

Archaeology for Children: A Note on the Sharma Children's Museum

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The growth of archaeology in India depends to a large extent on generating popular interest in the discipline and in making it relevant to modern society. In this process of popularising Indian archaeology, children have been largely ignored. Knowledge of India's cultural heritage is principally confined to text books, occasional visits to museums and, in recent years TV programmes and multimedia products. The largely chronological and static approach adopted in text books, the absence of sustained interaction between teachers and professional archaeologists, lack of funds, the rigid examination oriented syllabus, and relative scarcity of popular literature on archaeology all serve as deterrents, and the child's sense of wonder about our past is often lost forever.

The Sharma Children's Museum (inaugurated on the 19th of February, 1999) is a venture of the Sharma Centre for Heritage Information, a registered non-profit public educational body aiming at the promotion of Indian Heritage among young people and at conducting independent research. At present the museum is housed at the Ellen Sharma Memorial Matriculation School (a sister venture of the Children's Garden School, Chennai). The museum is named in honour of the noted educationists Dr. V.N. Sharma and Mrs. Ellen Sharma who established the Children's Garden School in 1937. Inspired by their work at the Odenwald Schüle (École d'Humanité) in Switzerland, they aimed at uniting Western and Eastern ideas on education into a unique system that would enable children to develop their innate talents and to enjoy the experience of learning. The school has grown from a small group of seven children, to more than 3,000 children coming from varied socio-economic and religious backgrounds; including orphans, handicapped children and Tibetan refugees. The Ellen Sharma Memorial Matriculation School, is a rural institute situated at Sholinganallore, 30 km outside Chennai, and provides free and subsidised education to children from the neighbouring industrial areas and villages; and also caters to children from Chennai and other cities in India and abroad (Souvenir, Children's Garden School 1997).

The museum was planned by the first author, as an experiment in school education; a small step to overcome

some of the deficiencies noted above in the teaching of our past. It aims at creating an innovative and informative museum environment where: (a) children can develop an awareness of Indian heritage; (b) a spirit of enquiry, wonder and imagination is stimulated and sustained; (c) archaeology is used as a tool to exercise skills in making judgements and critiques; (d) the past can be related to issues in daily life; (e) archaeological objects are used to teach principles of other social and physical sciences; (f) children are made aware of people (both belonging to past and present cultures) having different ways of life and belief systems; (g) local heritage issues are stressed; and (h) objects in the museum are used as a resource base for teachers for all disciplines taught in the school syllabus. We believe that in addition to gaining a better perspective of the past, issues in archaeology will sensitize children to modern problems such as degrading environments and changing value systems. The displays were designed in consultation with school teachers keeping in mind the school syllabus, the general developmental stages of children of different age groups and their varied social and economic backgrounds. The language of communication is both Tamil and English.

At present, the museum covers nine main themes (each comprising a diorama, a project/activity/game, and/or an interactive model), designed to encompass the scope of Indian archaeology ranging from the nature of the subject, its aims and methodology, associated sciences including Ethnoarchaeology, the story of human evolution, cultural phases ranging from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age and a special focus on Tamil Nadu. The main dioramas are designed for children ranging in age from 10 to 16 years with supplementary displays for younger children. Dioramas (some designed to simulate a Mesolithic rock shelter or a Neolithic hut) have text, pictures, models and original artefacts, which convey information in a simple manner, address the basic questions of Where? When? Who? How? and Why? and aim at stimulating the imagination and further inquiry. Dioramas are supplemented by models, one of which depicts an archaeological excavation of a multicultural site, with reproductions of layers, figures of archaeologists and labourers, artefacts, antiquities, pottery, structures, equipment used, etc. This serves to

explain basic concepts in archaeology and to satisfy the child's desire to know how sites and artefacts are discovered.

Concepts in archaeology are explained using a range of educational aids. These include a poetry book on fossils illustrated by the children and to be read aloud, interactive card games used for story-telling, creating short plays, games, and quiz competitions; and picture creation games. A carefully structured approach has been designed wherein each class is guided through the museum, with every visit focusing on a particular theme. The emphasis is not only on observation but includes discussions and questions and workshops on art and handicrafts or story-building, essays and quiz competitions where children are encouraged to freely express their feelings on what they have observed. A major focus in the museum is on the actual handling of artefacts by children. Children handle stone tools, describe them in terms of their physical properties, learn how they can be used and attempt to haft them with material provided. While this is not possible in the case of other antiquities, it has proved to be immensely popular and has encouraged them to treat finds with care.

We have adopted a multidisciplinary approach where archaeological objects and concepts are related to other social and physical sciences taught in the school curriculum. For example, the diorama on the Neolithic is associated with experiments on planting seedlings and other topics in environmental science; that on ethnoarchaeology encourages sensitivity in dealing with others from different backgrounds, castes, tribes or religions and so forth. With increasing feedback from teachers and students, each diorama is being modified to correct errors arising from differences in our preconceived assumptions and what the children find to be understandable and entertaining. The museum is bringing out a newsletter '*The Young Explorer*', and also organizes field trips to neighbouring archaeological sites and plans to hold lectures by eminent scholars. Since its inception, we have received a positive response from children and teachers. Teachers regularly use the museum to supplement text-book information, and numerous theme-based programmes involving more than 300 children have already been initiated. We have also observed that such museums located outside urban areas can indirectly play an important role in adult education. The museum attracted the attention of parents, carpenters and artisans among others. Artefacts on display caught their attention, in particular, when introduced to tool functions and their relation to present day professions-carpentry, metal work and farming; they could obviously relate to the early pioneers of human progress.

Further information on the museum activities can be obtained from the address given above or an email to

spappu@vsnl.com. The museum is open only on prior intimation to the school authorities, in order to be able to design a structured tour based on the audience requirements. We would greatly appreciate any aid in the form of advise and suggestions for future development, as well as any artefacts, posters/pictures, photographs and books.

It is up to archaeologists to share some of our delight in the subject with Indian children and to ensure that "*The days when 'museum education' meant parties of school-children being dragged round the display cases are long gone...*" (Eileen Hooper Greenhill 1994: 252).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Ms. Sakunthala Sharma, Correspondent and Secretary, Ms. Gita Sharma, and the Board of Management, Children's Garden School Society, and Ellen Sharma Memorial Matriculation School for giving us the opportunity and resources to establish the museum in the school. We thank the school teachers as well as the team of artists and sculptors from Sholinganallore and Chennai who aided in the creation of the excavation model and other displays.

Dr. Malti Nagar (retd., Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute), kindly donated numerous books, tribal artefacts, pictures and photographs which aided us in establishing the Dr. Malti Nagar section on Ethnoarchaeology and Anthropology.

We thank Prof. V.N. Misra and Prof. K. Paddayya of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute for sanctioning the donation of artefacts and photographs from the Deccan College Museum. We are deeply grateful to Mr. Balaji Gajul and his team of workers who provided invaluable help in the creation of most of the dioramas and models, while Dr. P.P. Dandawate provided valuable advise. We thank Mr. Sunil Jadhav for his photographs and Mr. Rokade for painting the backdrop for the model. Dr. V.S. Shinde, Kurush Dalal, Rhea Mitra, Dr. S.B. Darshana and Anup Misra gave us continuous help and encouragement.

Dr. M. Sargurumorthy and his colleagues at the Tamil Nadu Science and Technology Centre advised us on lighting, audio-visual and electronic aids.

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