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Three National Museums: The Musealization of Partition and its Memories in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article investigates how the national museums of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh represent and musealize the memory of Partition within the broader frameworks of state-building and identity formation. Through close examination of galleries, exhibitions, and curatorial narratives, it shows how each institution constructs selective versions of national history. The Indian National Museum foregrounds civilizational antiquity while omitting Partition and the Independence Movement. The National Museum of Pakistan emphasizes Islamic identity and mythologizes political leaders, offering only fragmented engagement with Partition's violence. In contrast, the Bangladesh National Museum highlights the 1971 Liberation War, relegating the 1947 Partition to the margins. Situating these practices within postcolonial politics, the study argues that the attainment of independence—through protracted movements in India and Pakistan, and through a nine-month war in Bangladesh—has overshadowed Partition in official narratives. Ultimately, it demonstrates that national museums function as political sites where memory is shaped through presence, absence, and silences.

Keywords

Partition of India (1947), National Museums, Musealization, Memory Politics, State-Nation-Building

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In the immediate aftermath of Partition, the two newly created nation-states—India and Pakistan—moved quickly to establish their own national museums. At the time, neither country had such an institution. Pakistan inaugurated its National Museum in Karachi in April 1950, shortly after the opening of the National Museum of India in Delhi on August 15, 1949, coinciding with the country's second Independence Day. The rush to inaugurate a national museum was not merely a cultural initiative but part of a broader political strategy. Kavita Singh observes "by making national museums these new nation-states were able to demonstrate their ability to define and to care for their patrimony" (Singh 2015, 107). For India and Pakistan, this act was directed not only toward the former colonial power but, more pointedly, toward each other. The implicit rivalry and political maneuvering embedded in this process can be better understood through an examination of two contemporary letters that illustrate these dynamics.

The first letter, dated July 27, 1949, was written by Dr. Tara Chand, Secretary of the Education Ministry, to Colonel Chatterjee, Military Secretary to the Governor-General of India. Chand writes:

> We saw from the newspapers that the Government of Pakistan have already placed at the disposal of their National Museum a large and good building and that their National Museum is expected to come into being on the 15th of August 1949. We have a much larger number of exhibits than the Government of Pakistan, and it is a matter of some pride to us that our museum also should open from the date not later than theirs. (mentioned by Singh, "A New Museum for a New Nation")

Chand's letter highlights the urgency of inaugurating the National Museum of India and a sense of pride in possessing a larger collection of exhibits than Pakistan.

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Illustration 1: Frere Hall, Karachi
This building was completed in 1865, made by the British. Initially designed to serve as Karachi's town hall, it now functions as an exhibition space and public library.

The second letter, dated April 1950, was written by the British archeologist R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, who served as the Director-General of the Archeological Survey of India from 1944 to 1948. After Partition, the newly formed state of Pakistan engaged Wheeler to establish a Department of Archeology, and he played a key role in founding the National Museum in Karachi (Venkateswaran). Wheeler also played a central role in negotiating the division of archeological and historical artifacts between India and Pakistan. He was present at

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the inauguration of the National Museum of Pakistan at the historic Frere Hall in Karachi on April 17, 1950. Reflecting on the event, Wheeler writes:

> The formal opening of the National Museum […] was a successful function […] The Governor-General, flanked by his Cabinet, made an imposing array on the platform, and in the body of the hall an abundance of flowers and the Corps Diplomatique concealed the scarcity of exhibits. (mentioned by Singh, "A New Museum for a New Nation")

These two letters are particularly significant as they reveal the urgency with which the newly independent states sought to establish their national museums, each facing contrasting challenges. Pakistan converted the Frere Hall (see Illustration 1) into its National Museum shortly after its emergence as a nation, despite facing a "scarcity of exhibits." India, by contrast, had an abundance of objects but lacked the infrastructure to inaugurate its national museum. Consequently, India responded to the lack of exhibition space by transforming a few rooms of the Viceroy's House into a makeshift National Museum.

After gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh—the youngest country in South Asia—designated a colonial-era museum as its National Museum. This brief discussion around the inauguration of national museums reveal that their establishment was not merely a cultural gesture, but a profoundly political act. National museums provided newly independent states a space for self-portrayal and allowed nations to calibrate their power in the post-colonial era. Partha Chatterjee observes, "this mode of recalling the past, the power to represent oneself is nothing other than political power itself" (Chatterjee 1993, 76). From this

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perspective, national museums emerge as political spaces where nations selectively remember and exhibit fragments of the past.

This paper aims to examine how the national museums of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh represent the memory of Partition. It situates these representations within the broader context of state-building and identity formation in each of the three Partition-affected countries. By closely looking at these museums' displays, galleries, and curatorial narratives, this paper addresses two sets of questions. Firstly, how were these museums established as national institutions in their respective countries, and in what ways do they portray the nation and its past by foregrounding the key historical moments? Secondly—and most central to this study—how is Partition narrated within these museums? Where the event is absent or marginalized, this text investigates the underlying politics that account for such omissions.

Indian National Museum,[1] Delhi

The conception and planning of this National Museum began during the colonial era, prior to India's independence. The establishment of this museum is closely linked to the relocation of the capital from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Delhi in 1911 under British rule. In the proposal for the administrative center of India in Delhi, city planner and architect Edwin L. Lutyens envisioned a set of museums for the new colonial capital. At the heart of the Central Vista, at the intersection of two main avenues, Lutyens proposed a comprehensive knowledge complex. This plan included the Imperial Record Offic*e*, a Medical Research Center/Museum,

[1] This section draws on fieldwork conducted at the museum in January–February 2023.

