

Kavita Singh

Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone



Reinwardt Academy
Amsterdam University of the Arts

Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone

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About the Memorial Lectures

In 2008, the Reinwardt Academy – the faculty for cultural heritage of the Amsterdam University of the Arts – decided to honour its namesake by organising a yearly lecture to be held on or around the man's birthday, June 3. Caspar Georg Carl Reinwardt (1773-1854) was a respected naturalist, a professor at three universities (Harderwijk, Amsterdam, Leiden), director of four botanical gardens (Harderwijk, Amsterdam, Bogor, Leiden), and director of a natural history museum (Amsterdam). During his stay in the Dutch East Indies (1816-1822), he amassed large collections that eventually found their way to several major Dutch museums of natural history and anthropology. Reinwardt maintained a large international network that included such famous naturalists as Alexander von Humboldt. The Reinwardt Academy is proud to bear his name.

As a person, Caspar Reinwardt stands for values that the academy considers of key importance: international orientation, collaboration in networks, sensitivity to the needs of society, and a helpful attitude towards students. Reinwardt first of all was a teacher, not a prolific author. Through his lively correspondence, his extensive library and his participation in a wide variety of scientific committees, he was well aware of contemporary developments in the field of science, and he considered it his first responsibility to share this knowledge with his students. It is in this spirit, with reference to these values, that the academy invites a distinguished speaker to give its annual Reinwardt Memorial Lecture.

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Foreword

It was stuffy that Sunday morning in the summer of 2013 at Oxford, when several hundreds of delegates gathered for the final lap to be sat through in the main conference hall of one of the colleges. The previous two days had been filled to the brim with lectures and workshops on 'The Future of the Ethnographic Museum'. That was the theme which had drawn ethnographers, academics and museum people from all over Europe and beyond to Oxford, to its Pitt Rivers Museum and Keble College. During the previous five years, no less than ten leading European museums in the field had been carrying out a research programme to that effect, generously supported by the EC. Now that 'othering' is no longer correct, neither culturally nor politically, how might ethnographic museums, icons of 19th-century colonial supremacy, develop in the 21st century? And, once freed from those fetters, how could or should they respond to new ideas, new audiences, new technologies and new political realities?

The project had been more or less successful, with heart-warming appeals to inclusion, increased attention to localized heritage performances and even the possibility of a new aesthetics, but the conclusions were not yet very clear. After a hot July weekend night, on Sunday morning the delegates were perhaps more focused on returning

home in a few hours' time than on re-opening the debate. At that moment, a woman came forward, wearing an elegant, colourful sari. Instead of reading a paper from behind the rostrum, she chose the empty space of the stage as her arena, spreading her arms wide and taking the audience on an hour's tour through her ideas about the future of the ethnographic museum, enunciating her speech in a calm, crystalline voice in the best classical rhetorical tradition.

This was Professor Kavita Singh. I was drawn as much by her refreshing performance, which made it seem as if the subject were being rediscovered while she formulated question after question, as by the originality of her argument. She drew attention to the new museum model being developed in her hemisphere, from the Middle East to the Far East. There, the cream of the old world's art collections is being put into megalomaniac buildings designed by the world's most distinguished architects. These new institutions are being appropriated by local elites of global expats – whose consorts wish to be members of the boards of these mega-museums. It is the 'Western museum' that is being collected here, and it is the European museum culture, museum collections and museum architecture that are on show. At the same time, contemporary artists across the world are increasingly being appreciated when their provenances and actual physical abodes are made clear, the one often far removed from the other. We unwittingly appear to attach more importance to artists once they can be seen as modern nomads from what used to be called the Third World, believing, it seems, that they have something

worthwhile to tell us. In these two ways, the future of the ethnographic museum is the museum itself, which becomes the subject of a new ethnography, including artists in diaspora. The audience was ravenous. And this speech gave us the idea to invite Professor Singh to come to Amsterdam the next year.

At the Reinwardt Academy, we feel it is important to be open to other perspectives on the meaning of museums and heritage in society. Are they part and parcel of the legacy of the Enlightenment? Or can they be separated from their original societal settings? Are they to be allowed to develop according to time and place, to be appropriated in quite different ways? And if so, what does that tell us about Europe's own love affair with material culture and the arts, musealized either in classy buildings or as well-protected heritage sites? These are the questions we discussed with Professor Singh. In doing so, we were actually constructing another 'othering' game in a reversed ethnographic position. Having Professor Singh come from across many an ocean (she visited Amsterdam going to and from the East Coast of the USA), we half expected to be able to attach special significance to what she had to say precisely because of her distant viewpoint. But we found out we did not really need such a ruse, since what she did say at the 2014 C.G.C. Reinwardt Memorial Lecture was eminently crisp, sharp and urgent in itself, as the next pages will make clear. There is no cultural schism between Eastern and Western societies; the fault lines are within them.

It is with great pleasure that we present Professor Singh's 2014 address. The lapse of time since then has enabled her to fine-tune some observations, add the requisite references and update her argument by reflecting on the sad destruction of heritage sites in recent months.

Amsterdam, June 2015
Riemer Knoop, Professor of Cultural Heritage, Reinwardt Academy

I

Introduction

Museums are material manifestations of one culture's interest in another. As such, museums are often described as places that build bridges between cultures: by bringing home knowledge of faraway places, they promote cross-cultural tolerance and understanding.

But think for a moment of the history of museums. Think of the way their collections have been built, and the purposes they have served. Think of the violent encounters that often lay behind the collecting of curiosities in the age of exploration; or think of the museums built by missionaries to display pagan gods wrenched away from natives. Think of the vast collections built (and the ways these were built) during the age of colonialism, with entire monuments transported across the seas and re-erected in museum galleries. Think of the nations transformed by revolutions, where treasures were violently wrested away from the church and presented as desacralized avatars in museums. Think now of decolonization, and of national museums that aimed to dignify some strands of culture as 'mainstream' and relegate others to 'lesser' or 'folk', ossifying internal privileges and hierarchies; think of museums built to serve

the competitive nationalisms of newly-created, newly-partitioned states; think of post-war multiculturalism, in which metropolitan museums have had to find new justifications for retaining colonial collections in the face of the demands for repatriation. Think of the growth of travel and tourism, the need for sights and spectacles in the places travelled to; think of the hollowing-out of meaning for the easy commodification of culture; think of globalization, religious revivalism and identity politics, and the ways in which all of these forces intersect with museums.

With such a history lying behind them, it is hardly surprising to find that museums are and have been the sites of not just the confluence of cultures but also their collision. In this paper, I will relate some instances in which museums and the professionalised heritage regime they represent became the flashpoints for misunderstandings between cultures. Drawing upon events that occurred in my neighbourhood – in India and in India's neighbours in South Asia – I will discuss episodes in which museums or museum culture writ large caused tensions, anxieties, distrust and anger, and precipitated crises between communities, cultures or nations. It will become clear how, in each instance, local groups offered resistance to a museal process that placed artworks within modern, secular and international frameworks. What can we learn from these stories of museum misunderstandings? What should we learn from them? Perhaps we should learn more, and less, than we would first think.

II

Bangladesh, Dhaka

I begin with the story of a temporary exhibition, for which a European museum was borrowing artefacts from museums in South Asia. We are familiar with the passions that arise in 'source countries' when wealthier nations acquire their artistic treasures through illegal trade or colonial plunder. But a loan exhibition involving two sovereign nations in the 21st century would appear to be an entirely benign project. It would be an opportunity for international cooperation, offering mutual advantage to borrower and lender alike. And yet, the plans for this exhibition led to controversy, protests, lawsuits, street riots, financial losses, damage to cultural property and international tensions. It ruined careers and even came at the cost of a human life.

It was late in 2007. Authorities in Bangladesh were working with the Musée Guimet, France's national museum of Asian art, to mount an exhibition of sculptural masterpieces borrowed from museums in Bangladesh. *Masterpieces of the Ganges Delta: Art from the Collections*

of Bangladesh was one of three ambitious exhibitions planned by the Parisian museum to focus on the classical sculpture of three major nations of South Asia. All three exhibitions related to a pre-Islamic period when Buddhism and Hinduism flourished across the region. The Musée Guimet had already mounted the first of these three exhibitions. Titled *The Golden Age of Classical India*, this exhibition gathered more than a hundred sculptures created in the Gupta period from museums across India. The Gupta period is named after a powerful dynasty that ruled over a vast Indian empire between the 4th and 6th centuries and is celebrated in India today as a 'golden age'. The period's elegantly restrained sculptures depict both Buddhist and Hindu deities, for this was the time when Buddhism began to wane and Hinduism took its place.

Three years later, in 2010, the museum would be organizing the third exhibition, *Pakistan – Where Civilizations Meet: Gandharan Arts*. This was to be an even larger exhibition, with more than two hundred objects borrowed from museums in Pakistan. It would gather an array of sculptures from the 1st to the 6th centuries from the historic Gandhara region, which today is shared by Pakistan and Afghanistan. Once ruled by Greeks who came in Alexander's wake, then by Central Asian, Bactrian and Persian overlords, Gandhara was predominantly Buddhist and its art was strongly affected by Hellenistic and Persian influences. Its 'Greco-Buddhist' sculptures have fascinated Western scholars and audiences, but the Pakistani state's interest in pre-Islamic art has dwindled in recent years. The exhibition organisers said they hoped 'that Pakistan can soon be the land of

encounters that it once was,"¹ reminding audiences that an area now known for its adherence to Islam was once the cosmopolitan crossroads of Asia.

