Modern Asian Studies (2023), **57**, 1277–1299
doi:10.1017/S0026749X22000580

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'East Punjab must not lag behind': Partition, museums, and identity in independent India

Mrinalini Venkateswaran[1,2]

[1]Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom and [2]Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, London, United Kingdom
Email: mv428@cantab.ac.uk

(Received 12 September 2021; revised 5 December 2022; accepted 6 December 2022)

Abstract
This article foregrounds the postcolonial museum as a new source, and site, from which to write South Asian histories of partition and its aftermath. It focuses on collecting practices in India within East Punjab, following the partition of the British-era Punjab province in 1947 between India and Pakistan. Tapping hitherto-unused archival sources, it reveals the considerable financial investment and drive to collect at this time, belying the idea of museums being 'dead' colonial assets, and demonstrates their centrality to how citizenship and belonging were articulated (or withheld) in independent India. Some discoveries have far-reaching implications for both historians and museum professionals. The article also shines a light upon a new range of actors—both named and nameless, professional and citizen—who have been marginal to historical enquiry thus far. Moving beyond the familiar colonial templates within which museums in the region have until now been studied, it asks critical questions of the *postcolonial* museum in South Asia by interrogating the relationship between collections, and the Indian nation-state and its subsidiaries.

Keywords: Partition of India; museums; East Punjab; evacuee property

Introduction

If, by studying colonial museums, we have uncovered the workings of the colonial state, what might we learn about the postcolonial nation-state and its subsidiaries from examining its museums?[1] This is the broad question to which this article provides one, particular answer, by focusing on the mechanisms and rationale behind the collecting drive for post-partition East Punjab's museums.

The 1947 partition of British India catalysed one of the largest displacements of people known in history, and its aftermath continues in many forms today.[2] It has

[1]I use the term 'postcolonial' in a chronological sense.

[2]Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000); Urvashi Butalia (ed.), *Partition: The Long Shadow* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014).

generated a vast field of scholarship over more than 70 years that has reframed the issues with regularity, and reconsidered sources.[3] Classic studies of high politics,[4] the role of regional actors and local motivations,[5] lived experience,[6] and engagement with oral sources have been some of the new approaches that have emerged over time.[7] While efforts to scale down to develop richness and detail continue, there are also reminders to scale up: to situate partition globally, to reconsider cause and effect and high politics,[8] the politics of minorities, and the nature of group violence.[9] Even larger are 'civilizational' questions about the longer history of South Asia,[10] and the importance of conversing with other disciplines.[11] This article takes the latter approach by forging new links between two established disciplines: partition historiography and

[3]Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds), *Partition and Post-colonial South Asia: A Reader*, 3 vols (London: Routledge, 2008); Joya Chatterji, 'Partition Studies: Prospects and Pitfalls', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73:2 (2014), pp. 309–312.

[4]Asim Roy, 'The High Politics of India's Partition: The Revisionist Perspective', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24:2 (1990), pp. 385–408; Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5]Ian Copland, 'The Master and the Maharajas: The Sikh Princes and the East Punjab Massacres of 1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36:3 (2002), pp. 657–704; Sarah Ansari, *Life After Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947–1962* (Karachi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010); Uttara Shahani, 'Sind and the Partition of India, c. 1927–1952', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019.

[6]Taylor Sherman, William Gould and Sarah Ansari (eds), *From Subjects to Citizens: Society and the Everyday State in India and Pakistan, 1947–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, 'Rebuilding Lives and Redefining Spaces: Women in Post-colonial Delhi, 1945–1980', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2015; Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, '"Useful" and "Earning" Citizens? Gender, State, and the Market in Post-colonial Delhi', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53:6 (2019), pp. 1924–1955; Sarah Ansari and William Gould, *Boundaries of Belonging: Localities, Citizenship and Rights in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[7]Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition* (New Delhi: Viking, 1998); Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kavita Puri, *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Aanchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material Memory* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2017); 1947partitionarchive.org, [accessed 7 March 2023].

[8]David Gilmartin, 'Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57:4 (1998), pp. 1068–1095; Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007).

