



# Strange displays

Dive headfirst into Delhi's museums, where the artefacts are stranger than fiction. From Ghaziabad to Gurgaon, join us on a tour of the bizarre and the beautiful at the city's lesser-known collections; and a thorough dusting-off of the museums you think you know. Plus, we've got the scoop on Delhi's future halls of history and culture.

Photography **Aditi Tailang**



# THE BIG DIG

From the odd to the awe-inspiring, *Time Out* excavates individual exhibits from the fertile ground of Delhi's museums.



ANSHIKA VARMA (2)

## National Agricultural Science Museum

We can't imagine anyone not wanting their country to be self-sufficient in food production. But who wants that advice from a **self-sufficient head on the wall**? One such head can be found in the National Agricultural Science Museum. Bathed in red light and superimposed with the actual mustachioed countenance of one of the museum's designers, it looked like a prop from a Dario Argento flick.

Disembodied talking head aside, the experience is informative, thorough, and a good deal more fun than you might imagine an Agricultural Science museum could be. One fascinating chart details **the origin and spread of spices** across the globe (did you know coffee was brought to India by Baba Budan, a seventeenth-century Sufi saint?). Test your agri-quotient with a **touchscreen quiz**: divided into five periods from prehistoric agriculture to the Mughal era, it serves up puzzlers like "Which Mughal Emperor is responsible for the introduction of the Turkey Fowl in India?" (C. Jahangir). Every right answer earns you the two-note fanfare you hear before announcements at the railway station; every wrong one gets a coquettish "Uh-oh". There's also some sound **advice from the Rig Veda** ("Play not with the Dice; pursue Agriculture and delight in the wealth so acquired") and a loud video installation damning the British imperialists for their forced indigo-cultivation policies. *Uday Bhatia*



## Air Force Museum

In 2006, President Abdul Kalam was given a joyride in a SU-30 fighter jet, for which he wrote a letter of thanks to the Air Chief Marshall. That letter, inscribed in steel, is displayed with a **SU-30 model** (still makes sense), with this little green-eyed, round-cheeked paratrooper doll hanging above. We know APJ is a fan of children. But we can't figure out para-baby, any more than we can figure out the female Caucasian mannequins, wearing **IAF uniforms** with nametags like "HS Bhardwaj".

The Air Force Museum doesn't loop-the-loop, but it doesn't crash and burn either. The coolness of air-force history (and a hangar full of planes) provide lift, but shabby curation adds a lot of drag. Outside, past three galleries of jumbled IAF memorabilia, are what should be the highlight – planes from **Spitfires** to **Sukhois**, plus choppers and ordnance – but they're so badly painted, they look like tacky replicas. Take a sense of humour, though, and you'll be barrel-rolling on the floor. *Raghu Karnad*

## Central Bureau of Investigation Museum

Skullduggery! The **cranium of the Raja of Kishangarh**, who had his head cracked open in 1971 by a kidnapper, was once forensic evidence in the possession of the CBI. Today it's a gory exhibit at the CBI Museum, alongside two other skulls – though they're fake, constructed for the investigations that followed. The CBI's strange collection includes almost any prop you'd need for a *Byomkesh Bakshi* remake – rusting but formidable country-made pistols, rifles, ammunition, fingerprints on

yellowing parchments (including an **impression of Abraham Lincoln's thumb**), and crowbars and pitch forks once used for break-ins.

The museum's other intrigues include a detailed **recounting of the murders of Geeta and Sanjay Chopra** in 1978, by the thieves Billa and Ranga, which created a scandal for the newly-appointed Janata Party government. Pictures of the Chopras' corpses, along with those from other encounters with dacoits, make up the grisliest parts of this



ADITTILANG

display. Too much to stomach? There's a more sombre, official arrangement nearby, of **police attire over the decades**, and a series of flags and mementoes gifted by visiting dignitaries and police officials. It's like the kotwali and the crime scene were collapsed into one.

Add to the exhibits, the background – a slightly dark, dank room, on a silent campus in the loneliest spot in Ghaziabad's outback – and you have the perfect crime scene. *Gayathri Sreedharan*



CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURY

## Crafts Museum

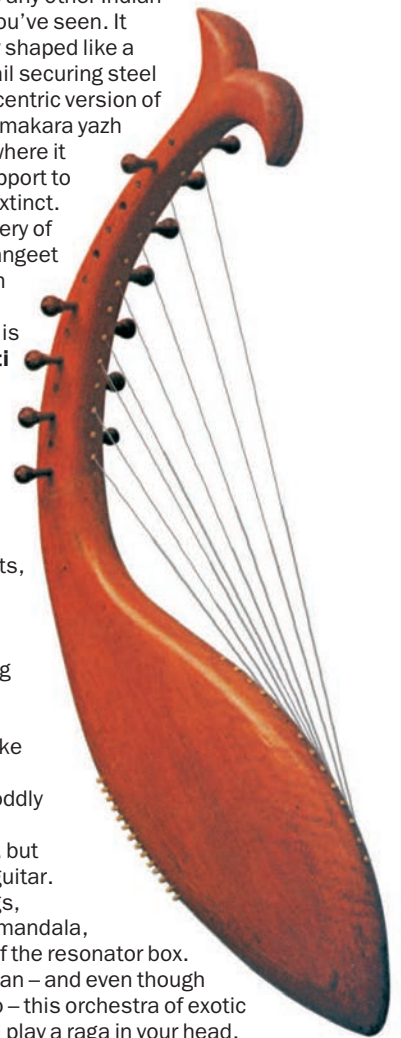
There are wooden sculptures, and then there are **Bhuta sculptures**. Don't take flight if you feel a chill as you enter the gallery of "ghost sculptures", full of beasts and men with multiples heads, bulging eyes and eerie expressions. Before they were acquired from the Mekekattu shrine in coastal Karnataka in the 1980s, these awesome figures underwent a Pranpratishtha ritual, in which spirit-life was breathed into them. We're not sure that they're capable of controlling human fate and the natural elements, but there's definitely nothing lifeless about them.

