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## **How things enable humans: Objects, Curiosity and Colonial Exhibitions (1880s)**

### **Abstract**

By focusing on the Calcutta International Exhibition (Calcutta, 1883-84) and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition (London, 1886-87), this paper suggests that inanimate objects have a power to control the emotions of human beings. In these exhibitions, a number of Indian objects contested pre-conceived notions of the British jurors and audience about uncivilized India; decline of Indian craft. British jurors found many exhibits “excellent”, “instructive examples”, “exotic”, “perfect”, “remarkable”, “superior”. They acknowledged that the Europeans would not be able to judge the exhibits. The main reason of the curiosity of British jurors and audience was decontextualization of objects. Exhibits produced and consumed in a context were displayed in another context. These curious things, which Indian craftsmen produced, thus challenged the claims of British curators about their superior knowledge and their ability to explain everything within scientific framework.

### **Introduction**

In the 1880s, the British state faced various challenges at home and in overseas colonies: Strong resistance in Afghanistan and Africa; inclusion of new territories in the empire; establishment of the Boy’s Brigade to promote Christian values in youth and Primrose League to involve working class men in politics through social and political campaigning; split in the Labour Party; formation of All India National Congress to encourage Indians to participate in the politics.<sup>1</sup> These developments coincided with the emergence of history as a scientific discipline. British intellectuals facing the problem of defining the multi-ethnic empire devised a genre of imperial history which could better explain the diversities, conflicts, inequalities, pluralities, race, settlement, governance, traditions and science in the colonies and metropolitan.<sup>2</sup>

To control diverse territories and cultures, and to address the issues of identity and political split, one of the British strategies was to invoke pride in the empire among state officials and English public by displaying colonial possessions. The spectacular displays were also supposed to impress the people in the colonies. Paul Rich suggests that the British had limited “ability to enforce politics by force. They used ceremonies as a substitute for gunboats”.<sup>3</sup> David Cannadine also

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explains how ceremonies, architecture, honours and chivalric orders based on class and social status represented and shaped the imperial image.<sup>4</sup> Aimed at displaying the grandeur of the empire in the 1880s, the British colonial state organized a number of large scale exhibitions in major power centres. For this paper my focus will be on two exhibitions: The Calcutta International Exhibition was organised in 1883-84, in Calcutta, the capital of British India. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition was curated in 1886-87 in London, the capital of British empire. Millions of visitors visited these huge exhibitionary complexes. British officials and public were embroiled in a relationship of mixed emotions regarding Indian crafts. The curators tried to invoke pride—based on their superior knowledge and civilization—by collecting, exhibiting and interpreting Indian exhibits. But cross-cultural encounter invoked the emotions of curiosity and surprise among the British organizers and visitors.

### **Feeling of Curiosity in Nineteenth Century**

The meanings of curiosity changed over time. It was considered a vice under the medieval Catholic Church's influence, a sin "in wanting to know too much, but sometimes in wanting to do something inappropriate".<sup>5</sup> It was synonym with animals.<sup>6</sup> From the seventeenth century onwards, secular intellectual circles began to see 'boldness' and 'curiosity' as healthy passion and virtues.<sup>7</sup> In nineteenth-century Europe, the category of curiosity was confusing. People used it for expressing appreciation and criticism.<sup>8</sup> It meant "rare, exotic, excellent, fine, elegant, delicate, beautiful, noteworthy, select, collectable, worth buying, small, hidden, or experimental, and so on",<sup>9</sup> and also "useless, uncommon, expensive, exclusive, learned, or short one, but conversely at other times as a useful, common, cheap, popular, unlearned, or long one".<sup>10</sup>

Here, we are concerned with unbridled curiosity, a feeling produces ambiguity about things, destabilises the existing categories and identities by contesting agreed ideas and social regulations. This unbridled curiosity in western epistemological tradition, or more precisely in David Hume's conceptualization, subverts knowledge production even undermines our existing knowledge leading to a crisis of skepticism.<sup>11</sup> Barbara Benedict shows that in early modern English culture, curiosity was considered "a threatening ambition, an ambition that takes the form of a perceptible violation of species and categories: an ontological transgression that is registered empirically. Curiosity is seeing your way out of your place. It is looking beyond".<sup>12</sup> The one who experiences this feeling, does not know how to respond by employing preconceived rationality, and unexpectedly reacts either by appreciation (excellent, good, fine, elegant, delicate, beautiful, etc.) or rejection (bad, unaesthetic, useless, uncommon, etc.).

Theoretically, Bill Brown's Thing Theory proposes that inanimate objects can form and transform humans subjects.<sup>13</sup> Brown distinguishes between objects and things: objects tell us about history, culture, nature and society; however, things are objects which do not perform their primary function and do not serve as a window. For Brown, "the story of objects asserting themselves at things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation".<sup>14</sup>

British wanted to contact real world of India through Indian things in exhibitions. But during the encounter, Indian things began to defy referentiality and preconceived notions. The British “began to confront the thingness of objects when they stopped working...when their flow within the circuit of production, distribution and consumption has been arrested, however, momentarily”.<sup>15</sup> In this encounter, British curators could not apprehend the Indian things. There was something excessive to their materiality and the British idea of utility—“their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence”, which made them irreducible to explicable objects. These “things lied beyond the grid of intelligibility [and]... outside the order of objects”. These things existed but “not in phenomenal form”, rather their effects were phenomenal, invoking the feeling of curiosity among British curators.<sup>16</sup> More British came close to things, more they began to realise how far they were from them.