[9]Ilyas Chattha, *Partition and Locality: Violence, Migration, and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot, 1947–1961* (Karachi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Paul Brass, 'The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab: 1946–47: Means, Methods and Purposes', in *The Independence of India and Pakistan: New Approaches and Reflections*, (ed.) Ian Talbot (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 15–57.

[10]David Gilmartin, 'The Historiography of India's Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 74:1 (2015), pp. 23–41.

[11]Chatterji, 'Partition Studies'; and, for example, Francesca Orsini (ed.), *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

museums. It goes further, by demonstrating museums' seminal role as a site from which to write this history, rather than their being dismissed as memorials to, and repositories of, history alone.

Most purpose-built government museums in India suffer from the perception that they are dull, 'dead', and uninspiring spaces.[12] Historians of museums, and museum professionals too (some in government service, many outside it), bemoan this state of affairs (which is compounded when displays are indeed found to be dusty). Yet, as we shall see, and notwithstanding laudable recent exceptions, such perceived indifference or apparent lack of care were far from the case in the aftermath of independence, at least in East Punjab.[13]

The development of the museum in India (and more broadly, South Asia)—in the form that we understand it today—and its European origins are by now established: from modest, if elite, beginnings as collections of 'curious' objects in cabinets;[14] to the more egalitarian space (in theory) of the university; and the grand, authoritative, public educational projects of the nineteenth century. We know, too, of the museum's conjoined career in metropole and colony; its central role in knowing, ordering, managing, and exploiting the empire for economic gain;[15] and in justifying it by pointing to India's supposed decadence, decay, and the monstrosity of its art.[16] We have also been made aware of challenges to the museum's authority and control, contested readings

[12]Some important qualifications apply. This statement is based in part on personal observation at many government museums across the country, and conversations with their staff about low visitor numbers. Compare this with visitor figures for the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum at the City Palace Jaipur (from where information was available to me in a professional capacity), which averaged a million a year until 2019. In general, palace museums, or those set in historic sites, often draw both a wider demographic and higher numbers. However, it is important to remember that visitor numbers will differ based on location and occasion—for instance, the Indian Museum in populous Kolkata receives many more visitors compared to the more remote Himachal Museum, and special events can cause a temporary spike. No systematic or regular survey is conducted across all types of museums in India, and surveys tend to be ad hoc from one museum to another. Furthermore, visitor numbers do not equate with levels of engagement or inspiration, about which there is even less data.

[13]Museums have not lost their appeal, and private money and renewed state interest in harnessing their institutional power have resulted in new investments and enterprises. Organizations like theheritagelab.in [accessed 8 March 2023] have, within the last decade, sought to make museums more accessible, especially by harnessing social media. These developments are valuable and relevant to the larger discussion of museums and their future in India but are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

[14]Today, we understand 'curious' to mean inquisitive or unusual; it used to mean 'made carefully' or with attention to detail. 'Curious', *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, available at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/curious, [accessed 7 March 2023].

[15]Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley; London: University of California, 2007); Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (eds), *no touching, no spitting, no praying: The Museum in South Asia* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015); Sudeshna Guha, *Artefacts of History: Archaeology, Historiography and Indian Pasts* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2015); Carol A. Breckenridge, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31:2 (1989), pp. 195–216. For a study of power and its (disciplinary) methods of colonization, see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[16]The seminal work in this context is Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of their purpose and impact,[17] and successful adaptations of the institution to suit local purposes.[18]

More recent 'counterhistories'[19] have shown how the museum operates in postcolonial South Asia and how its visitors relate to it, rather than measuring its effectiveness against an idealized yardstick modelled on Euro-American concepts that are themselves questionable. We should, it has been argued, resuscitate the discredited model of '*ajaibghar*' (or wonder house) and embrace something with local roots and resonance: the '*nokta nazar*' or subjective point of view of audiences.[20] However, if 'global museum impulses…crosscut a particular colonial and postcolonial trajectory',[21] it would appear productive to compare India with other post-colonies, including the perspective of colonized indigenous groups such as those within North America, not to forget India's own indigenous communities. It is also necessary to be alert to the diverse modes and contexts for constructing and consuming museums *within* India. It is one example of these modes and contexts—of collecting, constructing, and consuming material culture of historic value in post-partition East Punjab—that forms the crux of this article.