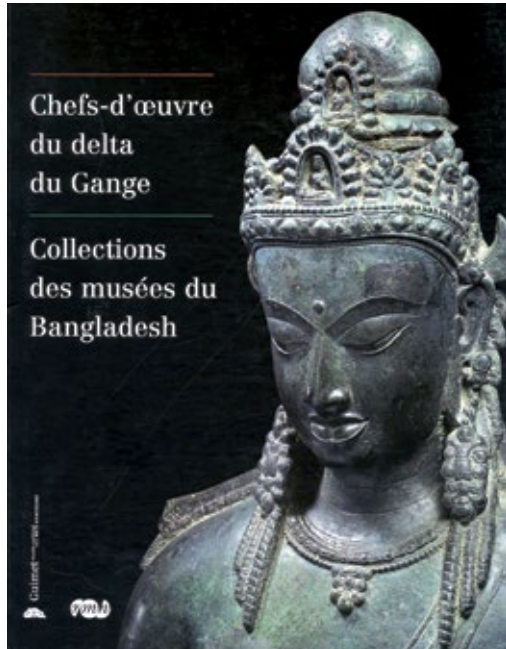


Figure 1. *Chefs d'œuvre de delta du Ganges: Collections des musées du Bangladesh*. Cover of catalogue published by Musée Guimet, 2001. By kind courtesy of Musée Guimet

Scheduled between these two exhibitions was *Art of the Ganges Delta: Masterpieces from the Collections of Bangladesh*. While Gandharan art has long been appreciated by Western museums and collectors, and while

those conversant with Indian art history would know the importance of Gupta art, the classical arts of Bangladesh had never been the subject of a major international exhibition. Yet these Buddhist and Hindu sculptures are as refined and historically significant as the coeval arts of neighbouring lands. Under the Pala and Sena dynasties of Bengal (8th-10th and 11th-12th centuries, respectively), sculpture in stone, terracotta and bronze developed a complex iconography and tremendous stylistic sophistication. Monks and pilgrims who visited the thriving Buddhist monasteries of the Pala kingdom carried its Buddhist icons and manuscripts to Nepal, Tibet, China, Thailand and Indonesia, and these formed the basis for Buddhist art in these regions. An exhibition on the classical arts of Bangladesh would not only make a broader public aware of the beauty of these objects, but also tell the story of their profound influence over much of Asian art.

Thus, when the Musée Guimet's curators drew up a list of 189 objects to be borrowed from five museums in Bangladesh, the exhibition organizers justifiably had a sense of breaking new ground. As the only international exhibition to be initiated since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, this project was promoted as a major cultural event that would benefit Bangladesh: it would highlight the civilizational richness of a land that was usually only noticed abroad at times of political turbulence or natural disasters, such as famines or cyclones.²

But many Bangladeshis did not see it that way. While a few members of the public were in favour of the show, the

majority of artists, art critics, art historians, archaeologists, retired museum officials and journalists expressed anxiety and indeed anger at the planned exhibition. Newspapers and blogsites bubbled with controversies and these soon spilled over to protests on the street. Why, for all its good intentions, did this exhibition project become so controversial?



Figure 2. Vajrasattva, bronze, 9th/10th century, 140 x 120 x 72 cm, Bhoja Vihara, Mainamati (Comilla), Mainamati Archaeological Museum Bangladesh. By kind courtesy of Musee Guimet

A very small minority of the protestors objected to the culture of Bangladesh being represented abroad through Hindu and Buddhist art, rather than the Islamic cultures of the present-day majority. But most protestors were anxious to point out that they were proud of Bangladesh's pre-Islamic heritage. Indeed, Islam occupies a complex place in Bangladesh's cultural identity. When British rule came to an end in 1947, this region was partitioned from India, as its Muslim majority felt the need for a state of their own. East Bengal became the eastern wing of Muslim-majority Pakistan. However, East Pakistan's relations with West Pakistan were fraught from the very start, leading eventually to a painful liberation struggle that left three million dead, but gave birth in 1971 to the sovereign nation of Bangladesh. Since then, Bangladesh has sought to define its identity through its regional culture, which is centred on the Bengali language and folk culture. Even the Islam of Bangladesh is seen as being enriched by its syncretism with local beliefs. The pre-Islamic past of Bangladesh is embraced as an important part of the nation's multicultural patrimony.

In these circumstances, those who opposed the exhibition said they did so not because they disdained the sculptures, but because they esteemed them and wanted to protect them from possible harm. Some of those who raised objections felt the objects were too precious to travel and should not be put at risk by a long journey. But most activists were deeply suspicious of the French. Why were they taking an interest in these sculptures? Was there an ulterior motive? They began to scrutinize every aspect of the project. When they read the agreement between France

and Bangladesh, they found the terms insulting. Bangladesh would lend some of its most ancient and valuable artefacts to France and would receive in return only twenty copies of the catalogue. Someone pointed out that when India had lent similar objects to the Musée Guimet, India had at least got a reciprocal exhibition of Picasso prints. Was Bangladesh not worthy of any gesture of reciprocity?

Bangladeshi activists kept a close watch on the entire process. How were the lists of objects drawn up? Were there discrepancies between the various lists? How was the objects' condition being checked? What measures were being taken to ensure their safety? The activists evidently had support from within the lending institutions, because technical documents like the inventory lists and condition reports were leaked to the press, where they were published and examined for lapses in protocol. It was found that many objects were poorly accessioned – one list item, for instance, was '93 coins' – and while this reflected poorly on the Bangladeshi museums, one writer pointed out that with such documentation, 'there was no way in which even the most diligent officials could verify that the objects lent, were indeed what had been returned'.⁴ The objects were also found to be insured at much less than market value.

But along with the scrutiny of the contract and procedures, what also circulated in Bangladesh were rumours of an astonishing sort. For instance, when it was found that the Guimet had undervalued the objects, nobody in Bangladesh suggested that the Guimet was playing fast and loose with insurance values in order to reduce costs. Instead, it

was suggested that these objects had been *deliberately* underinsured because the Guimet planned from the start to 'lose' the consignment and pay the small insured sum and then make a tidy profit by selling the goods that they had stolen on the market.⁵

In these articles, photographs of selected sculptures were reproduced with captions such as 'France's Gain, Bangladesh's Loss?' The protestors seemed convinced that the temporary exhibition was just a pretext: once the Bangladeshi objects travelled to France, they would never return. Rumours and suspicions centred also on the conservation that the objects were to undergo in Paris before they were put on display. A scholar recalled that a reliquary that had been sent to France for restoration in 1958 had never returned. Nobody seemed to know where the object was: whether in France, or in Bangladesh, or indeed in Pakistan, as this area had been East Pakistan at the time.⁶ But now it was said that the real purpose of the conservation process was to remove the artefacts to laboratories to make perfect copies. France would then send back the fakes, and keep the originals.⁷ This was even articulated in the press, in a cartoon that shows a Bangladeshi official trying to reclaim the loaned sculptures. Surrounded by identical sculptures, he can no longer tell which one was the original that should come back home.

Several parties moved the courts to try to block the show. A group of citizens filed a petition against one of the five museums that was lending works for the exhibition.⁸ This was struck down by the court. Another petition accused

the Ministry of Culture of neglecting proper procedures. This accusation had some merit and the courts demanded that insurance values for the artefacts be increased. Better agreements were drawn up, insurance values increased four-fold and now the French committed to giving fifty copies of the catalogue to each participating museum.



Figure 3: Cartoon by Shishir Bhattacharjee. By kind courtesy of the artist. Translation of texts: 'France will definitely return your things to you...But which one is ours? France – Unparalleled in making replicas'

Once the courts had disposed of the petition, the objects started being shipped out. To avoid the public gaze, the museum loaded its first consignment in the early hours of the morning in vans that were marked as bringing flood relief for a recent cyclone. This subterfuge aroused greater passions, and citizen groups assembled outside the



Figure 4. Protestors outside the Bangladesh National Museum, opposing the movement of artefact to France. Photo courtesy © Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World



Figure 5. Trucks carrying artefact from the National Museum of Bangladesh, under police escort. Photo courtesy © Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

museum and tried to block the trucks that were taking the consignment to the airport. As the police broke the cordon and the trucks drove to the airport, protestors attacked cars belonging to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and were in turn attacked by the police.

The second consignment was sent under cover of night. And now events took a terrible turn. While this consignment was being loaded on the plane, it was found that one of the thirteen crates was missing. The smallest among the containers in the consignment, it had contained two 6th-century terracotta statues. The disappearance of the crate caused alarm. Bangladeshi groups felt their fear that their objects would be stolen had already come true. They blamed the French authorities for not taking due care of the priceless artefacts. The French Embassy, in turn, accused the local transporters, the airport security, and Bangladeshis at large of stealing the crate. In the morning, the French Embassy declared that 'France feels the disappearance of this crate is highly suspicious and could also be the result of a conspiracy by a very small nexus of persons to embarrass France'.⁹ In short, the French authorities were accusing Bangladeshi protestors of stealing Bangladeshi objects to make France look bad.

