

The Museum of London 'Diversity Matters Programme' and Redbridge Museum: Creating Equality, Exhibiting Ethnicity from a Local Perspective

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Abstract The Museum of London 'Diversity Matters Programme' was launched in 2018 and closed in 2021. The programme encouraged London's small non-national museums to embrace the Arts Council England's directions to stimulate participation across socio-economic barriers such as the Equality Act (2010) and the Equality Duty (2011) recommended. However, the project results indicate a top-down approach to the involvement of minorities that seems to clash with the idea of inclusiveness itself. The local museums aimed to establish a bottom-up local history experience where visitors were content creators. These two opposite perspectives share the same scope but use different methods to achieve inclusion. By discussing survey data, the article investigates the Diversity Matters Programme as realised by Redbridge Museum, London, revealing competing and conflicting power relations that underpin the engineering of diversity and inclusion.

Keywords Museums. Ethnicity. Public engagement. Storytelling. Social inclusion. Gu-jurat. Museum of London. Redbridge Museum.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 New Missions. – 3 The Top-Down Perspective: Ethnic Identity from Above. – 4 A Different Approach to Ethnic Diversity. – 5 Conclusions.



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175

1 Introduction

In the arts sectors, concerns about ethnic equality and cultural diversity are crucial as they impact both the creative and the managerial activity (Kidd et al. 2014; Olivares, Piatak 2022). National governments and international organisations require institutions to develop strategies to enhance the diversity of boards, staff, and volunteers, while curators and cultural managers promote diversity to engage the public. In the specific case of museums, exhibition narratives are urged to endorse equality at all levels and address the pressure of decolonisation movements. However, inclusion is achieved by dividing the public according to specific social or ethnic categories. On the basis of these categories, exhibitions and events are targeted accordingly. In other words, separation is a requisite for inclusion. The acceptance of this inclusion/ exclusion discourse creates clusters of peculiar target visitors based on a construed ethnic and cultural identity. In fact, whether this strategy corresponds to a genuine shared sentiment of heritage within each group is a matter of debate (Whitehead et al. 2016; Levin 2016; Ashley, Degna 2023).

In the last decades, the social role of museums has been re-examined critically in a world that strives for social equality and equity. Indeed, diversity is not fully reflected in museum visits, and data show that wealth, more than ethnic identity, defines the public.¹ However, successful cases can be a fertile ground for observing discursive phenomena that forefront communication and its role in mediating conflicts, valorising heritage and acknowledging cultural and ethnic diversity by respecting individual sentiments (Kidd et al. 2014).

The following paragraphs examine first how the 'institutionalisation' of ethnicity in Britain is enacted by heritage legislation (top-down approach) and then how the role of small museums is becoming crucial in redefining ethnicity, adopting a bottom-up view. This study is based on data provided by Redbridge Museum, Ilford, London, related to *India's Gateway: Gujarat project-Mumbai and Britain*, a project funded by the Museum of London in 2020. The results indicate that community input must be integral to the planning of inclusion projects to ensure local voices are heard and involved effectively. Co-creation and diverse communication strategies play a significant role in addressing diversity and suggest that enhancing individual 'private' responses is central to the success of any engagement action and may aptly interpret ethnicity.

¹ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/adults-visiting-museums-and-galleries/latest#full-page-history>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/418334/museum-gallery-attendance-uk-england-by-ethnicity/>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1357074/share-museum-visitors-by-ethnicity-united-states/>.

2 New Missions

When fulfilling their role to serve society, museums proactively address inequality and exclusion.² This aspect of museum management assumes even greater significance in an environment marked by rising population movements, political polarisation, and controversial public discourses. Through various activities, museums address these problems by focusing on varied themes like participation, accessibility, well-being, gender, marginalisation, and inclusion/exclusion. In practice, museums are asked to develop systematic managerial and communicative strategies to support political action and ideology. In other words, institutions are asked to reorganise their activity to face sensitive issues such as ethnicity, gender, and disability in new social contexts that are dynamic and challenging. From this perspective, audience engagement practices go beyond the traditional mission of educating and conserving heritage. Accountability, impact evaluation, and social media criticism create a demanding environment (Decter, Semmel, Yellis 2022).