Like its wooden inhabitants, the National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum (Crafts Museum) is easily among the most vital museums in the city – not least because it hosts **traditional artisans**, who demonstrate their skills live and give workshops in the cool premises. The exhibits are also expertly and sensitively curated, like the wall of **Madhubani murals**, or **Sonabai Rajawar's clay sculpture** on the walls of the audiovisual room. A self-taught artist from Madhya Pradesh who was imprisoned by her husband for 15 years, Rajawar's art earned her the President's Award. Her modest masterpiece is a perfect example of how the 55-year-old institution has done its bit to keep our craft traditions alive. *Nirvana Sawhney*

## Gallery of Musical Instruments

The **makara yazh** is unlike any other Indian musical instrument that you've seen. It has a hollow wooden body shaped like a fish, with 14 pegs at the tail securing steel strings. It looks like an eccentric version of the Western harp, but the makara yazh comes from Tamil Nadu, where it was played as melodic support to vocalists. It is also quite extinct. The instrument at the Gallery of Musical Instruments in Sangeet Natak Akademi's Museum of Performing Arts, is a replica. Hanging right by it is a variant called the **vilkotti yazh**, which has a hollow wooden body shaped like a crescent moon.

The museum, which was inaugurated by violinist Yehudi Menuhin in 1964, has a collection of 600 musical instruments, out of which about 250 are on display. Most are **obscure folk instruments** with names like bakak ding dong (a Bengali stringed instrument), naagphani (a wind instrument shaped like a snake) and ravanhatha. An instrument that looks oddly familiar is the duttatraya veena. It looks like a sitar, but it has a sound hole like a guitar. Twenty sympathetic strings, which function like a swarmandala, are attached to one side of the resonator box. Even if you aren't a musician – and even though there's nothing to listen to – this orchestra of exotic and weird instruments will play a raga in your head. *Kingshuk Niyogy*



## Double take Bhai Mati Das Sati Das Museum vs Academy of Fine Arts and Literature

The chowk opposite Gurudwara Sis-ganj is where the Sikh spiritual leader Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed along with his devotee, Bhai Mati Das. The area is significant in the history of the Sikh faith, but don't go to the Bhai Mati Das Sati Das Museum expecting much memorabilia: it's an arbitrary collection, consisting of a rabab, some coins from Maharaja Ranjit Singh's mint and handwritten manuscripts of the Guru Granth Sahib. There is, however, an exhibit of the entire Chaupai Sahib (a prayer from the Dasam Granth) inscribed on grains of rice.

The rest of the ground floor is an illustrated narrative of the lives of the ten gurus. The basement has paintings of episodes from non-religious Sikh history, such as the 1920s movement to regain community control over gurudwara administration (which was then controlled by British-

installed puppet leaders). Each canvas is accompanied by text-heavy, though not necessarily descriptive, captions in English, Hindi and Gurmukhi.

The paintings are available for sale, but it is unlikely that they'll ever see the inside of an art gallery. They lack the finesse or provenance of Sikh miniatures, the sort you'll find at Arpana Caur's Academy of Fine Arts and Literature. The miniatures, registered with the Archaeological Survey of India, have been sourced from private collectors and are slowly being restored. Many were painted by Kangra miniaturists, under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who occupied the Kangra valley in 1809. The collection includes illustrated equivalents of janamsakhis (hagiographies) from the life of Guru Nanak. The miniaturists are inspired by the Persian school, evident from the fact that Nanak is kitted out in an



anrakha and Persian headgear. Popular Sikh art – like that at the Bhai Mati Das Museum – depicts Guru Nanak as a saintly old man in flowing robes; this may be your only chance to see him as a young man.



**Seering portraits** Guru Teg Bahadur at the Bhai Mati Das Museum; (right) a miniature of Guru Nanak at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature



## Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum

The government spends money every year to put up hoardings around the city, but there's nothing like **Indira Gandhi's blood-stained sari** or **Rajiv Gandhi's blast-tattered kurta-pyjama** to remind you about martyred prime ministers. Especially when they're on permanent display at the very house in which Mrs Gandhi lived and was assassinated. A **crystal-and-glass memorial path** marks Mrs Gandhi's last walk to the exact spot she was gunned down.

However it's not just disturbing exhibits that vie for your attention at the Lutyen's bungalow, now transformed into a memorial to the Nehru-Gandhi family. The place is stuffed with Indira Gandhi's photographs (a charming picture with a tiger cub at Teen Murti), writings, media clippings (her political conquests get more space than the Emergency) and personal items (knitting needles, a Scrabble set, and an **autograph from Charlie Chaplin**, given to her by Mahatma Gandhi).