As suspicions and accusations and counter-accusations swirled through Dhaka, what emerged from police investigations was far worse than could have been anticipated. The empty carton was found floating in a pond confessed – after being beaten by the police – to stealing near the airport. Two cargo handlers working at the airport



Figure 6. Vishnu with personified weapons, terracotta, 6th 7th century. Formerly collection of Bangladesh National Museum, now destroyed. By kind courtesy of the Musée Guimet.

and then destroying the statues. These were illiterate men whose imagination had been stoked by all they had heard about the priceless treasures in the cargo. The men were able to steal the smallest carton of the consignment. On opening it, they were disappointed to see that the sculptures were made not of precious metals but of common clay.



Figure 7. Bust of Vishnu, terracotta, 6th 7th century. Formerly collection of Bangladesh National Museum, now destroyed. By kind courtesy of the Musée Guimet.

Imagining the ‘treasure’ might be inside the sculptures they had smashed them, hoping to find a cache of gems.¹⁰ Bangladeshi policemen and archaeologists had to spend the next few days picking over Dhaka’s largest garbage dump to retrieve as much as possible of the sculptures, though they were damaged beyond repair.¹¹



Figure 8. Archaeologists and police authorities search for pieces of the broken sculptures in the garbage dump in Aminbazar, Dhaka. By kind courtesy of The Daily Star.

Bangladesh cancelled the show, the minister for culture resigned, and then another rumour spread through the city: that the French were now going to keep the artefacts that already had been shipped out as a ‘penalty’ because Bangladesh had ‘not performed its contractual obligations’.¹² In fact, the negotiations ongoing in Paris were now about who should bear the cost of shipping the objects back to Bangladesh. The Musée Guimet was facing the loss of 400,000 euros that it had spent on developing the exhibition and was unwilling to pay the costs of returning

the unexhibited artefacts.¹³ While these discussions proceeded, the young and by all accounts very likeable Bangladeshi ambassador in France emerged from a meeting at the Guimet only to collapse in his car with a brain haemorrhage.¹⁴ After a few days on life support, he died.

As one can see, an event that commenced as a farce in Bangladesh descended swiftly into a tragedy. In my description of these events, if I have dwelt on not just the facts but also the wild rumours that eddied around the facts, it is because these rumours were a vital part of the events, building fear, shaping people's responses, even attracting the attention and creating the pressures that led to the loss of both artefacts and human lives. There is no point in reasoning with these rumours; and we do not have to examine whether these rumours have any basis in fact. What is worth examining here is what these kinds of rumours and anxieties tell us about how the Western museum, and particularly a universal museum that takes an interest in the art of the world at large, is seen outside of the West.

From the vantage point of Dhaka, the Musée Guimet seems a terrifying place – a place with an inexplicable and insatiable desire for artefacts. The institution is a museological black hole and any object that comes within its magnetic field, even for a short-term exhibition, will be trapped forever, and will never be able to leave. In the universe of these rumours, the country that lends or gives up its treasures to the Western museum will have no voice or power against it and no recourse to law or justice. That is because this kind of museum is seen not just as a cultural institution, but as the

arm of a more powerful state, whether an erstwhile colonizing state or a new neocolonial state; it is seen as being able to manipulate the archives, able to hire clever lawyers to work out one-sided deals, able to produce perfect fakes through its technological prowess that is akin to black magic. For all that the curator of the exhibition, Vincent Lefevre, pleaded that contemporary loan exhibitions should not be seen in the same light as colonial collecting, for Bangladeshi activists, it seems, the relationship between a country like Bangladesh and a country like France could only be a colonial one.

It would appear then that the Musée Guimet controversy became the ground for a reprisal of old suspicions and old hostilities that pit poor against rich, East against West, source nations against collectors, colonized against colonizer or neocolonialist. But, as artist and critic Naeem Mohameian points out, Bangladesh has 'no history as a flash point for anti-French sentiments (or even pro-French enthusiasm)'.¹⁵ The region's colonial history, after all, is predominantly British, and France is historically neutral in this place. If anything, France should have been perceived as benign; the French cultural centre remains a popular meeting point for Dhaka's artists, and for several years before the exhibition project French archaeologists had been collaborating on Bangladeshi excavations and the French government had organized training workshops for curators and conservators. *The Arts of the Ganges Delta* exhibition grew out of these collaborations; and as a temporary exhibition it should not have raised fears more appropriate to a plundering colonial power. Why, then, was there such anxiety and such hysteria about the exhibition?

It is instructive to compare the essays written by Naeem Mohaiemen during and after the Musée Guimet controversy. Mohaiemen's earlier article, 'Tintin in Bengal', was written in the thick of the events, when the first consignment of artefacts had reached France and the second was yet to leave Bangladesh.¹⁶ In it, the author admits he had first been unsympathetic towards the protestors, but as they began to produce facts – inconsistent inventory lists, missing accession numbers, woefully low insurance values – he too felt that the exhibition was being managed poorly and with unseemly haste. Add to this a recent article by Nigerian-origin lawyer and crusader for the repatriation of artefacts to source countries, Dr Kwame Opoku, who averred that the Musée Guimet was filled with 'thousands of stolen/illegal objects',¹⁷ and Mohaiemen too began to feel anxious about the possible consequences of the exhibition.

Four years later, Mohaiemen wrote another essay reflecting upon these now-distant events.¹⁸ From his new perspective, the Guimet episode appeared as 'a proxy battle'. What was really on people's minds, Mohaiemen now realized, was the larger political situation in Bangladesh. From 2001 to 2006, Bangladesh was ruled by a democratic but spectacularly corrupt government. It had taken enormous bribes to buy an outdated \$100-million warship from the Americans; it bought expensive but substandard military planes from the Russians; and it gave oil drilling contracts to an incompetent Canadian company that ended up burning millions of dollars' worth of gas in a huge explosion that remained unextinguished for five weeks. In 2006 – the year before the Musée Guimet controversy – this administration had been

dismissed, but the caretaker government that was supposed to be in power for six months to oversee fresh elections turned out to be a front for a military junta that looked set to hold on to power for the long term. In the end, this caretaker government stayed in power for two years. The Guimet protests occurred exactly at a time when the caretaker government was consolidating its power by clamping down on journalists and human rights activists, one of whom had been tortured to death. Mohaiemen says: 'As a chill of fear descended, safe spaces were needed where the democracy movement could gather strength.' He continues: 'We can then look at the confrontation over the French museum show as a mobilising tactic for larger, more risky confrontations against the state. Putatively, the target was the French museum and embassy's high-handedness... (but) I remember watching an angry guest on a talk show, saying "how dare they take away our statues, like prisoners in a box", and thinking this was on-screen shadowboxing. His main target, indirectly, felt like the Caretaker Government itself.'¹⁹

This coalition of art historians, anthropologists, activists, writers and young artists that united to protest against the Musée Guimet 'reunited ... later (and are) now active in organising around oil-gas exploration, extrajudicial killing, conditions for garments workers'. According to Mohaiemen, then, even if the sculptures had to return unexhibited to their 'dusty conditions in local museums, where they will be poorly lit, badly maintained and eventually stolen by smugglers', the cancellation of the show still did some good for Bangladeshi society at large.²⁰ Seen in this light, what appears at first to be a straightforward clash between

the two binaries of East and West, source and collector, nationalists and cosmopolites, then turns out to be something much more complex and nuanced, with a range of local meanings not easily comprehended by outsiders. The easily recognized tropes of East versus West are used to frame a moral battleground of 'speaking truth to power' in which virtue lies on the side of the weak. But the identity of the amoral power to be opposed in this fight is deliberately obfuscated. The invocation of colonialism or neocolonialism is worn as a kind of cloak that disguises what is really at stake: a more complicated and more immediately dangerous engagement of East with East, one that could lead to harassment, arrest, torture and even custodial death.

If, at the start, the confrontation of Bangladeshi protestors versus Musée Guimet appears as a clash between cultures, an intercultural clash, closer examination makes us think again about the meaning of 'cultural' in the term 'inter-cultural'; here, pro-democracy activists also represent a cultural strand within Bangladesh that stands opposed to a culture of authoritarian power and privilege. This instance reminds us that there is no solid, cohesive, singular cultural entity anywhere – certainly there is no singular 'Bangladeshi' – although this solidification of a Bangladeshi identity is used as a ruse, an indirection that allows one to speak when one dare not utter what one really wants to say. And the invocation of the West is most useful as a bogey sometimes, an externalization of the unbearable aspects of the East's own self.

III

Afghanistan, Bamiyan Valley



Figure 9. View of rock-cut sanctuaries at Bamiyan. Photo: Walter Spink, courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies.

I turn now to another event that also resulted in irreparable damage to two sculptures. But unlike the thieves in Bangladesh who broke the sculptures in the hope of finding

III Afghanistan, Bamiyan Valley

hidden 'treasure', not comprehending that the value of these clay figurines lay in their antiquity and their status as art, those who destroyed this second set of sculptures understood very well the terms on which these objects were valued by the international community. They knew that the wilful destruction of these artefacts would shock large numbers of people across the world. The terracotta sculptures in Bangladesh were stolen by night, broken furtively and then the thieves tried to hide their deed by scattering the fragments of the ruined sculptures in rubbish bins. In contrast, the destruction of these other sculptures was decreed in advance, was performed by day and was intended to be seen; indeed the destruction was staged as a spectacle that was videotaped to be defiantly, triumphantly broadcast to the world. I am referring of course to the demolition of the giant stone and stucco sculptures of the Buddha that had towered above the Bamiyan valley in Afghanistan for 1400 years until the fateful week in March 2001 when, in a hail of artillery fire and dynamite, they were reduced to rubble.

