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## **Museum as Archives: A Colonial and Postcolonial Interpretation of Visual and Written sources**

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**Abstract:** Museums were typically seen as merely collections of objects, displayed in what appeared to be uninteresting ways, and which, for tourists, were things that needed to be ticked off a checklist, or as a day trip from a school. The idea has thankfully gone far beyond these beginnings, with museums now seen as more active (rather than static) spaces, and which constantly engage with the contemporary scenario in multiple ways. This paper will try to identify some concerns and issues to answer query that come along when museum and archives or Museum as archives are discussed.

Is a museum a static space? It is an unfortunate reality that this has long been considered the case. Museums were just part of (usually) city spaces, seen as dusty and boring places, which were visited only when one was forced to – either as a tourist, to tick something off a list of ‘what to see’, or as an ‘educational’ trip for students. But a museum is necessarily far more than this. It is informed by many perspectives – national, ethnographic, cultural, heritage, and many more. A museum is thus an archive of both ideas and knowledge, as seen through the objects and materials encompassed within a designated space. This paper explores, first, the changing approach to museums globally, specific study museums in colonial and postcolonial India.

It needs to be noted that the need for museums and archives to picking up from come together in the global age of digitalization increase the responsibility of social scientist. Other than bringing these various forms of institutional repositories together, it’s also important to study how and in what way/s they reflect as sources of knowledge. Can their physical existence speak? How does one study its tangible and intangible existence?

At large museum can be discussed on following areas:

- Various transitional phases in its functions as cultural and educational.
- As custodian and record keeper of tangible and intangible material evidence of human culture.
- Process of research, interpretation and curation of visual display of material evidence/ objects etc.
- Post exhibition evaluation and analysis of visitor’s responses such conceptualized or non-conceptualize exhibitions.

### **Indian Museum Culture: a review from origin of Museums in India as formal intuition**

The museum and its exhibitions, whatever its apparent subject, clearly illustrate the cultural assumptions of the people who make it. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to emphasize some truths and to ignore others. The assumptions supporting these decisions differ according to culture, its historical past, time and place, and as viewers share these views, there is no questioning of the ways in which exhibits are chosen and displayed. It is only when comparing older and newer installations, or those from different cultural contexts, that we understand the purpose of the installations.

As discusses Bernard<sup>1</sup> how an object, be it a fired piece of clay, a bone, paper with colors applied to it, a lump of metal shaped into a sharp point, a shiny stone which is polished, a feather, everything that we think of as existing in nature, can be transformed through human labor into a product which has a meaning, use, and value.

A pot shard dug up and placed in a museum with a label identifying and dating it becomes a specimen along with thousands of others, which establish, for the archaeologist, a history. A bone found in a particular geological formation becomes a fossil for a paleontologist to read as part of an evolutionary sequence. For someone else this bone ground up becomes an aphrodisiac. The paper covered by paint is a god; in another time and place, it is a work of art. A piece of cloth fabricated for presentation marking the alliance between two families through a marriage becomes a bedspread.

The production and meaning of objects, by shifting the focus from the fabricators of objects to those who commission, pay for, protect, support, and utilize the results of the labor and thought of the producers.

A relationship located in a political context, in which the British increasingly impose on Indians their own conception of value. The objects through which this relationship was constructed were found, discovered, collected, and classified as part of a larger European project to decode the history of India.

It was the British who, in the nineteenth century, defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined. It was the patrons who created a system of classification which determined what was valuable, that which would be preserved as monuments of the past, that which was collected and placed in museums, that which could be bought and sold, that which would be taken from India as mementos and souvenirs of their own relationship to India and Indians. The foreigners increasingly established markets which set the price of objects. By and large, until the early twentieth century, Indians were bystanders to discussions and polemics which established meaning and value for the Europeans. Even when increasing numbers of Indians entered into the discussion, the terms of the discourse and the agenda were set by European purposes and intentions.

From the inception of direct trading relations between Great Britain and India in the early seventeenth century, India was looked upon as the source of commodities, the sale of which in Europe and Asia would produce profits for the owners and employees of the East India Company. Other than textiles Indian products which were essentially seen as utilitarian goods, there was scattered interest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in items thought of as curios and preciousities, or what today might be thought of as "collectibles." These include odd paintings, both by Indians and Lusho-Indians, inlaid ivory chests and other items of furniture, jewelry and precious stones, swords and weapons to be used as decorative items.

