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'Official Memories' of the Last Days: Images of the Muslim Rule in the Lahore Museum

Abstract

New museology has raised the status of museums to public spaces where interpretations and politics of displays have replaced mere description of collections. Museums as heritage and memory sites bridge times and spaces by relating past with present and future. These memory sites are not innocent. Curators convey a political message through carefully selected and arranged exhibits. This paper explains how the decline of pre-colonial Muslim kingdoms were imagined and appropriated by the curators of the Lahore Museum to construct the "official memory" of the new nation of Pakistan. These representations are displayed in the Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery (completed in 1974). The main objective of this display is to link the decline of Muslim kingdoms with the struggle for independence of Pakistan.

Keywords: Lahore Museum; Freedom Movement Gallery; Tipu Sultan; Bahadur Shah Zafer; War of Independence

Introduction

Objects in a museum represent a political narrative of curators. This narrative changes over time due to emerging social needs. In other words, displays in museums create new meanings and interpretations to their collections.¹ Museums not only accumulate, preserve and guard the collections of a nation² but also celebrate collective social past of nations.³ As a storehouse of a nation's memory, museums help people to understand and define their pasts from ancient remnants placed on display. Graham Black has rightly pointed out that "collective memory is about the continual presence of that past in the present."⁴ Scholars such as Kavita Singh,⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta,⁶ Abu Talib Ahmad⁷ and Lianne McTavish⁸ explain as how postcolonial nations inherit their past through colonial museums and how these museums help postcolonial nations with imagining their ancient and ardent past. Memory, symbols and history are important parameters for defining a national identity,⁹ which is made convenient by museums.

"Historical memories have always been politicized."¹⁰ When the British left India in 1947, we see an urgency among the elites of postcolonial nations to accumulate and display "official memories" in public sphere. Curating exhibitions and setting-up new galleries in museums were a part of this strategy. Along with this, scholars in Pakistan and India began writing their distinct memories and histories to argue separate identities of communities living in the subcontinent. In Pakistan, the process of defining identity has multiple dimensions such as rewriting history, establishing new institutions, and renaming buildings, roads, towns, etc. We find very insightful debates among scholars on rewriting of history textbooks¹¹ but parallel developments in the national and local museums for re-imagining new history are less discussed. We propose in this paper that curators presented a new history of Pakistan—written in history textbooks—through objects in the Lahore Museum. Susan A. Crane mentions: "Museums are supplementary cultural institutions and showplaces of collected objects, they are the places of interaction between personal and collective memories, identities and history between information and knowledge production."¹² In the same way, the Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery, established in 1974 in the Lahore Museum, became a site where individual and collective memories, identities and new histories of the postcolonial state interacted and formed a discourse, which we call here the "official memories" of Pakistan. One important feature of this official memory was to glorify the Muslim kingdoms in precolonial India and to show that the

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Muslim rulers such as Tipu Sultan and Bahadur Shah Zafar were the precursor to independence of Pakistan. In this paper, we will describe how the decline of Muslim kingdoms are represented in the gallery.

Right from the very beginning, the State of Pakistan was sensitive about the emerging 'social needs' of the new nation, and accordingly initiated a process of revising curriculum and history textbooks. On 26 April 1949, the Pakistan History Board decided to remove certain historical facts from the revised version of history textbooks which were recently printed by the Government of Pakistan.¹³ The intention was to highlight those phases of history which could project Pakistan as a separate political, social, religious and cultural entity. This involved silencing some phases of history to promote particular memories. These silences in Pakistani history textbooks are critically studied by scholars.¹⁴

For promoting particular 'official memories' and 'uncritical patriotism',¹⁵ the writers of textbooks stressed on the themes of 'other' or enemy, a divide between 'us and them', glory of the Muslims, coming of the Muslim in the subcontinent as savior against the cruel Hindu rule. The stress on othering carved a new identity for Muslims in the subcontinent. In history textbooks, the story of Pakistan begins from the Indus Valley Civilization, and after discussing Buddhism and the Muslim rule, the All India Muslim League's struggle for independence from the British raj is highlighted.¹⁶ The narrative in the textbooks presents Hindus and Sikhs as brutal and unjust rulers.¹⁷ Similarly, a number of scholars argue that the role of Muslim rulers and reformers is exaggerated in the history textbooks.¹⁸ Whether the Hindu rulers were unjust or the role of Muslim rulers and reformers was exaggerated is beyond the scope of this paper. Our concern here is to show that how did the Lahore Museum represented precolonial Muslim kingdoms through images, captions and descriptions in line with the discourses of history textbooks.