Media coverage of this event has made the Bamiyan valley familiar to global audiences, making us sharply aware of what was lost to us in that place. The 175-foot tall sculpture that has been demolished was the largest Buddha figure in the world. The smaller Buddha was 120 feet tall, small only in comparison to its colossal neighbour. Both stood in deep niches carved into the living rock of a mountain range. Over the statues' core of rock, layers of stucco were used to fashion the robes and ornaments, though the faces of the Buddhas were perhaps made of metal and wood.

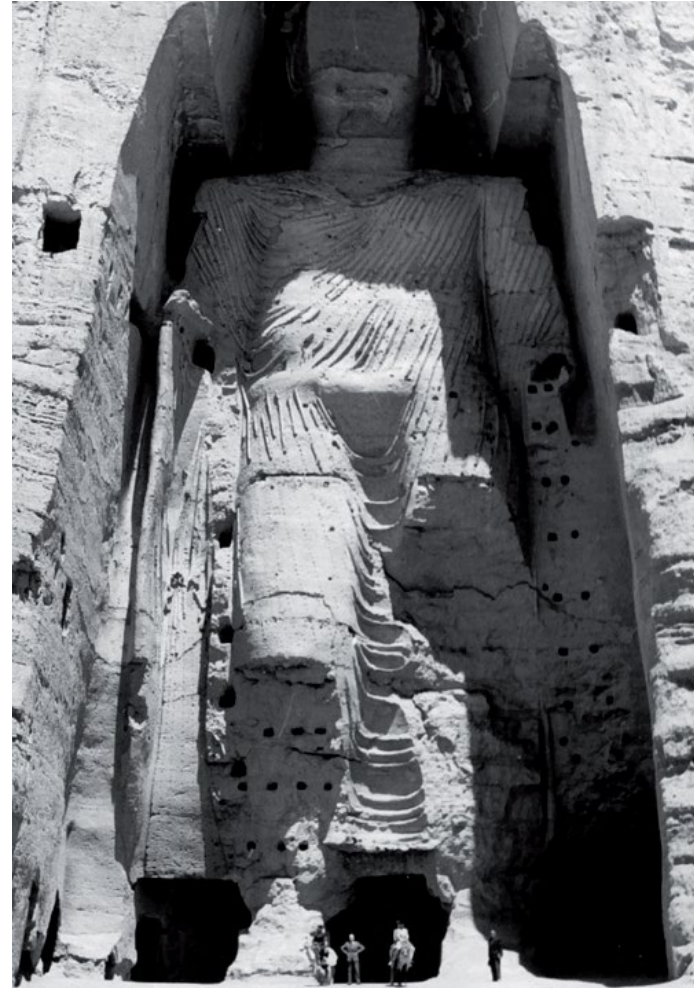


Figure 10. The taller of the two Bamiyan Buddhas in 1963. Creative Commons Licence courtesy Wikimedia. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taller_Buddha_of_Bamiyan_before_and_after_destruction.jpg

Remarkable as they were, the two giant Buddhas were only a fraction of Buddhist artefacts in Bamiyan. The broad valley housed an enormous monastery and a giant stupa that, in its time, would have been as eye-catching as the Buddhas. Several other Buddhas, seated and recumbent, were once ranged along the mountainside. Frescoes covered the niches of these sculptures, and hundreds of man-made caves were dug into the rock to provide monks with cells for meditation and prayer.



Figure 11. Fragments of frescoes in the niche of the taller Buddha at Bamiyan. Photo: Walter Spink, courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies.

Most of Bamiyan's Buddhist monuments were built in the 6th and 7th centuries, when Bamiyan was an important node on the ancient Silk Route. At this crossroads of the world, influences from India, China, Greece and Persia mingled in the arts. From the 8th century onwards, Islam began to supplant Buddhism in the region. The monuments fell out of worship, the stupa crumbled and the vast monastery disappeared, but apart from an attack by a passing conqueror in the 12th century, when the Buddhas probably lost their faces, the giant sculptures remained relatively intact.

In March 2001, when the Taliban regime proclaimed its intention to demolish the monumental sculptures along with all other depictions of living beings in their territory (resulting in the destruction also of collections in the Kabul Museum), the international community pleaded with the Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Omar to spare the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Although the United Nations had refused to recognize the Taliban government, the Director of UNESCO now made a personal appeal to the regime, and the Secretary-General of the UN met with Taliban officials in an attempt to avert the destruction. Leaders of Islamic countries including Egypt and Qatar tried to reason with the Afghan authorities and sent a delegation of clerics led by the mufti of the Al-Azhar seminary in Cairo, the most prestigious Sunni centre for the study of Islamic law, to Kandahar to dissuade Mullah Omar from destroying the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Yet the Mullah persisted. It is reported that the Taliban spent weeks gathering weapons and explosives from

other provinces in order to concentrate them in Bamiyan. The statues were first attacked with guns, anti-aircraft missiles and tanks. When these did not suffice, the Taliban brought in explosives experts from Saudi Arabia and from Pakistan.²¹ On their advice, workers rappelled down the cliff with jackhammers, blasting holes in the sculptures and packing these with dynamite that was detonated in timed explosions. A journalist from the Al-Jazeera network was allowed to film the final stage of destruction, and shortly afterwards a contingent of twenty international journalists were brought in to observe the now-empty niches.

Why did the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas become a task to be 'implemented at all costs'?²² Why, despite the pressure exerted by global leaders who pleaded for the safety of the Buddhas, did the Taliban invest so much time, labour and expense in the difficult task of demolishing them and in ensuring that the demolition was broadcast to the rest of the world?

In the *fatwa* that called for the destruction of the Buddhas, Mullah Omar framed the demolition as a religious act. Invoking the traditional Islamic condemnation of image-worship, he said: 'These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers.' Further, he declared, 'God Almighty is the only real shrine and all fake idols must be destroyed.'²³

Jamal Elias points out that the decree of demolition was issued in the weeks leading up to the annual Haj pilgrimage, a time of 'heightened religious sensitivity across the Muslim world'²⁴ The symbolism of demolishing icons at this

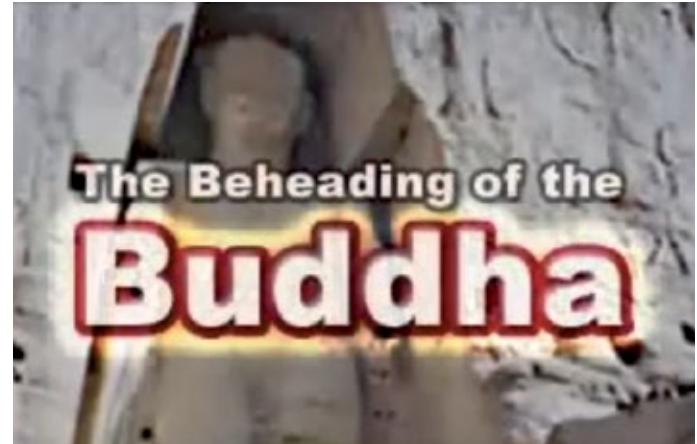


Figure 12. Screen grabs of a video uploaded to Youtube by the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaa'ah, a British Islamist organization. Video footage shows the destruction of the Buddhas, screen titles given theological justification for their destruction and the soundtrack has Quranic recitation. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYYBIPWYb7Y>)

religiously-charged time would have been legible to devout Muslims everywhere. The demolition itself took place around the time of Eid al-adha, a festival that commemorates the prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command. Abraham is revered in the Islamic tradition for opposing idol-worship and for repudiating his own father, who was a sculptor of idols. After the demolition, a number of Pakistani clerics congratulated the Taliban for 'reviving the tradition of Abraham'.²⁵ The following year, a press in Peshawar celebrated the event by printing and distributing a calendar that featured images of the niches before, during, and after the demolition. The calendar was titled *But-shikan*, or Idol-Destroyer, a term with strong historical-religious connotations. Clearly, in some quarters the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas was indeed understood as a pious Islamic act.

Yet two years earlier, in 1999, the same Mullah Omar had promised to protect these very Buddhas. With no Buddhists remaining in Afghanistan, he confirmed that the Buddhas were not idols under worship and there was no religious reason to attack them. The Mullah had said: 'The government considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors. The Taliban states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected.'²⁶ What accounts for the Taliban's volte face, in which a religious motivation, earlier dismissed as irrelevant, was used to now justify the attack?

In his essay on the Bamiyan events, Finbarr Barry Flood demonstrates that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was not a relapse of medieval religious impulses.²⁷ On the contrary, Flood argues, the Taliban clearly understood that these were not religious icons that they were destroying. The figures had already been defaced and had fallen out of worship more than a thousand years previously. Instead, Flood suggests that the destruction had a more proximate cause. The Taliban regime was recognized by only three countries in the world and was suffering under severe economic sanctions. The regime had been trying to build bridges with the international community. Earlier in the year, they had voluntarily destroyed Afghanistan's opium crop, hoping this would ease the sanctions on Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's continuing refusal to surrender Osama bin Laden, who was sheltering in Afghanistan at the time, led to a breakdown of negotiations. The United Nations refused to recognize the Taliban regime and invited representatives from the ousted government-in-exile to represent Afghanistan in their stead. After the United Nations imposed fresh sanctions upon Afghanistan, the Taliban gave up attempts to engage with the United Nations. Instead they chose a dramatic act to demonstrate their rejection of the international community that had rejected them.

