National Museum in a state of disorder

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Inadequate information about artefacts on display and incoherent arrangement of the objects and labels mislead the visitors to the National Museum at Shahbagh while some of the antiquities are exposed to the risk of being damaged.

Although the museum is attracting a large number of visitors, especially from the districts outside Dhaka, many of them are either half-educated or illiterate who overlook the inadequacies, mismanagement and poor service.

The museum was inaugurated on November 17, 1983 acquiring the artefacts of the old museum that was established in 1913. Apart from antiquities, it also displays art objects, specimens of natural history and contemporary cultural activities.

A certain gallery contained fruits, flowers, mammals, reptiles and birds. The fruits and flowers are made of clay or cloth and the remains of the mammals, reptiles and birds are preserved through taxidermy.

"Taxidermy is the process of removing the intestines of dead birds and animals, tanning their skins and refilling them with wood or cotton," explained Niru Shamsunnahar, the education officer at the museum.

However the labels attached with the objects contain no information excepting their names. The label of a flower that looks like a pink lotus is stated as 'blue water lily'. "How can a pink flower be called blue?" questioned a child.

A particular chart shows definitions and pictures of aquatic plants like shapla (water lily) and kachuripana but there are no samples. A label inside a particular shelf states 16 types of natural dyes whereas there are only two samples.

A gallery displays architectural elements from various religions like Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism. Clay tablets that contained inscriptions in Sanskrit and Arabic have no translated versions for the understanding of visitors.

Another gallery that displays terracotta pottery on a platform had no partitions around it. "I once prevented a child from stepping on the platform," said an attendant. A pair of ivory is displayed on a dirty blue board with no glass covering. Visitors broke the ends of the ivory.

Multiple objects displayed in some shelves have no numbers above them although their identities are stated in a numerical order on a label. Another gallery of contemporary art states the names of the painters without stating who they were and when they painted them.

A gallery with pictures of Rabindranath Tagore has no text stating who he was. "It's okay for us but we can't expect a foreigner to know who he is," said a visitor. Some pictures show some family members of Tagore without any labels stating their identity.

Some belongings of National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam are separated by wooden partitions but the labels are too distant for visitors to read. A text stating the identity of artist Jainul Abedin is written in Bengali with no English translation for the convenience of foreigners.

A certain gallery that deals with the

Liberation War of 1971 has no text stating the chronology of events from the Language Movement to the Liberation War. A picture of the Central Shaheed Minar has no label stating what it stood for or who took the picture.

A shelf that contains skulls is labelled to have been collected from mass graves after the Liberation War but it does not specify who collected

them, when and from where.

When contacted, officials of the museum gave different versions for the inadequacies.

Dr Noore Nasreen at the museum's Liberation War section said the skulls were excavated in 1972-73. "At that stage, we had two collectors who could not keep written records of the skulls as they were overburdened at the time," she said.

She also added that they did not mention the year of excavation on the labels because that would require

additional information that the museum does not have.

Dr Tarun Ghosh from the contemporary art section said many visitors are only interested in seeing the paintings with hardly any interest in knowing the painter. "Interested visitors can contact us if they want any additional information."

A source from the natural history section said it was not essential that

taxidermy be explained on the labels of birds and mammals. She also explained the case of the pink lotus being labelled as a blue one as being originally blue in colour but having turned pink because of the reflection of light. "That will be replaced," she assured.

The visiting hours at the museum are between 10:30am and 4:30pm from Saturday to Wednesday and 3:30pm to 7:00pm on Fridays. It remains closed on Thursday and other government holidays. A single