The museum also has two rooms dedicated to Rajiv Gandhi, where the curators draw upon that great untapped archive – **interviews with Simi Garewal** – to obtain quotes about Rajiv's relationship with his grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, his brother Sanjay Gandhi and his mother. "My only regret is I was so young when he had died," Rajiv tells Simi, about grandpa Nehru. "If I had been older or if he had lived longer, there would have been so much more that I could have imbibed." *Akshita Nahar*



## Gargoti Mineral Museum

Dark, mysterious purple amethysts, spiky crystals of chalcedony, rheumy quartz and brilliant blue cavancite line the shelves. It's not hard to imagine a sighting of the Virgin Mary or an Om within all this lustre (there are, in fact, many gods carved out of ruby or anthracite on display). What we didn't expect was a **Sheru calcite**.

The block of yellow mineral from Aurangabad was dolled up with plastic eyes, whiskers and a tricolour ribbon in honour of the Commonwealth Games last year. Far more dignified are the 65 million-year-old fossilised **dinosaur egg and bones** from Dahod, Gujarat. The region was home to *Rajasaurus narmadensis* (a *T. rex*-like dino) and it has one of the largest dinosaur hatcheries discovered anywhere in the world. Not that the display tells you this; nor the fact that these eggs are often sold illegally.

Much is also up for sale at the Textile Ministry's National Handicrafts Design Gallery & Museum, "curated" by Gargoti, a museum franchise owned by a mineral mining company. Rare gems and more common crystals are labelled "Museum Piece, Not for Sale," but these cards have prices on the back. The rocks rub shoulders with handicrafts from all over India – mostly National Award-winning pieces. There are some beautiful and wondrous things: minutely-detailed cane weaving; a gorgeously life-like clay pumpkin with its stringy innards faithfully reproduced; a polished slice of a meteor; bits of the Moon and of Mars. *Sonal Shah*



## Mumtaz Mahal Museum

The **binoculars of John Nicholson**, the general who retook Delhi from the mutineers in 1857, sit right beside the **sword of Archdale Wilson**, who surrendered Delhi to them. Just imagine: the two of them encamped at the top of the Ridge, the disgraced Wilson fidgeting with his hilt, while Nicholson turns the iron screw to bring the city walls into focus...

It's a little perverse, but one great exhibit at the Mumtaz Mahal Museum, dedicated to Mughaliana from Babur to Bahadur Shah II, is a device that would help bring the dynasty to its bloody end. But then the building itself, once a part of Queen Mumtaz's zenana, became a British military prison after 1857. Today it is gracefully occupied by the museum, the finest of the three inside the Red Fort. It's filled with manuscripts, gorgeous miniature paintings, letters of state, textiles and jewellery from across the Mughal era, as well as artefacts of Company-era British life (like the **Delhi Gazette**, the expat's uni-net mailing list of its time). The Museum only holds original artefacts, and their captions, if not lyrical, are relatively informative. Whether you're drawn to the frayed silk coat of Bahadur Shah II, the **bronze astrolabes**, or the letters from the British Resident to the Emperor insisting on a ban on cow-slaughter, you'll find plenty to spark your imagination. *Raghu Karnad*







## National Museum

Each about a foot high, rectangular, and far from the most intricate display in the Maurya Shunga gallery, the **Shunga pillars from Amin** would be easy to walk past. But you'd pay closer attention if you knew about their escapades. The two sandstone pillars were excavated in Amin, Haryana in 1927, and for the next four decades, sat there on site. That is, until 1968, when a group of smugglers called the Narang brothers – Rama, Mannu and Omi – attempted to steal and smuggle the pillars to foreign buyers in London.

To achieve this, they recruited two Delhi artisans, who made at least three sets of identical replicas, and judicial magistrate Hiralal Mehra, who helped them move the pillars from Amin to their Defence Colony home. The Narangs replaced the pillars with a fake set through the local police station in Butana. A second set was smuggled out of the country. But the third was intercepted in Mumbai, leading to an international investigation, and Interpol red flagging the pillars. It took eight years before Mannu Narang was arrested by Scotland Yard, right before an attempt to sell the pillars for Rs 40 lakhs, and another ten years before Rama Narang was sentenced by a Delhi court. The Amin pillars, on display at the National Museum since 1976, are silent witnesses to a time when Delhi's interest in antiques was centred on how to steal away with them. *Gayathri Sreedharan*

## Parliament Museum

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge..." A life-sized **animatronic Jawaharlal Nehru**, attired in his trademark white jacket with a red rose sprouting from a buttonhole, delivers the historic speech of August 15, 1947 in front of your eyes. His crackly Oxbridge-accented voice streams out from hidden speakers in the room, a recreation of the Central Hall of the Parliament. The animatronic Nehru's eyes are like dark pits, and his heads bobs up and down as he turns over the pages of his speech. Visitors take their seats in the hall, rubbing shoulders with legendary leaders. This writer sat next to Maulana Azad.