In a section of the essay titled 'Mullah Omar and the Museum', Flood tells us that when the Taliban announced their intention to destroy the Buddhas, the director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Phillipe de Montebello, had pleaded with the Taliban to allow the Met to find a way to take these sculptures out of Afghanistan. 'Let us

remove them so that they are in the context of an art museum, where they are cultural objects, works of art and not cult images,' he had said.²⁸ Others suggested veiling the icons if their sight offended the present rulers. The Taliban's intransigence in the face of the appeals from the international community then, and their refusal to agree to any compromise, demonstrates their intention to harm these statues precisely because they were valued outside Afghanistan.

The Taliban also took the opportunity to mock the international community's values that led it to valorise these sculptures. After the event, Mullah Omar disingenuously said, 'We do not understand why everybody is so worried ... All we are breaking are stones.'²⁹ Had the Taliban really seen these as just 'stones', however, they would not have been worth breaking; knowing that the statues meant very much more made the effort of destroying them worthwhile. As audiences across the globe expressed horror at the destruction of the sculptures, the Taliban countered this with their own claims of being horrified at a world that would offer to spend millions on salvaging artworks, while intensifying sanctions that blocked essential medical supplies and threatened human lives. A Taliban envoy reportedly said 'When your children are dying in front of you, you don't care about a piece of art.'³⁰

By declaring it their religious duty to destroy the Buddhas, the Taliban were rejecting the conceptual framework through which idols could be emptied of their original meanings and are reframed as works of art. As

Flood says, 'what was at stake here was not the literal worship of religious idols but their veneration as cultural icons';³¹ not an Oriental cult of an idol-worship but the Western cult of art.

Historically, this 'cult of art' had arisen as a specifically Western, post-Enlightenment response to a crisis of religion; the spiritual exaltation that religion had once provided was now to be experienced through the desacralized sublime of art.³² The central shrine of this secular cult of art was the museum. This was the locus within which objects shed their earlier religious functions and became available to a modern public as purely aesthetic objects. Later, as museums proliferated in non-Western locations, they were to play a critical role in resignifying the art of times past. In nations that were now predominantly Hindu, Christian or Islamic, museums neutralized the remains from a Buddhist, pagan or pre-Islamic past, making it possible to accept as 'cultural heritage' objects from a different or rival religion.

Musealised heritage plucks objects out of specific denominational contexts and makes them inheritable by an entire citizenry. The logical end of such musealisation is the concept of 'World Heritage', in which the art of the past is seen as the heritage of all of humanity. Although the concept of universal heritage has been articulated as early as the 18th century,³³ it took institutional form only in the post-WWII period with the establishment of the United Nations. Through the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, signatory states accepted a legally binding responsibility

towards World Heritage. The Convention set standards for the sites worthy of being inscribed on the World Heritage list. Once a monument or site is included in the List, the World Heritage apparatus asserts not just the international community's responsibility towards World Heritage, but also its authority over it: these sites must be conserved in the authorized manner, by experts of an approved type, or risk losing the World Heritage status altogether.

But what if a sovereign state's ideas do not mesh with the international community's ideas of appropriate care? The contradictions that might emerge between a nation's desires and designs for its own heritage, and the claims of the world to which these things also 'belong' are anticipated but not solved within the Convention. The care of World Heritage sites '... is the duty of the international community as a whole', the Convention says, '... whilst fully respecting the sovereignty of the States on whose territory [the World Heritage site] . . . is situated' (Article 6.1).

In an article written shortly after the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, Dario Gamboni suggests that the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas 'amounted to a provocative affirmation of sovereignty' over them; by breaking the statues the Taliban were 'exercising upon them the most radical right of the owner'. But the Taliban were asserting their sovereignty 'not only upon the territory and the people but upon the values' that would hold sway in Afghanistan.³⁴ Although Mullah Omar had understood that the sculptures could be useful for a future tourist economy, he now was choosing to reject that regime of values. Since

the Buddhas' heritage status and potential tourist value depended on increased interaction with the international community that had refused to recognize the Taliban, the act of '... tying certain objects to certain values... attracts the aggression of those who reject them or who feel rejected by them'. In these circumstances, Gamboni concludes, 'the notion of world heritage, intended as a shield, may instead act as a target'.³⁵ Indeed, the international community's interest in safeguarding the statues might well have suggested the idea of destroying them.³⁶

Gamboni's words were prescient. In the years that followed, World Heritage monuments, archaeological sites and objects in museums have become easy targets for groups wanting to stage a sensational and spectacular rejection of the international community. As I write, the forces of ISIS are choreographing videos of the destruction of the Mosul Museum and of the sites at Hatra and Nimrud. A few years previously, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Mali destroyed the extraordinary adobe mosques in Timbuktu and burnt down a library containing priceless manuscripts. A spokesman of the Ansar Dine, the Malian Islamist group, even warned: 'From now on, as soon as foreigners speak of Timbuktu, he declared, they would attack anything referred to as a World Heritage site. 'There is no world heritage,' the spokesman said. 'It doesn't exist. The infidels must not get involved in our business.'³⁷

Ironically, it was in the moment of their destruction that these two sculptures from a remote Afghan valley most fully became 'world heritage', with their loss being felt

by thousands who had previously been unaware of their existence. Bamiyan became a cause celebre, and soon after the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001, the 'Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley' were inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List as well as in its List of World Heritage in Danger. Since then, Afghan, French, German, Austrian, Japanese and American conservators and archaeologists have been at work in Bamiyan, making new discoveries and attempting to preserve and document what remains.

The global circulation of images and information on the destruction of the Buddhas, the global outcry that followed upon the event, the global efforts to salvage what might remain in the valley: all of these distil the events at Bamiyan as a struggle between two binary opposites. The ability to see the Buddhas as part of world art and world heritage versus the (assumed) inability to see them as anything but idols becomes the dividing line between the modern versus the medieval, the cultured versus the barbaric, the secular versus the fanatical. But the dyad of the Taliban-versus-International Community actually obscures a third, crucially important yet often overlooked group who were also a prime audience for the Taliban's acts. For this internal audience that lived in Bamiyan, who were Afghan but not Taliban, who cherished the Buddhas but not as 'art' or 'world heritage', the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas had another range of meanings altogether.

The Bamiyan valley is home to the community of Hazaras, an ethnic minority in Afghanistan. Their name, which

literally means 'the thousands', is meant to mark their descent from the regiments of thousands of soldiers left behind by Genghis Khan when he swept through the area in the 12th century. Recent DNA tests have confirmed that the Hazaras are indeed descended from Mongols. The Hazaras are not just ethnically different, but culturally and religiously distinct from the majority of Afghans: they speak Hazargi, a dialect of Persian, and they follow Shia Islam, which is considered heretical by the orthodox Sunni Taliban. As a religious, ethnic and linguistic minority, the Hazaras have suffered discrimination throughout modern Afghan history, and endured particularly severe persecution through the period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001.



Figure 13. Hazara farmers in the Bamiyan Valley. *From Faces of Afghanistan series.* Photo by kind courtesy of Steve McCurry.



Figure 14. 'Dragon Rock' near Bamiyan. By kind courtesy of Adam Valen Levinson

Living in the Bamiyan valley for centuries, the Hazaras displaced the earlier Buddhist inhabitants and eventually lost sight of the statues' original significance. They adopted the Bamiyan statues as part of their own heritage and gave new meanings to them. In the Hazara folklore that developed in the valley, the statues were associated with the love story of a low-born hero called Salsal who fell in love with a princess called Shahmama. When Shahmama's father, the ruler of Bamiyan, learned about their love he set Salsal two challenges: to save the Bamiyan valley from its frequent flooding, and to defeat a dragon that was plaguing the land. Hazaras point to the dam on the nearby Band-e-Amir lake: the dam wall, they say, was built by Salsal in answer to the king's first challenge. A nearby rock formation known as Darya Ajdahar or Dragon Rock, they say, are the petrified remains of the dragon that Salsal killed.

A victorious Salsal returned to claim his bride. To be readied for their wedding, the bride and groom retreated to two chambers carved into the mountain. The groom's cave was hung with a green curtain; the bride's with red. But alas, when the wedding day dawned and the curtains were parted, Salsal was dead: the dragon's poison had worked its way into his wounds and killed him overnight. His body was frozen stiff into the mountainside. Seeing him dead, Shahmama let out a shriek, and then she too died. According to the Hazara legend, the larger of the two Buddhas was actually the petrified body of the hero Salsal; the smaller, his bride Shahmama. Both remained on the hillside, locked in an eternal separation.



Figure 15. Lake Band-e-Amir, near Bamiyan. By kind courtesy of Adam Valen Levinson

The story knits the two Buddhist sculptures together with environmental elements – the dragon rock, the dam on the lake – making them part of the Bamiyan landscape. In this conceptualization of the Buddhas, the sculptures were not created by human hands: they were simply there, as part of the natural heritage of the Bamiyan valley.³⁸ Rock, water, sculpture: all are filled with Hazara meaning.

Those among the Hazaras who did not literally believe that the sculptures were the petrified remains of Salsal and Shahmama were convinced that their own ancestors had made these statues. When 12th-century invaders damaged the statues and probably destroyed their faces, they believe this was done because their faces were Hazara faces. Through the centuries, the Hazara have believed that the statues shared in the suffering and subjugation of the Hazara people, and they have tried to tend to them. During the Russian occupation the Hazara warlord Abdul Ali Mazari even assigned soldiers to protect the Buddhas. After Mazari was killed in 1995 by the Taliban who had invited him for peace talks, Hazara fighters resisted the Taliban and kept them out of Bamiyan.