European adopted different Interpretative Strategies for "Knowing" India mainly through a construction of a history for India. India was seen by Europeans not only as exotic and bizarre but as a kind of living museum of the European past. The literature on India of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries varies in its content but it established an enduring structural relationship between India and the West: Europe was progressive and changing, India static. Here could be found a kind of living fossil bed of the European past, a museum which was to

provide Europeans for the next two hundred years a vast field on which to impose their own visions of history. India was found to be the land of oriental despotism, with its cycles of strong but lawless rules, whose inability to create a political order based on anything but unbridled power led inevitably to its own destruction in a war of all against all, leading to anarchy and chaos.

India was to be provided with a linear history following a nineteenth century positivist historiography as well. Ruins could be dated, inscriptions made to reveal king lists, texts could be converted into sources for the study of the past. Each phase of the European effort to unlock the secret of the Indian past called for more and more collecting, more and more systems of classification, more and more building of repositories for the study of the past and the representation of the European history of India to Indians as well as themselves.

Colonel Mackenzie's, Jems Fergusson whose ambition to compile the source material necessary to write a history India. Produced whole lot of material collection. and architectural drawings. Such amount was spent in colonial times to create this repository of sources without classifying it as museum or archives. This itself defines the objectives of both as documentary repository.

The surveys and exploration, conceived by individuals and by the Company for the amassing of practical knowledge as part of the agency of rule, led to the formation of important collections. In addition, objects obtained through direct commission and the patronage of artists led to extensive assemblages of text and albums. Many objects of everyday use or produced for a luxury market in India could be bought in the marketplace. Bribery, extortion, and outright theft also played a role in the amassing of significant collections.

This colonial project of constructing history of India lead to the formation of museum as a formal institution in early 19<sup>th</sup> century with same view of eighteenth-century scientific experiment and rationalism. Museums like The Indian Museum had its origins from the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The concept of having a museum arose in 1796 from members of the Asiatic Society as a place where man-made and natural objects could be collected, cared for and displayed. The objective began to look achievable in 1808 when the Society was offered suitable accommodation by the Government of India in the Chowringhee-Park Street area, and the Museum was set up under the guidance of Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, Honorary Curator and then Superintendent of the *Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society*, in 1814. Not surprisingly, those who gave or lent their collections were Europeans, with the sole Indian being Babu Ramkamal Sen, initially a Collector and later the first Indian Secretary to the Asiatic Society. Today, the Museum has been listed in the seventh schedule of the Constitution of India as an 'institute of national importance'. The National Museum, another important institution, had its genesis in the exhibition of Indian artefacts in 1947-48 in London. This exhibition was replicated in India in 1849, at which time it was decided to set up a permanent National Museum and was formally opened to the public in 1960.

National movements and the establishment of the post-colonial independent nations brought about a change in the ways of seeing the world. The conflicts of that time resulted in different forms of appropriation and modernisation, which were then reflected in museums as well. Conscious destruction of historic sites, theft of artifacts, specimens, and museum collections that were formerly spoils of war and privilege of aggressor, were now seen as

improper violations and loss of world's cultural heritage.<sup>ii</sup> Further twists have come about with the disintegration of some nation states in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Questions about nations and nationalism, about ethnicity and identity, or about marginalisation, all must be seen as issues affecting museums. However, in the Indian scenario, the compositions and themes of gallery and its display consciously arrange to the need of preservation of historical multicultural past as well as the uniqueness of its civilization's transformations, from Indus valley civilization to Aryan Vedic period through medieval and colonial India and its independence and formation of federal India.

