The Touristic Gaze at the Lahore Museum

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Museums and Tourists

Open any guidebook or look in the 'What's on?' section of a newspaper supplement and invariably there will be mention of an exhibition, gallery, or museum that is either not to be missed or ideal for whiling away a few hours. Whether you desire the arts, natural history, science, personalities, cultural history, all can potentially be accommodated should you know which gallery or museum to visit. This is not surprising considering the proliferation in the number of museums that inhabit the public sphere of most metropolitan cities and towns in the western world. One reason for this in recent decades is the booming heritage and mass tourism industries that compliment each other in commoditizing society and culture for consumption by tourists – local and global. This is not to suggest that the museum is a new attraction for tourists – the modern museum, exhibitions, and world fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were highly effective in drawing large numbers of visitors. Just as tourists can potentially traverse and transiently colonize almost any part of the world, so the museum has managed to take root across the globe, with the former almost expecting to find the latter wherever they may find themselves. A cosmopolitan city or a new nation would seem incomplete without a museum where the traveller can glimpse at the history and culture of a society simply by looking at the material artefacts assembled in glass cases.

For many tourists the museum is a site that is easy to decode when visiting, since the rules for appropriation and interpretation are thought to be universal: buy a ticket, go around the galleries with/without a guide(book), look at the objects, read a few labels, take some photographs, perhaps buy a souvenir at the museum shop, and then tick it off as done. In this sense the tourist, no matter where he/she visits, essentially possesses an awareness of the protocol on how to see a museum, which for Donald Horne (1984) is akin to tourists being modern-day pilgrims who travel in a dreamland devoid of imagination and led by formalities, guide book, and doing what they are told. To further this metaphor, Carol Duncan's (1991) likening of the museum to a secular shrine comes to mind where tourists perform a museum ritual, paying homage to cultures past and present. Even though the museum may have transplanted itself globally, can the touristic gaze that operates within the museum space be singularly characterized as simply looking and being voyeuristic as John Urry (1990) suggests? More importantly here, what needs to be asked is what form does the construction of the museum display for the tourist and consumption of it by tourists take place in non-western museums: is the stereotypical and undifferentiated image of tourists at a museum hold true for the more localized tourist and are there other types of touristic gazes that need to be accounted for?

Since the museum map is no longer restricted to the world-renowned establishments that dominate the cultural-scape of the western world, the museums, cultural centres/complexes, and museums-cum-theme parks in non-western countries and their tourists need to be included within this discourse. New nations, communities, and minority groups have utilized the medium of a museum to express and communicate their identity as a nation or social group, as well as their history and culture through

material displays, whilst simultaneously partaking in creation and preservation of an archive for future generations. For most museums – old and new, their target audience is not limited to respective citizens or communities, but aim to serve a wider audience and especially tourists who can learn about a specific culture, add to the local economy, justify prospective funding, and bestow prestige on the museum as a globally known tourist site. In order to further the examination of the museum and tourists' activity within, I want to investigate this symbiotic relationship beyond the conventional setting and established protocol that is squarely based on a Eurocentric understanding of the museum. The non-western context that I want to explore is the Lahore Museum in Pakistan and its dynamics around perpetuating a specific image for itself through its collections and display, as well as curatorial rhetoric that desires the museum to be part of the global museum scene and attract tourists from around the world. However, such an image construction also has to deal with the reality of the actual visitors who consume the Lahore Museum; opinions on ideal visitors may abound but how reflective is this of actual interpretative strategies employed by the visitors – a large majority of whom are local, rather than global, tourists.

The Lahore Museum

The Lahore Museum is the largest and oldest public museum not only in Lahore, the Punjab Province, but also in Pakistan itself. Situated on the main thoroughfare through the city, it is one of the most distinguishable redbrick buildings from the British period. Dating back to 1856 the Lahore Museum was set up as part of the East India Company's initiative to establish a network of local museums in various districts of India. The original location of the museum was in a seventeenth century Mughal building and at that time was known as the Lahore Central Museum containing an ad-hoc mixture of collections some stated as pertaining to archaeology, ethnology, geology; whilst one also suspects a large number of the collections were curiosities. Over time, the museum's collections grew and in 1864 colonial administrators shifted the museum into the vacated Punjab Exhibition building nearby. This offered the museum space to reorganize, expand and with the arrival of J.L. Kipling in 1875 a new direction: Victorian art education and craft reform in colonial India. However, a permanent home for the Lahore Museum was only found in 1893 when the Jubilee Institute was completed, comprising of the Mayo School of Art and the Lahore Museum. The current museum still occupies this location, although now it is a separate entity from the neighbouring art school.