The Buddhas were destroyed shortly after the Taliban gained control of the Bamiyan valley. Their destruction was aimed at striking fear in Hazara hearts, by asserting Taliban dominance, destroying a Hazara cultural symbol, and ruining a potential resource for Bamiyan's future economy.³⁹ But the Buddhas were only one aspect of what the Taliban wrought in Bamiyan. The spectacle staged for our TV screens was the public face of an event intended for

our eyes. In its shadow was the other face – turned towards internal animosities against Afghan minorities. Immediately upon capturing the valley, the Taliban massacred the Hazara as punishment for their long resistance and entire villages around Bamiyan were wiped out.⁴⁰

As the Hazara have attempted to recover in a post-Taliban Afghanistan, how much these now-effaced statues continue to mean to the Hazaras can be gauged from the way they are still evoked to this day. NGOs formed to support the Hazara are named for Shahmama and Salsal.⁴¹ In 2014, when the community wanted to build a statue to commemorate their slain leader Abdul Ali Mazari, they erected it in front of the ridge where the Buddhas – or perhaps we should say Salsal and Shahmama – once stood. The homology between the statue commemorating his death and the empty niches in the cliff-side is easy to read.

In the months and years since the demolition, Hazara artists, writers, poets and filmmakers have dwelt on the Buddhas, grieving their loss, critiquing the Taliban, and wishing for a future when the statues return to their niches.⁴² Notable among these is 'Khak-e-Bot', a surrealistic short story by Zalmay Babakohi. Originally written in Dari (a Persianate language closely related to Hazargi), it was translated into English as 'The Idol's Dust'. In the story, the Taliban who demolish the Buddhas are covered with dust from the statues; they joke that they look like the idols they have demolished, but as they bathe in the river they find the dust will not wash off. Soon the men turn stiff, and then they become statues themselves. Other Taliban rush to destroy

them, but they too become covered in dust and begin to petrify. The ground is covered with these idols; every pebble turns into a Buddha and the clouds begin to look like Buddhas too.⁴³

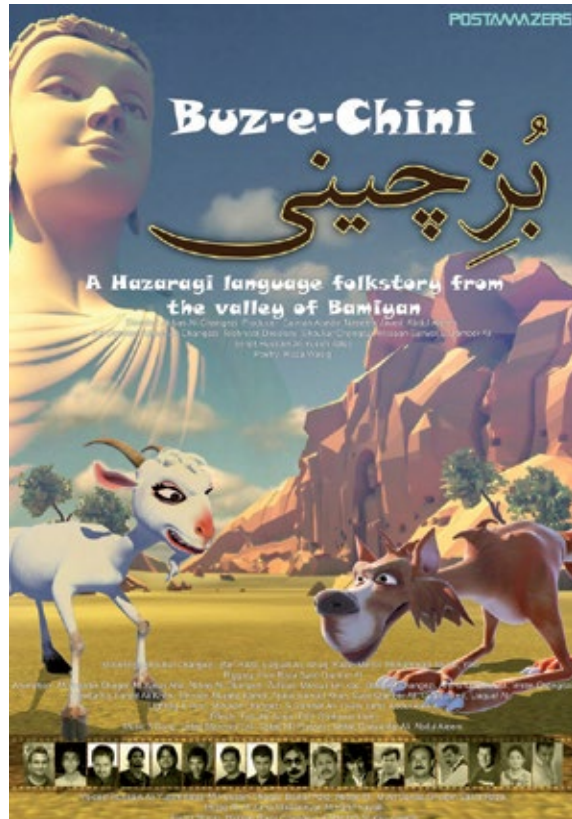


Figure 16. Poster for *Buz e Chini* (2011), a Hazaragi language animation film set in the Bamiyan valley.

If Babakohi imagined the Buddha idols as a virus that infected everyone who touched them, Hafiz Pakzad, a Bamiyan-born hyperrealist artist, had a simpler proposal. He wished to paint an enormous Buddha that would fill the empty niche. Never executed at full scale, his large painting now hangs in the Musée Guimet as a remembrance of the past.

The first animation film ever made in Hazargi imagined its events taking place in a Bamiyan before the demolition. *Buz-e-Chini*, which depicts a Hazargi fable about a wolf and a family of goats, shows the animals living in a Bamiyan valley where the Buddhas are intact and even their faces are undamaged.

Most prominent among Hazargi artists is Khadim Ali, a Pakistani-origin Hazara artist whose delicate miniature paintings and woven carpets return obsessively to the empty niches in Bamiyan. In a landscape inhabited by demons, the empty niches loom over the fragments of a Buddha that are scattered across the valley; or a felled Buddha appears peacefully asleep; or the niches are re-populated with the Buddha or are criss-crossed with bandages; or the niche and the Ka'aba fuse into one.

While writers, poets, and filmmakers offer a metaphoric 'return' of the Buddhas, Hazaras who live in Bamiyan have expressed their desire to rebuild the actual statues. To undo the Taliban's erasure of their heritage, to heal wounds, and to look to a future when tourism can return to the valley bringing better days: this is their wish. The future of the statues, however, remains uncertain. Today, at the feet of



Figure 17. Khadim Ali, *The Haunted Lotus*, 2013. Gouache, ink, and gold leaf on wasli paper, 70 x 54 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

III Afghanistan, Bamiyan Valley

the two Buddhas are the sheds archaeologists have built in which rubble from the statues has been gathered. Too much has been lost. It is estimated that it may be possible to piece together half of the smaller Buddha, but it will be impossible to rebuild any significant proportion of the larger one. International expert bodies such as UNESCO and the World Monuments Funds have advised against any rebuilding. With such little remaining of the original statues, whatever would be built would not be a repair but a new construction, resulting in a 'loss of authenticity' for the site.⁴⁴ Were this to occur, Bamiyan might risk losing its status as a World Heritage site. Experts favour only conservation of what remains, in effect simply stabilizing the crumbling walls of the empty niches.



Figure 18. Retrieved fragments of the broken Buddhas in storage, Bamiyan. Photo by kind courtesy of Adam Valen Levinson.



Figure 19. Scaffolding erected to stabilise the crumbling niche of the larger Buddha, at Bamiyan, 2008. Photo by Tracy Hunter from Kabul, Afghanistan (Scaffolding) [CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons]

If the statues were destroyed by a Taliban who were 'exercising upon them the most radical right of the owner',⁴⁵ today the international community of experts seems to exercise a supra-ownership by setting up 'global' and 'professional' standards of custodial care. Valuing the physical remains of an historical past, and defining authenticity in strictly material terms, the officials of world heritage organizations are a 'new orthodoxy of cultural globalization'⁴⁶ that have again taken Bamiyan's future out of Hazara hands. The Taliban had their way, destroying the Buddhas and leaving only empty niches behind. Had Philippe de Montebello had his way, the Metropolitan Museum would have rescued the Buddhas and taken them to New York, leaving empty niches behind. Now, the heritage experts and conservators discourage rebuilding the Buddhas, leaving empty niches behind.

IV India, Chandigarh

The Hazaras' wish to rebuild the Bamiyan Buddhas might be seen as a sentimental desire for a return to a storied past. Such ahistoric 'returns' become impermissible within the ethos of a professionalized heritage realm. Yet today in a number of museums and archives, institutions that exemplify professional custodianship of heritage, it is possible to see the professionals in retreat in deference to traditional communities who define the terms on which objects associated with them should be handled, seen and preserved. Where does this happen, and when and why does this occur?

Today many Western museums invite storytellers, ritual performers and musicians into their galleries to revivify objects and to convey to audiences a sense of the contexts that these things once served. This is done to celebrate multiculturalism. While such performances may be of interest for a general audience, museums also hope they will attract immigrant or indigenous ethnic groups by honouring their special relationship with the objects from

their heritage that the museum holds. Such gestures are part of what Stanley Fish calls 'boutique multiculturalism', which celebrates difference through superficial, colourful and easily consumable aspects of another's culture without allowing it to threaten the deeper structure of the collecting culture's own authority or beliefs.⁴⁷ But multiculturalism has impacted museums more profoundly as well. In the wake of post-colonialism and multiculturalism, the right of one culture to collect and interpret another is being questioned. Sometimes, the 'different but equal' status of various cultural groups penetrates the institution at a deeper structural level and is pursued to its logical end. We now have museums that no longer rely on their own authority but consult the communities of origin on the appropriate way to display and describe objects in galleries, or to treat them respectfully in storage. Sometimes the respect for ritual use dictates that the museum object no longer be shown to the uninitiated, and it is taken off display. Sometimes communities are allowed to perform rituals in the storage areas and even the galleries, to sustain the spiritual life of the objects. And we even have museums that give up the right to hold certain artefacts any more, acknowledging that the act of collecting was a kind of violence, and that these objects deserve to return to the communities of origin. Sometimes the community requests the return of objects for use in ritual ceremonies, regardless of the risks to their physical survival; sometimes it declares that the items will be destroyed in accordance with traditional custom. And the museum – according to whose ethic the physical preservation of an artefact is paramount – releases its artefacts into these new lives, or new deaths.

