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# Representing Religious Identity: Lahore Museum, 1960s-1990s

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*Exhibitions, galleries, and publications of the Lahore Museum represented the national history, interests, and ideology of Pakistani State between the 1960s and 1990s. Initially, the State did not take interest in the patronising and financing the Museum but from the 1960s onwards, various administrators began to use the Museum as a space where the State could represent its identity, ideology and unique history. Parallel to the process of Islamization in Pakistan, initially the Museum administrators in the 1970s, and then other State institutions in the 1980s and 1990s began to take keen interest in the ideologically motivated acquisitions and displays of the Museum.*

**Key Words:** Lahore Museum, Islamic Identity, Museum Bulletin, National History

## **Introduction**

Curators of modern museums curate galleries and publish material to project particular ideologies. (Davison 2001) (Hooper-Greenhill 2007) In this way, museums through collecting, displaying, and interpreting specific artefacts involve themselves in cultural politics of nation states. It is, therefore, important to understand who has the power to administer a museum? Who is interpreting the objects, who decides what should be on display and what should be removed from the display. (Hooper-Greenhill 2007). Tony Bennett has rightly pointed out, that curators organise displays in such a way that “people become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge”. (Bennett 2019) So, museums cannot be considered “ideologically neutral institutions”; they have ideological purpose which their curators convey through a display. This ideological purpose could be related to the ruling class, nation state, resistance movement and so on.

Contemporary cultural historians show how nations and identities are imagined through exhibitions and museums. (Chen 2007; Knell 2011; Mozaffari 2007; Jang 2020) Lahore Museum is no exception. The story of its transformation from a colonial to a national museum is fascinating. While establishing the Lahore Museum in the 1850s, the British administrators associated it with various objectives: promotion of science and natural history; promotion of trade of European goods and Indian crafts; improvement in the aesthetics of Indians by showing various paintings and sculptures.<sup>1</sup> After the partition in 1947, the museum administrators appropriated pre-colonial and colonial artefacts to construct a new identity based on religion. They also constructed ‘ancient history of Pakistan’ on the basis of Indus Valley Civilization and artefacts of pre-Muslim period.<sup>2</sup> Our article is about the representation of Pakistan’s Islamic nationalism in the Lahore Museum between the 1960s and 1990s.

The first section of this paper discusses the formative years of the Lahore Museum in the 1960s and the 70s, and the role of historians who shaped the discourse of Pakistan’s national history and were also involved in the management of the Museum. The second section deals with the temporary exhibitions curated in the Museum. These exhibitions were inspired and shaped by the administrators’ interests, contemporary political situation and the State’s narrative. The third part discusses the Lahore Museum Bulletin— a biannual publication of the Lahore Museum.

## **Formative Years after the Partition**

In the 1960s, the Pakistani State initiated a project of rewriting history textbooks to promote “Two Nation Theory” and “Islamic Identity”. (Jalal 1995; Qasmi 2019; Arif 2007) These writings were to shape the galleries in museums in Pakistan. Scholars such as Mortimer Wheeler, I.H Qureshi, Ahmed Hassan Dani and Shaikh Muhammad Ikram wrote and compiled ancient, medieval and modern histories of South Asia and significantly contributed to constructing an official narrative about the identity of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Mortimer Wheeler and Ahmed Hassan Dani, as part of the team, were responsible for upgrading the National Museum in Karachi in 1950. Established in Fere Hall, it replaced the Victoria Museum. Both scholars made rigorous efforts to collect artefacts from all over the country to represent a multicultural society. The artefacts were categorised in such a way to distinguish between the ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ heritages. This pattern was to be followed by the administrators of the Lahore Museum from the 1960s onwards.

In the 1950s, the state had neither resources nor intention to employ the Lahore Museum as an institution to represent its identity. Two former directors, who served the museum in the 1970s and the 1990s, subscribe to this opinion.<sup>4</sup> The state did not ask curators to organise displays on national themes, they struggled to secure funds for events, and usually they had to rely on their own resources. Without any ideological agenda, the administration initially focussed on improving the infrastructure of the museum. Only in 1964, the state formed a committee with BA Kureshi as its in-charge to propose the government to improve the functioning, maintenance, and themes for curating exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> The Lahore Museum was declared as “a semi-national or national museum of Pakistan.” (Bhatti 2012) The curators, who were directed by the state to show “national history”, not only appropriated previous collections of the Museum but also expanded the scope to elaborate various shades of Islamic identity of the country.