Amongst Lahorites (and in the colonial imagination) the Lahore Museum is popularly referred to as the *ajaib ghar* or wonder house, yet the museum distances itself from this and prefers to project an image that alludes to its status as the unofficial national museum of Pakistan. This conflicting nomenclature is one dilemma faced by the museum that immediately suggests there are competing levels of appropriation by different sectors of society, the museum being fixated with promoting only the latter, especially in relation to tourism. The museum does not miss any opportunity to flaunt its unofficial status and brings it to the attention of tourists, students, and VIPs, at public events, lectures, exhibition openings and in the introduction of the guided tour, through references to the museum's second place ranking in South Asia and tenth in the world in terms of its collections. This prestige of the Lahore Museum as Pakistan's cultural capital is implicitly tied to the materiality it possesses and on

occasion is extended to assertion of global patrimony - evoked in terms of regional importance where the museum claims to preserve the culture not only of Pakistan but also of other civilizations from South-East Asia and the Far East.

In relation to tourism this image is used not only by the museum to perpetuate an aura of national and global cultural importance to entice people to visit, but is taken up by other tourist/cultural organizations in a similar vein. For example, the Punjab Tourism Development Corporation's (PTDC) leaflets describe the Lahore Museum as the 'largest' in Pakistan displaying key collections such as Miniature Paintings, rare manuscripts, and Gandhara. Likewise, in attempts to develop cultural tourism within Pakistan, UNESCO has included the Lahore Museum on its Gandhara Civilization Trail owing to its vast material archive from this region including the world famous 'Fasting Buddha'. Such credentials highlight the museum's ability to operate within global discourses of cultural heritage and national patrimony through ownership of famous masterpieces or antiquities, and ultimately bring it to the notice of potential tourists. The comments of a previous Director on the museum a few years back make this stance all too apparent when he remarked that the Lahore Museum contained the '…richest collection of cultural heritage of Pakistan…[and is] the most popular public institution of its kind in the country.'; so what exactly are the Lahore Museum's collections, institutional rhetoric, and the intended attractions for tourists?

Collections and Display Narratives

The Lahore Museum is laid out over two floors and currently has seventeen permanent galleries open to the public that include: General, Islamic, Hindu, Jain(a) and Buddhist, Pre-Historic and Indus Civilizations, Gandhara, Miniature Paintings, Ethnological, Arms, Contemporary Crafts, Independence Movement, Pakistan Postage Stamps, Coins and Medals galleries. Despite additions of new galleries through re-arrangement and expansion over time, one palpable feature that remains from the past is a sense of the encyclopaedic museum with eclectic collections on display. When wandering through the museum one can see anything from sixteenth century wooden doors, ivory miniatures, Chinese vases, Mughal carpets, small cannons, gems, stone tools from Harrapa, Hindu deities in brass, marble and wood, a Buddhist Stupa, abstract paintings, Quranic calligraphy, a Jain Temple, furniture from Swat, clay figurines, embroidered textiles, musical instruments from Northern Pakistan, contemporary block printed cloth, stuffed animals, coins from various historical periods to replica photographs outlining the personalities and events of the Independence Movement.

These varying collections make it impossible to assign a single identity to the Lahore Museum, however, that has not prevented attempts at nationalizing the Lahore Museum after Independence in 1947, whose collections were largely made during the colonial era but today symbolize the nation of Pakistan and its cultural heritage; but is this anything more than simple ideological rhetoric? Most galleries retain the reminiscent South Kensington display cases that are densely packed with objects and general labels in English naming the artefact and the century in which it was made. Lack of funding, cultural investment and initiatives as well as adequate staff training have made the task of modernizing the museum more difficult, yet attempts at constructing a national character for the museum have not been altogether absent and

instead of a total overhaul some collections have been re-organized others newly created that reference Pakistan's political and cultural ideology. At this point, it is worth considering the basic premise of Pakistani identity and attempted portrayal of this in the displays at the Lahore Museum that tourists see.

