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Will the plans for a new National Museum put priceless artefacts at risk?

Despite the Centre's reassurance that the collection will stay in the present premises for the time being, the project remains shrouded in mystery.

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Side view of the sculpture titled "Rhythm" at National Museum, New Delhi. The Central government plans to create a new national museum, replacing the existing one. | Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

In his speech at the centenary celebration of the Madras Government Museum and the inauguration of the National Art Gallery, Madras, in November 1951, Jawaharlal Nehru

emphasised the importance of museums as educational tools that bridge the past with the present. He said, “A museum which is really meant to interest and educate must be something which connects its objects with the things the visitors are used to seeing in their lives and in their environments. It should not be just a symbol of the distant, unconnected past.”

Nehru was being remarkably perceptive in saying this: even today, more than 75 years after Independence, most museums in India are dusty galleries of dead objects when they should have infused the past with life by connecting it to the present. This does not, of course, mean that the past can be remoulded to suit the requirements of the present: what is needed is the linking of the past and the present in a way that it sheds light on both. Under the present government at the Centre, there have been attempts to reshape history to fit into the narrative of “new India.” One part of these ongoing attempts is the plan to create a new national museum, replacing the existing National Museum of India in New Delhi.

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