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an Ethnological Museum, and a Central National Museum. The colonial administration imagined this museum as New Delhi's Central National Museum of Art, Archeology, and Anthropology (Singh 2015, 107-31). However, the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent economic crisis delayed the project. Of Lutyens's original plan, only the Imperial Record Office—now the National Archives—was realized during his lifetime, opening in 1926.

In 1944, following the Second World War, the colonial administration formed a committee to establish the museum, chaired by R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, then Director General of Archaeology (mentioned earlier in this text). Wheeler issued an order to archeological museums across India, instructing them to send exhibits from their collections to Delhi for inclusion in the proposed Central National Museum. This call received significant responses. Museums from various regions, including those in what was then western India, contributed a significant number of artifacts. Prominent contributions came from museums in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Karachi, Lahore, and Taxila, which sent a selection of their objects to Delhi. These included artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization, a region that would later become part of Pakistan. Among the significant pieces, the Lahore Museum sent the *Dancing Girl*—one of the most celebrated artifacts of the Indian National Museum's exhibits—and the Priest-King, which is now housed in the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi. These objects, however, remained packed in wooden boxes in Delhi for a prolonged period.

The committee ultimately did not succeed in establishing the Central National Museum in Delhi as originally planned. However, it managed to accumulate a few thousand artifacts from across India. The National Museum in the Central Vista area was eventually founded nearly forty years later—not by the colonial administration, but by the newly independent Indian state. This raises a critical question: why did the newly sovereign state of India adopt a

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colonial plan for a museum in the postcolonial political and social realities? Singh argues that "by such accidents" this institution came into being (Singh 2015, 128). One of these accidents of history was the accumulation of artifacts in the capital, as noted above; others were directly linked to the Partition and one particular event that took place in London.

Three months after Independence in 1947, the Royal Academy of Arts in London organized a landmark exhibition titled *The Arts of India and Pakistan* at Burlington House. This event was significant for two reasons. First, it marked a shift in recognizing artifacts from the Indian subcontinent as fine art rather than antiquities (Singh 2015, 124). Second, its timing coincided with the Partition. A conservative, Eurocentric, and prestigious institution, curated the exhibition to showcase objects from India and Pakistan as fine art. Under the glare of the post-Partition political climate, the organizers of the exhibition took great care to ensure that it conveyed a politically appropriate message (Singh). The director of the Victoria and Albert Museum at the time, Leigh Ashton, viewed the exhibition as an exercise in cultural diplomacy. He remarked that, "well done, this show could 'make a great contribution in linking up Britain and India', but poorly done, it could worsen relations between the two countries" (Ashton cited by Singh 2015, 124–25). Both countries, India and Britain, employed their governmental institutions to ensure the exhibition's success. However, Pakistan's response and contribution to the exhibition remain largely unknown. The exhibition's *Commemorative Catalogue* acknowledges that "the generosity of the two Governments concerned and of the many private collectors and museums who agreed to lend enabled the Committee to secure a standard far higher than would otherwise have been possible" (Ashton 1948, XI). The list of exhibits clearly shows that many artifacts were borrowed from museums located in Pakistan.

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The Burlington House exhibition showcased over 1,500 objects drawn from various museums and private collections across India and Pakistan. The exhibition featured a diverse array of objects, including the 4th-century Ashoka pillar, large Yaksha sculptures from the Sung period, Gupta-period sculptures, and figurative works from Orissa and Khajuraho. According to the exhibition catalogue, many of these large sculptures were traveling outside India for the first time (Ashton). The exhibition also included Mughal miniatures and Deccan paintings. To provide a comprehensive view of Indian art, the organizers incorporated examples of contemporary art, including paintings by Amrita Sher-Gil, Zainul Abedin, and N.S. Bendre. Singh mentions that the inclusion of modern art was not initiated by the British organizers but was advocated by the Indian representative. The exhibition, however received only "mild approval from the critics" and attracted limited public interest (Singh 2015, 126). Following the exhibition, the British Government returned the loaned objects to their respective museums and private collectors in India. Tapati Guha-Thakurta interprets the exhibition as having dual significance. On the one hand, it marked the culmination of efforts to nationalize and institutionalize Indian art—a process that had begun in the early 20th century—through a new canonical framework shaped by selective historical accounts and curated collections. On the other hand, it contributed to the conceptualization of a national museum in New Delhi, envisioned as a centralized space to display the best and most representative artworks from across the country. Indian art, once shaped by colonial tutelage and framed by discourses of orientalism and nationalism, now emerged as a focal point for the newly independent nation-state (Guha-Thakurta 2004, 175–76).

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Upon the return of the extensive collection of exhibits from London,[2] Prime Minister Nehru remarked that "it would be a pity to disperse this collection" without allowing the Indian public to see these objects for the first time (cited by Singh 2015, 126). In response, the state mobilized its bureaucratic apparatus to organize a large-scale exhibition featuring the artifacts returned from London, and selected the President's House (formerly the Viceroy's House) as the venue. At the time, Delhi lacked any other gallery or museum capable of accommodating such an exhibition. Beyond logistic necessity, the choice carried powerful symbolic meaning. Following the end of colonial rule, the newly established postcolonial state invited its citizens into the president's residence, one of its most prominent government establishments, through this exhibition. The very house that had once embodied colonial authority now welcomed the public to engage with the cultural heritage of the nation. This gesture can be interpreted as a deliberate effort by the Indian state to assert its democratic ethos, foster a sense of national identity and collective belonging.