Nationalist discourse in Pakistan is firmly concerned with charting out a history of the nation and a national identity for its citizens that is rooted in the advent of Islam in South Asia in the seventh century, later the Mughal Empire, and more specifically, the rise of Muslim nationalism during the struggle for Independence from British colonists. The latter occupies the historical period from mid-nineteenth century to 1947 and is fore-grounded as the origin for the idea of Pakistan as a separate nation that culminated with the formation of a new nation. Ideologically this now informs the naturalization of Pakistani identity that anchors its stability to Islam as the basis for cultural unity and the right way of life for all Pakistani citizens. All political regimes – democratic or not, have utilized this basic ideological stance to create a unifying discourse that emphasizes the Muslim struggle for the nation, Islamic culture, and history, which in turn becomes *the* identity for Pakistan and its citizens.

The importance of communicating this rhetoric on identity lies in the fact that the Pakistani identity and notion of the self is fragile as it is permeated by other regional identity markers such as language, dress, and customs that have the ability to fragment the nation through ethnic conflict and sub-nationalisms. This is not to say that ethnic identity is not acknowledged, it is, but under a 'unity in diversity' umbrella. In a rudimentary way the existence of Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi, Pathan, and Kashmiri identities are presented as provincial identities ultimately united at a macro-level through the idea of a Muslim brotherhood - at a national level and global level through the *ummah*. This image of a Pakistani society and culture is actively disseminated through school textbooks and media, so what is the case for the Lahore Museum, and how does it visually present signs of national, or even, provincial, identity and Pakistani cultural heritage for tourists? The most immediate and primary indicators that address these issues are in the names of certain galleries such as the Independence Movement, Islamic, Manuscript and Calligraphy, Contemporary Crafts of Pakistan, and Pakistani Stamps galleries. All these galleries have the ability to materially represent the Pakistan ideology exposing the visitors to ideas of nationalist politics – pre- and post- Independence, and give a sense of regional cultural diversity.

Over the various political eras collections have been added or altered to enhance the Lahore Museum's capability to materialize this 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). The first gallery to be introduced to the museum after Independence was the Islamic Gallery in 1966-67, representing not religion per se but the arts and crafts of Muslim society and so dealing with stylistics and form. It is not clear to what extent this was a 'new' gallery as many of the artefacts put on display were from older collections; most likely it was a case of re-organization of objects to highlight what was deemed missing from the Lahore Museum – a gallery dealing exclusively with Islamic culture. Next, to be added was the Independence Movement Gallery in 1973 to the first floor of the museum, where the 2000 plus images on the gallery walls visually narrate the history of the Pakistan Movement through the working of the All India Muslim League and the founding fathers of Pakistan. This specific gallery signals a desire to present at the Lahore Museum a patriotic gallery that can act as an anchor for the other galleries; which subsequently can be interpreted as history, art,

antiquity of Pakistan – part of *its* patrimony and heritage. Also in 1973, a mural was painted on the ceiling of the Miniature Gallery based on verse by Pakistan's national poet Allama Iqbal and artistically interpreted by one of Pakistan's renowned modern artists – Sadequain; who also painted other large-scale calligraphies for the Islamic Gallery. Although painted during an era of populist politics and nationalization in Pakistan, they inadvertently signalled the onslaught of Islamization during Zia-ul-Haq's era (1977-88). However, the puritanical application of Islamic law to society had a relatively mild impact upon the Lahore Museum, as no alterations were demanded and essentially the museum was left alone. During the 1980's the museum did gain the Manuscripts and Calligraphy Gallery through a subdivision of the Islamic collections with an active accession programme for manuscripts and calligraphy alone. In 1984 a further two galleries were constructed – the Contemporary Crafts of Pakistan and Stamps Gallery, again neither was hindered by strict ideological constraints, instead fitted a generic nationalist genre.