The curators of Lahore Museum reconceptualized the galleries to present history from ancient period till the time of Partition. Since many noted historians were involved in setting up and upgrading the museums in Pakistan, the process of reconceptualization of galleries ran parallel to the project of writing new history of the country.¹⁹ The curators employed the disciplines of history, archaeology, geography, religious studies, sociology and fine arts to represent a history of the new nation.

Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery

Completed in 1974, Freedom Movement gallery is now renamed as Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery. Renaming was to stress on the struggle of Muslims only. The gallery was set-up to pay tribute to those Muslims of the subcontinent who sacrificed for independence.²⁰ The gallery consists of photographs, belongings of freedom fighters, newspaper cuttings and some description of the important events from the 18th century till the establishment of Pakistan.

Image content helps us to understand and interpret photographs and paintings in museums.²¹ For analysing image content, we ask questions such as why images were purchased, exchanged, collected or displayed. It is important to understand the thoughts and ideas of photographer or painter by noticing the angle and frame of a picture along with the timings.²² The curators of the gallery did not follow the acquisition and accessioning practices for the photographs and paintings displayed. It leaves us to focus on the arrangement and content of images, and description of the images for explaining visual information.²³ The write-up on the entrance of the gallery summarises major resistance movements between the War of Independence (1857) and the establishment of Pakistan (1947). This description sets up the tone of the display. Paintings in the gallery highlight some phases of history and at the same time hiding many other. Photographs and paintings of all imminent Muslim freedom fighters in the subcontinent, write-up on major events, belongings of Allama Iqbal (1877-1930) and rare flags of All India Muslim League²⁴ make the gallery a picturesque memory of the nation. Siraj ul Daula,²⁵ Tipu Sultan, Shah Wali Ullah,²⁶ Sayed Ahmed Shaheed²⁷ and Shah Ismail Shaheed²⁸ are symbolized as freedom fighters who fought against the British rule. All these images aim to invoke a feeling of patriotism in Pakistani audience and justify the demand for a separate Muslim state.

As depicted in Pakistani history textbooks, an eighteenth-century Muslim ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan,²⁹ is celebrated in the Freedom Movement Gallery as a brave, just, and modern ruler who gave a tough resistance to the East India Company and the Hindus. Paintings in the gallery³⁰ narrate Tipu Sultan's story from his childhood to the

final battle against the Company. These images hide how Tipu and his father, Haider Ali, formed alliances with the Hindus for the defense of their kingdoms.³¹ Selective depiction of the incidents of Tipu's bravery and relating them to the struggle for Pakistan aims to show a centuries old distinctiveness of Indian Muslims' identity.

The Lahore Museum does not possess any belonging of Tipu Sultan. Only images of weapons and belongings of Tipu's family exhibited in the Albert Museum London and the Army Museum Rawalpindi are displayed. The story of Tipu in the Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery ends with the fall of Seringapatam leading us to the next phase of struggle against the British raj. Tipu's pictorial representation in the gallery suggests that before the struggle for independence from the British, Indian Muslims had always been sensitive about their identity, religion and freedom which were threatened by an alliance of the East India Company with Hindus and (Muslim) traitors.

After depicting a few fragmented resistance movements such as the Fraizi movement and Sayed Ahmed Shaheed's *tehreek*, we gradually move to the representation of the War of 1857 which is described as the *Khooni Ma'arka* (bloody fight) and an important milestone towards achieving the independence.³² The description proposes that the War of Independence had a background of centuries old religious, political, social, and economic ideals and systems. Began from a soldier's camps, the War spread to all parts of India. The East India Company maintained its authority by paralyzing Muslim kingdoms and the Muslims' way of life.