The speech ends in about five minutes, and you return to the Parliament Museum, which presents the "democratic heritage of India". Using interactive computer media, virtual reality and animatronics, visitors can learn more about freedom struggle and the Indian Constitution, and join **proceedings at the Lok Sabha** and the Rajya Sabha (no storming the well). A special treat is a room with a giant screen, onto which bursts the figure of Mahatma Gandhi in a **virtual-reality Dandi March**. Stand facing the screen and walk towards it, and you seem to be walking alongside Gandhi. Strains of "Raghupati Raghava Rajaram" sound out, and you're encouraged to clap and sing along as you match your steps with the Mahatma. It's an experience to talk about, whether you take it to heart or with a pinch of salt. *Kingshuk Niyogy*



## Philatelic Museum

It was probably no fun being a postman a hundred years ago. The roads were bad and the company must have been unfriendly. At least that's what we infer from the small **speartips, with bells attached**, apparently a standard part of the postman's kit. They may have been used to ward off bandits and wild animals, or simply as industrial-strength paper-cutters – the National Philatelic Museum doesn't explain. Next to these lies a **curved sword** (now rusted). Other objects, presumably used by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century postmen, include a stylish rectangular leather bag for carrying letters, a bugle, and badges indicating designations.

The museum is the closest stamp collectors can get to paradise in Delhi; almost every stamp issued in India since 1947 has been preserved here. They're categorised under heads like railways, ships, aviation and wildlife. There's even a small section on **stamps of museums**. A recent addition to the museum's collection is a set of stamps issued this year, commemorating the centenary of the world's first air-mail service. Nearby sits a slightly cheesy scale **model of the Sommer biplane** piloted by Henry Pequet, who flew mail from Allahabad to Naini on February 18, 1911. All in all, it's a modest museum, but authorities should probably get back to basics. It's a stamp museum, but the souvenir shop doesn't sell stamps. *KN*





### Shankar's International Doll's Museum

To celebrate Janmashtami this year, the doll-makers at this museum's hidden workshop spent four months working on a new diorama. It's the 45-year-old museum's only multi-sensory display: **a tableau of Vasudeva crossing the Yamuna** with baby Krishna on his head. Thunder crashes and lightening flickers over the plastic rain and frozen waves, adding a gloomy vibe to the dim room, which is already eerie with the hundred glassy doll eyes looking out at you.

When political cartoonist K Shankar Pillai began amassing little people (many of them gifts from visiting heads of state), he envisioned his collection as a mini-United Nations. That vision still defines the Shankar's International Doll's Museum, but it is – perhaps like the UN itself – a bit frayed. There are amazing, gently disintegrating dolls here: **a 250-year-old Swiss doll** (who has been "confined to bed" in the display); Shankar's first doll – an apple-cheeked Hungarian peasant; Japanese Girl's Day festival **hinamatsuri dolls** with precise little fans and scrolls; witch-faced Irish biddies; and so much more. There are also recreations of **Neil Armstrong's first moonwalk**, Krishna cavorting with a bunch of wild-haired gopis, and Indian dolls made in the museum's own workshop. Sadly, information on the doll-folk's individual histories is negligible. *Sonal Shah*

### Tenzing Norgay Museum

Unless you're a mountaineering enthusiast or a Doon School alumnus, chances are you haven't heard of RL Holdsworth. But there's a clue to the former Doon teacher's immortality in a **photograph of Holdsworth smoking a pipe** in mountaineering gear, with snow in the background. This picture was taken on Mt Kamet in Garhwal – at 7,765m, the highest summit climb anyone had done in 1931. Holdsworth made the climb along with Frank Smythe, Eric Shipton and Lewa Sherpa, and though their feat was eclipsed six years later when Nanda Devi was summited, Holdsworth does have one lasting record to his name. That pipe (sadly not here) he enjoyed on the summit is considered the high-altitude smoking record. According to Richard Anderson's article in *The Alpine Journal* 2001: "It was on the same expedition that Holdsworth established a ski-mountaineering record of 7162m by descending from Meade's Col."

There's a lot more derring-do on display for the mountain-mad at the Tenzing Norgay Mountaineering Museum: **a theodolite used by George Everest**; the outfit and **gear of Bachendri Pal**, the first woman to climb Mt Everest; the minutes of the First Committee meeting of The Himalayan Club in May 1928. There's an excellent library upstairs, with every possible book imaginable on mountaineering and the Himalayas. And you have to appreciate their sense of humour: the Indian Mountaineering Foundation building is on top of a small hill, looking down on the bustle of South Campus. *Uday Bhatia*



### Sulabh International Museum of Toilets

We've heard of reading on the loo, but vice versa? Hopefully it hasn't happened since the seventeenth century, when this giant **volume of Macbeth** was created. Lift the cover, and it reveals itself to be a toilet bowl – a French artisan's jab at the English and their so-called classics.