### **Calcutta International Exhibition**

Due to the limited number of people available in Calcutta, the organisers had to engage either exhibitors or agents on jury for evaluating over 100,000 exhibits divided into 142 classes.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition literature mentions curiosity of jurors who could not understand many things and contested different myths and ideas, which colonial officials associated with Indian art and culture: the jurors gave quite different opinion about the jewellery of Assam, than the British bureaucrats who wrote the introduction to the province in the report; similarly, another dominating idea contested in this exhibition was the decline of India art and craft. In fact, the British officials were surprised to see a variety of exhibits, which they encountered for the first time. In a number of cases, they realized that the craft was not declining, rather, it was changing according to the demand.

Colonial administrators mention many exhibits as curiosities but do not explain them. While commenting on the “miscellaneous” section of Bengal Court, the official report mentions a few curious specimen of “mats woven with thin strips of ivory”, which Maharaja of Darbhanga and Nawab Ahsanullah donated.<sup>18</sup> We do not find any further details except prices. Similarly, several “miscellaneous articles” in the same Court included “some curious native playing-cards exhibited by the collector of Shahabad, some handsome manuscripts, and some large-sized models representing the ceremonies of a Bengali house-hold”.<sup>19</sup> The category of miscellaneous displaying curiosities without giving much details about the exhibits is significant. Bengali used to play cards for leisure, manuscripts represented knowledge tradition, and large-size models were for representing various ceremonies held in Bengali house-hold. Unexplained exhibits show unfamiliarity of the British about past-time activities, knowledge and social life of Bengal.

Previously a Muslim State, Mysore’s exhibits questioned the pre-conceived notion of the British about the development of Fine Arts and the suppression of Hindus by Muslims in India.<sup>20</sup> For the curators, “several exhibits of [Hindu gods in the section of fine arts had] intrinsic merit”.<sup>21</sup> The surfaces of the sculptures had bright colours giving a fresh look and angles were as clean as the first cut showed the skills of craftsmen. Similarly, Hindu mythological figures delicately carved on

woods of Sandal, Sorab and Sagar invoked curiosity among the British organisers and jurors:

“The boxes, fans, cabinets, and cases forming this collection, were entirely covered with elaborate patterns, consisting for the most part of medallions illustrating Hindu mythology, encircled by intricate foliage, with figures of animals in relief. The details incongruous in themselves, were grouped with eastern skill, and formed an exceedingly rich ornamentation. The minuteness of the carving on wood of so hard and close a grain as sandal demands so much care and practice that the production of a single panel is the labour of months”.<sup>22</sup>

The organisers discovered that Muslim rulers, such as Tipu Sultan (1750-1799), patronised figurative art and the British rule terminated this patronage and badly influenced the quality. Lack of patronage forced artists to adopt other professions to manage their finances. But still the Mysore paintings “printed with primitive appliances excel all exception in the durability and brightness of their tints”.<sup>23</sup> However, wherever the local rulers were powerful and influential, they continued patronising figurative art. For instance, in Madras Court, “two good portraits in oil of a prince and princess of Travankur were exhibited...these were the work of a native artist, and merited very high praise”.<sup>24</sup>

The British considered some regions such as Assam, Rajputana and Madras as far flung, uncivilized without any tradition of beautiful craft. In the exhibition report, Assam was presented as a province inhabited by aboriginal population “who were slowly attracted by the force of their superior civilization and drawn within the pale of the Hindu religion... In a country where diet of prince and peasant alike consisted mainly of rice flavoured when possible with a sufficiency of salt, the Court had no example of luxury to set to its subjects even in the matter of cookery”.<sup>25</sup> The organizers did not expect Assam—which was “touching the confines of barbarous tribes on all sides, and even including many such tribes within its own territory”—to compete with other “older, larger and richer provinces”.<sup>26</sup> This narrative shows the kind of preconceived ideas the colonial bureaucrats had about Assam.

The display of Assam challenged the preconceived notions of the organisers and jurors. They found saddle “(preserved among the inhabitants of the Manipuri valley—the cradle of the game of polo) more closely in material and workmanship to the European saddle than does that of other eastern nations”.<sup>27</sup> The jewellery of Manipur, largely made by the goldsmiths under the patronage of the Maharaja of Manipur, had “naturally graceful designs,” and “gold necklace of sumptuous description, composed of indented plaques of gold, from the outer edged of which depend gold drops, the size of the plaques increasing gradually to the middle of the necklace...form very splendid decoration, in which the richness of the material

and the half barbaric originality of the design compensate any lack of delicacy noticeable in the execution”.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Barpeta’s gold work attracted the attention of curators: “This is used for necklaces and bracelets in gold filigree work, which for beauty of design and workmanship compare favourably with the manufacture of any other part of India, while possessing a charm entirely its own in the beautiful form of pendant peculiar to this part of Assam...Nothing can be more original or graceful than this ornament, in which both form and expression are perfect of their kind”.<sup>29</sup> Even the shape of the necklace was a source for curiosity. The curators took keen interest in the discussion of the origins of the shape. Many of them believed that it was inspired from a half-opened flower or fruit. However, for locals, its shape was imitated from a shell, which their poor forefathers used to wear around neck as a decoration. For the British, this “beautiful”, “graceful” and “perfect” ornament, which was called gold by locals, would find many patrons outside the region of Assam through the Exhibition.