The description with the images stresses on the Hindu Muslim divide. For instance, with the decline of the Mughals in the nineteenth century, the Hindus joined hands with the British to victimize the Muslims. Properties and businesses of Muslims were confiscated; the British preferred Hindus over Muslims for jobs. Muslims were further marginalized when Persian was replaced with English as an official language. Christian missionaries with the patronage of the East India Company converted people from other religions to Christianity. In the War of Independence (1857), both Hindus and Muslims were involved but the after the War, Muslims were particularly targeted by the British. The description in the gallery relates the events of 1857 with the Freedom Movement: Both Hindu and Muslim soldiers fought together against the British, the rebels occupied Delhi and declared the Government of Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor (r.1837-1857).³³ The British overpowered the rebels. Major Hodson³⁴ shot dead two sons of Bahadur Shah. Their bodies were publicly displayed. Many innocent Nawabs, Qazis and Muftis were exiled to Andaman Islands.³⁵ The description also stated that the officers of East India Company decided to kill 10,000 Indians for each English killed during the War. Such executions took place on the bank of river Yumna. The British murdered 27000 people in Delhi only. According to the write-up, the failure in the War was a first attempt towards a complete freedom. The failure was followed by a series of attempts and a long political struggle to get rid of the foreign occupation.

A map of places where the War of Independence was fought is also displayed in the gallery. Images of mujahedin in various cities are displayed. One caption states: 'British Army brutally killing Mujahidin at Sialkot Sector' and the painting shows an un-armed mujahid murdered by the East India Company's soldier. A painting of Bahadur Shah Zafar is displayed with a caption: 'The Last Mughal Emperor'. Next to this is a telegram describing the destruction in Delhi by the rebel soldiers. Other paintings show the atrocities of the British along with the arrest of the Mughal princes and the emperor. One painting shows the caravan of Begum Hazrat Mahal (wife of the ruler of Awadh who rebelled against the British) suggesting that the Muslim women also took part in the War.³⁶

A letter of Nawab Khan Bahadur, the raja of Bireli,³⁷ asking Muslims and Hindus to fight against the British is displayed. Without any caption an image of an elephant with a soldier. Along with this is a painting of Tomb of Humayun. Bahadur Shah Zafar was arrested here. We see another image with a caption: 'Mujahidin Killing English brutally'. Along with this is the image of 'Khooni Darwaza' (bloody door). It was here Major Hodson killed three Mughal princes in 1857. This arrangement of images justifies the actions of the mujahideen. The East India Company threatened and then occupied Indian kingdoms and the mujahideen responded to them. The opinion of the British and Indian authors is exactly the opposite: Indians rebelled, and the British responded. Along with the images of attack on Delhi, a painting of dejected Bahadur Shah Zafar sitting on his throne. We also see Nawab Hamid Ali Khan, Mehboob Ali Khawja, Elahi Bakhsh³⁸ and other courtiers in the painting. The caption of this painting is: 'the last light of Timuri candle, which extinguished for forever'. The story of the decline of the Mughal Empire takes us to an image of Hazrat Mahal. The curators ensured to display images of women in the gallery to show that women were also involved in the Freedom Movement of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The representation of the decline of Muslim kingdoms in the Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery of the Lahore Museum aims at setting the background to depict a justified struggle of the All-India Muslim League for an independence Muslim state. The curators ensured that the depiction of the pre-colonial Muslim kingdoms of Tipu Sultan and the Mughals show a divide between the Hindus and the Muslims; sensitivity of the Muslims towards their freedom and their struggle against the East India Company; role of the Muslim women; and brutality of the East India Company's officers. The display invokes emotions of patriotism among the visitors. The Pakistan Freedom Movement Gallery is a classic example of post-colonial museums where states appropriate pre-colonial past to construct their ideals and nationalisms.

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