

Cultural Capital Without a Crown: The Case for Kolkata's Modern Art Museum

Jawhar Sircar writes about the City of Joy's struggle for a premier art gallery



Jawhar Sircar  • May 19, 2024  0  2 minutes read



Today, on International Museum Day, I was invited by K-MoMA, Kolkata Museum of Modern Art, an organisation that was created by the State Government over 20 years ago — to fill up the crying need for a proper art museum. Though I was among the first signatories to the Trust Deed that set up this body — along with several noted artists and art-related personalities of Kolkata — I did not attend K-MoMA's event.

I am sad that while every major city in India has a proper public-sponsored art gallery, Kolkata does not. Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore have great facilities called the National Galleries of Modern Art (NGMAs), set up and run by the Culture Ministry of the Central Government. But Kolkata — the cultural capital of India — was bypassed for the fourth NGMA, surprisingly without protest.

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In the early part of the twenty-first century, the then Chief Minister was keen to establish a government-supported public museum, and hence, K-MoMA was set up. The present CM also supports, but matters are just not moving with the desired speed, because of several complicated reasons. As a result, the best international art exhibitions, — like the first-ever exhibition of Picasso's art in India — simply bypassed Kolkata in 2001-02, because we do not have a world-class art museum, to display priceless paintings, photographs and other forms of visual arts.

While the Biswa Bangla complex does the city proud, it is not meant for art. The small public spaces available in the politics-ridden and archaic Academy of Fine Arts just do not have international standard lighting and temperature-controlled facilities. The Gaganendranath Pradarshanshala nearby or Rabindra Tirtha in New Town are completely inadequate. We have many private art galleries like the Birla Academy, CIMA and the spacious new Kolkata Centre for Creativity, but we badly need a grand public museum of art and affordable exhibition spaces.

The only such space readily available is the 'Belvedere House' of the National Library in Alipur. It is a magnificent specimen of neo-classical architecture that is very commodious. We, who have used the historic building as the National Library know its superb spaces. The Library was housed here from 1953 but it moved in 2005 to the mediocre Bhasa Bhavan next door.

This ancient building was left to fall into disrepair, till we intervened from the Culture Ministry in 2009-10 — to restore it, with abundant funds. It has a lovely and large hall after the entry and another huge teak-floored, gilded baroque ballroom as a second suitable exhibition space.

But as soon as the decade-long restoration was complete in 2020, the presiding babus of the Culture Ministry decided, without any consultation, to fill up this priceless space with some unexciting antiquities of the Indian Museum. They dedicated whatever additional space was available for a totally-ignored 'digital exhibition'. PM visited it in 2021 amidst great publicity with the primary purpose of equating Shayamaprasad Mookerjee with Tagore and Netaji, through this exhibit.

This re-utilisation of Belvedere is quite contrary to what the city's own, more knowledgeable personalities from culture and academia had proposed in

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2010-11. This Belvedere House is the best NGMA that Kolkata could dream of and it has almost ready exhibition galleries, plus adequate storage space.

Besides, the enviable art collections lying with the city's aristocratic families are simply crying out for restoration and display. The real bonus is easy parking.

The problem lies in the present regime's top-down thinking and the Central Culture Minister and Secretary's complete apathy to Kolkata. Belvedere House is a national property and **belongs to the city** — not to them. Mantris and *babus* are only custodians of heritage, not the owners.

Tags: Belvedere House, Kolkata, Museum, NGMA, Premier Art Gallery



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