These additions have expanded the Lahore Museum from an initial seven galleries in 1947 to eighteen sections in the late 1990's. At one level, the additional new galleries have been concerned with symbolizing the nation within the Lahore Museum and thus adding elements of Pakistani nationalism - be it political history, Islamic identity, or culture. Despite this, it is difficult to gloss the fact that largely the Lahore Museum has been overlooked by major political influence and reformation. There has been no major revamp of the museum along strict nationalist guidelines and no collection has been deemed unsuitable for a 'national' museum of Pakistan; even in times of radical social/cultural dogma. This cannot be said to be an intentional strategy on behalf of the Lahore Museum as a form of institutional resistance, but a result perhaps of the museum, though considered iconic for the modern nation, not being given enough investment or even interest other than as lip service. Nevertheless, this has not been to the detriment of the Lahore Museum, which perhaps illustrates one of the few truly democratic public spaces in Pakistan over the years that lives up to curators' claiming it is 'our' national treasure and cultural heritage.

The displaying of a national narrative in the Lahore Museum for its visitors is therefore partial at best despite some overt signs pointing in this direction. Yet for its staff, the museum is very much concerned with representing a Pakistani self, not in its ideological identity but as an all encompassing cultural heritage and antiquity that takes in all the different cultures and civilizations that have left their mark on the land over the centuries. What the museum highlights through this wider stance is the distinctive antiquity present within the glass cases that display Pakistan's past, whose its applicability is interestingly not restricted to national boundaries but thought of in terms of the global; as the Keeper of Paintings Mrs Nusrat Ali indicated: 'Our cultural heritage is shown here through art and history represented in the objects...just like in other museums of the world…'.[i] In a very explicit way objects like the Fasting Buddha, Miracle of Saraswati, pieces from Moenjodaro or the coins collections enable the Lahore Museum to allude to a sense of antiquity and ownership that can be historically chronologized from pre-historic period onwards and so align their possession and their order to the great museums of the world. These collections today represent the antiquities of the Pakistani nation with the Lahore Museum envisaging itself as an 'educator' of object lessons relating to history and culture. This is the most propelling image that the museum is keen to communicate to its visitors, be they local or foreign, who should come and learn something and not leave feeling 'empty'.

However, the extent to which this pedagogic wish is fulfilled is debateable and the disdain the museum holds towards the actual mode of consumption by many of its visitors suggests that it is not the most popular appropriation of the museum. So who are the visitors to the Lahore Museum and what do they come to gaze upon?

Touristic Gaze as Local Gaze

The Lahore Museum is referred to in tourist brochures as a prominent museum of Pakistan that offers insights into the country's past and the museum offers facilities for tourists such as guides (official and unofficial), gallery leaflets, labels and textual panels, and lectures offer information on specific collections or objects. Recently the museum is increasingly using local media to generate interest among the local public with the hope that this will increase visitor numbers. At a regional level the PTDC - a provincial government authority, concerned with encouraging tourism, both domestic and international, conducts daily bus tours through Lahore city that include a stop at the museum. However, despite its wide-ranging plans the large majority of the tourists that use its services happen to be foreigners; locals are very rarely seen stepping off its buses when they arrive in the museum's car park; but this should not be taken as indicative of a lack in tourists at the Lahore Museum. If one stretches the notion of a tourist to include the domestic tourist,[ii] then the museum is a definite hotspot. Visitor numbers themselves are suggestive of this trend with figures for the year 2003-04 recording that a total of 324,978 people visited the Lahore Museum of which only 3,126 were foreigners – whose numbers have declined dramatically museum staff informed following 9/11.[iii] My concern here is specifically with the local tourist and a somewhat clearer idea of the composition is gained when they are distinguished into those coming from Lahore city and those from other districts and Provinces: 46% from Lahore and 53% from places such as Bahawalpur District in Punjab or the Provinces of Sindh or Jammu and Kashmir. [iv]