It was in 1972, the curators began to reorganise the galleries for ideological purposes. Ahmad Hassan Dani, a leading Pakistani archaeologist by that time, was instrumental in this development.<sup>6</sup> National displays, establishment of Islamic and Freedom Movement galleries were realized, the number of galleries were increased from seven to nine.<sup>7</sup> (Dar 1979; Dar 1984; Dar 1994) The introduction of the new galleries widened the scope of the Museum and “transformed it from archaeological to cultural and

historical museum.” Considering the limitations of the Museum in terms of resources and space,<sup>8</sup> the re-organisation and establishment of galleries was a major transformation to showcase the ‘personality of Pakistan’.

### **Temporary Exhibitions (1970s-1990s)**

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the Lahore Museum remained an active cultural institution. Administrators regularly curated temporary exhibitions to popularise Pakistan’s nationalism by displaying new acquisitions, attracting large gatherings on particular days such as 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 14<sup>th</sup> August, and 6<sup>th</sup> September. Such exhibitions also enhanced the status and prestige of the Museum. These exhibitions were a communication tool between the curators and the public for promoting national history. Temporary exhibitions also served as a means of public diplomacy in particular circumstances. (Mclean 1999)

The separation of East Pakistan in 1971 and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s initiative to frame the third Constitution of Pakistan on the basis of religion influenced the working of the Lahore Museum. (Amstutz 2019) From the 1970s onwards, the Museum focussed on Freedom Movement Gallery sometimes referred to as Pakistan movement Gallery, acquisition and display of Islamic paintings, coins, manuscripts, and other artefacts from various Muslim countries. Individual efforts of the administrators resulted in five temporary exhibitions on textbooks in the 1970s which were inaugurated by Ghulam Mustafa Khar, Governor of the Punjab.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the “State showed no interest in representing a national narrative in the Lahore Museum”, Saif-ur-Rehman Dar, former director of the Museum asserted. Another director, Anjum Rehmani mentioned: “we collected books and established new galleries without any direction by the government.”<sup>10</sup> Freedom Movement Gallery, the largest gallery in the Museum, was the outcome of sequential temporary exhibitions on national heroes and historical documents.<sup>11</sup> Such exhibitions not only enhanced the museum's role as a space of collective memory but pictorial history with captions in Urdu gave an opportunity to those who had no formal education to know about the national history of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Acquisition and display of artefacts aimed at highlighting Islamic identity of Pakistan. Since the establishment of the Board of Governance with Shaikh Muhammad Ikram, a leading historian of that time, as its member, the Museum administrators had already prioritised the acquisition of Islamic artefacts.<sup>13</sup> The administrators curated successive temporary exhibitions on

manuscripts, inscriptions, on various accessions of Ramadan, Eid and Eid Miladun Nabi.<sup>14</sup> To stress on the idea of Muslim brotherhood, the curators organised a temporary exhibition on newspapers of Muslim countries between 21-31 March 1979. All these exhibitions were generously supported by the State and attracted a large number of visitors.<sup>15</sup> The tradition of temporary exhibitions on personalities, coins, calligraphies, with the intention of highlighting Islamic identity continued in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup>

These exhibitions constructed a national narrative through display which was to be presented by curators in their publications. The Museum emerged as an institution which began educating public about national history. Personal ambitions and aspirations of members of the Board of Governors, researchers and directors shaped this narrative. Under the directorship of Saif-ur Rehman Dar, who was an archaeologist by training, focussed on archaeological exhibits. He wrote articles on archaeology, delivered lectures on excavations and archaeological exhibits. While Anjum Rehmani, as an historian, was more interested in Islamic artefacts and their historical value. His catalogues of Islamic Gallery and subsequent exhibitions and acquisitions of manuscripts and calligraphies subscribe to this observation. So, along with political context, personal ambitions and training of the directors strongly influenced the working of the Museum from archaeological and historical point of views which in turn enriched the national narrative.