**The Knowledge project: Victorian projection of histories oriental/ Indian objects: politics and aesthetics in museum in colonial period**

The very first museum of India was undeniably one that took away knowledge and treasures of India under the sign of colonial control. This earliest museum was the India Museum, which the East India Company maintained in its headquarters in London. It was the outcome of the collections sent back by East India Company officers who had developed scholarly enthusiasms beyond the line of duty. The Company's India Museum started as a motley collection of scientific samples, manuscripts and antiquities, curiosities and military loot which the Company Board agreed to house. These collections were built up gratis: as the Board's announcement said. "It is not our meaning that the Company should go into the expense of forming a Collection... But Gentlemen might chose gratuitously to lodge valuable Compositions ..."<sup>iii</sup> What was acquired was kept in storage for many years, until a retired official persuaded the Company to appoint him "Librarian" to the Repository in 1801. Over the next 78 years the India Museum had an erratic history in which the zeal of some scholars and officials was pitted against the resentment of Compare bureaucracy that had to provide space, manpower, and finances to support the growing accumulation of objects. The India Museum functioned – inadequately staffed, inadequately housed, and inadequately publicized, according to some observers – until 1879 when, with the demise of the East India Company, the museum too was dissolved and its collections distributed amongst several London institutions. The India Museum's dispersed collections are today the core of the Indian material in the British Museum., the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the British Library (including the India Office Collection). If this important collection could have had such an accidental beginning and such a provisional life, one would not expect the careers of the museums set up on Indian soil to be much different.

By the time the Mutiny/Uprising of 1857 brought Company rule to an end in India, there were museums in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, all capital cities of British presidencies I would appear that the East India Company was greatly invested in gathering, organizing, and storing knowledge, since it sponsored museums in all the principal cities in its dominion. Yet a closer look at the histories of these institutions suggests that the first museums of India were not, in fact, intentionally conceived by the colonial power, but were rather foundlings thrust upon it for its care.

What was in these museums? The ambitious statements made by museum keepers who asserted that the museum would "serve as an illustrated record of the accumulated knowledge of India" are taken today as evidence of their intention to create an Encyclopedia Indica, a place where all knowledge about India could be lodged.<sup>iv</sup>

**New Palace Museum, Kolhapur: Memory, distortion, history and feeling of being at the museum (colonial history and Postcolonial interpretation)**

Recently, the Indian princely states have been centre of consideration among historians of South Asia. This vast area of princely states was by no means insignificant in terms of its size, political and military presence. They comprised two-fifth of South Asia's territory and about one-fifth of its population at the time when British took over the control of remaining provinces from East India Company in 1858. Each area of subcontinent has its own history of regional and cultural diversity and interpretation with the expanding British Empire.

The varied nature of these states and their different positions in the wider scheme of political governance on the subcontinent has been neglected even by conceptually astute branches of South Asian Studies like post-modern, postcolonial, literary and subaltern studies. Some work that is been published from late nineteenth century onwards are self-contained histories of specific states or the Indian nationalist historiography that illustrated the success of the freedom struggle that had led to the merger of the princely States with the Indian Union.

Picking up the limitations in existing research regarding the creation of and retaining of the legacy and legitimacy through control of land became an difficult aspect for the princely states in both colonial and postcolonial period. Here the aspect of creating and retaining cultural hegemony through public participation becomes an important tool to the creation of and retaining of the legacy and legitimacy. As cultural hegemony describes the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who manipulate the culture of the society the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores-so that their ruling-class becomes the worldview that is imposed and accepted as the cultural norm, at this point one finds that more of mingling of state and people either through the social welfare policy e.g. Mysore state and its medical reforms, Education policy e.g. State of Baroda or through caste reforms by many which are studied in details another aspect that I would like draw attention and would be of my research will be public ceremony its forms of celebration e.g. *Dassahra and Diwall* and Holi festivals and setting up of museums mainly in Royal places. This type of interaction of ruler and ruled is where the space of legitimization is created.

Thus, in this created space of legitimization it becomes difficult for people from not being captivated by its highly evocative power. The historic palace converted into museum calls up feelings and memories in visitors. In this atmosphere people are taken back to an older time, and makes them wonder what other person had transited through same space that they are now passing. This impact on public, along with a particular type of mental and emotional reaction are produced by the presence and absence of the people who once lived in the in the palace. However, above all these places and objects are perceived as true reality and therefore free from manipulations. Thus, such museums and objects successfully generate a combination of cultural images which can convey feeling-perceptions, in addition to knowledge producing an intimate link between collective memory and personal memory. The objective of such museums is not history or life per se, but portrayal of history or life; not the past per se, but its representation. Each corner can be stage managed in order to portray a theme strengthening its impact and message aimed at reconstruction of historical verisimilitude.