The Indian quasi-replication of the Burlington House exhibition in Delhi, hosted at the President's House, was titled *Masterpieces of Indian Art*. The capital recreated the London exhibition with some notable exclusions—most significantly, it ommited landscape paintings by European traveler-artists and works by contemporary Indian artists. Instead, the focus was exclusively on India's historical past, featuring artifacts spanning over five thousand years. This exhibition opened on November 6, 1948, and continued until December 31, 1948, attracting a large number of visitors. Nehru expressed interest in keeping the collection in Delhi. Accordingly, "the Ministry of Education chose to retain this exhibition and make it the

[2] Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2004) and Kavita Singh (2015) investigated this exhibition's politics and its impact in India. But studies on the Pakistan side are not available, therefore we do not know how Pakistan responded to this exhibition.

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core of a new National Museum" (Singh 2015, 127). This collection of artifacts ultimately became the nucleus of the National Museum of India: "through the simple act of renaming, the temporary exhibition in the Rashtrapati Bhavan became the National Museum of India!" (Singh 2015, 127).

Subsequently, the newly formed National Museum was relocated to its designated site, as envisioned in Lutyens's original plan, officially moved to its current premises in December 1960. At that time, the state sought international expertise to manage the museum. Grace McCann Morley, an American modernist and former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (from 1935 to 1958), was appointed as the director of country's national museum.

The discussion so far illustrates that the colonial framework profoundly shaped the National Museum of India—its original conception, site, collection development, and the intellectual meanings attached to it (Phillips 2007, 95). This raises several critical questions: within this inherited framework, how did independent India construct its national narrative and memory? What elements constitute the nation's memory within the museum's display? What are the crucial points of the museum's narrative? And, most importantly, where—and in what manner—is Partition positioned within this narrative?

The Indian National Museum comprises more than twenty galleries and presently houses around 200,000 objects (*The National Museum Website*). Including sculptures, paintings, coins, decorative arts, textiles, arms and armor, manuscripts, and anthropological objects. The museum opens with the Harappan Gallery, featuring an extensive collection from the Indus Valley Civilization, located in present-day Pakistan. The most prominent artifact in this gallery is the *Dancing Girl*, excavated from Mohenjodaro, a major Harappan site in

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Pakistan's Sindh Province. Subsequent galleries present objects from the Mauryan, Shunga, and Satavahana periods (Mauryan Gallery); Gandhara sculptures from the Kushana period (Kushan Gallery); Gupta Dynasty sculptures (Gupta Gallery); Jaina Tirthankaras' sculptures (Medieval Arts Gallery); Mughal miniature paintings (Miniature Painting Gallery); Tanjore and Mysore style paintings (Tanjore and Mysore Painting Gallery); and coins from the Gupta Dynasty (Coins Gallery). A large portion of the second floor is dedicated to the Virtual Experiential Museum on Ajanta, a digital gallery allowing visitors to explore the Ajanta Caves through virtual technology.

The Indian National Museum exhibits artifacts spanning the last five thousand years, drawn not only from present-day India but also from the broader geographical region, including areas that are now Pakistan and Bangladesh. In addition to this historical range, the museum features tribal art and crafts from India's North-East region, as well as Buddhist art, and relics of Buddha from Piprahwa, Uttar Pradesh. Its vast collection also extends beyond national and regional boundaries, incorporating objects from Central Asia, pre-Colombian cultures, and Western art traditions.

At the Indian National Museum, the national narrative is constructed through the integration of archaeology, art, and anthropology into a glorifying account of the nation. However, the museum does not display any objects, photographs, or narratives related to the Indian Independence Movement or its leaders. The end of colonial rule and the Partition of the subcontinent are entirely absent from the museal display. From this perspective, the museum frames national memory primarily around the antiquity of the region, presenting India as eternal which's spatial and geographical entity existed well before colonial times. In this narrative, the struggle for independence, the conclusion of colonial governance, and even the

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momentous event of Partition are excluded as formative forces, suggesting that India's identity is rooted in its ancient past rather than in the transformative events of the twentieth century.

The Indian National Museum in Delhi conveys the notion that India has always existed. Over this vast span of time, however, this region has undergone significant transformations: its borders have been reshaped multiple times, and it has experienced many dynasties and rulers. The independence and Partition of 1947 marked the emergence of the modern state of India. However, in the national museum's interpretation, India is portrayed as historically continuous. Colonial rule and the Partition did not disrupt the perpetuity of India's existence—perhaps explaining why independence and Partition are blotted out. In this framing, the notion of India came into appearance, rather than reflecting the historical emergence of the present-day nation-state of India.

National Museum of Pakistan,[3] Karachi

The National Museum of Pakistan initially opened its doors to the public in Frere Hall in April 1950, as noted earlier in this text. However, Frere Hall lacked sufficient space to accommodate the museum's expanding collection. In March 1958, the Education Advisor and Joint Secretary to the Government of Pakistan proposed establishing a new site for the National Museum (Qasmi, *Qaum, Mulk, Sultanat: Citizenship and National Belonging in Pakistan*). In response, the Director of Archaeology, F. A. Khan developed a comprehensive proposal outlining not only the architectural requirements for a national museum but also concepts for curating the national narrative, designing galleries, and enhancing the museum's educational

[3] Fieldwork at this museum was conducted in December 2023, and the following discussion draws on observations from that period.

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role. Khan emphasized, "the National Museum of the Islamic Republic should be one of the richest of the world in this field. It should be representative not only of all the Muslim periods in the Sub-continent—so rich in cultural and artistic achievements—but also of all the particular Muslim cultures in the rest of the world" (cited by Ibid, 338). In 1960, President Ayub Khan commissioned the construction of a new museum building, designed by Italian architect Alfredo Kotzian. The structure was completed in 1970 and oficially inaugurated by President Yahya Khan that same year.

The provincial capital of Sindh, Karachi, was profoundly transformed by Partition. The massive influx of migrants dramatically changed the city's demographic composition, the population "expanded from about 400,000 in 1947 to over 1.3 million in 1953, placing a huge strain on the life of the city" (Ansari 1994, 153). Most of the refugees arriving in Karachi were Urdu-speaking; these migrants, who settled in Sindh, came to be known as Muhajir.