### **Lahore Museum Bulletin**

Journals and publications of the Lahore Museum reflect the rationale, utility, working, and changing relevance of the institution. On such publication is the *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, a bi-annual research journal. Over the years, it has become a communicative tool to engage academia and general public with the interpretation of artefacts, cataloguing, working of the Museum, annual working reports and lectures, and reception of the exhibits. Similarly, another journal, *Ancient Archaeology*, published by the Government of Pakistan aimed at presenting Pakistani readers “knowledge about the sources of our pride while it will make the Pakistanis satisfied that their own rich heritage and also its regular updating will be spreading a realistic image of Pakistan to the people of the world at large”.<sup>17</sup>

In 1988, the Lahore Museum began publishing the *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, a bi-annual journal.<sup>18</sup> The journal invited papers on museology, fine arts and crafts, archaeology, anthropology and history.<sup>19</sup> The journal

also encouraged book reviews and notes on preserving exhibits, and articles on best practices in modern museums.

Initial articles published in the *Bulletin* presented the Lahore Museum as one of the largest national museums of Pakistan after the Partition.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Bashir Ahmed Kureshi, a bureaucrat turned museologist, in an article, “The Lahore Museum Now and Then”, stated that the museum as an institution which was national and decolonised, and was representing the national history of Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> It was a rupture between the British Raj and the new Islamic State. Dani, Dar and Anjum Rehmani, who were involved in the reorganisation of the museum, presented similar argument in their articles in the *Bulletin*.

One of the objectives of publishing the *Lahore Museum Bulletin* was to discover an “authentic”, non-Hindu ancient history of Pakistan. We see a similar discourse in the curriculum where ancient history of Pakistan was distinguished from the history of the rest of the subcontinent.<sup>22</sup> By distinguishing ancient history of the region which comprised Pakistan, the historians, politicians and museum administrators intended to argue that Pakistan and India had separate identities, culture, and the partition was the natural outcome of different historical pasts: “Some of us like to limit our historical evolution of culture from religion and ideology of Islam but this is not an evolutionary process” says Ahmed Hassan Dani.<sup>23</sup> Excavation of Gandhara as Buddhist past was the most distinguished feature of the discourse on unique ancient history of Pakistan. (Qureshi 1963)

While distinguishing religious past of Pakistan from the rest of the subcontinent, contributors to the *Bulletin* proposed that Pakistan was the place from where Buddhism originated and spread to different parts of the world.<sup>24</sup> Dar argues: “Judging the Asian history retrospectively, we are sure that if there had been no Buddhist Gandhara, there would have been no Buddhism in Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Pakistan had cultural and religious links with Central Asia and China than the region which comprised post-1947 India. Dar’s claims are contested by many historians such as Amstutz who suggests that Buddhism has strong roots in Nepal and Tibet. (Amstutz 2019) Some articles in the *Bulletin* proposed that the region which comprised Pakistan had its own unique history which could be traced back to the stone age. This idea was argued on the basis of some prehistoric collections found in Mehargarh of Balochistan, Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. These collections also propounded a case of city

civilizations of Mehrgarh, Saraikola, Gumla, Kot Diji,<sup>26</sup> which strengthened the Lahore Museum's narrative of ancient history of Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

Editors of the *Bulletin* also contested histories which did not subscribe to their nationalist discourse. For instance, while reviewing Yahya Amjad's *Tarikh-i-Pakistan*, Saif-ur Rehman Dar contested the use of Marxist perspective by the author. Dar criticized Amjad's notion of class division in Indus Valley and proposed that the Valley was bounded together on the basis of religion and equality rather than economic reasons. Amjad's assumption that "Jainism is less attached with Pakistan" was also questioned by him: Jainism was "anterior to Buddhism".<sup>28</sup> By mentioning that the Gandhara civilization was eroded by "Hindus", Dar was justifying the fears of the Muslim League which argued that Muslim civilization in India was in danger because of the Hindu majority.<sup>29</sup>

Discussion on various artefacts from other regions including China in the *Bulletin* proposed that in the ancient history, the region now comprising Pakistan, was never ruled by one political authority. Several empires fought over this region, dividing it on many occasions.<sup>30</sup> Hence, this region became the melting pot of different civilizations. The rich collections from all over the world in the Lahore Museum complemented such claims.