As Morse points out, museums are places of “care” with a solid ethical commitment that involves all the people working within the institution and all the “users” (2020, chap. 4). Commitment means respect for social groups and individuals, and it is the premise for inclusion. However, the composition and the notion of a social, cultural or ethnic group itself is problematic as groups are anything but homogeneous. In particular, legislation and projects that construe ethnic groups as disadvantaged and excluded from the mainstream fail to understand ethnicity as a dense and often opaque aspect of individual lives. Personal feelings may not match collective ones, nor is grouping into traditional categories always desirable, especially with young generations (Eckersley 2022, chap. 1; Turunen 2022). Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield maintain that anti-racism is often comprehended within generic and vague concepts of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social practices (2014). In particular, ethnic inclusion focuses on the public sphere but fails to recognise the private one, i.e. ethnicity and racism; inequality and difference are not considered in their impact on the private and personal life of individuals (Lahav 2023).

Moreover, ethnicity and inequality are paired as two sides of the same coin, but this may not always be the case, and the idea of belonging to a ‘minority’ ethnic group may not imply exclusion. In the British context, second or third-generation diaspora groups build cohesion within their discourse community around concepts, symbols,

² See the new ICOM definition of Museum and their mission at <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

and behaviours the older generations may not share. Indeed, they understand their identity and construe their role within society rather than seeing themselves as marginal minorities. As with Asian communities, wealth and education have changed their social status (Cornell, Hartman [1998] 2006, 27-9; Coxshell 2020).³

We need not assume a negative view of how ethnicity is managed and theorised by governments per se, of course. Actions from above and projects from below may be complementary and synergistic as both tendencies are motivated by the same aim of providing strength and visibility to ethnic groups. In the case of museums, both views enact discursive practices that frame identity within the mainstream and assume that visitors must have a shared sense of ethnic identity: the tension that develops may be a fertile ground for inclusiveness rather than separation (Price, Appelbaum 2022). From this perspective, projects meant to support inclusion need to adopt a multidimensional approach to discursive practices comprising the complexity of both museum's internal and external communication, thus turning museums into mediators of personal and collective identity.⁴

3 See the definition provided by ONS-UK: "The Office for National Statistics notes that there is no consensus on what constitutes an ethnic group, and membership is something that is self-defined and subjectively meaningful to the person concerned. Since ethnicity is a multifaceted and changing phenomenon, various possible ways of measuring ethnic groups are available and have been used over time. These include common ancestry and elements of culture, identity, religion, language and physical appearance. What seems to be generally accepted, however, is that ethnicity includes all these aspects, and others, in combination". <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/measuringequality/ethnicgroupnationalidentityandreligion>.

4 Cf. Giroux 2006; Kapoor 2013; Kinsley 2016; Nielsen 2017; Swensen, Sneve 2019; Ünsal 2019; Jones 2019. The most recent survey available indicates equal percentages of visitors considered as ethnic groups. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/adults-visiting-museums-and-galleries/latest>.

3 The Top-Down Perspective: Ethnic Identity from Above

In 2017, the Arts Council England provided directions to “turn diversity into an opportunity”.⁵ Hence, the program aimed at engaging a more diverse range of visitors and adopting recruiting policies to balance the ethnic and socio-cultural composition of the employees and support them in case of legal controversies. The urgency to develop inclusiveness was motivated by British national legislation meant to overcome socio-economic barriers, i.e. the Equality Act (2010) and the Equality Duty (2011).⁶

The Equality Act provided a uniform legal framework to protect the rights of individuals and to promote equality of opportunity for all, while The Equality Duty ensured that all public bodies tackle discrimination as a mandatory aspect of sound administration. Consequently, private and public institutions were legally bound to implement inclusiveness and equality as best practices. The Acts fostered accessibility via improved communication realised through reduced bureaucracy, a more transparent use of English (i.e. plain style), and the understanding of equality per se. Communication became crucial in building responsiveness and awareness in the audience, the media, and obviously in writing official documents (Sarita 2014).⁷

The Equality Act compelled institutions to construe minorities as social groups and develop inclusion. However, the Act did not mention ethnicity but race, thus stirring controversy. Different racial groups were defined as minorities against a White majority instead of being treated equally or as independent groups. The document described race in terms of a person's skin colour, nationality, and language in an attempt to objectify a network of experiences, feelings, and memories, which, on the contrary, is subject to change. In fact, the perception of one's skin colour is more relevant in statistical terms than within families or sets of individuals. Similarly, how people describe themselves may grow or shift in time as their perception and feeling about being represented within a group, if any, develop. A person's identity is a lifelong commitment that may not match notions of citizenship, nationality and social engagement (Fenton 2010; Aspinall, Miri 2013; Kahn 2019).

In this perspective, one may compare the idea of ethnicity to the phenomenon of 'linguaging' (Thibault 2019). Using languages

⁵ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance-library/equality-action-plan-guidance#section-1>.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty>.