The museum flyer announces: "as it [the museum] portrays the various phases of cultural evolution in Pakistan and represents all the regions of the country, it may well boast of being the 'show[case] window of the nation.'"[4] In line with this vision, the museum comprises ten galleries that present the country's heritage in a chronological sequence. These galleries include: (i) Pre-Historic Gallery, (ii) Proto Historic Gallery, (iii) Post Harrapan Gallery, (iv) Gandhara Gallery and Hindu Sculptures, (v) Quran Gallery, (vi) Coins Gallery, (vii) Freedom Movement Gallery, (viii) Ethnological Gallery, (ix) Islamic Art, and (x) Manuscript Gallery.

[4] The flyer was collected from the museum in December 2023 and does not provide a publishing date.

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To understand the museum's framing of national memory, it is first necessary to revisit the historical context that shaped the very conception of Pakistan as a state. As Qasmi observes, "[t]he demand for the creation of Pakistan was based on a historical narrative built around the centrality of the Muslim community in India and its distinctiveness in terms of religious beliefs, cultural traits, and historical tradition" (Qasmi 2019, 1). Significantly, among the three countries discussed in this study, Pakistan is the only *Islāmī Jumhūriyah* or Islamic Republic. Qasmi identifies three critical turning points in the conceptualization of Pakistan as a state: (i) a distinct religious belief, Islam, which is separate from the other dominant religions of the region, namely Hinduism and Buddhism; (ii) a historical tradition that predates Islam and carries an antiquity of thousands of years; and (iii) a shared cultural fabric, which encompasses diverse customs and languages under the national umbrella of Pakistan. Together, these elements underpin the vision of a unified national community. The first four galleries of the museum emphasize the antiquity of the land that now constitutes Pakistan, while other four illustrate a distinct Muslim historical tradition. The Ethnological Gallery showcases the cultural diversity of Pakistan's people, and the Freedom Movement Gallery focuses on the creation of

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the state.

Illustration 2: The Priest-King, Pakistan National Museum, Karachi
This 17.5 cm X 11 cm male bust sculpture is one of the most celebrated exhibits of the museum. This one is dated (around) to 2000-1900 BCE. *Photograph by the author, December 2023*

The museum opens with the Pre-Historic Gallery, featuring a two-million-year-old axe from Riwat in the Rawalpindi district. accompanying text says, “the primitive stone axe is the oldest tool discovered not only in Pakistan but also in Asia,” emphasizing the deep antiquity of the region—an antiquity that predates the formation of the Pakistani state by millennia. The display further mentions, “it is the oldest dated evidence for the presence of man in Pakistan.” Other relics unearthed in the Sukkur and Rohri districts further highlight this ancient past. The

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gallery also displays Harappan pottery, terracotta toys, and stone and shell jewelry from the Indus Civilization.

The Proto Historic Gallery presents a wide collection of objects from Harappa and Moenjo-Daro, including burnt clay male and female figurines, jewelry, terracotta toys, seals, faience and shell objects, copper and bronze items, chessboards, other indoor recreational games, and a variety of pottery. At its center is the iconic *Priest-King* (see Illustration 2), one of the museum's most celebrated artifacts. The information panel notes: "one of the most delicate products of Harappan artistry is that now 17.5 cm high steatite bust of the so-called 'Priest-King'. Although this designation of the obviously high-ranking subject cannot be verified, particular details of the sculpted representation indicate that the figure possesses a certain ideological importance."

The bust sculpture known as the 'Priest-King' is deeply intertwined with the history of Partition and the British administration's early plan to establish a national museum in Delhi. As noted earlier, Mortimer Wheeler, then Director General of the Archaeological Department, instructed museums across India to send their finest relics to Delhi, leading the Lahore Museum to contribute both the Priest-King and the Dancing Girl. Although the national museum project in Delhi did not immediately materialize, these objects, along with others, remained there. In 1972, the Priest-King was repatriated to Pakistan as part of the provision outlined in the Shimla Agreement (Awan). Under this agreement, Pakistan demanded the return of both the Dancing Girl and the Priest-King. India agreed to return one artifact, and ultimately, Pakistan chose the Priest-King. Yet, the National Museum of Pakistan does not acknowledge this episode in its display, leaving the repatriation of this iconic artifact absent from its narrative.

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The Post Harappan Gallery houses archaeological relics, pottery, and ornaments from Taxila. Next to it, the Gandhara Gallery occupies a central space on the first floor, showcasing Buddhist sculptures and relics from the Peshawar Valley. The ancient region of Gandhara encompassed the Valley of Peshawar and the surrounding hilly areas of Swat, Buner, Dir, and Bajaur. Renowned as one of the earliest centers of Buddhist religion and culture, Gandhara flourished under the patronage of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka during the 3rd century BCE. A connected room adjacent to the Gandhara Gallery features a selection of Hindu sculptures. However, the display provides no contextual information about their origins or periods, leaving their historical significance unaddressed.

The museum's first four galleries highlight Pakistan's deep antiquity by showcasing evidence of early human presence and cultural development. Andrew Amstutz notes that "Pakistani museum exhibits often framed Buddhism as an anti-Hindu force that marked the territories of Pakistan as having been distinct from India from before the arrival of Islam" (2019, 238). This perspective contributes to the museums' tendency to sideline the Hindu past in its narrative. The Gandhara Gallery exemplifies this tendency: it displays a wide range of Buddhist sculptures, relics, and inscriptions from the Gandhara region, each carefully annotated with production date, provenance, and title. In contrast, a separate section within the Gandhara Gallery, titled Hindu Sculptures, displays a selection of Hindu deities. Unlike the Gandhara artifacts, this section provides only a brief introduction to the gods and goddesses, omitting key contextual information such as provenance and dating. This absence of provenance details may lead visitors to infer that the artifacts originate from outside present-day Pakistan, thereby contributing to the erasure or marginalization of the region's Hindu heritage.

