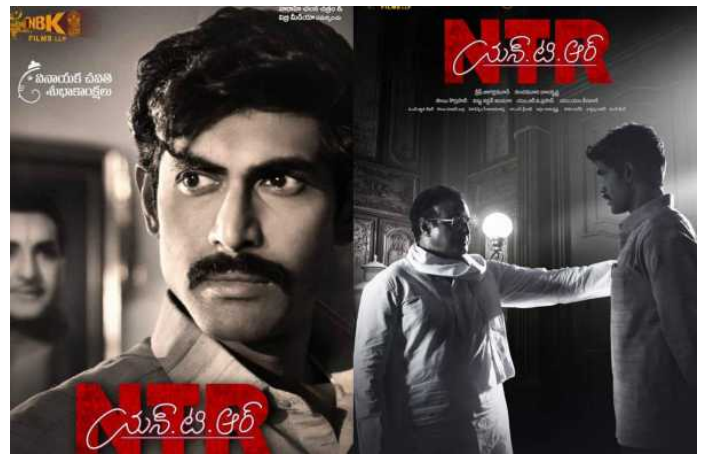
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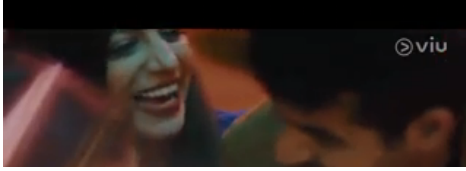
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