One reason of British curiosity was their little awareness of Assam, which had a significant network of goldsmiths, traders operating in Khassia Hills, Jaitia Hills, Barpeta in Kamrup district, Jorhat in Sibsagar district, Manipur and Sylhet. Considering local needs and market outside the Assam region, goldsmiths used to produce various items. For instance, in hilly areas such as Khassia, rich women liked large necklaces of coral and gold shells were filled with lac. Goldsmiths used pure gold and most items comprised half gold and half silver, usually inner surface was made of silver and the outer was of gold. Various shapes of flowers, wreaths, crowns and boats were made on different kinds of bracelets such as *khangam* and *kharu*, and on necklaces such as *sonapoki* and *gulluguta*. Corals and gold were mainly imported from Calcutta, and designs in Manipur were mainly followed especially in Sylhet, which had a considerable number of goldsmiths and traders from Manipur. It was after the exhibition, a number of British publications began mentioning and appreciating jewellery, goldsmiths and trade network in Assam.<sup>30</sup>

As in the case of textiles, jewellery too had a religious and emotional value in India. For temples, people used to donate gold and jewellery to get the blessings of deity. Necklaces, bangles, earrings and nose pins were gifted to girls on marriage. In nineteenth-century India, pregnant women were not allowed to wear jewellery. When a child started reading the Quran, or reciting *bismillah* (the verse Muslims used to say for beginning any work—I began by the name of Allah, the most merciful and beneficent), a gold or silver plate was hanged with red thread around his or her neck. Bridegroom’s family used to send different kinds of jewellery to the bride.<sup>31</sup> All these jewelleries had an emotional value for boys and girls and were a means of remembering those special occasions and people who gifted them.

For the local princes and notables, jewellery was also a means of displaying pride. Some jewelleries were particularly designed and produced for them. For instance, *kalgi*, “a huma or phoenix (bird of paradise) feather, having generally a pearl fastened to the end of it; worn only by kings and the great”. Similarly, *turha*, “worn as the preceding, and made of gold and precious stones”.<sup>32</sup> Local rulers

used to patronize goldsmiths for producing particular type of jewellery which they wore on special occasions or during durbar proceedings. When the British organized Calcutta International Exhibition, various princely rulers, included those in Assam, sent their special collection. These collections evoked curiosity among the British and contested their preconceived notions about the region.

For the British organisers, north-western state of Rajputana which comprised eighteen feudal states, was the only Indian region which continued with “ancient Hindu religious system, social customs, and methods of agriculture and manufactures”. Even the Muslim invaders could not break these traditions. However, despite labeling the region as highly religious and traditional, the curators found the exhibits innovative. Ajmir’s bangles, rose-water sprinklers and handles looked to them quite fancy. These were delicately decorated with small paintings, such as elephant painted on a little box in different bright colours, an artist making a fly, “a chain with instruments so tiny as to require the aid of a microscope to see them...”.<sup>33</sup> The variety of clothes in terms of material and colours impressed the jurors: “*Pagris* made from European thread are fine specimens of native muslins, with beautiful borders, in which gold thread is often tastefully introduced”.<sup>34</sup> Local arms displayed were “curious and unique, and of great artistic, ethnological, and historical interest”.<sup>35</sup> For the curators, perhaps these arms were no longer useful with the modern weapons British brought in India, but these weapons showed how developed were industry and science of treating steel and iron among the Rajput tribes.

The organisers considered exhibits in the Madras court as “ordinary”. The craft industry declined due to the lack of transportation, and tourists did not visit Madras too often. Circulation of capital necessary for encouraging the local industry was not possible in Madras, unlike other provinces. However, the exhibits did contest the organisers’ opinion: “The delicacy and accuracy of carving displayed on [cocoanut shells and bael fruit from Ganjam] was most remarkable...”.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, “another feature of great merit was the work made at Vizagapatam, consisting of ivory, bison-horn, or tortoise shell laid on to sandal wood, or of a combination of the three materials ...[by] Yendapilli Virasalingam and G. Chinna Viranna [respectively]. The production of each were of nearly equal excellence, but a combined work and jewel-box exhibited by the latter was said to be the best specimen of the work ever made”.<sup>37</sup>

One the closing of the Calcutta International Exhibition, the remarks of organizers show how they were amazed by the Indian exhibits. Augustus Rivers Thompson, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal remarked: “Who that has seen the beautiful carpets and shawls from Kashmir and Agra, the silken and muslin fabrics of native manufacture, the silver-work of Cuttack, the ivory-work from Murshidabad, the wood-carving from Burma, and the brassware from Benares, Jaipur, and many other cities, but must realise the great resources of native technical talent in those directions in which delicacy of touch and colouring are especially called into use”.<sup>38</sup> The Viceroy of India said: “Many visitors from Europe and America and from Australia have been surprised to have seen the beauty and the variety of the products of this country, and the many proofs of the artistic skill of the inhabitants of India which those Courts offered”.<sup>39</sup>