Editors of the journal argued that colonial interception of the British and the Russians, and new trend of micro-histories blurred the age-old relations between immediate neighbours.<sup>31</sup> Imperial powers made consolidated efforts to disentangle Central Asia from other Muslim states. Dani states "The human relations were left dormant under the imperial exploitations which opened eastern and western oceanic pathways and blocked all the direct land routes of contact, relations and friendliness".<sup>32</sup> The Turks were Buddhist by religion, succeeded the Huns. Both had multiple branches of tribes who shared one politico-economic and cultural zone in the regions of Pakistan and Central Asia.<sup>33</sup> For Dani, the Samanids, the Seljuqs, the Karakhittais and the Karakhanids became dominating in Central Asia and their tribesmen also came to 'ancient' Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> In the medieval period, Muslim diaspora in China strongly influenced the local languages, food, culture and architecture.<sup>35</sup>

Along with Central Asia and China, the publications in the *Bulletin* also stressed on the close religious and cultural ties with the Middle Eastern countries. The case in point is of Iran. One of the authors claimed that archaeological findings proved connections between Iran and Pakistan in

prehistoric times through the routes of Balochistan.<sup>36</sup> After the Seljuks invasion of Kirman in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Iranian tribes came to Makran, Sistan and Sindh regions which could be inferred from the similar vocabularies used in the languages spoken in Kafir desert and Balochistan. The Mughals strengthened these cultural ties by establishing strong political relations. The cultural exchange between the regions and could be seen in paintings, calligraphy and architecture.<sup>37</sup>

One scholar, while reviewing a book, argued that Muslim craft was a superior and perfect form of pre-Muslim evolutionary crafts in India which were inspired by different religious traditions such as Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism.<sup>38</sup> Thus the Islamic collections in the Museum depicted superior craft of Muslims such as inscriptions, sacred manuscripts, coins and paintings. The scholar claimed that setting up the Islamic gallery shows that people were taking interest in Islamic collections, “it is only recently that the interest in the Islamic work has been revived worldwide”.<sup>39</sup> This point is significant, the way Muslim League’s leaders claimed that Pakistan would be a laboratory of practising Islam, the curators of the Museum and contributors to the *Bulletin* claimed that Islamic collections would invoke interests in Islamic art and culture. The way religious scholars presented Islam as a global religion and a way of life, the curators and writers presented Islamic artefacts as a product of global cultural interaction of diverse communities. For instance, book reviews of some works such as that of Najib Mayil Hirwani’s *Kitab Arai Der Tamaddan i Islam*<sup>40</sup> discuss techniques of paintings, paper-binding, styles and techniques of calligraphy popular in the medieval Islamic world. These writings presented Islamic collections as global master-pieces.

## Conclusion

Between the 1960s and 1990s, the administrators at the Lahore Museum curated exhibitions and published research journal to represent the Islamic identity of Pakistan. The leading Pakistani historians were involved in collecting artefacts and setting up of galleries such as Freedom Movement gallery and Islamic gallery. The objective was to represent national history as written in the textbooks. Writings published in the research journal, *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, had three salient features: Pakistan was presented as a melting pot of civilizations which had a history different than the rest of the subcontinent; Pakistan was the centre of religious movements such as Buddhism, it was from this region that Buddhism spread to Central Asia

and China; and Pakistan had close cultural and economic ties with the Muslim Middle Eastern countries.

## End Notes and Bibliography

<sup>1</sup>For the history of the Lahore Museum in British India see Hussain Ahmad Khan, *Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth Century Punjab* (London: IB Tauris, 2015); Shaila Tabasum Bhatti, *Translating Museums: a Counter History of South Asian museology*, (California: Left Coast Press, 2012), pp.33-117. The history of Lahore Museum after Partition from 1947 onwards is discussed by Aparna Megan Kumar, *Partition and the Historiography of Art in South Asia* (Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>Anwasha Sengupta, "Breaking up: Dividing assets between India and Pakistan in times of Partition," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (2014): 529-548.