⁷ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide>. See also The Arts Council policies at <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/developing-creativity-culture>.

according to context and adapting communication to individual needs and a specific situation indicates that language elicits the idea of a social group as something the user determines. Just like languaging, ethnicity indicates that individuals position themselves in society within a natural continuum, thus realising more aptly their human (linguistic) uniqueness (exhibited personally, locally or socially) beyond the normative constraints of a standard (Fought 2006, 3-40; Kahn 2019). In other words, the individual signals their belonging to a community by choice via language and other 'signs' that may or may not be disclosed and acted out. One may speak one or more languages according to circumstances, dress or wear items that indicate 'belonging' or express personal choice with no particular connotation. In the case of Museums, the public may 'tune in' and decide if the institution meets the flux of their identity, or the public may experience the museum without expectations. It is up to individuals to decide where to position themselves according to personal circumstances, i.e. inside or outside the heritage of the country one lives in.

In sum, while the government agenda for inclusion is communicated to the public with the support of the media, museums and arts organisations respond to the Government's social inclusion agenda by looking for effective strategies by developing culturally specific content, implementing communication and engagement settings and turning their collections into local heritage hubs. The latter indicates that small museums collect ideas from their local community and set up collaborative projects, looking back at the 1970s, but with less ideological commitment and a more managerial approach (Ross 2015). In other words, museums work with the more traditional and well-established community centres to connect people, popularise their collections, and co-curate events for social inclusion.⁸

As stated in the *Collections - 2030 Recommendations* published by the Museum Association:

[M]useums, funders and sector bodies work collectively to become more open and democratic both internally and externally, using collections to bring communities together, promote health and well-being, explore issues of place and identity, and equip people with the facts and understanding that are relevant to contemporary issues.⁹

The quotation refers to a vast program that sees the role of museums as supporting citizenship from the perspective of continuous

⁸ Matarasso 2013; Stephenson, Tate 2015; Hankivsky, de Merich, Christoffersen 2019; Rex 2020.

⁹ Available at <https://shorturl.at/oqMW0>.

education, promotion of well-being and social cohesion. This approach aims to empower people to be active participants in a democratic society by promoting participation.¹⁰

The idea of opening museums to communities entered the public debate well before the legislation discussed above. In an article published in 2004, Rhiannon Mason identified three distinct discourses or trends in British society that have contributed to shaping current views of socially inclusive museums. These three discourses are identified as 'governmental', 'representational', and 'economic', although each word is an umbrella term for several related issues. 'Representation' considers cultural democracy, such as social history, new museology, and multiculturalism, as expertise supporting curatorial choices. 'Government' refers to the legislation promoting equality in the arts through the Arts Council, for example, that guides and funds the arts in Britain. Finally, 'economic' refers to the need for museums to respond to economic change, economic crisis, class division, and the promotion of wealth that may concern museums as operating within local communities and sharing the same social issues of the community they are placed in (Mason 2004). Mason also highlighted that the idea of seeing museums as active agents of promotion and domestication of culture and idea that dates back to the nineteenth century, as many Victorian museums, with the exception of the British Museum, were appreciated for their ability to shed light on social issues. After the Second World War, the need to repair and strengthen social bonds through culture and national identity was re-enacted. Access to culture was seen as a way to re-civilise society after the barbarism of the Second World War. This policy valorised the working classes and other marginalised groups, hence the interest in folk culture and locality. New Museology focused on material culture and history 'from below'. In the 1990s, community-oriented, social-inclusion initiatives and multiculturalism reframed the role of museums as places where members of the elites presented culture as a tool for *improving people*, for stabilising a communal identity where their spare time, i.e. the time devoted to visiting exhibitions, could be filled with purposeful and proactive activities.¹¹

As Payne and Harrison point out, British society has overcome the abrupt individualism of the 1980s by developing strict social group divisions (2020 5-14). A paradox as it may be, institutions reformulated the notion of social class by using strictly defined frames that separated people to make them coexist. In this perspective, 'the Nation' needs people who adhere to descriptors *and standardise* themselves

¹⁰ Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2018; Terry 2020; Giblin, Ramos, Grout 2019; Coombes, Philips 2013; Gourievidis 2014; Gilitto et al. 2019; Lopez 2020.

¹¹ Bennet 1995; Belfiore 2002; Mason 2004; Newman, McLean 2004; Asensio 2017.

to belong to Britain (Gross, Wilson 2018; De Bellaigue, Mills, Worth 2019; Beukeboom, Burgers 2019).