British press viewed the Exhibition from different perspectives. A group of journalists believed that Indian curiosities were instructional for “dispelling some of the erroneous notions” and the Exhibition would be “spreading a keener appreciation of the beauties of the indigenous arts of the country”:<sup>40</sup>

“The people who visit the Exhibition from distant countries the collection will be peculiarly instructive, as there is an idea abroad that India is a laborious country, inhabited by a laborious people, whose sole knowledge of arts and manufactures consists in what they have been taught by Western nations. How mistaken this idea is, every well-informed man knows, for history tells us that when Europe was enveloped in the gloom of the dark ages, India supplied her with the beautiful fabrics and the luxurious products which she was not sufficiently advanced in civilization herself to supply. The volume of trade in those days flowed from the East to the West and not from the West to the East. Even up to comparatively recent times England consumed a large quantity of Indian manufactured cotton goods...”<sup>41</sup>

The other group of British journalists was concerned with the utility of displaying “Hindoo” and “Mussulman” exhibits and the scope of this skill in the European market.<sup>42</sup> Instead of asking craftsmen to practice such delicate but irrelevant craft, they could be trained in operating modern machinery. Keeping them in centuries old practices was the waste of their time and energies. For them, Indians were resistant to change and that’s what these curiosities represented in the Exhibition. Problems with conservative Indians was that they were also negatively influencing British living among them. The British had now began using primitive tools for agriculture, for instance.<sup>43</sup> The resistance to consider curiosities and incorporate them in the European knowledge system reflects the dynamics of the feeling of curiosity. These journalists could not comprehend the utility of the objects and dismissed them as primitive, outdated and traditional.

Interestingly, a few observers viewed curiosities as forgeries:

In Jeypore Court, “I find a repetition of old story and as the genuine antiques are exhausted, the Jeypore makers have found it necessary to keep up the supply by forging new armour to look like the old. These swords and daggers are good to look at, and may deceive the unwary, but they would prove awkward aid in a fight. Still the moralist must feel pleased that the world is becoming so

amiable that armourers forge weapons to amuse people who have not thought of using them”.<sup>44</sup>

All these above-mentioned responses show how the observers were entangled with Indian things. The British struggled to determine the utility or economic value of exhibits, many of which had emotional and religious value for Indians. These multiple responses suggest the curiosity let the observers to see them in multiple ways. Some were contesting their pre-conceived notions after viewing these objects; some were interested in using them for global trade; many wondered why did the state use them for display if these were so primitive, incompatible with modern machinery. While still others believed that these were not really antique and curiosities, in fact, craftsmen presented them as an antique exhibit to amuse the visitors, who did not know about them. What binds all these responses together in the category of curiosity is the feeling of unknowability and entanglement of things and humans forcing latter to think in multiple ways.

### **The Colonial and Indian Exhibition**

In the Colonial Indian Exhibition, the British curators encountered with a problem of classification. The solution they came up with was to classify Indian exhibits in two broad categories: Art-ware and Economic products. These categories were misleading, art-ware did not mean it was economically insignificant, rather these were unusual for the British. While products in the economic court were frequently available and the British could determine their utility and economic value. The official catalogue describes the basis of arrangement of art-wares as locality, while economic wares was considered “scientific”. Officials acknowledged that the circumstances under which the art-wares were acquired were unknown to those who lived in Great Britain, craftpersons had no awareness about the project and the government had to purchase these exhibits.<sup>45</sup>

Over time, the British organisers began increasingly realizing that decontextualization of exhibits would make it difficult for the English viewers to understand and appreciate Indian crafts. They re-created contexts by making models of a village, jungle, ethnographic display and by showing Indian artisans working at the site of exhibition. These living and dead models further decontextualized the exhibits. India was reduced to a place which was like village and jungle, dominated by beasts, unhygienic, traditional, pre-industrial and tribal.

In the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, a model of village made by a “native of Lucknow” was displayed. It contained a *Zamindar* (land-holder) sitting on a charpoy taking a briefing from a village accountant about collection of rent. To represent instant justice, a man was beaten up by villagers. A Brahmin was decorating an idol, workshops, village shops, a woman nurturing pigs, people shoeing a bullock, while dogs and vultures around, some of them were eating ass near a pond. The model also showed various methods of irrigations such as the use of bullocks on inclined planes. Growing crops of yams and tobacco were shown, and in the field, a farmer was twisting tail of an unmoved bullock.<sup>46</sup>

Designed by a British taxidermist Rowland Ward, the curators displayed a model of jungle life which projected India’s image as a place still dominated by animals.



