

Another India: Explorations and Expressions of Indigenous South Asia.* Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, March 8, 2017-April 22, 2018.

Reviewed by Katja Müller

The exhibition, *Another India: Explorations and Expressions of Indigenous South Asia*, delivered what its title promised: it conveyed to visitors ideas about material culture and the artistic expressions of Indian indigenous (*Adivasi*) people. In an explorative way, it gave voice to artists from Indian communities who often remain excluded, or at the margins of, mediated imaginations of the Indian nation. Especially the year 2017—which the British and Indian government celebrate as the “UK-India Year of Culture” with a “year-long programme to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Indian independence and UK cultural ties”—was in need of an exhibition like *Another India*, one that decidedly put the spotlight on an India beyond Hinduism and Bollywood (United Kingdom 2015).

The great strength of *Another India* lay in combining artifacts from pre-independence India, which are now housed at the museum and that have been stored away for most of the last decades, with contemporary pieces of art by Adivasi artists, including Som Murmu, Saheb Ram Tudu, Balubhai Rathwa, and others. These many of these new art works were commissioned in relation to existing artifacts from the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology’s (MAA) collection, and *Another India* aimed at creating a dialogue between the new acquisitions and the old ones. For example, it displayed Bhupendra Jaidev Baghel’s 2016 brass interpretation of a 1935 photograph (showing a Maria Gond woman with Colonel Edgar S. Hyde) together with the original image in a glass cabinet. Similarly (but not as obviously representing single artifacts or images from the MAA’s collection), the other newly commissioned art works by Lanu Pongen or Ram Mandavi showed, in form and content, close links to displayed pre-independence artifacts, such as painted imaginaries of the Naga or figures from Bastar. In this way, the exhibition found a way of combining the “opening the boxes” process with a post-colonial agenda. Looking at some of the museum’s collections from India for the first time in decades, the exhibition was also an outcome of the attempt to figure out details of the life histories of the things housed there. At the same time, the MAA continues to establish itself as a museum that is not only talking about “the other” through ethnographic collections, but one that is also giving contemporary stakeholders, here from Adivasi communities, a voice in shaping the display. *Another India* found a cooperative way of bridging the gap between the museum’s past and Adivasi’s present-day material culture.

These bridges, however, did not always come out clearly through the display. Dialogues between contemporary and older objects were not as much visible in the artifacts’ line of sight or in the spatial arrangements of the exhibition. The new artifacts seemed rather to be placed within the exhibition by criteria of regional affiliation. For instance, Lanu Pongen’s marvelous *Naga Warrior* sculpture was situated in close proximity to other—new and old—representations of Northeast Indian culture, but it did look away from them into the middle of the room (thus drawing greater attention). And Bhupendra Jaidev Baghel’s *Colonial Encounter* statue drew so

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much admiration as a wonderful piece of art in its own right that the relation to the photo revealed itself only on closer inspection or when reading the accompanying text.

The text—from a social anthropologist’s point of view—was another strength of the exhibition. Upon entering, it carefully introduced to the visitor four major issues related to Adivasi in India: imaginary Indias, colonial encounters, portraits and stereotypes, and anthropologists and others. These four statements, which did not overburden the visitor with long explanations, corresponded delightfully well with the stories of the displayed parrying weapon, Baghel’s statue, the Portrait of Mamie, and the Guligan image. The texts also did not claim to state absolute truths, but rather they raised questions and pointed to blind spots. They introduced the different perspectives that played a role not only in anthropology and museums, but also in this particular exhibition. The text thus disclosed the reflexive position of the museum and its curators. This stance continues and is deepened in the exhibition catalogue (printed by *adivaani*, an Adivasi publishing outfit based in Kolkata) (Elliott 2017).

Yet, text sometimes seemed too necessary for understanding the display. For example when ornaments from Chota Nagpur were put on view in one showcase, the accompanying text stated that “presented here removed from the bodies that gave them movement and sound, [the ornaments] call our attention to absent bodies.” This was one possible interpretation of the artifacts in the exhibition. Yet, for my understanding, this was not what the ornaments as displayed and arranged in the room evoked. Overall, the artifacts’ collectors and museum makers continued to play a large role in the explanatory texts—for obvious reasons—and thus do not only overlap, but partially covered up the unknown creators or users of the artifacts as well.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition displays selected objects from various Adivasi communities, ranging from skirts, headdresses and jewelry to musical instruments, paintings and statues of deities. Geographically the contexts spanned from the Northeast to the South of India, representing the Santal, Maria Gond, Naga, Toda, and numerous other named or unnamed communities. It referred to hunting techniques, religion, ornamentation, warfare, and representation, to name but a few themes. In 108 square meters, an exhibition with such a variety of subjects, areas, and communities can only remain at the surface of such a huge topic as “Indigenous Expressions in South Asia.” Hence even though the exhibition in general was structured according to communities or areas—starting with an overview of India and its relation or conception of indigenous people, ending with Northeast Indian indigenous communities—the visitor expecting a conventional educational tour that they would have left with an in-depth knowledge about the characteristics of several Adivasi communities would have been disappointed. Neither is there a superficial overarching “indigeneity” argument that would communicate a kind of pan-Indian Adivasi identity. What the exhibition did—and did with great care and success—was to combine the presentation of older ethnographic collections with contemporary art. Text is required to transform this combination into a dialogue and a multi-perspective conversation. Yet it allowed the visitor to decide, in a complex entanglement of colonial encounters, museum history, and artistic expressions, to explore these to the depth that they wanted to. The visitor was provided with a wide range of possibilities: from contemplating the relation between Hinduism and Adivasi art and religious forms when seeing Bokli Nageshwar Rao’s *Ocean of Blood*, to learning about J. H. Hutton’s attachment to a head taker’s ornament. *Another India* was, for these reasons, a very insightful and intriguing opportunity to explore cultural expressions of indigenous India.

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