Such programmes have been put in place in the United States and in Canada, and in Australia and New Zealand where they address the native American, Aboriginal and Maori populations respectively. For centuries these indigenous communities had been victims of a horrendous internal colonization. Along with the decimation of populations, loss of rights over land and resources, forced conversions, lost generations of children separated from families and communities and the withering of language, belief and culture, came the communities' lack of control over their own objects and even the bodies of their own dead, as their graves were seen as 'archaeological' sites and their contents taken away and placed in museums for scientific study. In North America, for instance, the Smithsonian Institution alone is estimated to hold more than 200,000 objects removed from graves as well as the mortal remains of over 33,000 Native Americans.⁴⁸

With changed political circumstances and newly gained civil rights, indigenous groups were finally able to intervene in this situation towards the end of the 20th century. The rights of Native American groups over the remains of their ancestors as well as ritually significant artefacts were enshrined in law in the United States in 1990 through the Native American Graves Repatriation and Protection Act (NAGPRA). Under the terms of this law, if Native American groups could substantiate the claim that human remains or ritual objects in a museum's collection belonged to their ancestors, museums were obliged to repatriate them to the claimants.⁴⁹

What happened when these objects or human remains were returned to their communities? Invariably, human remains were buried with funeral rites, marking their passage from 'specimen' to 'person'. Artefacts, on the other hand, might have any of a range of afterlives: being displayed in museums built by the community, or being kept in shrines and used in the rituals for which they were originally made, or being ritually disposed of. The community might damage the physical body of the object, but in this context the object was counted as being much more than and also something *other* than its physical body. Thus, in 2007 when 38 objects including masks and other artefacts were returned by the US National Museum of the American Indian to an Apache community in Arizona, the shipping crates in which they were packed were given breathing holes because the masks and other artefacts were believed to have souls and to be alive.⁵⁰ From the moment that the process of return began, the objects exited the secular frame of artefact and entered the enchanted frame of things invested with magical power. A repatriation of this kind is deep multiculturalism in action, where the museum's Western-scientific-enlightenment frame no longer imposes itself upon the artefacts as the only valid approach, but retreats in favour of the source community's own practices and beliefs.

It is impossible to ignore the good intentions that underlie this self-critical move made by the museum, and it is necessary to welcome the larger political changes that make these repatriations possible because they mark the end of a chapter in a shameful history. However, as the indigenous rights of return become an established

paradigm that is cited and sought to be replicated elsewhere, it is necessary to pause and to reassess its implications. I want to suggest that this is not a formula that is equally applicable everywhere, and that every attempt to respect communities of origin by allowing them to reframe objects on their terms is not always a good thing.

The first dissatisfaction one might register against this model of repatriation could be this: one could argue that the returns of symbolic capital to indigenous peoples act as a screen against the things that are not returned and reparations that are not made. As the repatriation of human remains, rattles and masks fills us with the sense of having done 'right' by the natives, we have to ask how it is that the field of culture has come to be this comforting area of symbolic actions that can exempt us from ethical action on other, more economically critical planes, such as the return of mineral rights, or indeed of the land itself.

A second dissatisfaction arises when we realize that museums have begun repatriating objects to indigenous communities who are citizens of their own countries, while continuing to ignore the calls to repatriate similarly sacred or significant objects to groups belonging to other nations. Those who follow the debates on repatriation would know that few groups are more vocal about these matters than the Greeks and the Nigerians and Beninese, but no Western museum with significant collections of their contested artefacts accepts the call to repatriate these things to other countries, even as they accept the moral necessity of repatriating items to their own minorities.

But, more crucially, I believe that these acts are made when they can safely function as gestures; when the community who is making demands, and whose demands are being met, is a relatively small one, with little influence on the power structure. To see this clearly, let us consider what happens when we apply the logic of these returns in cases when the 'community of origin' is not a small minority that has little place in the power structure, but is a powerful group that can do real damage to those who do not belong to it. In such cases, it is instructive to see how the principle applies.

A country like India offers good ground to study the implications of such 'deep multiculturalism'. Its complex society seethes with different interest groups, where minorities and majorities both use the language of identity politics and the performance of victimhood to jockey for visibility, power, or political consolidation. Here more than in most places, it is possible to see the cynical uses of religious revivalisms and invocations of hurt feelings to enact what become offenses in the public realm. It is here that the third and final story of this paper occurs. It is a story that relates to my own community, that of the Sikhs.

Sikhism is recognized as the fourth-largest religion in India, accounting for 2% of the population. It is also one of the youngest religions, having started in the 16th century as a sect that followed a lineage of gurus or spiritual leaders. In the early 18th century, when the tenth and last guru of the Sikhs lay dying, his followers asked who would succeed him. '*Guru maniyo Granth*', he is reported to have said: 'Let the

Book be your Guru.' He probably intended that his Sikhs (literally 'pupils') should be guided by the writings of the previous Gurus that had been compiled in a book. But Sikhs took him for his word both figuratively and literally. While most Sikhs read the book, they also call it the 'Guru Granth Sahib', where 'Guru' means 'spiritual leader', 'Granth' means 'book' and 'Sahib' means 'Lord.' Sikhs treat the book as a living entity, and have evolved a code of conduct that cares for the physical needs of their guru, in ways that resemble Hindus' treatment of consecrated idols in their shrines. The book is enthroned in the gurudwara, or Sikh temple, and nobody is allowed to use a seat that is higher than the Granth's own. All who enter its presence must be barefoot and must cover their heads. When the Granth is open an attendant should wave a flywhisk over it, just as whisks were used to fan rulers of olden days. Ritual food is offered to the book first, before being distributed to the congregation. Diurnal rites require that the book be woken in the morning by being ceremonially opened and draped in fresh cloths, and be put to rest at night by being shut and swaddled. In some gurudwaras, the book rests in a separate bedchamber at night, to and from which it is carried in procession. The book's dress is splendid. In the domestic shrine in my home, our book would wear thin muslins in summer and thick woollen clothes that my mother had knitted for it in winter. When the book becomes old and tattered, it is given a respectful funeral, which involves a seven-day ritual of first bathing, then dressing and then cremating the book with, finally, a ritual scattering of its ashes.



Figure 20. Gurudwara Sisganj Sahib in Delhi, showing the throne platform on which the holy book or Guru Granth Sahib is kept. Wikimedia Creative Commons licence By Hari Singh from Ilford, Essex, UK (IMG_4662) [CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Given this traditional method of treating the Guru Granth Sahib, old manuscripts or early print copies of the book are hard to come by. A scholar in the city of Chandigarh amassed a rare collection of manuscripts by persuading various Sikh temples that the Sikh cause would be better served by preserving rather than destroying these books. In 1999, he gifted his collection to the Chandigarh museum, where our story will unfold.

The Chandigarh Museum proudly displayed its collection of Granths in the Manuscripts gallery. Some years passed without event, until 2003, when a local politician who was standing for election to a powerful Sikh committee burst into the museum – with attendant members of the press – and

insisted that the museum's treatment of the Sikh holy book was sacrilegious. In gurudwaras, he said, the books were clothed and handled with reverence and only opened at religiously appropriate times. Here in the museum they were naked, propped open, laid bare to anybody's eyes. No dress code was applied to the visitors to the museum, whereas the gurudwaras followed a strict *rahit maryada*, or code of conduct, for the handling of these books.



Figure 21. Manuscripts Gallery, Government Art Museum and Gallery, Chandigarh. Photo by kind courtesy of Tulay Atak.

The Sikhs are a majority in the province of Punjab where these events took place, and the government in power at the time was a Sikh right-wing party. Moreover, in the 1980s and 90's the region had been wracked by the Khalistani separatist movement, which had sought to establish an independent Sikh nation. The Khalistan movement was a

violent campaign that was violently put down, but memories of its turbulence were still fresh in everybody's minds. So when the protesting politician led supporters on a march to the museum, the museum authorities chose not to take any chances. They called in a priest who ritually shut the manuscripts and swaddled them in cloths, putting these museum objects in the same position as sleeping Guru Granth Sahibs in gurudwaras.

Predictably enough, a few weeks later, representatives from the local Muslim community came to the museum and *they* objected. Why were the Sikh books being given this privilege, they asked, when their holy books, the Quran, were lying propped open in the museum's glass cases? The museum now shut the Qurans and wrapped them in cloth. Now, before visitors enter the Manuscripts Gallery in the Chandigarh Museum, a noticeboard instructs them to take off their shoes and to cover their heads, as they would do before entering a temple or a mosque. Once inside the gallery, they walk past case after case in which all the exhibits are in plain sight, hidden from view.

What we see in Chandigarh's Manuscripts Gallery is not a physical repatriation that effects a removal from the museum and into the hands of the community. Instead we see another related phenomenon familiar to us from the intersection of museums with indigenous peoples. When objects of indigenous heritage cannot be de-accessioned from the museum, but the museum still wishes to respect the community's beliefs about the objects, it asks community elders to advise on the proper way to handle



Figures 22, 23. The Guru Granth and Quran manuscripts lying wrapped up in the manuscripts gallery, Chandigarh. Photo by kind courtesy of Tulay Atak.

and treat the artefacts. The discord that can result from this attempt to conjoin two different modes of engagement was vividly illustrated when a Plains Indians group asked the Canadian Museum of Civilizations in Ottawa to ensure that menstruating women not handle certain artefacts. For the museum this became 'a requirement virtually impossible to meet under the contemporary guidelines of gender equity and protection of privacy'.⁵¹ Indeed, one is forced to consider what one is to do in such a situation, and whose rights are under threat.