Who gives a crap? Sulabh, that's who. The same organisation that's been installing public toilets across India since 1970 is also responsible for Delhi's strangest, and arguably most entertaining, museum. The Sulabh International Museum of Toilets presents an unsanitised version of history, from Harrappan underground sewage systems to state-of-the-art **crappers fitted with MP3 players**. Did you know that the flush toilet was anticipated in Da Vinci's drawings, invented by John Harrington in 1596, and patented 182 years later by Alexander Cummings? Were you aware that "Su-jok therapy" can be applied to one's palm when there's an urgent need to relieve pressures down below? Whether you're a trivia addict or just a kid intent on wrecking the next family dinner conversation, don't let this opportunity go to waste. You'll emerge flush with excitement. *UB*



## Double take Tribal Museum vs Museum of Folk and Tribal Art



ANSHIKA VARMA (2)



**Dubious dioramas** Tribal lives on view at the Tribal Museum; (right) a musical instrument from South India at the Museum of Folk and Tribal Art

A perfectly proportioned Muria woman from Madhya Pradesh gazes lovingly at the parrot perched on her wrist. The statue is the most arresting display at the Bharatiya Adimjaati Sevak Sangh's Tribal Museum at Jhandewalan, but there are other figures too, including a fetching Jaunsari girl from UP carefully studying her feet and a Toda woman from Tamil Nadu dreamily combing her hair. If you can ignore the paternalism and the exoticisation of the "other" evident in the figures, you could enjoy the museum's

fine collection of artefacts. There are musical instruments, including the Bathudi membranophone, a sort of flat drum; and Madiya dancing sticks. You could admire the intricate weaves and marvel at the bows, metal-tipped arrows and assorted weaponry. The richness of the museum's collection, however, does not camouflage the absence of a unifying vision.

That's not a criticism that can be levelled at the Museum of Folk and Tribal Art in Gurgaon. Started in 1984 by the late artist and art histo-

rian KC Aryan to house the pieces he picked up on his cross-country travels, the museum has an extensive collection of wall hangings and statuettes related to Hanuman, Haryana's favourite deity, rare bronze ware, masks, patakas or ritual flags, wood and ivory combs, woodcuts and an impressive range of objects that were once an intrinsic part of the lives of indigenous peoples. The red brick bungalow also happens to be the home of Indologists Dr Subhashini and BN Aryan, who have inherited their

father's abiding passion for this country's near-extinct arts and crafts. Pieces like the marriage post from Bastar, which adorns a corner of the reception room, the tribal masks that look almost modern in their pared down simplicity, and the ferocious giant iron mask that was once a mould for the central head of Ravan's effigy, are no longer made. "My father was collecting these pieces before anyone else was.

Temple priests would approach him and sell him their patakas for ₹5 back in the 1970s. They have stopped making them now because the younger generation is no longer interested," says BN Aryan, pointing to a colourful specimen depicting the Navagrahas. The Aryans support their passion by lecturing on Indian folk and tribal art at universities across the world. "Most of what I learn goes back into buying rare pieces for this place," says Aryan, his arms spread wide to take in the museum's magnificent collection.

Oh, and not a statue of a noble savage in sight. *Manjula Narayan*



### Listings

**Academy of Fine Arts and Literature** 4/6 Siri Fort Institutional Area (2649-6289). Daily 9am-7pm. Free.  
**National Agricultural Science Museum** NASC Complex, Dev Prakash Shastri Marg, Pusa Campus (2584-6375). Tue-Sun 10am-4.30pm. Entry ₹10; free for students.  
**Air Force Museum** Palam Air Force Station, Palam (2569-7551). Wed-Sun, 10am-5pm. Free.  
**Bhai Mati Das Sati Das Museum** Bhai Veer Mati Das Chowk, Chandni Chowk. ☎ Chandni Chowk. Daily 7am-7pm. Free.  
**Central Bureau of Investigation Museum**, CBI Academy, Kamla Nehru Nagar, Hapur road, Ghaziabad (0120-2782925). By appointment only; write to the Director

General at [sptgr@cbi.gov.in](mailto:sptgr@cbi.gov.in) to arrange a group visit. Free.  
**Crafts Museum** Pragati Maidan, Bhairon Road (2337-1641). ☎ Pragati Maidan. Tue-Sun 10am-5pm. Entry ₹10; ₹1 for students with identity card.  
**Museum of Folk and Tribal Art** 2009, Sector 4, Urban Estate, Gurgaon (0124-2321783). By appointment only. Free.  
**Gallery of Musical Instruments** Sangeet Natak Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, Mandi Circle (2338-7246). ☎ Mandi House. Mon-Fri 11am-5pm. Free.  
**Gargoti Mineral Museum** National Handicrafts Design Gallery & Museum (Earth Treasures), Rajiv Gandhi Handicrafts Bhawan, Third Floor, Baba Kharag Singh Marg (6470-0053). ☎ Rajiv Chowk. Mon-Sat 9am-7pm, Sun noon-

7pm. Free.  
**Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum** 1 Safdarjung Road (2301-1358). ☎ Race Course. Tue-Sun 9.30am-5pm. Free.  
**Mumtaz Mahal Museum** Red Fort, Chandni Chowk (2327-3703). ☎ Chandni Chowk. Tue-Sun 10am-5pm. Indian citizens ₹15; others ₹100.  
**National Museum** Janpath (2301-9272). ☎ Udyog Bhawan. Tue-Sun 10am-5pm. Entry fees ₹5.  
**Parliament Museum** Parliament Library Building, Pandit Pant Marg (2303-5326). ☎ Central Secretariat. Tue-Sat 11am-5pm. Entry ₹10 (not sold between 12.30-2pm). Groups of three people; children below 10 not allowed.  
**Philatelic Museum** Dak Bhawan, Sardar Patel Chowk, Sansad Marg (2303-6447).

