

Archaeology in schools: an Indian example

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The growth of archaeology in India depends on generating a popular interest in the discipline and in making it relevant to modern society. Pre- and Protohistory especially do not readily lend themselves to the creation of popular symbols in establishing political or social identities, a problem compounded by the alienation of archaeological research centres/universities from the Indian public, plus a mindset which largely perceives archaeology to have little practical use. While museums have been largely successful in popularizing Indian archaeology, children are often excluded. Knowledge of India's cultural heritage among urban children is confined to text-books, TV, multimedia and sporadic outings to museums and sites. The ability to convey information and stimulate their interest is dependent on the individual capabilities and enthusiasm of the teacher/curator. The average child is often bored and returns with memories of stones, bones and antiquities locked in dusty cabinets, and commands of 'Do Not Touch'; and the chance for stimulating a sense of wonder about our past is lost forever. This is compounded by the lack of sustained interaction between school teachers and professional archaeologists/museum staff, a lack of funds, a rigid examination-oriented syllabus and the relative scarcity of popular literature on archaeology.

The Sharma Children's Museum (inaugurated 19 February 1999) is a venture of the Sharma Centre for Heritage Education, a registered non-profit public educational body aiming to promote Indian Heritage among young people and to conduct independent research. Its aims are the creation of an innovative and informative museum environment where awareness of Indian heritage and a spirit of enquiry and imagination are stimulated and sustained. Artefacts are used to encourage critical thinking about archaeological issues, and to illustrate the variety of different ways of life and belief systems.

The museum, housed at the Ellen Sharma Memorial Matriculation School, is named in honour of noted educationists Dr V.N. & Mrs Ellen Sharma, founders of the Children's Garden School in 1937. Inspired by their work at the Odenwald Schüle (Ecole de Humanité) in Switzerland, they aimed at uniting western and eastern ideas on education into a unique system that would enable a child to develop its innate talents and to enjoy the experience of learning; an aim which has served

as the inspiration for the museum. The school is situated at Sholinganallore, near Chennai, and provides free and subsidized education to local children and Tibetan refugees. The languages of communication at the museum are 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 for children of 10–16 years, with supplementary displays for younger children. Themes range from introductory archaeology, associated sciences and ethnoarchaeology, the story of human evolution, cultural phases in India from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age and a special focus on Tamil Nadu. 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 imagination and further enquiry. Dioramas are supplemented by models (FIGURE 1) and educational aids. The children have illustrated a poetry book on fossils to be read aloud. We have designed interactive card games used for story-telling, creating short plays, games and quiz competitions, and picture creation games. Each class is guided on a theme-based experience of the museum. This is followed by workshops on art, handicrafts or story-building, essays and quiz competitions where children are encouraged to express freely their feelings on what they have observed (FIGURES 2 & 3). A major focus in the museum is the actual handling of artefacts by children, who 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 (FIGURE 4). In addition to this, archaeological objects and concepts are related to other social and physical sciences taught in the school curriculum. Thus experiments in growing plants are associated with the diorama on the Neolithic, a visit to local ironsmiths with that of the Iron Age and so on. Visiting scholars deliver lectures and children are taken to neighbouring archaeological sites.

The museum is a low-budget experiment created largely with material available at hand and occupies a single room in the school. We hope gradually to develop and modify displays in accordance with feedback from children and parents to create an exciting experience of archaeology for Indian children.

