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Building the music room



Ranjani Govind

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Music and Heritage

What do you include and what do you leave out in a museum of Indian music?

Black and yellow autorickshaws blare Thermal And A Quarter. A granite rock sings when you tap it. A ‘sound garden’ reverberates with wind chimes, tubular bells and gongs. And an installation lets you create your own music. By the end of this year, Bengaluru promises to host an ambitious, interactive, 50,000 sq.ft. Centre for Indian Music Experience (IME), which, with some help from touchscreens, promises visitors “a transformation in the way you experience music”.

IME, which hopes to present the impossibly vast repertoire that is Indian music, including classical, devotional, folk, film, rock, regional and protest music—and no less than 60 versions of ‘Vande Mataram’—is designed by Gallagher & Associates, who also designed the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles.

While the project has on its team a group of prominent musicians and artistes, scholars and scientists, it all began with a real estate developer, M.R. Jaishankar, and his visit to Seattle’s avant garde, \$100 million Museum of Pop Culture, or MoPOP. Inspired by the idea, he handed over a two-acre plot in Brigade Millennium Enclave—an upmarket residential complex in south Bengaluru—for the creation of an interactive museum.

The building was ready four years ago, but designing the IME was the hitch. “Every museum experience presents its own set of unique challenges, but developing the narrative structure for IME, in my opinion, was the most challenging,” admits Sujit Tolat, Senior Associate, at Gallagher & Associates.

“How much to tell?” was the big question. Music in India after all has such rich diversity and history. “Should it be encyclopaedic, collections-based or use another approach?” They decided that the content should be able to engage visitors of all ages, backgrounds and levels of interest in music, from the traditional to the non-traditional and contemporary.

Team IME plunged into research and travelled to 10 museums in the U.S, taking notes on everything from display to lighting to maintenance. They even checked out the back-of-house facilities, storage, server rooms and archives.

Legends galore

“IME transcends the idea of a mere artefact-driven museum,” says Manasi Prasad, Project Director. It is set to have eight thematic galleries that explore themes, including international

influences, and the history of recording; an instruments gallery with 250 Indian instruments; interactive installations; and a learning centre that will impart curriculum-based music education. The classical music section will feature two full-length concerts, and explain the segments of each one.

From the recordings of Gauhar Jaan, the first courtesan singer to have been recorded on LP, to Sufi songs; from devotional Manipuri Sankirtana to the Punjabi tradition of Gurmat Sangeet; qawwali to Rabindra Sangeet—you will find it all here, an onscreen tap away.

The IME committee chose, however, not to focus on living performers, unless they are ‘legends’ in their respective fields. So, in the Hall of Fame, for instance, which features 100 legends from all genres, from present musicians you have flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia, tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, mridangist Umayalapuram Sivaraman and playback singer Asha Bhosle.

“We did not want to select musicians whose popularity chart brightened and waned, even if they were known crowd-pullers,” says musicologist Pappu Venugopala Rao, an adviser. The content team, headed by Rao, includes musician Rajiv Vijayakar and Kathak dancer Jayant Kastuar.

“IME will perhaps be the first museum of music in India that matches international standards,” says veena artiste and Outreach Director Suma Sudhindra.

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