However, it must be remembered that the high symbolic value of historic palace museums can lead to their being used by different ideologies as simplified messages portraying cultural identity.

**New Palace Museum of Kolhapur: The socio-political life of objects and interpreting our material culture**



New Palace, Kolhapur: Architected by Royal Engineer Major C. Mant. Construction completed between 1877-84. Watch on the tower is of Land and Bleckley Co. London. This building today has the Museum.

**Historical Background of the Sate of Kolhapur (1707-1949)**

Kolhapur State was a Maratha princely State of British India, under the Deccan Division of the Bombay Presidency, and later the Deccan States Agency. It was considered the important of the Maratha principalities. Kolhapur State, together with its *jagirs* or feudatories, covered an area of 3,165 square miles (8.200 km).

The states of Satara and Kolhapur came into being in 1707, because of the succession dispute over the Maratha kingship. By 1710 two separate principalities had become an established fact, eventually confirmed by the Treaty of Warana in 1731. The British sent expeditions against Kolhapur in 1765 and 1792, Kolhapur entered into treaty relations with the British, after the collapse of the Maratha confederacy in 1812. In the early years of the 19th century the British invaded again, and appointed a political officer to temporarily manage the state.<sup>v</sup>

New Palace Built in 1884, it is also known as the Maharaja's New Place. Major Mant designed the palace. The architecture of the palace is a combination of Jain and Hindu influences from Gujarat and Rajasthan, and local Rajwada style.

The first floor is for the present Maharaja, while the ground floor is dedicated to a fine collection of costumes, weapons, games, jewellery, embroidery and paraphernalia such as silver elephant saddles. A letter from the British Viceroy and Governor General of India is the other memorabilia.

**The Galleries/Themes and Display**

This museum is a museum called Shahaji Chhatrapati Museum at New Palace. Curious and interesting collections from the possessions of Maharaja Shahaji Chhatrapati like guns, trophies and clothes are preserved here. The museum also has large, excellent weapons collection, including a gold-plated, double-barrelled shotgun, some swords, and other guns. There is also one of Aurangzeb's swords at the Shahaji Chhatrapati Museum.

The galleries under the survey are as following

1. Darbar Hall
2. Costumes Robes and Medal Gallery
3. Arms and Armaments
4. Natural History
5. Life Style Gallery

In order to understand the contemporary opinion about the Princely state Museum, a questionnaire was circulated among the following: 1. Children 2. Students of History 3. General Visitors 4. Experts in History

#### **Questionnaire Based evaluation of Galleries and Objects: Meanings and Interpretations**

The Children could not make meaning of the concept of the Princely state but could say it's a state of India's real old king The concept of Princely state as the creation of British colonial rule was clear to the students of History and of course the experts

**This display of materials in museum and close access to these objects that are in the very palace were the heirs of Chh. Shiavji Maharaj live still upholds the very purpose of exhibition to create legacy of glorious history of nation. Specifically important in post-colonial era when India a federal democratic State.**

Children could not understand the meaning of **Princely state Museum and its origin**. They could only say it's our king's museum made to educate us. Mixed response of the general public mostly had adoptions of museum showing wealth and History of Indian king.

Experts could understand the processor of knowledge making through museums and the complications of keeping their right over the private property by making it public through opening it to people

This creates a paradox in the minds of viewers about the historical facts and meaning that they are gaining from the object that that presented to them in particular fashion of ( here its Glorious past) therefore this becomes an visual archive of facts, current socio-political notions of the present time.

**All though the museum building that's the palace is successful in creating the grandeur of past it fails to give its history of being. As in survey result** Children were clueless other than it being a museum. General public mostly had an idea that king lived here and royal family still resides in the palace. Students of History could tell little of its architecture form and kings residence in the same building Experts could give details of its type of architecture, its engineer (Mant) year of completion (1884).