It was a “sort of introduction to the Indian Courts”.<sup>47</sup> It showed “most interesting birds, beasts and reptiles...wounded boars seeking refuse, and a cheetah in the act of bringing down a deer...magnificent peacocks...buffalos, black buck, hog-deer, sambur, and bears...Twin round the branches of one of the trees overhead is a huge python; while below, emerging from a pool of water, are shown several alligators. All the animals are grouped with great spirit in the most natural attitudes...”.<sup>48</sup>

The ethnographic section displayed various models made of plaster of Paris to give “some practical idea of the variety of races which are found in different parts of India, as well as of various manners in which fabrics are utilized as article of dress”.<sup>49</sup> The curators had a particular understanding of history, which the official catalogue explains: “In ancient times, the Aryans conquered Indo-Turians (old inhabitants of India), soon the former broke up with their ancestral places and “forced to intermarry with the aboriginal of India, they degenerated, and were ultimately no more the pure and intellectual people...contaminated both in blood and religion”.<sup>50</sup> The Muslim invaders also persecuted the Aryans driving them to the mountainous areas. However, the social and religious liberties, and “unmolested trade and commerce” in the British rule would completely erase the racial distinctions so that their study would be “perfectly impossible”.<sup>51</sup>

The curators expressed similar opinion about the tribes living in Bengal and Bombay presidencies. They described the ethnography of the presidency of Bengal by invoking dominating colonial vocabulary used for so-called uncivilized nations. Out of 70,000,000, broken into “a number of distinct and antagonistic races”, nearly 2,091,226 were original inhabitants of Bengal region, “pure and uncontaminated” either by Hindus or Muslims.<sup>52</sup> “Races” such as the Santal, Munda Kol, Hos, Bhumij, Mal and others had following characteristics: They were intoxicated, wore short or no dress, nomadic-cultivators, warrior or docile, kidnaped children for religious sacrifices, fond of music and dancing, plunderers, had simple, ancient form of weapons, ate animals killed on the spot, purchased women for marriage, believed in spirits, unhealthy, had no domesticated animals, wild races, and their each village was a self-contained state.<sup>53</sup>

Prepared with the help of a Bombay resident, AB Gupta, the Catalogue employs similar vocabulary for Bombay, which it did for Bengal presidency. The Bombay presidency had less population of aboriginal tribes such as the Karkari, Warli and Son. Their characteristics were: poorer, plunderers, brave, skillful huntsmen, reckless, dunked, primitive, inartistic, extremely uncivilized, timid, loved jungles, sea pirates and afraid of long voyages.<sup>54</sup> In the same way, the Catalogue described Toda in the presidency of Madras as having simple religious ideas, primitive traditions, and had their original home in the hills of Hasanur. The Irula tribe of Madras cultivated “small patches of land in a careless haphazard way”, they were fond of banana, they “coat[ed] their bodies with a substance which prevent[ed] bees from stinging them”. The Kurumba had “matted hair and almost nude bodies”, they used to sell jungle produce to supplement the food obtained by agriculture.<sup>55</sup>

Live artisan models working in the forecourt of the Indian Palace also decontextualized the Indian craft practices.<sup>56</sup> Weavers, dyers, seal engravers, ivory miniature painter, goldsmiths, silversmiths and potters practicing their craft attracted a lot of visitors' attention. These craftsmen faced a number of problem: windy and cold weather; unavailability of proper equipment as in the case of Muhammad Subhan from Benaras who was a silk and gold barocade weaver and lac-maker, and used to work on a loom specially designed for brocade, but in the Exhibition he had to do spinning; perhaps a number of the people working there were not craftsmen, as Saloni Mathur shows in her work. These craftsmen performed in front of Indian Palace, and the curators claimed they "were all daily to be seen at work as they would be in India".<sup>57</sup> For the British, these craftsmen were using "simple appliances" and their "leisurely movements" was "exciting amusement" for English visitors.<sup>58</sup>

The curators admitted that no scientific or general system could help in classifying vastly different and unique exhibits. They decided to allocate spaces to different governments, who could make their own categories, "best suited to their requirements" and "special circumstances". Since the curators could not categorize the objects, they decided not to form juries for commenting on the exhibits.<sup>59</sup> In *Official Guide*, the curators admitted that the variety of exhibits was so vast that "it was found impossible to lay down any hard-and-fast rules for classification".<sup>60</sup> This point is significant. It shows how curious Indian objects posed challenge to the organisers' understanding and knowledge who could not classify and judge the exhibits.

In the previous Exhibitions such as Second Punjab Exhibition and Calcutta International Exhibition, organisers followed similar classifications: Industrial Arts Manufactures—based on geographical regions, Economic Court—which the British could classify on the basis of their utility, Administrative Courts—comprising exhibits from the British administrative departments. But the reports of those exhibitions do not clearly mention the problem of classification. Juries were nominated in those events to give prizes according to a defined criterion. But here in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, the curators openly admitted their limitations and did not nominate jury for evaluating the exhibits. Here we see British curators "officially" recognizing their limited access to Indian things.