This approach to Britishness and inclusion can be found in the Census, general legislation, the education system and the National Curriculum (Aydin 2013). The 2011 Census, for example, introduced a question on 'national' identity due to an increased interest in 'national' consciousness and demand from people to acknowledge their identity.¹² The respondents were allowed to tick more than one identity, which was understood as a multidimensional and fluctuating element in life. This view of ethnic identity raised a debate among politicians and the public, but the Census collected an established attitude of relativism and criticism among political parties (Simpson, Jivraj, Warren 2016; Harries 2017, chap. 3).

In those years, the opposition leader, David Cameron, described 'state multiculturalism' as "the idea that citizens should respect different cultures within Britain to the point of allowing them to live separate lives".¹³ Interviewed during the election campaign, he stated that in the voluntary sector, "state multiculturalism" had involved "granting financial aid for artistic and other projects purely on account of ethnic background - with various groups, purporting to represent various minorities, competing for money against each other".¹⁴ Recent immigration had fuelled the debate about the multicultural nature of British society while Scotland and Wales faced devolution - a process that intensified, contributing to creating a sense of separation from the EU that later led to Brexit and is still a matter of debate.

Issues of representation and equality or alienation and exclusion build on these developments. In this perspective, social inclusion and cultural diversity are often conflated and understood in mere economic terms, generating friction as culturally diverse groups may not necessarily share the problems that socially excluded people may suffer (Calhoun 2017). As a matter of fact, individuals from socially excluded groups may well experience a strong sense of inclusion and cohesion within specific groups or families, even though they are excluded from a wider community. Moreover, they may not need the protection of institutions (Ashcroft, Bevir 2018; Anderson 2019).

Let me consider the data of the 2011 Census as they are relevant for a discussion of the *Diversity Matters* project.¹⁵ In 2011 people who

12 Data are available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>.

13 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/feb/26/conservatives.race>.

14 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/feb/26/conservatives.race>.

15 The results of the new 2021 Census were published after the project closed and are still being processed, yet they seem to confirm that the picture we have of ethnic groups achieving high levels of qualification does not pair with the idea of them being

described themselves as Indian formed a community that 'equalled' the White one. 76% of Indian pupils met the expected standard in key stage 2 in primary education for reading, writing and maths, compared with 65% of White British pupils. Moreover, 62% of Indian pupils got a 'strong pass' in English and maths GCSE, compared with 42,7% of White British pupils. 96% of Indian students went into further education (such as A levels), compared with 85% of White British students. On average, Indian graduates earn £28,500 a year, while White graduates earn around £26,100. Hence, 31% of Indian workers were employed in 'professional' occupations (for example, engineers, teachers or lawyers), the highest percentage of all ethnic groups. In other words, while 26,4% of Indian workers were employed in the public administration, education and health sector, a further 20,9% were employed in the banking, finance and insurance sector, the highest of all ethnic groups. In this case, the idea of Indians being a minority needing support appears to be a myth.

The same can be observed for the Chinese, who also achieve the results of the White British. The published summary indicates that 12,8% of people from the Chinese ethnic group were in 'higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations, the second-highest percentage of all ethnic groups after the Indian group (15,4%). Moreover, just over a quarter (26,2%) of people from the Chinese ethnic group were in the 'managerial and professional' groups, compared with a national average of 30,4%, and 33,3% of people from the Chinese ethnic group were full-time students, the highest percentage of all ethnic groups.

The same data available for Black Caribbeans are very different. In particular, the same document states that in year 6 of primary education, only 55% of Black Caribbean pupils met the expected standard in key stage 2 reading, writing and maths, compared with 65% of White British pupils, the lowest percentage out of all ethnic groups after White Irish Traveller and Gypsy Roma pupils. Moreover, Black Caribbean pupils are almost three times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than White British pupils. No

marginalised groups. In particular, the 2021 questions were reviewed to increase public acceptability of questions about sensitive issues. For example: "when non-colour terminology was used, the research found that: respondents could not easily locate their ethnic group under the high-level ethnic group categories, resulting in confusion, errors and an increase in multiple responses; many Black and Black British participants identified using colour terminology, and found its removal unacceptable, viewing it as denying them an aspect of their identity; while some participants identified as 'European', the term was viewed with suspicion as being 'a mask for Whiteness'". See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/nationalidentityethnicgrouplanguageandreligionquestiondevelopmentfor-census2021>. At present data are available here with maps and topic summaries: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/aboutcensus/releaseplans>.

data on income are available, but the arrest rate is given: Black Caribbean people are 3.8 times as likely to be arrested than white British people.¹⁶

In conclusion, the 2011 Census results and the data presented to the public are divisive. The 'summaries' describe only a selection of data which may stigmatise or praise one group (e.g. income for the Indians versus crime rate for the Caribbeans; well off versus poor who are seen as prone to commit a crime). Moreover, data are not presented to explain how age and the environment affect identity, behaviour, access to education and good jobs. The social complexity and shifting identities that are part of current British culture should prompt museums and cultural institutions to consider how to adjust to current social needs.