By the time India and Pakistan gained independence, the sentiment that museums were a civilizational status marker was widely shared in South Asia. Not only museum professionals (whom one might expect to hold such a view), but also bureaucrats and the general public thought so too. As this article will reveal, the effort expended on collecting for them, notwithstanding the other demands placed on the East Punjab government in the wake of partition, offers important evidence for this. For as museum scholars have established, 'both new nations as well as old ones need ancient pasts' and museums were positioned to cater to this need.[22] They were not just

[17]Including the practice of collecting, more broadly. Examples of new interpretations of indigenous collecting and display include Savithri Preetha Nair, *Raja Serfoji II: Science, Medicine and Enlightenment in Tanjore* (London: Routledge, 2012) and Priya Maholay-Jaradi, *Fashioning a National Art: Baroda's Royal Collection and Art Institutions (1875–1924)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016). Rather than being 'copycat' behaviour, there is evidence to assert that it was 'mimicry' at work. A detailed discussion is outside the purview of this article, but see Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 121–131.

[18]Louise Purbrick (ed.), *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Giles Tillotson, 'The Jaipur Exhibition of 1883', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 14:2 (2004), pp. 111–126; Maxine Berg, 'Useful Knowledge, "Industrial Enlightenment", and the Place of India', *Journal of Global History*, 8:1 (2013), pp. 117–141.

[19]Shaila Bhatti, *Translating Museums: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

[20]Ibid., pp. 191–192.

[21]Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, 'Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India', in *no touching, no spitting, no praying*, (eds) Mathur and Singh, pp. 173–184.

[22]Johnathan R. Gillis, 'Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship', in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, (ed.) Johnathan R. Gillis (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 9. There is no scope for a full discussion of the politics and impact of colonial collecting here, but these assertions are based on established scholarship that engages with the particular case of both India and further afield. A selection includes Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', *New Formations*, 4 (1988), pp. 73–102; Carol A. Breckenridge, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31:2 (1989), pp. 195–216; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

logical repositories for historic materials, but institutions that channelled the power of antiquity to produce legitimacy and authority.[23]

The situation can also be better understood by recalling that the Lahore Museum, previously the museum of undivided Punjab, had been 'lost' to Pakistan. Its collections were divided between West and East Punjab, as were the assets in Punjab's libraries and archives. With the ultimate goal of creating a new museum for East Punjab, the collecting initiatives discussed here were intended to replace the losses across the border, and to 'build back' a larger, richer, and 'worthy' collection (as several actors phrased it in what follows). The vicissitudes of that process, the history of the new Punjab Museum (today the Chandigarh Museum), and how it relates to other regional and national collections lie outside the scope of this article.[24] The goal, instead, is to examine the act of contributing to collections of national significance, as a way to both assert and demonstrate that one was a citizen—that one belonged. In contrast, being denied the agency and the right to act in this manner—which certain refugees of partition were—constituted disenfranchisement. Scrutinizing little-known or used archival sources, this article investigates post-partition collecting methods in East Punjab, how they enabled (or disabled) citizenship, and speculates on the rationale and motivations behind them. It closes by reflecting on how these historical findings inform current debates (such as on decolonization), and practice, in the museums and heritage sector as they are relevant to South Asia.