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Adjacent to the Gandhara Gallery, the Quran Gallery (Gallery Five) functions as a transitional space within the museum, marking a shift in the historical narrative of Pakistan. Renovated in 2008, the gallery features a distinctive interior that sets it apart from the other. The walls are painted in a dark gray tone, and an array of glass vitrines illuminated by spotlights showcase Qurans. These Qurans represent a range of calligraphic styles from different regions and historical periods, highlighting the richness and diversity of Islamic art. The gallery draws a line between the historical past of the land and its current identity as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan—a nation fundamentally tied to Muslim distinctiveness. From this gallery onward, the museal representation of the country's past is reframed through a distinctly Islamic lens. The subsequent galleries continue to build and reinforce a Muslim identity for the nation. At the same time, the Quran Gallery creates a clear spatiotemporal separation from the region's Buddhist and Hindu heritage.

Post-Partition (or independent) Pakistan effectively disassociated both Hindus and the colonial regime from its domestic political landscape, as the territory attained the status of a Muslim nation (Islam 1981, 55-72). Despite the country's cultural, linguistic, and tribal diversity, "Islam was employed as a means of fostering group identity to mobilize the masses in the pre [-] independence period" (Islam 1981, 56). This use of Islam as unifying force continued after Partition. Jalal observes that Pakistan, in its "desperate quest for an officially sanctioned Islamic identity, lends itself remarkably well to an examination of the nexus between power and bigotry in creative imagining of national identity" (Jalal 1995, 74). Within this broader project of nation-building, identity formation, and historical narration, the National Museum underwent a process of Islamization, becoming a site where "religion becomes much more implicit in this view" (Plate 2017, 44).

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The three other galleries in the museum are dedicated to exhibiting and accentuating the Muslim identity of the nation. The Islamic Art Gallery on the ground floor features a rich collection of artifacts. A large section of the gallery highlights the arrival of Muslim rulers in the region now known as Pakistan. Exhibits include arms and armor, inscriptions, relics from Muslim architectural sites, and illustrations, while also showcasing contributions of Muslim scholars and scientists from the Middle East and beyond. This transnational perspective reinforces a collective Muslim identity that transcends national borders. The final gallery, the Manuscript Galleryhouses an extensive collection of manuscripts, handwritten books, illustrations, and official correspondence, primarily from the periods of various Muslim rulers. Within the context of the Pakistan National Museum, Buddhism and Hinduism are situated within the domain of 'other place and other time,' aligning with the narrative of the antiquity of the country. In contrast, Islam is presented within the context of its ongoing presence, depicted as both the foundational principle of the state and source for making a transnational Muslim identity. The Ethnological Gallery (Gallery Five) is curated to encapsulate the country's cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity within the overarching framework of a Pakistani Islamic nation-state.

The seventh gallery of the museum, the Freedom Movement Gallery, holds vital significance for this paper. Situated on the first floor, this spacious gallery is designed with large windows that allow sufficient natural light and ventilation. The gallery opens with a display dedicated to Jinnah. Like any other museum in Pakistan, the presence of Jinnah is prominent and lauded in the country's national museum. The display positions Jinnah as the founder and the first Governor-General of Pakistan. The accompanying information text provides a short biography of him in English, notably without any Urdu version. The display

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showcases Jinnah's portrait and some of his personal belongings, including a photo frame he used, one of his notebooks, a pen stand, and his passport issued by the British Government, which is also displayed in a separate glass vitrine. Additionally, the gallery showcases numerous artifacts associated with him, including portraits of his family members—his daughter, wife, and sister—along with various souvenirs and letters he received from various organizations during his lifetime.

The second prominent figure featured in this museum is Allama Iqbal. Alongside a brief biography presented in English,[5] this gallery displays his books and manuscripts. Ayesha Jalal highlights the significance of Iqbal's contribution to the conceptualization of Pakistan, characterizing his vision not as a product of abstract idealism but as a strategic and contextually grounded response to prevailing political realities. While Iqbal alluded to the presence of multiple nations within India, his political aspirations were framed within the boundaries set by colonial discourse. This framework, particularly the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909, provided the necessary political conditions that enabled the articulation of Muslim nationhood within the platform of the All-India Muslim League (Jalal 2017, 75). Iqbal's perspective on Islam was distinct, as he "viewed Islam as a binding force which would integrate the Muslim community consisting of people of various ethnic and linguistic origin" (Islam 1981, 55). Despite Iqbal's foundational role in articulating a political identity for Indian Muslims, the display of his portraits and personal belongings as auratic objects falls short of providing clarity on his political imagination. The absence of the necessary contextual

[5] In this gallery, all the information boards are bilingual, presenting both Urdu and English text. However, it is worth mentioning that only the biographies of Jinnah, Iqbal, and Liaquat Ali are provided just in English.

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background limits visitors' understanding of Iqbal's contributions and the subtleties of his ideas for the Indian Muslims in colonial India.

The third central figure featured in the gallery is the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan (1947 – 1951). His display includes a photograph along with a few personal belongings, such as his wristwatch and pen. Compared to Jinnah and Iqbal, Khan is less known as a historical figure of Pakistan. Jinnah and Iqbal are iconic figures—memorialized through the naming of airports, universities, hospitals, roads, and many other institutions. However, the contributions of Jinnah and Iqbal to the nation are not clearly displayed in the national museum, possibly for various reasons.