In this context, cultural institutions need to understand their position within a community by monitoring communication and how language and visual culture address people, especially in borderline situations of mixed race (Bennett 1995; Aspinall, Miri 2013). Research about engagement experiences 'from below' is crucial, and the Redbridge experience is a case in point (Tak, Pazos-López 2020; Robinson 2020).

4 A Different Approach to Ethnic Diversity

The Museum of London Development's 'Diversity Matters Programme' (2018-21) aimed to support participation across socio-economic barriers and geographic locations.¹⁷ The available documents, and the webpages that presented the project to the public, showed a top-down approach, i.e. a strategy to implement inclusiveness as best practice and as a form of managerial training offered to small-scale museums.¹⁸ Museums taking part in the project were asked to

16 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/summaries/black-caribbean-ethnic-group>.

17 A description of the program is currently available on line at: <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/supporting-london-museums/development-grant-programmes/diversity-matters>; see also <https://www.redbridge.gov.uk/leisure-sport-and-the-arts/redbridge-museum/>. Redbridge Museum also provided the author of this essay access to a database collecting information from the visitor's book with comments, age, ethnicity, sex.

18 <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/supporting-london-museums/development-grant-programmes/diversity-matters>. For example: "an annual briefing and training event is meant to showcase examples in embedding best practice in diversity, through board and workforce, running programmes to target specific under-represented audiences and how to deliver the final transformational change of a more diverse core visitor base, regularly engaging with displays and collections". More recently the Arts Council England started a program about decolonising collections that goes

increase the diversity of their workforce and, at the same time, increase the number of core visitors by addressing 'minorities', supported by funds and assistance in effective fundraising. The museums funded in 2018-20 were the Redbridge Museum, Brent Museum & Archive, Kingston Museum, the Royal College of Music Museum, The View, Epping Forest, and the Musical Museum. Several case studies were publicised to show how London's small non-national museums responded and supported the national diversity agenda and to prove the "increased opportunities for people from protected characteristic groups to engage with their collections and programmes".¹⁹

The documents that presented the programme to the public defined the "Protected characteristic groups" according to "Race, religion and belief" or "Religion, belief and Sex". At the same time, the community addressed ranged from the Jewish one at Hackney Museum to those showing "Disability, Gender reassignment, Race, Sexual orientation" at the Royal College of Nurses Library and Archive. Finally, "Age and socio-economic status" were the focus of two projects at Brent Museum, which focused on the Somali contribution to the First World War and local Caribbean communities.²⁰

All the case studies were described according to pre-set schemata providing a uniform picture and evaluation of the experiences according to standard project management practices. In other words, all the projects entailed standardisation of procedures and adherence to prescribed methodologies, practices and ideology. As for the Redbridge Museum, though, the project's success was rooted in the ability to serve the community and its willingness to be *open* to local diversity rather than just implementing best practices.²¹

The museum started its activity in 2000, focusing on immaterial heritage and developing a strong link with the borough. Redbridge is the 4th most ethnically diverse borough in the London area, with 65% of the population from a non-white British background (2011 Census). In fact, over 35% of the borough's population is South Asian, with increasing diversity within the communities. The document describing the project stated, "rather than treating these communities

in the same direction involving the exhibits rather than staff: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/decolonisation/>.

19 <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/supporting-london-museums/development-grant-programmes/diversity-matters>.

20 https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/9115/3563/4942/FINAL_LMD_Redbridge_Museum_August_2018.pdf.

