



## **Beyond the Hindukush: A Leaf from a Memoir 2006**

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### **Article History**

Published by: 23 June 2022

Inculcating historical consciousness and pride amongst its citizens, is a desirable task of any modern day Nation-State. In the absence of a committed, liberal, modern and stable government, the cultural components of a nation suffer a major drawback. One such well known cultural component is the 'National Museum'. I would like to share a leaf from my Afghan memoir to elucidate my point. I was accompanied by my mother to Afghanistan once a year from 2006 to 2008, to join my father in Kabul where he was posted at the Indian Embassy. During my first visit in 2006 – as was befitting our diplomatic status and as per the touristic itinerary and diplomatically scripted past– we were shown Bagh-i-Babur (the founder of the mighty Mughal dynasty in India) the locals would invite us to high - walled, double iron gated, security sensitive restaurants in bullet proof cars. Having had too much of these 'relaxing' evenings, I began looking for the real Afghanistan. It was dangerous yet necessary – to begin with, my desire to visit the National Museum on the outskirts of Kabul, was met with some degree of resistance but I was finally given a car, driver and a suitable company. As our car got lonelier on the road, away from the traffic of Kabul city, we came across several shelled buildings – both ugly and painful to look at. Soon we arrived a freshly renovated building which looked welcoming. The journey to this museum began here.

They have been called the 'silent survivors' or the 'hidden treasures' that tour Europe and America, to project rich heritage of a war torn Afghanistan. The Afghan Museum collection represented certainly more than that. To rebuild its global image, the post-Taliban State carried this additional burden to collaborate with nations that have in the past taken interest in 'historically' contextualizing the Afghan landscape. The academic reclamation of Afghan landmass as historically that of a trading zone with rich and exquisite cultures and fostering multiple religions, was extremely crucial in undoing the then image of a 'militarized zone'.

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Doi: 10.12944/CRJSSH.5.1.01

The Afghan State established its first museum in 1919 at the *Bagh-i-Bala* palace overlooking Kabul and till the present day remains proactive in ensuring the safe return of artifacts of 'Afghan Museum in Exile' in Switzerland. The Afghan State between 1920s and 1980s nurtured an adventurous zeal towards exploration of the past. It collaborated with the French, Italians, Americans, British, Japanese and Soviets in archaeological expeditions. In 1966, Afghan Institute of Archaeological was established with an aim to house most of the excavated material. From 1980s onwards, Afghan political scenario had acquired complexity. The departure of the Soviets in 1989 triggered off another phase of unrest. The museum staff packed and stored bulk of its collection in the storerooms. The rule of the *mujahideen* unleashed internal wars. The civil war of the 1990s destroyed the top floor of the three storey museum. The 'Afghanistan Museum in Exile' was established in Bubendorf in Switzerland in the year 2000 with the approval of UNESCO after the Afghan president requested the Swiss authorities to protect endangered artifacts

After the Bamyán Buddhas were dynamited in March 2001, the Museum in Exile and UNESCO stipulated that they will not acquire objects through commercial transaction and thereafter accepted only donated objects. In 2006, the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture made a request to the UNESCO for the restitution of these objects. UNESCO gave its consent and in 2007, more than 1400 artifacts found their way back into National Museum of Afghanistan. Nurturing material remains is not a new phenomenon in Afghan history; in fact the Kings throughout the 20th century had used metaphors and symbolism of the preceding ruling dynasties to strengthen their legitimacy. Babur's tomb has remained a symbol of imperial pride to this day.

In fact, in the 1970s, staircase in the Ethnographic hall had photographs of the Kings and their weapons. There were pictures of Mohammad Doud, President of State, and founder of the Republic of Afghanistan portrait of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901), by John Grey, an English surgeon, 1891; Amir Habibullah (1901-1929), eldest son of Amir Abdur Rahman, 1905 King Amanullah (1919-1929), third son of Amir Habibullah, King Mohammad Nadir Shah (1929-33), distant cousin of King Amanullah, King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-73), son of King Mohammad Nadir Shah. There were weapons from the arsenals of Amir Habibullah and Amir Sher Ali. They were inlaid with gold, mother of pearl, ivory and bone, silver banding around the stocks and barrels. There were belt buckles and central Asian daggers, gold and silver epigraphic and geometric inlay. There were steel breast plates with buckles with elaborate floral incised decorations. Two silk wall hangings were presented by the Amir of Bokhara to Amir Abdur Rahman at the turn of the century. One was destroyed during the 1929 civil war, the other survived. Today, however such exhibition has been carefully done away with rather it has been replaced by a wide variety of cultural material remains, the State being the guardian, preserver and custodian.

