Archaeology, Museums and the Creation of National Identity in the Indian Subcontinent

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In many former colonial nations, museums and the display of archaeological heritage offer an opportunity for the conscious creation and projection of national identity. This paper examines contemporary writings about the role of archaeology and museums in the three subcontinental nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Once united under a colonial regime, these three nations today have different political philosophies and practices; yet in each case the ancient past is consciously projected as a touchstone for national identity in the present. In archaeological displays, viewers are guided to see the physical remains of the ancient past as evidence of a long-standing cultural and national unity.

In regions of the world that have known colonial domination, many institutions have been created to define a common ground among the diverse ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures found within the boundaries of new nation-states. Museums in particular offer an opportunity for the conscious creation and projection of national identity: as public institutions that invite but cannot coerce attendance, museums in their displays acknowledge the public's self-perception at the same time that new identities are proposed. In the Indian subcontinent, the three nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India occupy a region once united under a colonial regime. Despite considerable differences in current political structure, the proponents and directors of museums in each country are concerned with the way in which the past can be used to confirm and project a cohesive national identity in the present.

The modern, post-colonial history of the Indian subcontinent began in 1947 with independence from Britain that was accompanied by the partition of the subcontinent into two political entities along the lines of religion: India was meant to be a secular state, while Pakistan was designated by the departing British as a nation for Muslims. Pakistan's division into two physical halves endured for one generation, before the eastern, disconnected portion became Bangladesh in 1971. Today, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh find themselves in uneasy coexistence in the Indian subcontinent, often struggling over political boundaries and ideology. All three nations are beset with problems of identity remaining from the inevitably imperfect separation of peoples. Bangladesh is just now emerging from a series of political crises which have played themselves out in its first generation of nationhood (Baxter 1984). Pakistan has also confronted a large number of political and economic crises, in addition to facing challenges for autonomy and control from minority groups. India, the largest of the three nations, has continually faced the question, how many nations are contained in a single "India"?

Archaeology and National Identity in the Subcontinent

It has been proposed that "the simple existence of nations implies the existence of a past" (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996:3), and that the tangible remains of the past provide the necessary link between personal ancestry and a national heritage (Sørensen 1996). Museums, as the quintessential repository of artifacts, are fertile ground for the conscious creation of national identity. In Western nations, the concept of the museum began at the same time as the concept of the "nation," where the tangible remains of the past recovered through archaeological investigations were collected and displayed as a statement of shared heritage (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996, Graves-Brown *et al.* 1996, Kristiansen 1996, Prösler 1996). A similar process of linking the past to the present has more recently been carried out in developing nations, which often place the creation of museums as a significant component of central government planning (for Papua New Guinea, see Mangi 1989; for Sri Lanka see Prösler 1996; for Malaysia see Nair 1992; for Nigeria see Nzewunwa 1990; for contemporary Russia see Balzer 1997).

In the subcontinent, the importance of museums in the creation of national unity is often made explicit when discussing archaeological heritage, as seen in the following three quotations. From Bangladesh on the eve of independence, one author noted:

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> It is a national pride of every country to display her cultural treasures in museums which are the veritable mirrors of a nation's history...Our coming generations will not open their eyes to an insipid and featureless identity, but will find their cultural roots well preserved for their sober reflection and feeling of pride for belonging to a land which has a chronology full of anecdotes testified by material remains (Khan 1972:22).

Similarly, the Superintendent of the National Museum of Pakistan commented that:

> Cultural relics of a country are the virtual foundations for advancement in corporate life. As achievements acquired after a prolonged struggle with nature and environment, they manifest the store of creative intelligence, initiative, perseverance and integrity that have gone into the making of a particular national character. With this philosophy, the National Museum of Pakistan was opened in 1951, a time not particularly suitable for the birth of such an institution when the entire structure of (the) national economy was only faintly inscribed on blue prints (Naqvi 1969:255).

In India, similar sentiments are expressed by the director of a regional archaeological museum:

> ...a museum in India can serve our people best by making them aware of the fundamental unity of India. It can ably bring home to the masses the fact that in spite of the apparent diversities in race, language, way of life etc., Indian culture is one and indivisible...A museum, through its exhibits and direct communication with the visitors by means of lectures, film-shows, distribution of pamphlets and brochures, can enlighten the people of the fact that they are a member of one community, that their rich cultural heritage stems from a single source... (Bhuyan 1976:41-42).

