

Politics of Collection and Display in Colonial Indian Exhibitions

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This presentation reconsiders material culture studies of South Asia in terms of the colonial implications of collection and display of objects. Particularly, the presentation examines the development of international and domestic exhibitions throughout the Indian Empire during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies of expositions and world's fairs have revealed a perspective of South Asia mainly in relation to the creation of Oriental images in Europe, particularly addressing how India had been and still was represented through a westerners' lens, rather than pointing to India's initiative in accumulating its own cultural knowledge. Underlain by such circumstances, the author examines primary sources about Indian exhibitions held under British rule, in chronological order and thoroughly from the Indian Office Library collection in London. Sources including exhibition catalogues, reports, and visitors' observations in newspapers and journals reveal that exhibitions in colonial India changed their purposes. The initial exhibitions in colonial India were held by major princely states such as Hyderabad, influenced by the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace for industrial development. Although exhibitions became a cultural and political device to display the loyalty of contributors after the establishment of the Indian Empire, the collection and display of diverse cultural traditions in colonial India helped to bring forth the idea of "Indian" identities that encouraged nationalists to make use of exhibitions to unite people under an independent movement.