We have discussed how the so-called aboriginals or ancient inhabitants were looked down upon by the organizers of the Exhibition. However, the report on the exhibits shows quite different view. The curators described Indian exhibits as "a veritable Paradise" for "the lovers of Oriental art".<sup>61</sup> All three Indian Courts contained "the shawls, curtains, carpets, embroidered fabrics, metal work, porcelain, jewelry, inlaid furniture, and the wonderful variety of carved screens", displaying the rich art of different provinces.<sup>62</sup> The Bombay Court had "most striking screens in the Exhibition" and its bays were "so beautiful" that the organisers decided to emulate their designs for other courts. Similarly, "pre-eminent" silver ware had "admirable design and workmanship".<sup>63</sup> In the Bengal Court, Decca muslin "deserved special notice". Refined and matchless muslins in Bengal were "invisible when laid on dew grass or in a running stream".<sup>64</sup> For the organisers, the "most interesting objects" in the Madras court were "fine collection

of jewellery, and some very artistic metal-work, pots, plates made of mixed brass and copper”.<sup>65</sup>

The press reports also mentioned the curious British experience. They mentioned as if they encountered something marvelous, dazzling and bewildering that was beyond their expectations. *The Westminster Review* published a piece on the Exhibition showing amazement on the scale and intensity of a variety and quality of Indian exhibits which “exceed[ed to] all our preconceived ideas”.<sup>66</sup> The Indian courts were “adorned with a carved screen of native work, and containing the different works of art of the several provinces. These screens are perfect marvels of carving of different kinds ...Glancing up and down these art courts, the eye is dazzled and bewildered by the variety and beauty of the wares displayed”.<sup>67</sup> *The Journal of Indian Art* wrote: “In passing through the Punjab Court, the visitor has often to pause and admire the high excellence of the artistic wealth of the province...[the exhibits] at once rivet the attention and excite the surprise of all lover of the beautiful; and the more minutely the delicate working of the design and the finish of the handiworks are examined, the more does it heighten the admiration for the unswerving patience, the high skill, and unerring taste of the manufacturer”.<sup>68</sup> Another publication described screens in the Indian courts as “a novel and pleasing feature” and the courts contained “endless variety” of exhibits. For instance, the Rajputana section had “curious carvings in stone, a fine collection of arms and armour...some exquisitely pretty enameled articles, embroidery in gold and silk thread...”. Bengal’s gold embroidery was “superb” and Lucknow had “more than beautiful jewellery and vassals of gold and silver”.<sup>69</sup>

Some voices were critical and saw the influences of European exports to India. They believed that these exports had badly influenced the aesthetics of Indian craftsmen who because of their integration with the English economy began to consider the “hybrid fancies of English purchaser. The distressing fact is pretty patent by this time that we have succeeded tolerably well in eliminating native art work everywhere, and have substituted bad examples of scamped work, which the British public indiscriminately scramble for in the rush to become possessors of ‘art’ work”.<sup>70</sup> The journalist feared if Indian craftsmen were encouraged in this way, they would pose an overwhelming challenge to the market of English crafts.

Another journalist appreciated Indian crafts which was “an amazing museum of objects and art...imaginable and unimaginable...”, similar to those of European past: The Trichinopoly jewellery in Mardras Court had “exquisite specimens” which was “as fine and beautiful as any that has been discovered in the Greek or Etruscan tombs”. The glasswork was “very fine in colour and closely resembling the old Venetian in shape”. The Kashmiri brasswork in lamps and candelabra was similar to those of Greeks and Romans.<sup>71</sup>

While encountering Indian things, a few voices also suggested to learn from the Indian craftsmen. One journalist remarked that the crafts were so perfect that the British could hardly suggest anything for improving them. The exhibition provided an opportunity to the British people and craftsmen to see and learn from the “wonderful” Indian crafts.<sup>72</sup> Another newspaper viewed “intrinsic value of the splendid Imperial Exhibition as a means of national education”.<sup>73</sup> An official

*Handbook* for Jeypore Court, called for “a patient and pleasing study” to understand “the endless variety of ornament, showing the fertility of invention, and the true artistic sense of the carvers”.<sup>74</sup> In fact, the government encouraged mayors and concerned authorities in major towns in Britain to facilitate craftsmen in their respective localities to visit the Exhibition, who could view and emulate intelligently crafted exhibits. This opportunity was “largely taken off” by the English craftsmen and their families.<sup>75</sup> In their meeting with the Prince of Wales, the representatives of London Trades Council and London Working Men’s Association thanked him for providing them an opportunity for learning from the exhibits.<sup>76</sup> The Prince also wrote to the London School Board to make sure that the elementary school children visit the venue because “study of the Exhibition was of the highest educational value”.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, various schools arranged study trips to the exhibition, and the total number of children who visited the Exhibition were 255,669.<sup>78</sup>

The unknown and unclassifiable Indian things, which challenged the preconceived categories of the colonial administrators, were to be “retained” in South Kensington Museum.<sup>79</sup> Since the Indian craftsmen did not fully cooperate with the collectors, the British Indian Government had to order each of these exhibits. These exhibits continued to show the vastness and richness of Indian colony, at the same time, challenging the preconceived notions of the British curators and visitors.

## **Conclusion**

This article shows various manifestations of curiosity among the British curators and journalists. Curiosity was a feeling of unknowability. The British approached Indian exhibits with their feeling of pride in their superior knowledge, responsibility for guiding Indian craftsmen to compete in the global market and in colonies as their possession. To conceptually explain their possession, the jurors and curators were supposed to make suggestions. However, when they encountered Indian exhibits or “things”, they began realizing their limitations of knowledge, unawareness of Indian culture and craftsmanship. Indian things evoked a feeling of unknowability or curiosity and the British curators, jurors and journalists responded variously: many of them appreciated the things, some of them rejected exhibits altogether and still others wondered as how to make use of these things in their trade network. What binds together all these responses was their limitations to explain Indian exhibits. British encounter with Indian things contested pre-conceived notions about Indian culture and craftsmanship. In the colonial Exhibitions, we did notice that curiosities led the British curators and jurors to explore Indian manufactures for trade and learning.