These three quotations emphasize the links between the tangible past, and the cultivation of a sense of history that transcends individual concerns to result in national unity.

The long trajectory of human occupation in the subcontinent, dating at least a half-million years, has resulted in an archaeological palimpsest of criss-crossing political, religious and cultural frontiers. In any given area, multiple pasts can be called upon. One might expect that given the acrimonious nature of Partition there would be mutual exclusion of arts that emanate from contrasting Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. Indeed, the archaeological remains for which each country is best-noted do not represent the current majority culture. The most famous monument in India is the Taj Mahal, constructed under a Muslim regime. In Pakistan, the remains of the Harappan period predate the introduction of Islam by more than 2000 years. And in Islamic Bangladesh, the first monument to be listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list was the eighth-century A.D. Buddhist monastery at Paharpur. Moreover, in India especially, the beginnings of archaeology in the new nation were largely guided by the political realities of Partition. Because all of the major Indus valley sites were now in Pakistani territory, the first post-independence task of the Archaeological Survey of India was to look for Harappan sites on their side of the border so that a claim of ancestry to the premier Bronze Age culture of the subcontinent could be retained (M.R. Mughal cited in Khan 1975:58, Srivastava 1982:157).

The destructive potential for competing claims of archaeological possession is still present, and has been brought forward into the public realm on a number of occasions. The results of partisan action towards heritage is illustrated, for example, by the destruction of Muslim monuments by Hindu fundamentalists in India. In 1992, the 16th-century mosque known as the Babri Masjid was destroyed by an angry mob, in part based upon claims by reputable, but politically-motivated, archaeologists that the original Islamic builders had destroyed an important Hindu shrine that had previously stood on that same spot (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996; for a history of conflicting claims at Ayodhya, see Rao 1994). The event of destruction, and the ensuing violence between religious communities throughout the subcontinent, indicates that concern for the past also means selecting the past about which one should be concerned. The subsequent debate has produced the subcontinent's first political treatise on archaeological stratigraphy (Mandal 1993); more soberingly, it was the catalyst for a series of riots in which hundreds of people

were killed.

Similarly, in Pakistan the emphasis on Muslim heritage alone carries the risk of political difficulties. As they attempt to seek unity between numerous different ethnic groups and languages, political moderates are especially insistent that Pakistani identity be tied to geography rather than to religion. This geographical link encompasses the ancient past, including references to the rich archaeological remains from sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. Well-aware of the pressures for Islamic fundamentalism, the legal counsel for former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto urged the nation to seek unity in the generic past that "bears testimony to the primordial and restless impulse of the Indus region (Pakistan), to be a distinct and independent `nation state'" since the first occupation by literate peoples of the Bronze Age (Ahsan, cited in Ernst 1996:74).

Thus, the archaeology of the subcontinent is seen as a source of objective knowledge (Bedekar 1989), permitting a more scientific development of cultural identity. Monuments emphasize the shared heritage of communities as "mile-stones in the march of humanity to the modern world" and demonstrate a continuity of living traditions through which problems can be solved in light of the continuous chain of actions that bind people to the land (Dani 1980:162; see also Ernst 1996). But as the noted Pakistani archaeologist A.H. Dani observes, "the old survives as the relic of the past but they do not become monuments until we give that meaning to them" (Dani 1980:162). In addition to the archaeological sites themselves, the portable remains of the past are assembled and presented to the public as evidence of a shared heritage.

Museums and the Making of National Identity

Museums are ideally suited for the conscious projection of a generic, holistic past, since the objects on display are almost always accompanied by interpretations and written labels. Many of the sentiments prompted by museum visitation in the subcontinent are similar to those encountered in museums in the West when people are confronted with displays of objects similar to those from their everyday experience (Urry 1996). The connection between archaeological materials and modern life is thus easily bridged through examples of heritage that encompass living traditions (see Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992). Archaeological display cases in the subcontinent often contain religious motifs, including Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim texts and sculptures similar to those actually used in contemporary worship. Their presence within a single building and in an atmosphere of rational, scientific examination is one way in which museums attempt to transcend the bounds of partisan heritage.