It is likely that the museum authorities assume visitors already have sufficient knowledge about these figures. Jinnah and Iqbal have achieved an almost mythical status in Pakistan's state-nation-building narratives. By presenting some aspects of their lives and displaying their personal belongings as museal objects, the museum appears to invite visitors to use their imagination to construct the personas of these three figures—Jinnah, Iqbal, and Khan. The investment of visitors' imagination to envision these national figures perhaps enables them to mythologize these characters, and this might be very momentous for a national-memory-making scheme. At the center of the gallery stands a large table, which was used for the first cabinet meeting.

Two more documents prominently displayed in separate glass vitrines within this gallery are pages from Choudhary Rahmat Ali's pamphlet. Ali was a nationalist and was among the first to advocate for the formation of Pakistan. The first pamphlet, titled Nasaristan: The Fatherland of the Nasar Nation (1933), was published by the Pakistan National Movement in Cambridge, England. The second pamphlet, Siddiqistan and Safiistan (1933), presents

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proposed maps of the Islamic States of India. Rahmat Ali is the initiator of the word 'Pakistan,' which literally translates to 'the land of the pure.' Jalal mentions: "Rahmat Ali conceived of a wholly sovereign and separate state of Pakistan. The scheme was dismissed out of hand by most Muslim politicians, some of whom described it as chimerical and impracticable" (Jalal 75). Although Ali is included in the National Museum's narrative, the exhibit offers no context about who he was, how his ideas developed, or the eventual trajectory of his vision for Pakistan. There is also no mention of when these pamphlets were published. Two pages are on display without any contextualization, and the description of the gallery does not grant any importance to these pages. The final wall of the gallery features portraits of all the prominent leaders of Pakistan's freedom movement. However, the arrangement resembles a portrait gallery rather than a cohesive historical narrative.

Besides Iqbal's manuscripts and books, a model of the Minar-e-Pakistan monument is displayed in the gallery. This monument, located in Lahore and holds a deep symbolic significance. The accompanying information board reads: "Minar-e-Pakistan proudly represents the great success of Muslims of the subcontinent, the symbol of unity, struggle of freedom, initiated after the Pakistan Resolution was passed on March 23, 1940. The unfolded petals of white marble, with a tall minaret, reflects a perfect blend of Mughals, Islamic and modern architecture. The rostrum is built up on patterned tiles; the 8-meter-high base is comprised of four platform to symbolize the humble beginning of the freedom struggle." The panel also lists the names of the monument's designer and engineers. It explains that "the inscriptions include the text of the Lahore Resolution in Urdu, Bengali, and English, and the Delhi Resolution's text, which was passed on 9th April 1946. On different plaques, Quranic verses and 99 attributions of Allah are inscribed in Arabic calligraphy, whereas the National Anthem of Pakistan is in Urdu and Bengali, and excerpts from speeches of Muhammad Ali

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Jinnah are in Urdu, Bengali, and English, along with few couplets of Allamah Iqbal, among other important inscriptions."

This narrative introduces a significant ambiguity by falling to explain why the monument's inscription includes the text of the resolution in Bengali along with Urdu and English. In fact, the foundation stone of this memorial was laid in 1960, and it was completed in 1968. During that period, Bangladesh, former East Pakistan, was still part of Pakistan, and Bengli was one of the country's official languages. Which explains the inclusion of the resolution text in Bengali. However, the Freedom Movement Gallery does not acknowledge Pakistan's structure as a bifurcated nation with two wings. Former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was a part of Pakistan for twenty-four years, becoming an independent nation with two separate parts is totally outside of the museum display. The National Museum's narrative of Pakistan provides no acknowledgment of the shared history of East and West Pakistan.

The Freedom Movement Gallery also features four paintings. The most prominent of which is titled *In Memory of Men, Women and Children who Laid Down Their Lives in the Struggle of 1947 for the Creation of Pakistan,* painted by Jimmy F. Engineer. Measuring approximately two and a half meters wide and one meter in height, the artwork on display is a digital reproduction of the original painting, positioned at a prime spot in the gallery. Adjacent to this painting are Rahmat Ali's pamphlets in glass cases, with portraits of Jinnah and Iqbal placed on either side. Despite this arrangement, the painting appears disconnected from the surrounding exhibits. Notably, critical contextual details, such as the date of creation, the medium used, the fate of the original artwork, the reason behind displaying a digital reproduction, and where the original work is now—all are absent. The painting's background shows a vibrant green landscape reminiscent of the agricultural fields of Punjab. Very far from

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the foreground, indistinct burning houses and villages emerge. The sky is clouded by a greyish hue, rising smoke generated from the burning houses. The foreground is dominated by red soil and dust, where numerous men and women, along with several bullock carts loaded with household things. It appears that these men and women are going to start their journey, and many others are gathering to join them. Their houses and villages are on fire behind them, indicating the imminent commencement of their collective journey. The painting evokes memories of a *kafila*—the mass exodus and forced migration that marked the Partition.

The gallery also features three other paintings displayed next to Jinnah's portrait and personal belongings. These paintings depict scenes of Partition violence but are presented without any accompanying information, such as titles, artist names, or dates of creation. Based on the visible signature of the artist, it is likely that all three paintings were created by the same artist in 1969. A second painting depicts another *kafila* of thousands of people walking along a long path. This artwork measures around one meter in width and half a meter in height. A few bullock carts are laden with objects, and some women are seated on them. Some dead bodies lie beside the road, and in the background, houses and villages are engulfed in flames. These individuals are walking forward with the hope of crossing the border, seeking refuge to save their lives from the violence. The next painting depicts a refugee camp. Thousands of men and women are seated on the ground; perhaps it is the courtyard of a fort. It seems they have reached a place offering a temporary break, allowing them to rest briefly. However, the expression on their faces reflects profound pain, agony, helplessness, and an overwhelming anxiety for the uncertain future. The third, small painting—approximately half a meter wide—captures a poignant scene of death: an elderly man holding the body of a young man, stained with blood. Behind them, the glow of fire and burning houses reminds us of the ongoing violence. The old man's face expresses his helplessness.