21 The Museum of London is a charitable institution funded by a variety of organisations and individuals including the City of London Corporation and Greater London Assembly and is influential.

as homogenous, the museum focuses on specific experiences and locates people in their local and international historical contexts".²²

India's Gateway exhibition, discussed here as a case study, focused on the Gujarat community "to produce, present and distribute its public programmes, events, exhibitions and collections to ensure it is more responsive to its respective local community".²³ This statement points to the importance of receiving feedback, networking, and engaging with visitors, thus rooting the museum's activity in the borough's history. A large number of inhabitants belongs to the so-called 'double diaspora', i.e. people who migrated from India to East Africa and then to Britain in the 1950s as a consequence of decolonisation, which indicates that identity was and still is a complex issue for many families (Parmar 2019). Not surprisingly, memory was crucial in defining the exhibition's objectives and the programme set-up. As stated in the description of the project, the aim was

- To explore the 400-year-old links between Gujarat and Britain, the first place of British contact in India.
- To draw in both Gujarati and non-Gujarati and regular and occasional visitors.
- To produce an exhibition of a high professional standard in both content and presentation, matched with a broad range of stories reflecting the experiences of local people.
- To facilitate collaborative working between the lead photographer, the partner Museums and local Gujaratis.²⁴

The museum mediated roles, forefronting people and their history as the very object of the exhibition.

The local community had a significant component of second generations who grew up in the UK but often travelled to India for their holidays and, in some cases, migrated back to India (Smith 2016). Understanding the nuances of their history and family experiences and recognising differences within the Gujarati community was a core aspect of the project. In particular, the museum identified a panel of 65 people to work out the best communicative strategies to address the locals, collect items, and in-person testimonies to be displayed. The panel included three groups of Gujarati elders, two Hindu caste community organisations, three local businesses, one Hindu faith

22 https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/9115/3563/4942/FINAL_LMD_Redbridge_Museum_August_2018.pdf.

23 https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/9115/3563/4942/FINAL_LMD_Redbridge_Museum_August_2018.pdf.

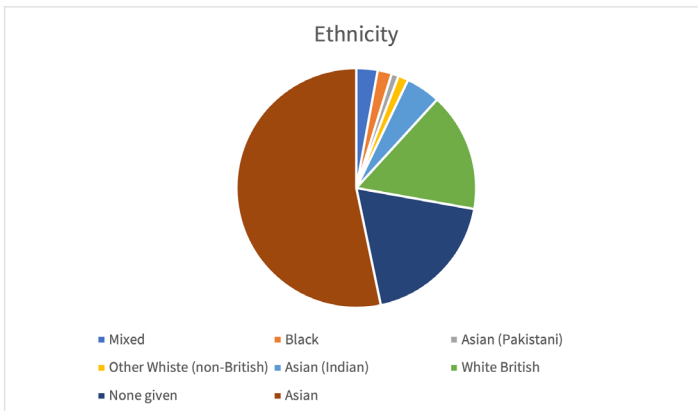
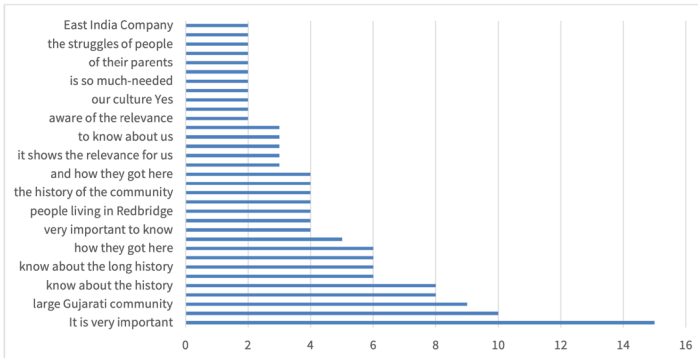
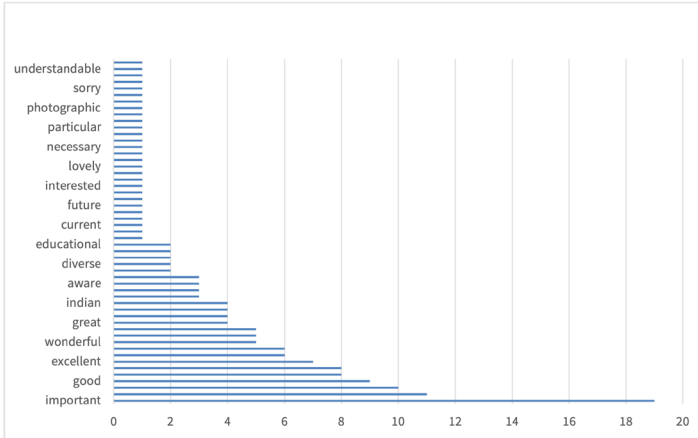
24 https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/9115/3563/4942/FINAL_LMD_Redbridge_Museum_August_2018.pdf.

school, one Hindu mandir and about fifteen local individuals. All were recruited through direct approaches from the museum with a mix of cold-calling, using previous contacts, introductions from community members, local authorities, parent organisations, colleagues, and staff contacts. The data collected by the museum show that the approach described above was more successful with any community from whatever background, as personal interaction was considered the best strategy to build trust, communicate the 'friendly' activity of the museum, overcome possible misunderstandings and tailor the project to people's expectations. In other words, the museum opted for a traditional approach that did not use social media communication but direct contact and word of mouth to ease interaction, especially with the elderly. However, this strategy indicated that these communities were self-contained and preferred unmediated communicative strategies to ensure the presence of a range of ages, backgrounds and life experiences.