☎ Patel Chowk. Mon-Fri 10am-5pm. Free.  
**Shankar's International Doll's Museum** Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg (2331-6970). ☎ Pragati Maidan. Tue-Sun 10am-6pm, Entry ₹15; ₹5 for children under 12.  
**Sulabh International Museum of Toilets** Sulabh Gram, Mahavir Enclave, Palam-Dabri Marg (2503-1518). Mon-Sat 10am-5pm. Free.  
**Tenzing Norgay Museum** Indian Mountaineering Foundation, 6 Benito Juarez Road (2411-1211). Daily 10am-5pm; closed every second Sat-Sun. Free.  
**Tribal Museum** Thakkar Bapa Smarak Sadan, Dr Ambedkar Marg, Link road (2362-5492). ☎ Jhandewalan. Daily 11am-2.30pm. Entry ₹5.

# DRIVING PASSION

Three transport museums light up the road ahead, says **Sonal Shah**.



The words “Guggenheim” and “Gurgaon” have rarely, if ever, been uttered in the same breath. Yet Vikas Harish had the audacity to refer to the New York landmark as he talked about an upcoming suburban museum. It was no idle boast. Harish, a museologist and the curator of the staggering 85,000-square-foot Heritage Transport Museum, described how a Lloyd Wright-inspired system of ramps and atria will create interior vistas across its four levels.

The museum is one of three projects driven by car-mad Delhi collectors, who are racing to move their antique vehicles out of the garage and into curated museums, parking them within the context of India’s history.

The first to rev up was Diljeet Titus’ Pro Bono Publico Museum for Vintage and Classic Cars, most of which were formerly owned by royalty. It’s currently in the shop for a major overhaul, but Titus hopes to reopen the place to visitors, by appointment, next March. In keeping with the princely nature of his collection, his museum will be set up like “a

giant 25,000 square-foot drawing room,” he said, with antique carpets and cars, palms, and Oslo chandeliers. “The effect is of a 1930s-’40s showroom,” the way cars were typically displayed at Western motor shows at the height of Art Deco style. “I’m not using any technology or electronic gimmickry,” Titus said.

Pro Bono Publico is geared towards serious enthusiasts; every vehicle will have supporting photographs or artefacts that belonged to its first owner. Titus explained, “I’m trying to show that these cars have documented provenance.” In Delhi, it’s a small miracle to hear the word “provenance” matched with “museum”.

Three months ago, restorer and collector Sandeep Katari opened up a little labour of love in Jaunapur Village. Katari sold his accessories shop to fund his museum. “I couldn’t afford a fancy place,” he said. “I want to

“**I’m trying to show these cars have documented provenance**”

show that you don’t have to be super-loaded to do something like this slowly. It takes time – and getting used to abuses from your family – but it should not deter you from doing it on a small scale.” Katari has an abundance

of secondary sources: memorabilia, posters, photos. His museum is a small but tantalising appetiser before the big event: the Heritage Transport Museum, slated to open near Manesar by December.

*Time Out* first spoke to Tarun Thakral, an obsessive collector who also happens to be COO of Le Meridien, in February of 2009. He was just beginning to institutionalise his private collection, which includes palanquins, antique autos and a royal rail saloon. At the time, he said it would be ready in nine months.

Three years later – and with nearly ten crores of Ministry of Culture funding, private donations and sponsorship – Thakral’s vision for the Heritage Transport Museum has grown to incredible scale. It promises to be a deluge of immersive audio-visual displays, archival photos and documents, and a large dollop of the good old-fashioned wow-factor. Its exhibits will include a Bollywood section with Shah Rukh Khan’s *Dil To Pagal Hai* clown car, Gond and Warli artists’ renditions of

**On the horizon** The Heritage Transport Museum nears completion; (below) a 1959 Lambretta from Sandeep Katari’s collection

modern transport, kitsch trucks surrounded by hand-painted hoardings, a period mechanic’s shop, “jugaad” or modified transport, maritime transport, postal stamps, video art, a railway platform and possibly old engines from the Ministry of Railways. Then add a conference centre, a cafe, a library and an auditorium, along with Thakral’s 1947 Piper JC3 Cub plane, and “something big in aviation,” Harish teased. “We really can’t speak about it right now!”

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it Superman? Ultimately, the real surprise at the Heritage Transport Museum will likely be the thought and research behind it. Harish, the head curator, got his start at the National Museum Institute in Delhi but has lived in Paris for the past few years – he knows the wrecked state of local museums.

“There’s a museological joke,” Harish said. “Somebody’s up in a balloon and asks ‘Where am I?’ and the museologist on the ground looks up and says, ‘You’re in the air!’” Whether it’s a hot air balloon or a horse carriage, we expect to be told a lot more than that.

**Sandeep Katari’s collection** Jaunapur Village (98730-33111). Daily, by appointment only.





# WINDOWS IN THE CITY WALLS

Two Old Delhi buildings are waiting to be reborn as city museums, **Sonal Shah** reports.

In a miniature watercolour from 1820, Sir David Ochterlony lords over a nautch, dressed in Mughal garb with hookah in hand. That portrait shows Delhi's first British Resident in his home – a building which still architecturally reflects the life of the famed "White Mughal", as well as the many-layered history of the Kashmere Gate area.

