

National Museums of South Asia (Kavita Singh)

Abstract:

In this lecture, I will discuss three National Museums of South Asia: the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi, whose founding was announced immediately after Independence in 1947; the National Museum of India, which was formed at almost the same time; and the National Museum of Bangladesh, formed in 1971. The dates of the foundation of these museums, so close to the nation's attainment of independence or liberation, immediately suggest a close relationship between political sovereignty and national self-representation in the cultural sphere. Indeed, writings by Benedict Anderson, Carol Duncan, Flora Kaplan, Don Preziosi, Annie Coombes, Dipesh Chakrabarty examine the relationship between national museums and the formation of national communities through the construction of a common heritage.

As a process, heritage construction depends on the production of collective memory. But equally vital to this process is the production of collective amnesia. For South Asia, 1947 was the moment of Independence but it was also the moment of Partition, which cleaved the territories of India and Pakistan. It was inevitable that the two countries would look at their histories anew, and reframe them in ways that were useful to the nation-building projects that lay ahead. Some two decades later, the eruption of difference within Pakistan would lead to the breaking away of East Pakistan, which eventually gained independence to become Bangladesh.

Each phase of national reconstruction required a reframing of the national past. As we shall see through this talk, each National Museum in South Asia has struggled to articulate a past that is useful to its present. This is an act that requires significant speech and significant silences. In my reading, in one way or another articulated or repressed central theme of each of these national museums becomes its reckoning with the presence of Islam.

Readings:

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2002. "Museums in Late Democracies". *Humanities Research* Vol IX(1). ([web](#))

Muan, Ingrid. 2006.: "In Transit: Musings on Museums from Phnom Penh (Cambodia)". In Ivan Karp et al (eds.) *Museum Frictions, Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, Duke University Press, pp. 257-285.