Illustration 3: Painting by Jimmy F. Engineer in the Freedom Movement Gallery
Photograph by the author, December 2023

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Illustration 3: Painting by Jimmy F. Engineer in the Freedom Movement Gallery
Photograph by the author, December 2023

At the National Museum of Pakistan, the antiquity of the land plays a pivotal role in the construction of national memory. The museum emphasizes the deep historical roots of the region by asserting its status as one of the earliest sites of human presence in Asia, as evidenced in the Pre-Historic Gallery. Alongside, the Buddhist heritage of Pakistan is another focal point emphasized in the museum's display. As Amstutz notes, "the ancient intermingling of Greek and Buddhist artistic motifs in Gandhara sculpture became important tools in the hands of Pakistani museum curators to advance Pakistan's global connectivity to Europe and Southeast Asia, beyond its shared Islamic ties with the Middle East" (2019, 239). Islam and the Islamic identity of the country are prominently accentuated in the museum's framing of the state of Pakistan. The National Museum showcases the becoming of sovereign state Pakistan and its political independence. However, within this musealization process, the emphasis is placed not on the event of independence itself, but rather on the leaders who were at the forefront of the movement. Human suffering during the Partition is acknowledged through the above-

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mentioned four paintings, but it remains largely underrepresented. Although the museum incorporates both independence and Partition as integral parts of national memory, the narrative of these events is presented in a fragmented and disjointed manner, limiting engagement with the human experiences and emotional significance of Partition.

Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka[6]

Bangladesh, the youngest nation in South Asia, transformed the colonial-era Dhaka Museum into the country's National Museum. Following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the British administration decided to establish a museum in Dhaka, located in the eastern part of Bengal. This plan materialized in August 1913, when the museum was formally inaugurated in a room of the British Secretariat in Dhaka. A year later, in August 1914, it opened its doors to the public with an initial collection of 379 exhibits. After the independence of Bangladesh, the institution was designated as the National Museum. In 1973, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman initiated efforts to upgrade the museum and construct a new building (Musem Website). The present premises of the museum, situated in the central location of Shahbag, Dhaka, were inaugurated on 17 November 1983.

The *Century Commemorative Volume* (2013) describes the Bangladesh National Museum as "a multidimensional museum"[7] (Shamsunnahar, 407). The museum currently comprises forty-four galleries, most of which seek to present a comprehensive narrative of Bangladesh's identity. Its collections encompass a wide array of subjects, including folklore, anthropology, biodiversity, history, archaeological artifacts, coins, textiles, musical

[6] This section draws on fieldwork conducted at the museum in December 2022.
[7] বাংলাদেশ জাতীয় জাদুঘর একটি বহুমাত্রিক জাদুঘর

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instruments, and contemporary art. Notably, the nation's struggle for independence occupies a central and highly visible place within the museum's displays.

The majority of galleries in the Bangladesh National Museum are devoted to constructing the nation's borders, territory, and historical narrative. This is achieved through the curation of a diverse range of objects—such as maps, rocks and minerals, birds, crafts, and artworks—that collectively articulate the geography and cultural identity of Bangladesh. Significantly, many of the galleries on the first floor bear the suffix "of Bangladesh," for instance, *Plants of Bangladesh*, *Birds of Bangladesh*, *Mammals of Bangladesh*, *Boats of Bangladesh*, and *Tribes of Bangladesh*. The overwhelming majority of displayed objects originate from within the national territory, reinforcing this nationally bounded framework. A notable exception can be found in three galleries on the third floor—*World Civilization*, *Western Arts*, and *Portraits of World Intellectuals*—which exhibit collections and portraits of prominent global political and intellectual figures.

Alongside its emphasis on the territorial boundaries of the nation, the Bangladesh National Museum also foregrounds the antiquity of the land. This is conveyed through the display of collections such as rocks, minerals, ancient sculptures, coins, and ornaments. At the same time, the museum allocates two galleries—*Contemporary Art 1* and *Contemporary Art 2*—to contemporary artistic practices, exhibiting paintings and sculptures that reflect the current state of the country's art scene. By juxtaposing its oldest artifacts with contemporary artistic productions, and by highlighting folk art, wood carvings, and stone sculptures across different galleries, the museum constructs a narrative of cultural continuity while simultaneously showcasing the dynamism and richness of Bangladesh's heritage.

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In the musealization of Bangladesh as a nation-state, the Liberation War of 1971 occupies a central and defining position at the Bangladesh National Museum. Three extensive galleries on the second floor—*Bangladesh's Struggle for Independence: Bangalee Bangladesh War of Liberation* (1, 2, and 3)—are dedicated to a detailed representation of the 1971 war and the broader struggle for independence. These galleries bring together a wide range of materials, including photographs, archival documents, newspapers, objects, relics, and audio-visual records. Personal memories of victims and participants are integrated through recorded interviews and testimonies, as well as through the display of bodily remains. Collectively, these elements are curated to construct a historical narrative that traces the nation's trajectory from its formative struggles to the establishment of a sovereign state.

The gallery *Bangladesh's Struggle for Independence: Bangalee Bangladesh War of Liberation – 1* foregrounds a series of historical events that are framed as foundational to the history of Bangladesh. Prominent among these is the Battle of Plassey (1757), in which the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah (1733–1757), was defeated by the British East India Company, an event that marked the beginning of Company rule in Bengal. The gallery also includes portraits of prominent Bengali intellectuals and members of Dhaka's Nawab family. By contrast, the Partition of India receives only limited attention, represented by a small display consisting of a few photographs and a map.