<sup>3</sup> For the first time, the Pakistan History was compiled by an archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, in his book, Robert Eric Mortimer Wheeler, *Five thousand years of Pakistan: an archaeological outline* (London: Royal India & Pakistan Society, 1950).A.H. Dani, *Recent archaeological discoveries in Pakistan* (Paris & Tokyo: UNESCO Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Anjum Rehmani (24 July 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of the Advisory Committee held on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes of 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of Board of Governors held on 5 August 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Saif-ur Rehman Dar, *A Brief Guide to Lahore Museum* (Lahore: Lahore Museum, 1979); Saif-ur Rehman Dar, *A Brief Guide to Lahore Museum* (Lahore: Lahore Museum, 1984); Saif-ur Rehman Dar, *A Brief Guide to Lahore Museum* (Lahore: Lahore Museum, 1994); Interview with Saif-ur Rehman Dar (16<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Saif-ur Rehman Dar (16<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>9</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1971, 1973, 23-29 April 1975, from Annual Progress Report of the Lahore Museum, 1972, 1974, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Anjum Rehmani (24 July 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Temporary exhibitions were arranged on Iqbal on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1970, Pakistan Freedom Movement on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1970, Life and Documents of Quaid e Azam between 23 March-22 April 1976, Documents of Allama Iqbal, Pakistan Resolution Documents 14-31 August 1984 and rare pamphlets related to Pakistan Movement Gallery in 1986. On Iqbal day exhibitions of Sadequain's paintings on verses of Iqbal were held from 8-15 November 1984. Exhibition of photographs and documents relating to 23<sup>rd</sup> March were held from 23<sup>rd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> March 1990. These successive temporary exhibitions related to exhibits on Pakistan Movement were actually developed into the permanent exhibitions of Pakistan Movement Gallery.

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<sup>12</sup> Exhibition on renowned Urdu poet Altaf Hussain Hali was held in January 1973, Science fair Exhibition by the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Lahore organized in March 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of meetings 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Board of Governors Lahore Museum.

<sup>14</sup> Quarnic manuscripts were exhibited in November 1972 and Calligraphic exhibitions from 18 June-10 July 1976. The Exhibition of Manuscripts in Bahar Style of Calligraphy was held from 25 February-8 March 1979 and Kjaroshthi inscription on 2 April 1979. In Ramadan, Quranic Calligraphy of Sadequain was held between 21 August- 30 September 1979 and in 1994 on traditional and modern specimen of calligraphy along with Maqbool's painting and calligraphies between 19-22 September, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Saif-ur Rehman Dar (16<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>16</sup> In 1987, we see exhibitions on Pakistani coins, Independence Day and Calligraphies of Aslam Kamal.

<sup>17</sup> Saif Rehman, "Introductory note to Haleem Sharar (Editor), The Archaeology, 1 No.2." *Lahore Museum Bulletin* II, no. 1 (Jan-June 1989), 83-85.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of meeting of Board of Governors 1976.

<sup>19</sup> Saif-ur Rehman Dar, "Editor's note", *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, I, no. 1, (1988).

<sup>20</sup> Bashir Ahmed Kureshi, "Lahore Museum Now and Then," 2-4. Also published again in Anjum Rehmani, *Lahore Museum Heritage* (Lahore: Lahore museum, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> This article was republished in *Lahore Museum Heritage* – a seminal work of Anjum Rehmani on the Lahore Museum.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Hassan Dani, "Reconstructing a cultural museum in Pakistan", *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, VII, No. 1,2, (1994), 23

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>24</sup> Saif-ur Rehman Dar, "The silk road and Buddhism in Pakistani Context," *Lahore Museum Bulletin* 1, no. 2, (July-December 1988): 30, 31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> M. Rafique Mughal, "Genesis of the Indus Valley Civilization", *Lahore museum Bulletin*, V 1, No. 1, (January- June 1988): 45-53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, A. H. Dani, "Pak-China Historical Relation," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, IX, no.2 (July-Dec 1996) 27-43.

<sup>28</sup> Saif-ur Rehman Dar, "Book review Yahya Amjad, *Tarikh-i-Pakistan*, Sangemeel publications Lahore 1989," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, III, No. 1 (Jan-June 1990) 95.

<sup>29</sup> Dani, "Pak-China Historical Relation", 28.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ahmad Hasan Dani, "Central Asia and Pakistan through the ages," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, III, No.1, (Jan-Jun 1990): 4-12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmad Hassan Dani, "Pak-China Historical Relation," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, IX, no.2, (July-Dec 1996): 27-43.

<sup>36</sup> Masoodul Hasan Khokhar, "A cultural link between Iran and Pakistan," *Lahore museum Bulletin*, VI, nos. 1,2 (January-December, 1993): 71.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Humera Alam, "Book Review of Akhtar Riazuddin, History of Handicrafts Pakistan-India," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, V, No 2, (July-December 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Tariq Masood, "Dr. Abdul Rahman: Symposium on Islamic Art, Calligraphy, Architecture and Archeology: The proceedings of the Hijra Celebration," *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, I, no. 1 (july-dec 1988), 169

<sup>40</sup> Anjum Rehmani, Book Review, *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, VI, nos. 1,2 (January- December 1993): 89-92.

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