On the other hand, for the Western archaeological and historical scholarship, reconfiguring this landmass is crucial to trace the ancient Western linkages, primarily the legacy of Alexander. A group of researchers have argued that the Western biases in National Geographic have continued over the past century. The magazine amplifies and distorted mainstream perspectives including those of archaeologists themselves. The magazine's prehistoric world is one of brilliant and ally male and muscular. Archaeology had in fact begun by viewing Europeans and Western European civilization as a realm of existence apart from the rest of the evolutionary superiority and white man's burden. On receiving back the collection from Museum in Exile, one of the first few items to be opened and displayed included a phallus shaped stone that was once part of a foundation stone of a city in northern Afghanistan called Ai-Khanum, which was founded by Alexander about 2,300 years ago. A carved owl on one end of the stone represented the Greek city of Athens. However, to the present day, rest of the 1400 artifacts is awaiting their liberation from the boxes.

In September 2005, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed an International Convention where each member of the Convention was committed to safeguard this Museum collection. This reaffirmed the earlier UNESCO Conventions of the 1970s. In 2003, the Interpol was given a list of antiquity by the Afghan authorities. It helped the Interpol recognize the artifacts that were being black marketed. The same year Scotland Yard and Heathrow customs recovered some stolen items. They were clearly identified as Afghan pieces

by the experts but are yet to return to their country. During Najibullah's regime, which was that of a political instability, the Museum authorities transferred some of its collection to the city centre but during the Taliban rule the Ministry did not impart any information about the Begram treasure. Moreover, about 231 artifacts were touring France and Italy to 'announce to the world that Afghanistan is not a land of killing and fighting'.

There had been a noticeable development in terms of infrastructure, i.e. more glass cases better lighting and more galleries. The Museum collection spans fifty millenniums – the Prehistoric, Classical, Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic. The layout of the entrance of the Museum is designed to 'make visible' the multicultural legacy. On entering the Museum, right of the exhibition hall a black marble basin greets the visitor. The black marble basin was found 1925 at the shrine of Sultan Mir Wais Baba in the old city of Kandahar. It has a lotus carved on the underside and dates back to the Kushans, which is why perhaps it was known as Buddha's begging bowl. One which belongs to 1490 AD says that this basin was used to serve sherbet to Muslim pilgrims. The other, belonging to the sixteenth AD lists rules and regulations of the Kandahar madrasa. This basin is a giant testimony to the fact that the Muslims in the 15th century respected and preserved the religious legacy of other religions as well. This negates the present day notion of a monolithic Islamic culture promoted by some fundamentalist groups.

The Museum in the 1970s had the marriage costumes from Kabul region, Pushtun dress and jewelry from Paktia Province, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif dress, Panjsheri-Tajik dress from Kapisa Province, Kafir and Nuristanijewelry and weapons. At present to perhaps to avoid representation of 'exclusivity', this Ethnographic room has not been restored. Only the Nuristani culture has been represented in a separate hall of the museum. The exhibition conveys the inclusion and celebration of the Nuristanis, crucial for them as they are new to Islam.

Prior to the present regime in Afghanistan, these efforts could have been seen as a positive movement towards building a multicultural society just as in Europe with the reconfiguration of political communities as modern 'nations' in the 18th centuries, and the intellectuals and statesman used narratives about past to provide legitimacy for these new political constructs. It invokes a particular style of imagining a community which becomes dominant after two other relevant cultural systems, the religious community and the dynastic realm begin to weaken.

Nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism are all cultural artefacts (Anderson:2006). These artifacts once generated become modular and capable of being transplanted with varying degrees of self-consciousness and can be merged with a wide variety of political and ideological constellations. Interestingly, the present day conservative ruling regime of Afghanistan and its people – cannot simply imagine a plural past

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I am grateful to Prof Himanshu Prabha Ray for provoking my interest in the Museum collections. I wish to thank Anisha Deswal for having proof read this article.