A close reading of colonial reports also suggest how pride was transformed into curiosity when the British encountered Indian exhibits. These reports normally began with the assertion of superior European knowledge, destitution of craftsmen, uncivilized Indian culture and responsibility of the British for improving declining craft. However, the text written after the encounter shows completely different emotions: Indian crafts understood as excellent, beautiful, perfect, worthy of emulating, etc. We also find a few other reactions which scholars term as representing curiosity: exotic, pathetic, unworthy, expensive, bad,

etc. These reactions basically reflect limitations of knowledge and unawareness of the commentator about the context in which a craft was produced. In many cases, text related to pride and text related to curiosity were written by different persons. The former came from colonial bureaucrats and those who proposed and planned exhibition, the latter came from jurors and those who encountered the Indian things. Sometimes both texts came from a same group of people. Whatever the case may be, we find similar patterns in feelings: pride before the exhibitions and curiosity after them.

## Notes & References

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<sup>1</sup> Toyin Falola, *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009); Antoinette Burton, *The First Anglo-Afghan Wars: A Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1964); Mark Bevir (ed.), *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press, 2011); Amales Tripathi, *Indian National Congress and the Struggle for Freedom, 1885-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See for discussion, Amanda Behm, *Imperial History and Global Politics of Exclusion: Britain, 1880-1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> P.J. Rich, *Elixir of Empire: The British Public Schools, Ritualism, Freemasonry, and Imperialism* (Regency, 1989), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> In France's Chartres Cathedral, curiosity was represented with apes. See Christian K. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth Century England* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.11.

<sup>7</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg's study of Greek mythology of Icarus and Prometheus. Carlo Ginzburg, "High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Past & Present*, No. 73 (Nov., 1976): pp. 28-41, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Janell Watson, *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 2, 5. For British society, see Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany*, 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Axel Gelfert, "The Passion of Curiosity: A Humean Perspective," in *The Moral Psychology of Curiosity*, Ilhan Inan, Lani Watson, Dennis Whitcomb and Safiya Yigit, eds. (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): pp. 1-22. Here Brown uses thing to describe object-subject relationship. See Bill's another work for contextualisation of "Thing Theory" in the history of thinking things. Bill Brown ed., *Other Things* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Brown, "Thing Theory," p.4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.2-4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

<sup>17</sup> *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883-1884*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885), pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>20</sup> For collecting exhibits from Mysore, a 22-member committee, under the presidentship of Lieut.-Col. A. LeMessurier, RE, with secretaries Stadish Lee and C. Baghavacharlu, was

formed. While the jurors for judging paintings and drawings were A. Hone, Jules Schaumburg (d. 1886), draughtsman to the Archeological Survey of India, G. Wince and Moquin Tandon. For sculptures, the jury included Jules Schaumburg, B. Cabasse and H.L. Tilly.

<sup>21</sup>Since large sized sculptures were difficult to transport, some small sized, not really representing the typical regional work were displayed. *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883-1884*, Vol. I, p.177.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p.177.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p.169.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p.86.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>29</sup>“It is difficult to guess whence the pattern has been derived. The local belief is that it is an imitation of the kind of shell which in less prosperous days the people used to wear as a decoration round the neck. Possibly it is copied from some half-opened fruit or flower. It has no distinctive name, being known merely by the generic title of ‘gold’, in which material alone it is wrought”. *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, see T.N. Mukherji, *Arts-Manufactures of India* (Calcutta: The Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888), pp.129-130; Thomas Holbein Hendley, *Indian Jewellery* (London: Extracted from the *Journal of Indian Art*, 1906-1909); H.Z. Darrah, “Three Manufactures of Assam (1885),” in *Notes on some Industries of Assam from 1884-1895*, Office of the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, ed. (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1896), pp.69-71.

<sup>31</sup> See how the British viewed Indian jewellery in the early twentieth century, Hendley, *Indian Jewellery*, p.5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>33</sup>*Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883-1884*, Vol. I, pp.220-221.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p.222.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p.224.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>40</sup>“Calcutta International Exhibition,” *The Leeds Mercury*, 15 December 1883.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>“I look up at a specimen of stone carving as I enter the Indian courts. Here are no less than 72 tons of magnificent carved stone, and the head of the arch is a monolith of eight tons, encrusted with spirited carvings, and showing against the sky-line a perforated screen which looks like a fine piece of lace as it shows against the bright Indian sky...it will be sent to South Kensington when its term of duty has finished here”. “Calcutta International Exhibition,” *Leeds Mercury*, 12 January 1884.

<sup>43</sup> “It is very curious to observe here that not only is the native conservative in instinct and habit, but he has also the power of infecting others. I was looking over a collection of native agricultural implements, and models of their methods of raising water, and on remarking that the plough was as primitive a tool for scratching the land as could be found anywhere in the world. An English gentleman, resident in the country, took up the cudgels on behalf of the native make-shift contrivance. It was, he said, good enough, for the soil only needed scratching. I find Englishmen here who were otherwise full of the spirit and enterprise of the day, give in to the idea that things are good enough for the Indian cultivator”. “Calcutta International Exhibition,” *Leeds Mercury*, 12 January 1884.