These local tourists visit the museum as part of a day out in the city that can take in other tourist/recreational sites; coming in groups that range in size from two to fifteen and of all ages with many of the older visitors on return visits, whilst others are attracted to the museum by what they have heard. Their inquisitiveness is based on a desire to see the museum with their own eyes; as one student Fariha Sherazi from Muridkay recalled: '…my mother and elders had told us that children should not go to the museum as there are lots of scary *bhuts* (idols) and *murday* (corpses).'.[v] This perception of the museum as being associated with the wondrous and curious is at times mixed with a sense of there also being history and culture being present and so the museum is referred to as a *tehreeki ghar* (historic house). The latter understanding of the museum is closer to how the institution would like to be perceived, however, it is not the primary or most popular conception amongst local tourists. These divergent appropriations indicate a clash between the museum staff and their ideal visitors - who would use the collections to learn and socially progress, and the actual consumption by the majority of visitors. This significant differentiation of tourists can be assessed in terms of those who possess the right 'cultural competence' (Bourdieu 1996) and those who do not. To some extent, the museum staff allude to this when positing two classes of visitors: one being the foreign tourists and VIPs and the second being the local tourist. The first is romanticized by the museum as having an awareness of 'how to visit and see' the

museum *properly*; as one museum officer commented: '…[foreigners] come with interest and have background knowledge of where they are going and what they will see.'.[vi] In comparison the category of local tourists is looked down upon with condescension since they are regarded as appropriating the museum in an *improper* manner that is defined by museum staff as being 'uneducated'; the Registrar of the museum once commented: '[The] *public* in my *observation*…just come for *entertainment* alone and are not concerned with *education* or to learn…the *learning aspect* we do not see this in them, it is just entertainment…and this is a *real factual* thing.'.[vii] However, this image of the local visitor as an 'uneducated' being is contradicted when one looks at the fact that in a sample of visitors 80% had been to Urdu/English medium schools, 20% were Matriculation passed, 11% High School level, 28% had Bachelors and 11% a Masters; and so fall into the category of lower-middle to middle class.[viii] Perhaps the derision held against the local tourist is based more on the Lahore Museum's unwillingness to abandon its own pedagogic comprehension and control over the signification of the objects on display. One cannot simply reduce the tourist experience of a museum to a singular type of understanding and so I want to look at some of the local tourist's interpretations of the Lahore Museum.

The local tourist, more than anything else, is attracted to the museum not for cultural heritage that the institution itself obsesses over, but a desire to see things that appear strange and curious. The touristic gaze rather than overtly looking for aesthetic, cultural, or historical lessons is interested in seeing objects that fascinate, amaze, and engage their imagination; mixed with the need for recreation and a keen interest to simply tour the museum. These motivations inform some of the imagined notions local tourists hold of the Lahore Museum that include alternative names such as *bhut bangla* (house of idols). In a palpable way, the museum building and galleries housing the objects create a strong impact on the visitor, not quite the classical temple-effect as in the west but an impression that inspires awe and imagination, attracting and drawing in the visitor to experience it further; Kurat-ul-Nainh from Naushehra said: 'I really like this place. I thought it was only one gallery but there is more and even though I cannot understand how these things were created or how they work, I am amazed by them. I really wanted to visit it.'.[ix]

One way of comprehending this sense of 'wonder' is to refer to it implicitly as the ability of an object to arrest a viewer through exalted attention (Greenblatt 1991); perhaps through uniqueness or intense attraction of the visitor's gaze. This is certainly true for the Lahore Museum, but at the same time 'wonder' is mixed up with aspects of 'resonance' to constitute the actual interaction between object and subject. The initial act of appropriation is through familiarity – resonance, with an object where it may be present in the viewer's lived world and so is 'known': A. Shehzad from Chinot found the Akbari wooden doors most interesting: '…as I am from a rural area and we still have doors like this and similar work can still be seen there.'.[x] However, the more prevalent form of interaction is wonder and this frequently accounts for why certain artefacts were found visually appealing and amazing. Pleasure and astonishment lay in the quality, aesthetic beauty or over-whelming nature of some objects, particularly *handiwork*, as Nazia from Shahdara commented: '…the hand-made objects are so attractive they pull (*khainchtay*) us towards them.'.[xi]