What was it that happened in the Chandigarh museum, when the holy books were removed from the sight of unbelievers? Members of the Sikh community were demanding that their holy book in the museum should be treated just like their holy book in their temple. The grounds on which the manuscripts were made not invisible but un-visible within these galleries, was their continuing holiness. These were sacred books, and it was inappropriate to see them framed in any way that was not defined by their sacrality. The object's sacredness had become a sticky substance that could never be sloughed off.

In a number of controversies that have arisen in India regarding objects of religious inspiration which now live on as works of art in museums, scholars have pointed out to protestors that for most traditional religions sacredness is a quality that must be installed and maintained within the object – say the icon – and that objects not under worship, or damaged objects, or incomplete ones are traditionally not held to be sacred anymore;⁵² that most traditions have their

own modes of deconsecrating objects, of declaring the end of an object's ritual life – but this cuts little ice. For in this new form of politicized religiosity, tradition is not followed but is used in order to create disturbance based on a claim of hurt feelings.

In an essay titled the 'Joys and Perils of Victimhood', Ian Buruma offers a scathing analysis of this recourse to feeling in the politics of our age. He says:

'Historiography is less and less a matter of finding out how things really were, or trying to explain how things happened. For not only is historical truth irrelevant, but it has become a common assumption that there is no such thing. Everything is subjective, or a sociopolitical construct. So we study memory, that is to say, history as it is felt, especially by its victims. By sharing the pain of others, we learn to understand their feelings, and get in touch with our own.'⁵³

Buruma asks us to examine the consequences of this granting primacy of feeling over fact: where does it lead us? To me, the image of a swaddled book in a glass case succinctly sums up the battle between two regimes. Here is the glass case, constructed to allow unimpeded visual access but barring the visitor's touch; here is the swaddling cloth that hides the object but whose softness invites the fingers to caress. This is Objective versus Subjective, Science versus Faith, Analysis versus Devotion.

The world of museums and glass cases and historical study is the disenchanted world that turns sacred icons into sculptures and holy books into historical manuscripts. This disenchantment was being rejected by a group of Sikhs. But, I would argue, disenchantment weaves its own magic. When it makes the idol a sculpture, or the holy book a manuscript, it lifts them out of particular religious contexts and makes them available to us all. It allows a Hindu object, or an Islamic one, to be my heritage, even though I am a Sikh, as it brings me to an appreciation of the object through a common ground of art, skill, and historical interest that allows me and my Hindu neighbour to have an equal stake in it. It sets us upon a common ground, defined by our common humanity, and framed by an assumption of our equality as human beings. This is a foundational assumption on which our ideas of human rights are based.

Conversely, the re-enchantment of objects – re-investing them with special, magical, spiritual and religious powers for their community of origin – is also a means of shutting out others from access to it. And all too often, this symbolic closing of a book can lead to a literal closing of the books. In the past ten years, as Sikh identity politics has intensified, scholars who study Sikhism and Sikh history have come under intense pressure from the community which wants to monitor their research.. Harjot Singh Oberoi, who had the Chair for Sikh Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, wrote an acclaimed book called the *Construction of Religious Boundaries* (OUP, 1996). It showed how certain community leaders helped to shape a distinct Sikh identity in the early 20th century. Because

Oberoi's book demonstrated that Sikh identity evolved recently in the 20th century, and was not always already a pure structure in the past, he faced intense pressure from the Sikh community and eventually had to resign his chair. Another scholar, Pashaura Singh of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, published a book on the history of the Granth, studying different recensions and showing how the authoritative version evolved.⁵⁴ He was labelled a heretic and excommunicated by the high priests of the religion; he and his family received death threats, and when he was hired to a position at University of California Riverside, in 2008, busloads of Sikhs arrived at the campus to protest his appointment.⁵⁵



Figure 24. Sikh groups protesting at University of California, Riverside, against the appointment of Pashaura Singh. September 28, 2008. Photo: NRIPress.com

From these cases it becomes clear that one does not need to be an outsider to be treated as one by the community. When Sikh scholars take an approach that is scholarly and historical, they *become* outsiders and their right to study the religious objects is contested. For the protestors, the religious object is an object of faith, not an object of historical inquiry.

I have taken a Sikh example, but this kind of fractiousness is seen endlessly in contemporary India. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, upper castes, lower castes: all seem engaged in a competitive offense-taking, in a contest where the one who protests loudest about the largest number of things that hurt his or her feelings will have made the strongest claim for definition and leadership of his community. In Britain, multiculturalism evolved in response to the need for a more inclusive society. But the adoption of the norms and rhetoric of multiculturalism by this Sikh group shows how it can also be a tool for exclusion and division. The assertion that the communities of origin alone have the right to govern over and to determine discourse about all objects that flow from their traditions is a fundamentalist one. And although this is an act that presented itself as traditional, it is important to note that it is in fact a profoundly contemporary act. It takes recourse to tradition in order to shore up political power in an era of identity politics. It refuses to submit to the museum's taxonomies in order to demonstrate a community's power to claim exceptional status. And if the museum objects went off view as a result, let us not forget that the act of protest was performed for the media eye, making the 'disappearance' of the object itself a hypervisible event.

V Epilogue

Each story I have related in this paper shows two different constituencies locked in argument over the proper treatment of historic artefacts. In Bangladesh, protestors saw themselves as patriots, protecting national treasures from the presumed depredations of French museums. In Afghanistan, the Taliban interpreted the Buddha statues as idolatrous, refusing to see them as artworks of world heritage and ordering their destruction as a religious duty in response to international isolation imposed by the West. In India, representatives of a religious minority contested the museum's right to frame their sacred book as a historical manuscript and insisted that it only be perceived within a ritually prescribed frame.

At first, each of these incidents seemed to rehearse clashes between familiar antagonists: patriots versus internationalists, traditionalists versus modernizers, minority communities versus majoritarian states. But as we examined the micropolitics of each case, each instance revealed itself as something more, and something other than the stereotypes through which we first sought to understand it. In the case of Bangladesh,

we found that protestors railed against the Western museum because in their difficult political circumstances, this was the only target they could safely attack. In the incident in Afghanistan, the roar of what we heard – the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas – was designed to drown out the cries of the Hazara genocide that were hidden from the international community. And in India, leaders from a minority group ensured that the media was in attendance as they protested against the de-sacralisation of their objects; their real intention being to create a sensation, gain publicity and garner political gains.

I offer these tales as a caution against our good intentions that make us speak up for what we see as the minority and the disenfranchised. We speak up for ethnic minorities against powerful majorities, for religious communities against powerful states, for their traditional values against a de-sacralising national or international heritage regime. But let our good intentions not blind us to the fact that many traditional communities are traditionally patriarchal, casteist, xenophobic or discriminatory; many postcolonial polities are brutal and corrupt. They are not just victims of history but capable of terrible victimization as well. In these tales, what appeared to be a series of contestations between East and West, the powerful and the weak, sacred and secular, turned out to be embedded in a complex local politics. On closer examination, each of these clashes began to appear as not just an episode in the fraught relationship between East and West, but also as an instance where the *trope* of East and West was mobilised by one faction against another within the East.

In all of these instances, the realm of museums and ‘world heritage’ became the target as a domain that uprooted ‘culture’ from its traditional moorings and local constituencies. But historically, this dislocation has not been a curse; rather, it has been the source of the museum’s radical potency. After all, the museum was born out of a utopian gesture of redistribution, where precious things that had belonged to a few became available to all. This redistribution was possible only through dislocation, by changing the terms on which precious artefacts were to be seen, or to whom they legitimately ‘belonged’.

Today, the museum stands for a universalism that has been discredited in the wake of multiculturalism. But those who favour multiculturalism are caught in a dilemma as the formerly disenfranchised minority groups use their growing power to publicly assert their right to practice the less palatable aspects of their ‘culture’. As we grope our way through this ethical minefield, we find our universalism itself relativized: rather than being a Universal, universalism too has become a particular; it is one cultural formation and one creed, espoused by a trans-national community that dreams (in its own ways) of human rights, egalitarianism, and democracy.

Against today’s resurgent tribalism, what do we have but our unfashionable and battered universalism, which at least allows us to imagine that we are equals under the sun? And what is the museum but a small, fragile and increasingly embattled enclave for the performance of our secularism, our rights of equal access, our equality in the eyes of the law?

In a multicultural world of shifting perspectives and relative values, let us fight, then, for a corner in which we can keep hold of our shared enlightenment.

About the Author

Kavita Singh (b. 1964, Calcutta) studied Art History in India and the USA, and has held the position of Associate Professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, since 2002 and turned Professor in 2015. Her specialties are Indian miniature painting and the theory of museums and art institutions, focusing on themes like globalization, nationalism, minorities, and the return of heritage objects to their original contexts. Of particular interest to her is the tension between globalism and universalism on the one hand and local cultures on the other. Professor Singh has extensively published on this topic, as well as on Asian, Sikh and Indian art, both historical and contemporary, while also working as a guest curator in India and the USA (San Diego, New York) and giving lectures across the world (the UK, Hong Kong, continental Europe, Asia, North America, Middle East). Since 2009, she has been a partner with the Kunsthistorisches Institut of the Max Planck Society in Florence, Italy.



Endnotes

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