Finally, *India's Gateway* also highlighted diversity within the Gujarati communities across England. It reconstructed the history of the Gujarat textile workers by displaying photographs collected by Tim Smith, complemented by materials from the museum's collections, including oral history, videos, personal photographs and objects loaned by residents. Photographs of Surat, Mumbai and Ahmedabad were featured in the exhibition to testify to the historical links dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between the Borough of Redbridge and Gujarat and the East India Company merchants. Four short films and family events enriched the exhibition, which was visited by 1,536 people. Finally, the museum organised a high-quality exhibition catalogue that collected photographs which contributed to 'historifying' the Gujarati presence in London while providing a vivid picture of the community in present-day India. The aim was to help the second and third generation understand their story by blending the memories of different generations. The age component was vital, as was the story of the community, and the photographs gathered contributions from local families that engaged the young, bypassing social habits and possible attitudes of indifference or ignorance. This was also testified by the many school visits and family workshops' responses.

The exhibition received over 224 written comments that were positive and empathic.²⁵ The comments consist of fragments or short sentences. However, the adjectives used defined the exhibition as

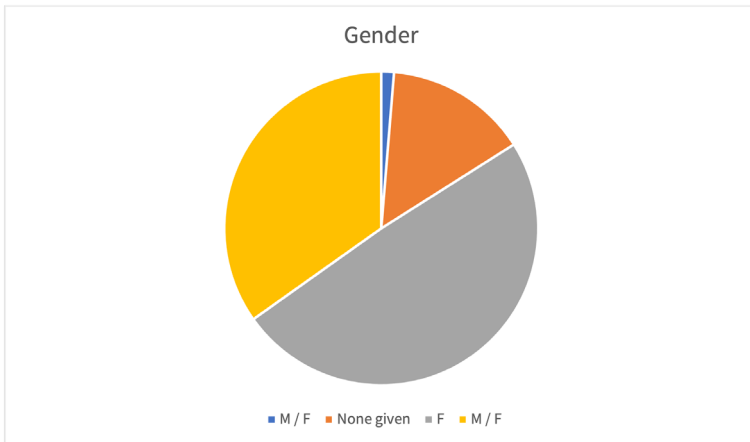
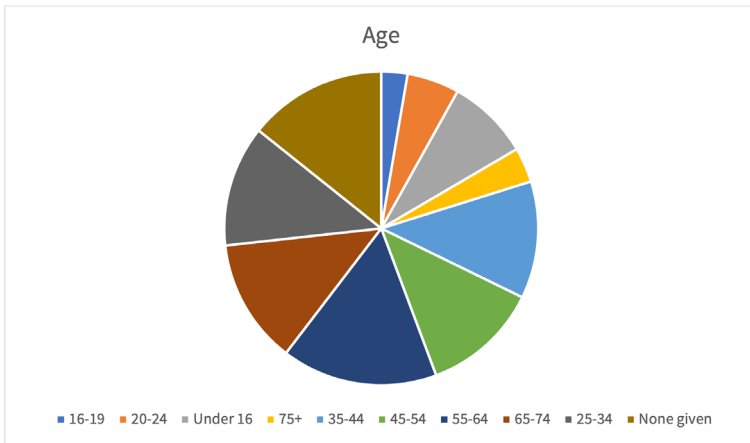
25 The raw data were provided to the Author of this article by Redbridge Museum and consist in feedback collected in the visitor's book, online response and questionnaires. Data were processed with Sketch Engine. Search of keywords, word frequency and collocations of India, culture, history, people, community and Gujarat all confirm the significance of the exhibition for the local community and their identity.



Graph 1 India's Gateway Project, evaluation data – frequent adjectives in questionnaire's answers

Graph 2 India's Gateway Project, evaluation data – phrases (N-grams) in questionnaire's answers

Graph 3 India's Gateway Project, evaluation data – ethnicity



Graph 4 India's Gateway Project, evaluation data – age

Graph 5 India's Gateway Project, evaluation data – gender

relevant, informative and vital to raising the historical awareness of the young local Asian community [graf. 1]. On the other hand, the most frequent statements show the understanding of the role played by the Gujarat culture in creating a sense of community and the benefits of a historical perspective provided by the exhibition itself [graf. 2].