The amazement and eagerness to simply wander and see the curious and novel leads to there being very little that is said not to be liked because it is not comprehended. Although an 'aesthetic' dislike of objects is not forthcoming, what did manifest itself was a difficult or 'uncomfortable' viewing of some objects, particularly the ubiquitous *bhuts* (idols); thought to be un-Islamic (*baymazbhi*) and not Pakistani. However, it must be realized that for most it was the large numbers on display, their profuse presence that was complained about, rather than any desire to abolish them, as some people found them highly attractive and a pleasure to see; especially the beauty and radiance that was felt to emanate from particular statues. Some tourists expressed their disappointment in not finding more Islamic culture on display that they directed linked to national identity, as Abid from Hyderabad articulated: 'Islamic things should be kept here or those from the Mughal era or from Turkey not Hindu and Buddhist things that are not Pakistani.'.[xii] Such comments by local tourists on what they would like to see more of in the Lahore Museum indicate that there is more going on than simply curiosity mongering. In fact the motivation for visiting combines the need to see wonders as well as collections that are of an historical or nationalist nature; Ejaz Ali who frequented the museum often as a young man recalled: '…when we see [these things]…they have a strong impact on our minds and hearts and you feel proud that we are the owners of this ancient heritage. Our culture is buried in them…and that after all these centuries it still *impresses* us…'.[xiii] Many of the local tourists were willing to concede that history and cultures of the past are represented in the Lahore Museum but for them this was not equitable with a sense of *their* identity since that was associated with the living culture present outside the museum; as Tanveer Akhtar stated: 'I mean it is, it is our ancestor's and land's heritage and culture and history, but you cannot relate to it personally, it is cultural inheritance but not my identity…'.[xiv]

The touristic gaze at the Lahore Museum then, much like its eclectic collections, cannot be tied down to one form of touristic spectatorship since motivational aspirations expect to see a combination of culture and heritage and the 'strange'. One cannot be myopic in understanding the 'strange' quality alluded to by many tourists as it refers to a sense of unfamiliarity wherein the objects appear puzzling and exact decipherability is not of primary concern. Very much like the nineteenth century visitors to the public museums and exhibitions, the notion of rational recreation is befitting here where elements of entertainment and learning went hand in hand. The discrepancy and dysfunction between the local tourists and the museum staff in *the* proper way to see the museum is mainly due to the latter adhering too rigidly to a model of visitor consumption that is premised simply on education and learning, which also is how many museum tourists are thought to act, when in fact other forms of appropriation are active and present and need to be taken into account as legitimate not oppositional. The museum tourist, especially for museums like the Lahore Museum, are largely from the local population who utilize other modes of touristic gaze and behaviour that perhaps tap into appropriation that is not acknowledged in the west. A single type of museum experience where tourists are thought to be attracted by history and culture alone now needs to be revised to include other ways of gazing upon what is housed in the global institution of a museum.

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[i] Interview with Mrs Nusrat Ali on 03.03.03.

[ii] I shall refer to as local tourist henceforth.
[iii] Figures provided by the Lahore Museum as calculated from monthly ticket sales from July 2003 to August 2003.
[iv] Based on a questionnaire conducted by author at the Lahore Museum on 100 visitors during 2003.
[v] Fariha Sherazi, a 13 years old student had come from Muridkay, which is north of the Shahdara a suburb of northern Lahore.
[vi] Interview on 12.11.02.
[vii] Interview on 14.11.02.
[viii] Based on a questionnaire by the author at the Lahore Museum in 2003.
[ix] Kurat-ul-Nainh, a 17 years old visiting with her mother from Naushehra near Peshawar (09.05.03).
[x] A. Shehzad, 28 years old from Chinot who was visiting a friend at the University of Engineering and Technology (02.05.03).
[xi] Nazia, a 23 years old thinking of going on to do a M.A. was visiting the museum with her cousin (26.04.03).
[xii] Abid, a 40 years old television repairer from Hyderabad in Sindh (08.05.03).
[xiii] Interview on 15.09.03.
[xiv] Interview with Tanveer Akhtar on 14.08.03.