It's a popular belief that the building, which dates back to 1637, was once prince Dara Shikoh's library. Ochterlony had it remodeled in the early 1800s, mixing soaring British columns with the hunkered Mughal arches. Later it was used as artillery barracks; then for various government schools and colleges. Since the 1980s, it has housed the state government's Archaeological Department, which wants to turn this capsule of the city's past into the future site of a Delhi City Museum.

There couldn't be a better location than Kashmere Gate, a neighbourhood that is itself a spread-out, crumbling urban museum. The Dara Shikoh Library is surrounded by city walls, churches, graveyards and historic markets, all sundered by multilane traffic and modern construction. The Delhi City Museum might be the key that unlocks all of Kashmere Gate.

Or it might not. Delhi already has a city museum, less than three kilometres away at Lahori Gate. The defunct Walled City Museum opened in 2004, intended as a cultural shot-in-the-arm for Shahjahanabad. Vijay Goel, a history-dabbler, former area MP and General Secretary of the BJP, gave 50 lakhs of MPLADS money, as well as objects from his own collection, to the new institution. But the three-courtyard 1929 haveli is now derelict: broken stone and pigeon shit is all that's on display. Goel's association is, unfortunately for him, engraved in stone above the entrance. The MCD failed to maintain it, he explained. "Us ka haal he behaal. All the exhibits have been stolen or destroyed, so I took out whatever was left there."

Goel is still urging the MCD to revitalise the Walled City Museum. It has received a proposal to restore and restock the place



from the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. INTACH's preliminary proposal envisions technology superimposed over history, using the kind of gizmo-kiosks that are ubiquitous in Delhi's newer museums. Ajay Kumar, senior project manager in INTACH's Delhi Chapter, described the Museum as a potential "interpretation centre" for the traditions of trade, food and lived heritage of the area.

Meanwhile, the Archaeological Department has also received proposals about the Dara Shikoh Library from – no prizes for guessing – INTACH. As with their plans for the Walled City Museum, the proposal seems to have sprung from INTACH's search for a permanent home for its *Delhi: A Living Heritage* exhibition from last year. Kumar explained the special appeal of the Dara Shikoh Library. "It's near the university, it's near the Metro station, it's near the old part of the city," he said. "Whenever any tourist comes to Delhi, they visit Old Delhi. You could say that locals don't prefer to go that side, but we want to develop the site as an interaction. Why do people go to

Dilli Haat, and not this place?"

So far, most of the "interaction" with the surrounding community has involved professors of Ambedkar University Delhi, which is shifting into historic buildings on the same compound. Anil Persaud, a professor of Liberal Studies, believes that the Delhi City Museum could be one "that exists even outside its walls", linking together Mughal, British

and modern urban history. Referencing the Museum of the City of New York, a paragon of its type, Persaud dreams of bringing the city into the museum, via cultural programming, or even a camera

obscura that uses a periscope to refract views of the city into the museum's interiors.

At this point, however, predicting the museum's facilities is not unlike squinting through a periscope into the future. The Department of Archaeology, accustomed to counting out years in the thousands, seems in no rush. "We're calling for an Expression of Interest again," said Keshav Chandra, the Secretary for Art, Culture, Languages, and also Special Secretary to the Chief Minister. "It is at a very pre-

mature stage."

Until then, the Dara Shikoh Library is filled with the echoes of Persaud's wry comment: "When an archaeological department starts talking about a museum, it's time to get suspicious." The front hall of the library holds a ramshackle museum-repository, all dusty display cases littered with late-Harappan potsherds or ornaments excavated from Mandoli, Bhorgarh and Jhatikara. The centrepiece is a half-buried hominid skeleton, surrounded with pieces of pottery. Its caption – simply, "The Pit" – could easily describe the building around it, or the current state of the Walled City Museum.

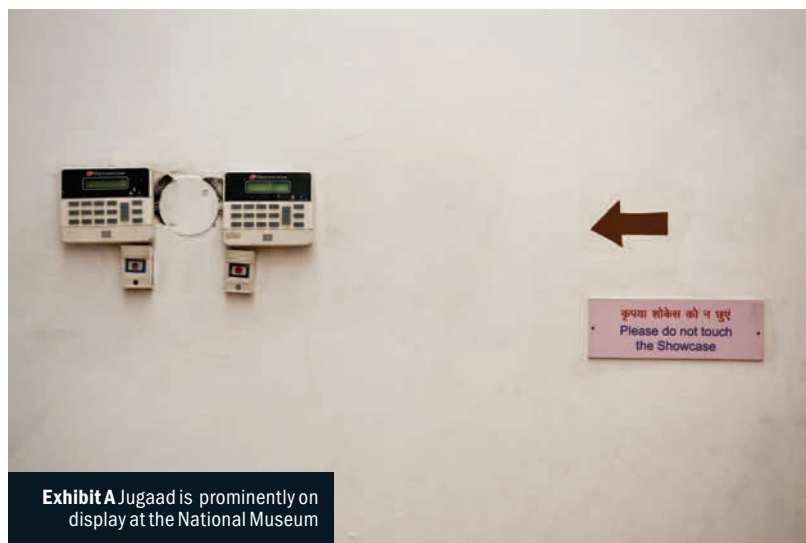
Rather than setting a gloomy precedent, the failure of the Walled City Museum should provide a lesson for the Delhi City Museum. Meanwhile, after the closing of Delhi Town Hall at Chandni Chowk last month, there have murmurs about a potential city museum there as well. If we're very lucky, the city could have two, maybe three, illuminating museums, within cycle-rickshaw distance of each other, creating connections between Delhi, old and new. Though there's no Commonwealth Games urgency behind them, they could do far more for city pride.

