

2022

SIDDHANT SHAH / ITP REPORT



Siddhant Chetan Shah
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Executive Report

I, Siddhant Shah was the 2021 recipient of the International Training Programme (ITP) at the British Museum, U.K. supported by the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation and Charles Wallace India Trust.

My experience being at the British Museum as well as National Museums Northern Ireland, Belfast as part of the ITP has been very enriching as it gave me an opportunity to look at various aspects of accessibility, inclusion, and diversity engagement for persons with disability and other forgotten stakeholders in the museum space along with deep community engagement.

As an access consultant working in a developing country like India where the population is a major factor for all the services that are provided either by the government or by a private entity, groups that identify with a disability/ies or on the gender spectrum, find very limited resources to engage with, particularly in the museum and culture space.



Image: ITP 2021 Fellows with the Director of The British Museum on the grand steps of the museum.

Application of Acquired Knowledge

Particularly for me this experience was immediately applicable as Access For ALL is the accessibility consultant for one of the biggest art fairs in India - BMW India Art Fair 2022. This gave me an opportunity to put into practice all the knowledge that I had acquired while being on the Prentice at the British Museum – **mainly during the sessions on Handling Collections, Working with Volunteers and one-on-one interactions with Stuart Frost and William Westwood from the BM’s LNP department.**



I am super excited to use this experience on the ground but there are two major challenges - budget and facilitation of products, in terms of the quality and the refinement that one saw at the British Museum.



One of the key elements that are incorporated as part of accessibility programming at the India Art fair was a provision for a nursing room for lactating mothers and a diaper changing station. This was inspired by my visit to the Ulster Museum, National Museums Northern Ireland in Belfast. It was amazing to see that museums of National Museum Northern Ireland had spaces that were friendly for mothers who would require a space for breastfeeding.

In the past, Access For ALL has designed braille books and it was during my session with the BM accessibility team and my visit to the V&A Museum that I came across braille books that also had large font prints to make it more inclusive and accessible for persons with low vision. Learning from that, this year we incorporated the large font print in various braille books and we received great feedback for this approach. Even press and media covered it extensively across the country.

The most inspiring part of the programme was ***my interaction with Prof. Richard Parkinson*** in Oxford and understanding how he worked around the concept of LGBTQ inclusion in the museum space. A brief yet informative 20-minute interaction with him inspired me to initiate a discussion around gender sensitization and awareness in the space of art and culture. Given the taboo that is attached to this topic of LGBTQ in India, I had to work on it very carefully and bring it out through the lens of art activity. As part of a sensitization outreach programme at India Art fair, I conducted a workshop on exploring gender identity and the multifaceted nature of the concept of belonging, with the base frame work being artworks of artists in India. I also referred the LGBTQ tours led by the volunteers at the BM & TATE.



Image: Giving a presentation on Making Museum's Accessible Digitally – Go MAAD as part of the fellow led session in my favorite room, the Sloane room.

Contributing to the ITP 'Global Network'

One of the advantages for me has been that as an independent consultant for various design and cultural museums in India and around the globe, I am not associated with only one museum. Taking an opportunity from this position, I am planning a pilot project with a fellow 2021 ITP participant for the **ITP Knowledge Exchange**, where I will be providing accessibility consultation to the Sudan National Museum along with Nosiba Mahgoub and her team.

I would like to seize this chance to create a network of subject specific groups/experts within the ITP network that act as a resource partner for small museums that face challenges with regards to funding, human resource and technological know-how. I have already registered a domain name called **Access Beyond Borders** - which would be a global Consortium of Museum professionals working in the area of diversity outreach, accessibility, inclusion and community engagement with an aim of sharing knowledge and best practices in a resourceful way. I would like to initiate this project with the British Museum and the ITP Partner museums network and the ITP fellow network. I also hope to be part of the ITP in various different ways and bring in a more developmental perspective to this global programme. My next step for this would be to be a Senior Fellow on the ITP programme in the near future along with contributing to ITP's blogs and other opportunities.



Image: Exploring the South Asia department with the team

Personal Growth

There is no doubt that this training programme was extremely beneficial for me **professionally**, but more than that it was a **great learning curve for my *personal* development**. My interaction with colleagues from various parts of the world, experts (**Will and Stuart**) at the **British Museum and NMNI** allowed me to grow into an informed person, to understand the temperament of the audiences with a global perspective and with a heart-to-heart connection. During an NMNI session on Social Prescribing, I learnt a valuable lesson that access and inclusion is not about service provision but more so about welcoming diverse groups within the museum space where they feel comfortable and safe. This could be for any group, be it children with special needs or a group of vulnerable young adults or senior citizens.

I consider myself extremely lucky to have met **Isabelle Lawrence** who is a PhD scholar and is working on the representation of disability in the BM's collection. Working with her has given me immense clarity on how I would personally like to take my PhD forward and look at the aspects of inclusion and diversity not only as a service that can be provided in a museum but also how it is represented within the museum object.

Finally I would like to thank the sponsors - **the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation and Charles Wallace India Trust** for this opportunity and for allowing me to up-skill myself and gain confidence in the fact that Access and Inclusion can be mainstream in the space of arts and cultural heritage.

I would like to show gratitude personally to **Claire, George and Anna** for making sure that everything was well organized, all questions were answered patiently and at all points they took efforts to allow us to make the most of this opportunity.

Above all, meeting my fellow ITP colleagues for me was like –

“Meeting your old friends from the museum world for the first time! And knowing that help or connection is just one email or one message on the BM ITP FB page, away!!”

Siddhant Shah

www.accessforall.co