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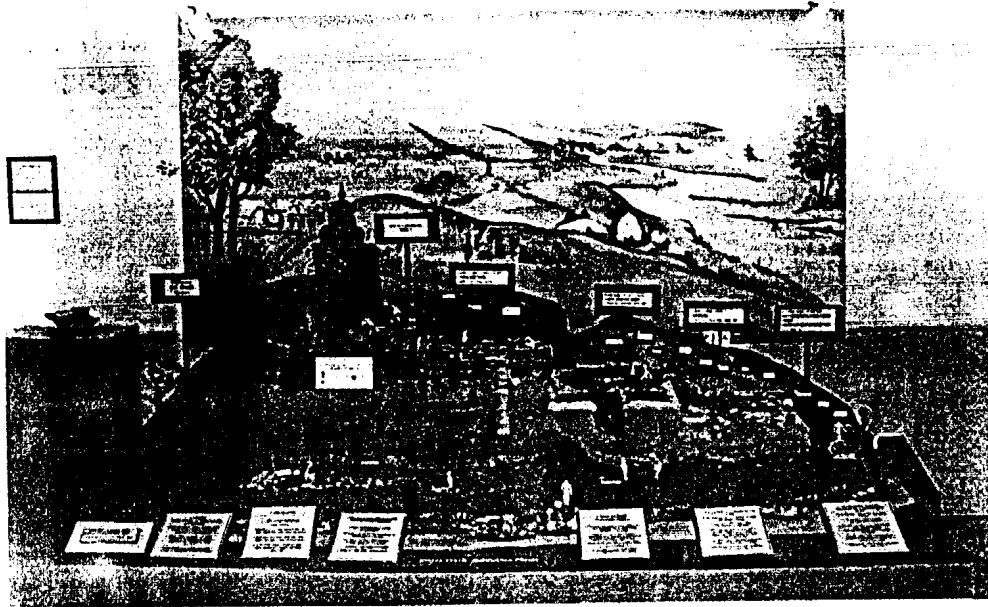


FIGURE 1. Model of an excavation in progress (showing a hypothetical site with cultural phases ranging from the Palaeolithic to historical periods).



FIGURE 2. An art competition in progress.



FIGURE 3. A child's interpretation of a prehistoric hunting scene.

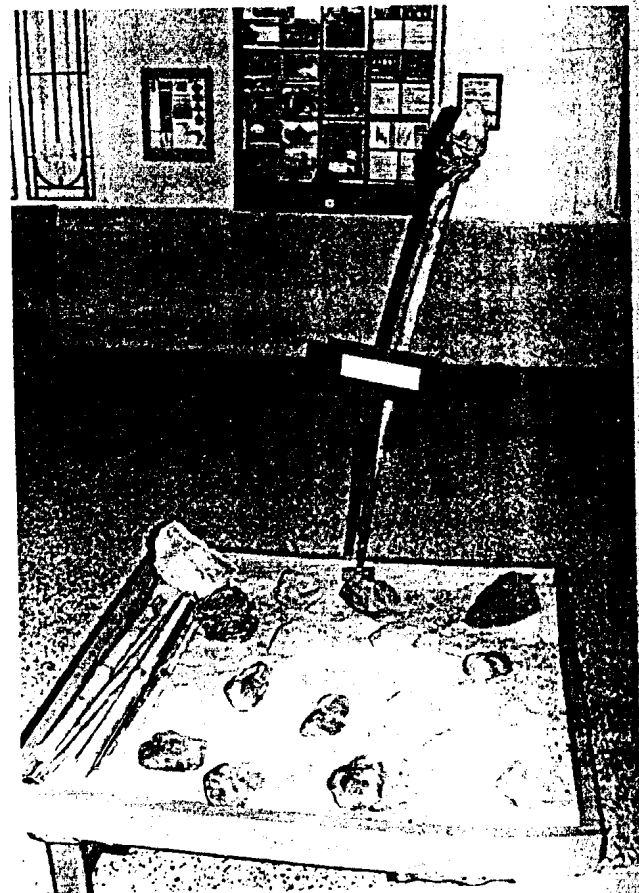


FIGURE 4. Handling and using stone tools (with diorama on the Stone Age in the background).

Reference
 PAPPU, S., K.V. RAMAN & N.C. GHOSH. 1999. Archaeology for children: a note on the Sharma Children's Museum. *Man and Environment* 24(2): 91-2.