The Partition narrative within the gallery opens with a wall-mounted map, approximately one meter wide, depicting the division of Bengal and Punjab by the British, which led to the creation of Pakistan. Beyond this introductory display, the remainder of the Partition section is confined to a glass cabinet containing a small selection of press photographs. These include images of the Kolkata riot on Direct Action Day (16 August 1946),

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a well-known photograph of migration by rail taken by Margaret Bourke-White (though the photographer's name is not acknowledged), and a picture of Gandhi visiting Bengal in the aftermath of the Noakhali riot. The focus of these exhibits remains narrowly restricted to Bengal, with no reference to experiences in Punjab or to the wider consequences of Partition across the subcontinent. Critical dimensions—such as the scale of displacement, the widespread communal violence, and the profound demographic and social upheavals—are conspicuously absent. Additional displays include photographs of Mountbatten's meetings with Nehru and Jinnah during the final stages of Partition planning, as well as an image commemorating the founding of the Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906. Yet, these materials are presented without a coherent chronological or thematic structure, which diminishes their interpretive clarity. Portraits of influential Bengali leaders, including A. K. Fazlul Haque and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, are also exhibited but remain under-contextualized. The absence of interpretive panels or substantive textual explanations further constrains the narrative, leaving visitors with only a fragmented and limited understanding of the historical significance and human impact of Partition.

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Illustration 4.10: Display of the Partition Photographs Image captured from the Virtual Gallery of the Museum by the author on April 1, 2024. *Source: https://vt.bnm.org.bd/*

In addition to these photographs, the gallery highlights two pictures. One shows the Baker Hostel in Kolkata, where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman lived during his studies at Islamia College. The other captures a key moment immediately after the Partition, when Gandhi visited Kolkata and went on a hunger strike to protest the Partition and the violent outcome of the event. This photograph shows Gandhi sitting with Suhrawardy and others, with Mujib standing behind them. The next gallery, *Bangladesh's Struggle for Independence: Bangalee Bangladesh War of Liberation – 2*, opens with Jinnah's visit to Dhaka in March 1948, where he declared at a public meeting that Urdu would be the state language. The rest of the gallery follows a chronological progression, showcasing the Language Movement and the ongoing discrimination faced by East Pakistan from West Pakistan. These tensions ultimately led to the Liberation War of 1971 and the formation of the sovereign state of Bangladesh.

In the museal representation at the *Bangladesh National Museum*, the Partition of India is given limited importance. Apart from a few press photos, the museum does not offer a substantial narrative of the event or the widespread human suffering it caused. The pictorial display largely focuses on Partition politics and young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's presence in

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the political scene of that time. The narrative thus bypasses a detailed exploration of the event and largely avoids the memories of violence, displacement, and trauma that followed. The brief display only touches upon the Partition, without contextualizing its consequences for East Pakistan—now Bangladesh.

Remembering Partition: Presence, Absence, and Distance

By examining the galleries of the national museums in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, this paper has illustrated how each nation constructs its memory through musealization. To conclude, it is crucial to compare how the Partition and its memories are represented across the displays of these museums.

The Indian National Museum in Delhi is a colonial commencement and reflects a colonial vision of a national museum, which is evident in its exhibits. The conceptual framework of India's National Museum was structured long before the country's independence. After gaining independence, India did not change the colonial concept or create any space in the country's National Museum to display the country's independence or the Partition of the subcontinent. Instead, the musealized narrative centers on thousands of years of antiquity primarily showcased through archaeological artifacts. This portrayal suggests that India has existed for millennia. As a result, the formation of present-day sovereign India, along with the Partition and its associated anguish, has been blotted out from the nation's memory curated within the National Museum.

At the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi, the violent consequences of Partition are visually represented through four paintings. However, the display does not include any textual narrative that contextualizes the Partition or acknowledges its human cost. Although the gallery is titled the *Freedom Movement Gallery*, it does not offer a coherent account of the

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country's independence or the formation of Pakistan. Instead, the museal display primarily focuses on Jinnah and Iqbal. The independence of the country, the Partition, and the associated torments are not narrated; instead, they are dimmed beneath the exaltation of these two figures. Moreover, the museum neglects to represent Karachi's experience of Partition, including the influx of millions of refugees that reshaped the city's social and demographic landscape.

For Bangladesh, the path to independence was shaped by twenty-four years of struggle under Pakistan's discriminatory rule. This struggle culminated in a hard-won independence in 1971, following a nine-month-long war. On one side, Bangladesh suffered the violent aftermath of the Partition; on the other, the subsequent twenty-four years were characterized as oppression under Pakistani rule. Therefore, the misery and violence of 1971 relegated the Partition to a distant and remote memory for Bangladesh. This shift led to the Partition being sidelined in the representation of the country's National Museum. The photograph of Sheikh Mujib displayed in the Bangladesh National Museum draws a connection between 1947 and 1971. It highlights that Mujib, the prominent leader of Bangladesh's liberation, was also active in the political landscape of 1947. From this perspective, the National Museum uses this photograph to incorporate the Partition into the broader framework of the state's nation-building narrative.

With all this in mind, it would not be improper to say that, within the Bangladesh National Museum, the significance of 1971 has overshadowed that of the 1947 Partition. In Pakistan's National Museums, the suffering and violent outcomes of Partition remain dimed under mytholization of national leaders. In the Indian National Museum, the notion of India renders the nation India less essential. More broadly, the attainment of independence—through prolonged movements in India and Pakistan, and a nine-month-long war in Bangladesh—has

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placed the memories of Partition different location to the museal narratives of their respective national museums.

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