ticket cost Tk 5. Photography, smoking and food items with the exception of drinking water are restricted inside the premises.
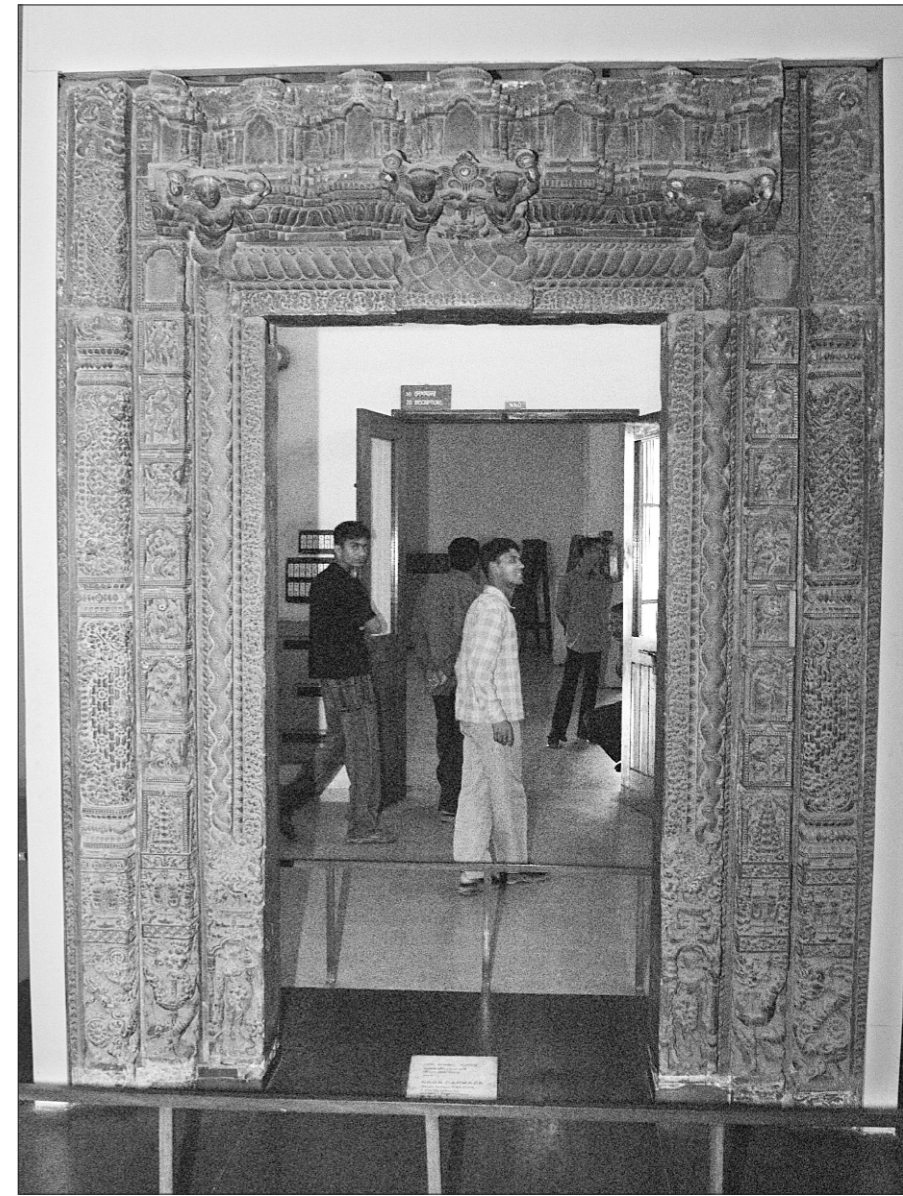
"Camera rays can affect fragile artefacts. Moreover some visitors could make replicas of the artefacts after taking their pictures. Researchers can take pictures with permission from the authorities," said Niru Shamsunnahar. She also added that an artefact must be at least 100 years old to be eligible to be displayed in a museum.

Officials said some of the older antiquities have been shifted to the museum's store for accommodating newly arrived artefacts.

Wheelchairs are available for the convenience of disabled people intending to visit the museum but there are no ramp staircases at the entrance and within the premises. None of the 46 galleries in the museum has guides or computers for browsing. The attendants, who do not know much about the objects on display, sometimes mislead the visitors.

Some visitors complained that moving around the museum is tiring but there is no restaurant within the premises and the visitors can't bring food items. "There was a canteen but it was shut down as youths used to gather there and create a nuisance," said an attendant. He also said that people tend to litter if they are allowed to bring food.

However, a frequent visitor to the museum cited inefficiency and negligence of the authorities. "The museum is in the same state for the last 16 years," said the visitor.

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