

Reflections on the Arna-Jharna Museum.

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I was impressed by the sense of integrity and dignity the Arna-Jharna Museum conveys. The treatment of the open spaces within the museum grounds, the construction of the museum buildings and the installation of its first exhibition all seem scrupulously true to the spirit of simplicity, restraint and unpretentiousness of the late Komal Kothari. Instead of embellishing a collection of extraordinary objects the museum brings to light the genius embodied in everyday artifacts and practices. Traditional knowledge is not only documented but put into practice in the use of traditional water-harvesting practices to create a small lake, and in the use of traditional techniques and materials in the exhibition, construction and decorations of the museum buildings. State of the art videos and panels are incorporated in the exhibition in a way that enhances instead of competing with the stark presence of the brooms. It seems to me that such a high degree of congruence is an eloquent expression of the long term, conscientious collective effort led by the dedicated members of the Arna-Jharna team.

This museum cannot be defined either as a community museum nor an ecomuseum, but it has some affinities with both concepts. As some ecomuseums, it seeks to provide opportunities to learn about and to pay tribute to the deep knowledge through which local communities relate to their environment. Like a community museum, it seeks to empower communities by telling stories based in their everyday experience, and to become a vehicle to impact community well-being. The Broom Project identifies a series of problems which could be addressed, including the improvement of health conditions for broom makers, the development of alternative designs and products to increase broom makers' income, and the expansion of educational opportunities for children of broom-makers' families.

Opened only recently to the public, the Arna-Jharna Museum has already carried out several activities to serve the communities it is involved with. The Managaniar musician community has been strengthened by intensive workshops on rare songs and musical styles, as well as an inter-generational workshop that brought together senior professional musicians and young singers. The museum has hosted an all-night performance of traditional mimicry, puppetry and folk opera for local communities, as well as a performance of the narrative of the folk legend of Pabuji for the local villagers of Moklawas. In terms of economic impact, the museum has intervened to open up access to a micro-credit program for a community of broom makers.

The museum faces the complex task of identifying multiple communities in the local and regional context, their composition, organizational dynamics and self-defined priorities. How can the museum relate to each one in diverse ways and with different degrees of intensity? How can it develop a relationship with community representatives or diverse community interlocutors? How can it offer itself as an instrument for communities to validate their own experience, to analyze their present circumstances and to develop projects to enhance the lives of community members? These are some of the questions the museum is already beginning to answer.