**The question regarding the Gallery where Medals and wardrobe/attire of Maharajas are displayed where the image of Shahu as Lokraja King of subject is achieved. This Image necessary is based on the reformation work that Shahu Maharaj carried in his reign in Kolhapur princely State**

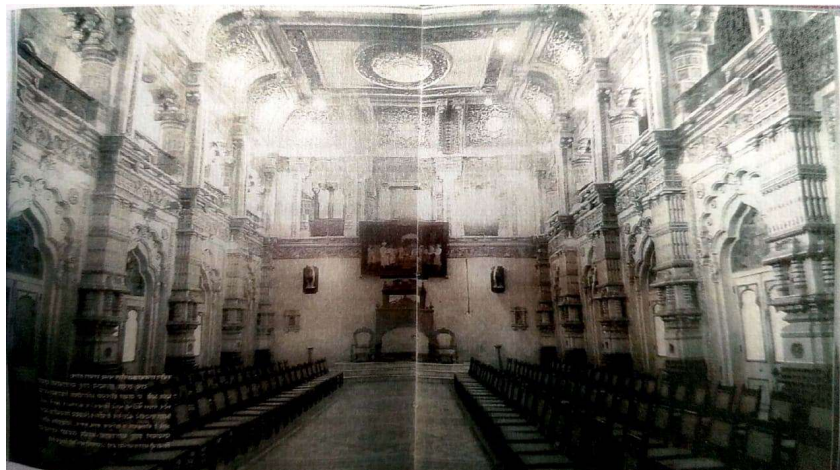


**The Costumes of Chh. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur in a Display Showcase, Picture of Shahu Maharaj.**

Though Children looked at objects curiously but could make no real sense of the object or its purpose of display. General public appreciated the design and make of the costumes of Shahu and were thrilled to have a chance to feel it so closely. Students responded mixed manner of appreciating the personality of Chh. Shahu with comment to requirement of preservation.

Experts had the opinion the display serves the purpose of reaching the personality of Shahu as king of subject as these cloths are simple in make and fashion bring Shahu alike his own subject

Regarding the Medal all three groups except the experts took pride about their king receiving so many awards, failing to understand the acceptance of authority of British who awarded it to King who had accepted sovereignty of British for experts its reflected the acceptance adoption of culture and manners of British



**The Darbar Hall of the New Palace of Kolhapur as an exhibit**

**Magnificence and splendour of Darbar Hall was felt by all four groups who took the pride in spender of Darbar hall as a symbol of power of Maratha king appreciated the design and architecture. However, expert could identify it as process of reinventing the Indian princes by British. Interestingly the huge collection of arms and armaments created pride in spender and variety of arms as a symbol of power of Maratha king. But to expert it was relics of defunct power propped up by the British support.**



**The gallery of lifestyle which display colonial variety/style furniture was though received as curiosity, amusement and appreciated about king's eye and capacity of king to acquire such expensive life style to maintain lifestyle, the experts felt that it is a reminder of hegemony of British in the lifestyle of indigenous elites.**

*This Gallery at one point is justified by people by accepting the royalness of their king and need to maintain it as he is the "KING"*

*Thus here gain the king receives legitimacy to his sovereignty even in the postcolonial period.*

**The zoology/natural history gallery** couldn't justify the Hunting hobby of the late kings to as symbol of bravery in given Time and Space but only accepted it as adoption of British lifestyle and game of get-togethers. Though Children liked the scientific part of it. Conflict was seen on the question of wild life protection.

Overall experience of all groups was educative giving knowledge of great historical past of their King Shahu allowing them to take pride of being citizens of Kolhapur.

The difference that a princely State museum is a particular specific museum of the king informing the greatness of king, History and heritage was clearly brought out.



**Chh. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur in his simplest gesture**

### **Princely States Museums do reflect Colonial and Postcolonial Ideology**

With the case study of New Palace, it can be concluded that they were the creations of colonial ideas of Knowledge to enlighten to the extend for the education of its public. Coming into existence within structures of the colonial era, they are still seen as evocative of structures of legitimacy and the king's legacy, either with a sense of nostalgia and pride (and so being part of present-day identity), or as part of a post-colonial reformulation of an earlier time. The historicity behind the exhibition and theme and meaning of artifacts are unfolded in objective method are only few who are the scholars of history.