<sup>44</sup> “The Calcutta International Exhibition: The Indian Courts—Jeypore Continued Assam,” *The Times of India*, 21 December 1883, p.4.

<sup>45</sup> “Probably no person who has not lived in Oriental countries can conceive how much labour is involved in getting together within a short period anything like a complete set of art wares of a province or state...The advantage of advertisement being little understanding the manufacturer has no incentive to send his wares for exhibition to a foreign country of which he has but a vague idea at the best...almost every single exhibit has had to be specially ordered by a Government official”. “Preface,” by Sir Edward C. Buck (Secretary to the Government of India, in the Revenue and Agricultural Department, Commissioner for India) in *Special Catalogue of Exhibits by The Government of India and Private Exhibitors* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1886), p.2.

<sup>46</sup> *Official Guide to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1886), pp.22-23.

<sup>47</sup> “The Colonial and Indian exhibition,” *The Leeds Mercury*, 16 June 1886.

<sup>48</sup> *Official Guide to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, p.14.

<sup>49</sup> “Preface,” by Sir Edward C. Buck, p.3.

<sup>50</sup> *Special Catalogue of Exhibits by The Government of India and Private Exhibitors*, p.160.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.172-173.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.173-178.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.178-180.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.180-182.

<sup>56</sup> J. Tayler, Superintendent of the Agra jail, selected them and came with them to the exhibition. Messrs. Henry S. Kings and Co. sponsored their visit.

<sup>57</sup> “They are genuine artisans, such as may be seen at work within the precincts of the palaces of many of the Indian Princes, and living in the palace would, in their own country, possess many privileges as workmen of the royal *Karkhana*”. Frank Cundall, ed., *Reminiscences of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1886), pp.28-29.

<sup>58</sup> “The Colonial and Indian exhibition,” *The Leeds Mercury*, 16 June 1886.

<sup>59</sup> In the Report, the officials admitted that “no general system of classification could be adopted suitable for all colonies and for India...[so] the Royal Commission decided that each colony should be allowed to use such a classification as was best suited to its own requirements, and, as a consequence, that there should be no juries for awarding medals”. J.R. Royle, *Report on the Indian Section of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, India Office London, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1887 (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1887), p.15.



<sup>60</sup>“It [was] left to each Exhibiting Government to arrange its own display in the manner best suited to its special circumstances. Consequently the space available has not been divided up in such a way as to accommodate groups of subjects, but has been simply partitioned up geographically amongst the various countries that take part in the Exhibition”. *Official Guide to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, p.6.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>66</sup>“With an [Indian] empire so vast and so varied in natural productions, as well as in race and in climate, it is easy to imagine that the exhibits would also be rich and varied, but we may fairly say that they exceed all our preconceived ideas”. “Art. III.---The Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” *Westminster Review* Jul. 1886, 126, 151: p.30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31-32.

<sup>68</sup> “The Punjab Court,” *The Journal of Indian Art*, Vol. 1 (October 1886): p.105.

<sup>69</sup> “The Colonial and Indian exhibition,” *The Leeds Mercury*, 16 June 1886.

<sup>70</sup> “Art Metal Work at the Colonial Exhibition,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 May 1886.

<sup>71</sup> “The Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” *The Morning Post*, 10 May 1886.

<sup>72</sup> “Every one associates with India, rich shawls, jewellery, carpets, and carvings in wood and ivory, and these have from time immemorial, been so perfect, that it would be hard to express *progress* in these arts, and indeed one great idea of the present Exhibition was, that these wonderful works of native art should become better known in this country, so as to help to educate our artificers, rather than to receive education from them...”. “Art. III.---The Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” p.30.

<sup>73</sup> “Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” *Illustrated London News*, 17 July 1886.

<sup>74</sup> T.H. Hendley, *Handbook of the Jeypore Courts* (Calcutta: Calcutta Central press Co., Ltd, 1886), p.12.

<sup>75</sup> “The Working Classes and the Exhibition,” *The Morning Post*, 11 August 1886; “The Working Classes and the Exhibition,” *The Morning Post*, 12 August 1886; Cundall, *Reminiscences of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, p.6.

<sup>76</sup> “The Prince of Wales and the Working Classes at the Exhibition,” *The Morning Post*, 16 November 1886, p.5.

<sup>77</sup> “Children at the Exhibition,” *Daily News*, 10 August 1886.

<sup>78</sup> “The Prince of Wales and the Working Classes at the Exhibition,” p.5.

<sup>79</sup>*The Official Guide* states: “In the three Courts of [South] Gallery are placed the exhibits from our Indian Empire, which, taken together, constitute a collection such as has never been equaled in the annals of Exhibitions. The shawls, curtains, carpets, embroidered fabrics, metal work, porcelain, jewelry, inlaid furniture, and the wonderful variety of carved screens, illustrating the art of every province, will be found a veritable Paradise by the lovers of Oriental art. It is satisfactory to know that nearly whole of this immense collection will be retained in this country...”. *Official Guide to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition*, pp.11-12.