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**Why do  
people go to  
Dilli Haat,  
and not here?**”

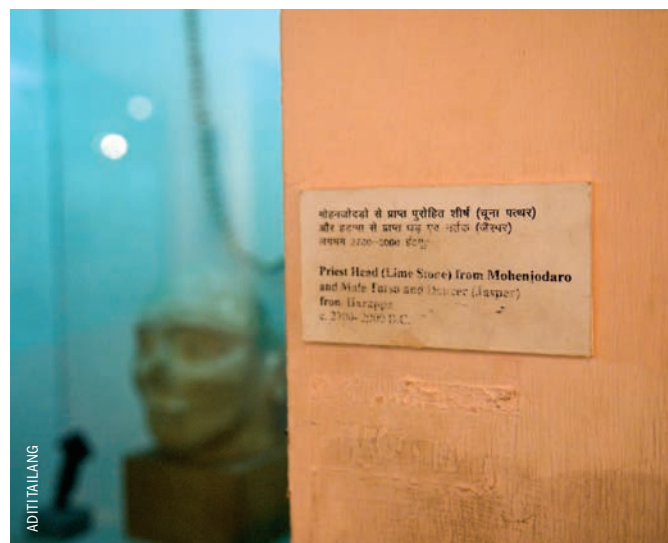


# BLIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

**Pramod Kumar HG** wonders how we can revitalise our museums.



**Exhibit A** Jugaad is prominently on display at the National Museum



In 2008, a celebrated collection of large-format miniature paintings from the royal collection at Jodhpur made its international debut at the Smithsonian's Freer & Sackler Gallery in Washington DC. The show, *Garden and Cosmos*, then moved to the British Museum at London. The exhibition's catalogue listed the National Museum in Delhi as its penultimate venue, in November 2009, before the show would return home to Jodhpur.

Instead, the calendar of events abruptly changed. The exhibition flew to Australia before returning to Jodhpur, skipping Delhi. The National Museum gave no explanation, but those in the know talk of how its exhibition officer at the time refused to have any semblance of a discussion with the *Garden and Cosmos* curatorial team until the eleventh hour. The National Museum also demanded complete control over the exhibition's sceneography, something no curator would allow anywhere in the world.

This wasn't the first time that Delhi missed the opportunity to see a world-class art exhibition. Overseas and even Indian collaborators complain about the capital's inadequate galleries, non-existent lighting and humidity controls, and poorly trained staff for mounting exhibitions. Even translating labels from English into Hindi is an ordeal, one in a sea of problems that ail museums in

the nation's capital.

Skim a list of Delhi's museums, and you'll be impressed by how innovative they sound, like Sulabh International's Museum of Toilets or the Sanskriti Kendra's Museum of Everyday Art. In reality, most are badly-kept curio corners masquerading as museums. Let's start right at the top, with the country's apex museum. What does a visitor see as they enter the foyer of the National Museum? Two shower curtain-like waterfalls (mercifully between glass sheets) decorate the sides of what used to be the reception desk. While you struggle to find the reception, you can't possibly miss the fake Ormolu gilt-framed enlargements of Raja Ravi Varma paintings. They adorn not just one level, but run right up the rotunda's two-storey height. What could have possessed the museum, which holds in its custody over two lakh original objects, including arguably India's finest art collection, to display reproductions of paintings not even from its own collection?

But what else can you expect from a national institution that has functioned without a head for over 15 years? The mandarins at the Ministry of Culture claim no suitable person could be found. The grapevine has it that

qualified candidates refused the position because their demands (like the freedom to appoint or fire underperforming staff) were always to be too unorthodox and independent for the babus at Shastri Bhavan.

This isn't a malaise restricted to the National Museum – it's the story of most museums in Delhi, and across the country. Indian museums, like the Bhau Daji Lad in Mumbai, were first built by the British to impress and educate the natives. They were presented

as a "wonder house" for the masses. Sadly, our museums retain that blinkered vision today. The world over, the trend in museums has been to excite, delight, inform and entertain, but we cling on to didactic dioramas and 3-D models of incomplete structures

behind dusty glass panes, all illuminated by fluorescent lights.

This myopic view of culture was on prominent display in recent years, as Delhi prepared for the Commonwealth Games. The fact that the National Museum shop was revamped, but not the museum itself, says enough about the priorities of our planners.

The problem is complex. On the one hand, the majority of our urban population has been pushed away from museums by the highly exclusivist set that

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has governed the display and production of art in museums since independence. On the other hand, the community of new visitors is connected to social media, and more ready to be excited and educated by the Internet. This audience won't stand for present-day museums, their didactic messages or their desperate condition.

*Pramod Kumar HG is the Managing Director of Eka Archiving Services, a museum-consulting company based in Delhi. He can be contacted at [pramod@ekaresources.com](mailto:pramod@ekaresources.com).*