The data collected indicate that 81% of visitors would likely recommend the exhibition to friends and family. Many visitors appreciated the mix of exhibits and declared their interest in the historical links between India, Britain and Redbridge that the exhibition described for the first time. The possibility of better understanding local differences within South Asian communities was also appreciated as a positive result of the project.

Most visitors declared their gender, for the most part female. Different age groups are represented, with the group 35-75 as the largest. As for race and ethnicity, 26% of the visitors defined themselves as White, while 58% provided a general definition of Asian. Lower percentages, though, specified their ethnic background within the framework of Asian, such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Mauritius, and these were mostly young (from 16 to 45) with an equal distribution of gender, which may point to a more developed ethnic awareness among the young generations [graphs 3-5].²⁶

As Malik and Shankley point out, Asian people are “significantly less likely to take part in arts than white people (including white ethnic minority people and black people)”, and

[T]he reasons for the relative lack of consumption of and participation in the arts are likely to be complex and would include questions of representation [...] perceptions of whom art is produced for, as well as economic factors which prohibit participation in the arts. (2020, 177-8)

Indeed The Redbridge museum project proves that tailored exhibitions and the involvement of local communities are best practices and may overcome these problems. Data show that Gujaratis who visited the exhibitions were pleased that their contribution to local and national historical events had been recognised: “because my family contributed positively in this borough”; “It shows the contribution of Gujaratis in bringing Redbridge to a higher level”; “because it is important in post-Brexit uneasiness about identity and migration”.²⁷ In

²⁶ Data in graph 3 comprise individuals who specified subcategories such as Irish, European, French among the White group, and Bangladeshi, Mauritian, Indo-Guyanese, Indo-Caribbean among the Asian group. Other subcategories indicated by a single visitor include Black Asian, Black Chinese, and American Asian.

²⁷ Anonymous comment given in the questionnaire.

other words, the exhibition allowed for a different representation of ethnic groups as *givers*, not takers, within British society.

The stories collected as part of the *India's Gateway* exhibition showed how individuals matter as much as the ethnic group, especially with third or fourth generations that are better off than part of the (White) English community surrounding them or those who migrated back to India for new opportunities. Turning history into heritage testified to a dynamic society networking multiple groups that cannot be easily contained into a frame. The project showed the vitality and promptness of small-scale institutions in addressing the cultural needs of communities as opposed to the ideological stance on cultural heritage and visitor engagement supported by national authorities and large institutions. Its bottom-up approach has created open forms of association that valorise intergenerational cultural transmission and encourage narrative practices among all community members.

5 Conclusions

A top-down and bottom-up perspective on ethnicity share the same aim but use a different approach. Both reveal competing and conflicting power relations that underpin the engineering of diversity and inclusion. Both create narratives that include or exclude by labelling social groups. The idea of 'diversity' as a substitute for racial and ethnic identity and labels inspired by biological notions of descent or cultural belonging as they appeared in the 2011 Census seems incomplete and problematic. In other words, categories like 'Muslims' referring to religion, 'Gypsy or Traveller' construing social and economic diversity, 'Other' highlighting an indistinct, maybe, transhuman cultural belonging, 'Whites' and 'Mixed' referring to skin and family status, pinpoint the complexity of British society and the need to overcome the limits of these labels.

In other words, there is a need to increase actions that valorise history from below and address society in its complexity; museums are an interesting case in point with their mission to preserve history and, at the same time, make it meaningful for new generations. Empathy and knowledge of people's contextual histories are the keys to the success of curatorial practices at all levels. By establishing a multi-directional experience of local history, any visitor may act as a content creator and collaborator. Despite maintaining their strong identity, groups who manage to fit into British society are crucial contributors to Britishness. Projects aiming to tell their stories may help museums improve social relations by showing that minority does not equate with poverty (Coffee 2008; Balan 2020; Barrett 2012, 118-42; Coxshall 2020). Whatever the approach, museums need a constant

reassessment and adjustment of how projects are communicated. Re-creating meaning around collections and addressing audiences' from below' is essential to engage people who do not usually visit museums: drawing meaningful connections between the exhibits and individuals is what makes a museum purposeful, bypassing the idea of institutions as places for the storage and presentation of objects or information that are rare, old, or privileged.

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