As in the museums of Europe and America, the desired effects upon the visitors are achieved not only by the objects displayed but in the organization of space in the museum (cf. Hetherington 1997). An example can be found in the National Museum of Pakistan, in which the display of artifacts from the struggle for independence was initially adjacent to archaeological artifacts. This seemingly incongruous juxtaposition was purposeful, made with the intent of connecting active and recent memories with much older time periods. As noted in an official communication of the Museum, the visitor "finds himself surrounded by the history which has an immense appeal to him. The atmosphere thus created invokes his personal interest in the museum and he is tempted to know more about its contents which reflect his own past and the present" (Anonymous 1970-71:151). A similar layout can be found at the National Museum in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in which there is a portrait gallery of famous local and national leaders incorporated into a museum that also contains ethnographic and archaeological collections.

Museums in the subcontinent present the tangible remains of the past in a manner that is inviting to the visitor. In small communities in the subcontinent, the idea of a museum as a large building is something of a novelty in conditions when the majority of other architecture is either small and domestic or embodies bureaucracy in the form of a government office or police station. In many areas, the only other large government-sponsored buildings are schools, which are limited to those actively involved in teaching and learning. In addition to the building, the grounds of a museum or historical monument comprise an open space, providing a suitable area for family outings. Entrance-fees are also extremely modest, so that virtually no class of society is economically barred from entry. The museum as a public space (cf. "ludic sphere." Gottdiener 1995) is acted upon by the designers of museums, who frame the museum buildings with gardens, lawns, and walkways.

A summary provided by the Indian scholar K.C. Deka indicates seven roles for a museum: a temple of learning, a place of education, a store-house of collections, a place of interest for visitors, a laboratory for researchers, a

center of art and culture, and a place for attainment of solace, peace and amusement (Deka 1985:63). The organization of space makes allowances for all of these purposes, with special attention to aesthetics. Speaking of the new building of the National Museum in Karachi in 1969, the then-Superintendent offered a comment that describes many museums in the subcontinent: "(It) stands in the middle of a spacious garden, surrounded by palm groves, tamarisk trees, shrubberies, green lawns with flower beds and girdled by serpentine hedges. The sylvan atmosphere and seclusion offer a welcome relief from the din and bustle of surging waves of traffic, creating a mood of languor, retrospection and receptivity, particularly suited to seeing and listening to the eloquent message of the past in the various galleries of the Museum" (Naqvi 1969:256).

Once the bond between individuals and the abstract concept of the nation is achieved, the past is put to additional uses in addressing dominant social concerns. Archaeology and a concern for the past is seen as a generator of social responsibility (N. Sarma 1985), when local people take interest in conserving archaeological sites without placing the responsibility solely on government authorities (Bedekar 1989; see also H.K. Sarma 1985). In the conservation of heritage, there is inevitable competition between regional and central groups for scarce resources. Officials of the periphery want central government attention, including money to support local museums, which they point out is in the center's best interest as it holds the loyalty of the local people (H.K. Sarma 1985). In India, peripheral areas such as Jammu in the north (Singh 1980-81) and Assam in the east (e.g. Bhattacharya 1985, P.C. Sarma 1985, H.K. Sarma 1985) actively petition the center for support for museums and the protection of cultural monuments. In Bangladesh, the popular press calls attention to rural museums and points out the need for government investment so that people may "visit the museum to enjoy ancient tradition and cultural heritage of the area." (Anonymous 1998:11).

Conclusion

A nation cannot choose its traditions, but it can choose how those traditions are emphasized (Larrain 1994). Archaeological evidence is highly versatile and requires interpretation, allowing it to be used for social and political aims in a very flexible manner (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996:19). In many Western nations, where cultural identities have long been solidified through the development of dominant cultures and languages, the flexibility of archaeological interpretation is now being used to recover diversity (e.g., Macdonald 1996). In many developing nations, however, archaeological materials in museums are used primarily to create unity, rather than to contest it. The creation of unity extends beyond the material remains of the past to the presentation of those remains in an inviting and informative manner. The creative display and curation of archaeological remains as a basis for a shared heritage, especially within nations that are deeply divided along ethnic, religious or linguistic grounds, is a strong testimony to the power of the past as an essential bridge from the individual to the concept of a nation.

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