We need to point out that objects do not speak, as some art museums claim. The mendacity of objects is all too familiar to markers of collections and exhibitions: once removed from the continuity of everyday uses in of time and space and made exquisite on display, stabilized and conserved, objects are transformed in the meanings that they may be said to carry:

they become moments of ownership, commodities. So, although the origin of object is from the colonial identity as they have not a single past but an unbroken sequence of past times leading backwards from the present moment. Moreover, there is no ideal spot on the temporal continuum that inherently deserves emphasis... in elevating or admiring one piece of the past, we tend to ignore or devalue others. One reality lives at the expense of countless others and thus tends to relate to the glory of our price then reflecting or having impact of the colonial past. Thus Memories fade and cultures step in and takeover. The culture of the museum creates its own juxtapositions, its pertinent locations of authenticity. These are framed by the use of the past that museum culture may choose. With objects transformed from one temporal continuity of use to another, their meanings are entirely reconstituted: the proximity of things to one another perhaps has more authority, more readable meaning than the things themselves.

Objects, ideas and people are met in the interpretive exhibition, a kind of narrative form. It is a narrative concerned with re-presenting the past, making present that which is not usually present...this work can be seen as a kind of dramatic art. David Cole suggest that “theatre and theatre alone of human activities, provides an opportunity of experiencing imaginative truth as present truth... Imagination and presence come up against each other in a way that allows us to test the strength of each against the claims of the other”

In an exhibition site as in theatre, this testing is carried out by witness and the exhibition maker alike. A narrative is being constructed by the audience, whether the exhibition developers like it or not. The space between the object and the label is an active one. The political choice to be made by the exhibition maker is, then, in what way, when and how much to intervene in the shaping of this event. Thus these princely state museum right from its architecture of the building to its collection have the legacy of colonial ideology as it is represented in the objects its self like the hall the imported artifacts the pictures of hunting with their English officials friends, their medals of honour, the life style objects like furniture, wardrobes etc. still in the today they are received by the average visitor as glory of their princes and it legitimizes legacy of the their Maharajas.

Thus, thoughone receives museums as the institution of archive of culture which would educate them their cultural past one can see it cannot act as remote cultural institute but a place of cultural and political discourse. Museums in India have been seen to have failed to transform themselves adequately to become new centres of knowledge production. A Museum, as an archive and a repository of tangible and intangible pasts can be recast as an archive, which brings in scholar and lay audience in a participatory fashion, which would help both the museum and the discipline of history as pedagogical tools.

Museum as archives can be referred to in two ways: one, Archives as a formal section established in the Museum that consist of documentary records e.g. manuscripts, rare publications, maps etc., and the other is interpretation of material objects that are curated and displayed in galleries. The above two case studies define the second form of archives as deeper matter of research and evaluation based the display consist of many prior and post exhibition process. That includes:

- Form selection of Concept, theme, Objects vis-a- vis along
- display labels, information panels, catalogue etc.

- educational activities for all age's groups and different sections of society. the outcome of these interactive sessions between viewers and objects becomes an integral part of visual archival record.
- Post exhibition analysis based on views responses that are collected through formal feedback Sheets/ questionnaire
- These records turned into documentary evidences becoming part of archival records.

Based on these broad I have discussed few arguments that are debated while studying the museum stage that provides platform for various aspects of human life which are performed in various forms like visual, oral, written to become an archive in itself. The very data created in the museum through various processes like inventory of materials, the fact-finding research of each object, the research done while creating an exhibition whether permanent or temporary. It creates meanings that are made each time when studied in different time period of socio-political situation. The actual records of visitors' opinions and the post exhibition data are preserved as archives. All these mentioned documented data become an archive of material objects as discussed earlier by Bernard S. Cohn.<sup>vi</sup> Museum is an Archive of material culture based on representation of human reflections, visitors' memory, responses to socio-cultural, socio-political ideas of time and space studies continuously over the period creating knowledge repository of changing/ developing histories of human being.

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<sup>i</sup>Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge, The British in India*, Princeton University, Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996

<sup>ii</sup> Kalpan, F.E.S. ed. (1994), *Museums and making "ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity*. London: Leicester University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> India and Bengal Dispatches, March 16, 1777. quoted in Ray Desmond. *The India Museum 1801-79*, HMSO. London, 1982, p. 5. Seen in *Material Fantasy The Museum In colonial India*. Kavita Singh, Marg

<sup>iv</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Ch. 2, "The Museum in the Colony: Collecting, Conserving Classifying", in *Monuments Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, pp 43-84.

<sup>v</sup> Kolhapur Gazetteer, Graham, Statistical report, 1885

<sup>vi</sup>Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge, The British in India*, Princeton University, Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996