Civilizing East Punjab

> The preservation of the relics of the past is an essential requirement of all civilised society and a museum thus is a primary cultural need of a progressive society…East Punjab must not lag behind.[25]

So wrote B. C. Mitra, former Gallery Assistant of the Central Museum Lahore, and Officer on Special Duty with the responsibility for packing up East Punjab's share from the Lahore Museum in 1948. Mitra felt the reasons were so obvious that he could 'refrain from expatiating on the need for' a museum in East Punjab and he moved on to discussing potential sources that could 'yield a collection of a fairly respectable size at a surprisingly low cost'.[26] East Punjab's urgent need for civilizational credentials (according to Mitra) is all the more telling because of the context in which his

[23]Just one example that is indicative of the substantial body of work on the theme of museums and national identity (other than those already cited) is: Fiona McLean, 'Museums and National Identity', *Museum and Society*, 3:1 (2005), pp. 1–4 (the entire issue is dedicated to the subject). I must also note here that 'museum' includes archival material. My sources use the terms interchangeably as disciplinary boundaries were less settled at this time. A full debate on the merits and mechanics of disciplinary divisions is beyond the scope of this article.

[24]Kristina K. Phillips, 'A Museum for the Nation: Publics and Politics at the National Museum of India', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 2006; Bhatti, *Translating Museums;* and Mathur and Singh (eds), *no touching, no spitting, no praying* offer some insights into the early/ transitional years of the museum sector in independent India and Pakistan, but there remains much more to be done.

[25]'Note on the Proposed Museum to be set up in the East Pb', 25/17 48-G, Punjab State Archives, Chandigarh (PDL reference FI-17506).

[26]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argument was made: the international bad press that both India and Pakistan received (the Punjab in particular) as a result of the violence which accompanied partition. A desire to redress it by acquiring evidence of culture and putting it on display may well be what drove many of the actors in this story, without their always being aware of it.

For the museum he hoped to build, Mitra identified two kinds of sources: first, those of government (such as acquisitions under the Treasure Trove Act of 1878;[27] reciprocal exchanges and surplus distribution of coins and other objects between government museums; free copies of government publications); and second, private sources that could be gifted or loaned.[28] At this early stage, government sources also included East Punjab's share of collections from Lahore, derived from the Museum as well as the Central Record Office, all of which reached Amritsar by the end of 1949. But as we shall see, although contested and coveted in equal measure, as was the case with all the 'assets' divided at partition,[29] these collections were by no means the only, or even key, source of East Punjab's historical treasures. By May 1950, East Punjab appointed the Keeper of Government Records, Dr G. L. Chopra, as Curator of the Museum too, paving the way for amalgamating the two institutions under the Historical Records Office at Shimla.[30]

That B. C. Mitra articulated a need for tangible remnants of a past heritage and the legitimacy offered by museums is one thing—he was, after all, tasked with recovering East Punjab's share of the Lahore Museum collection. But that others did so too, in the midst of the trauma of partition, is notable. Even more remarkable is the fact that it stayed on the agenda of local government, despite the enormous strain it was under to maintain law and order, effect partition, resolve innumerable related disputes, and address refugee requirements.[31] The mechanics of how this was accomplished, and their implications for East Punjab, and for South Asia, are explored in what follows.

Collecting for East Punjab

On 5 January 1949, Dr G. L. Chopra (then still the Keeper of Records), received two wire communications. The first was from Amritsar, with instructions to postpone his impending visit to Lahore, scheduled to collect East Punjab's share of documents from the Central Record Office.[32] The second was from the Deputy Commissioner of Jullunder 'saying that orders for transferance of a large collection of a muslim evacuee

[27]Act regarding the ownership of treasure found in the soil, including the rules for acquiring it on behalf of Government, retained by the Government of India after 1947, available at https://www.indiaculture.nic.in/sites/default/files/Legislations/9.pdf, [last accessed 29 April 2020].

[28]'Note on the Proposed Museum to be set up in the East Pb', pp. 3–4.

[29]For example, see Anwesha Sengupta, 'Breaking up Bengal: People, Things and Land in Times of Partition', PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2015.

[30]'Proposal to Have a Joint Control of the Records Office and the Museum, Special pay to KR for Starting the Nucleus of Museum', 707, Punjab State Archives, Chandigarh (PDL reference Fl-16255).

[31]V. P. Menon, *Integration of the Indian States* (London: Sangam, 1985); Pallavi Raghavan, *Animosity at Bay: An Alternative History of the India–Pakistan Relationship, 1947–1952* (London: Hurst and Co., 2020).

[32]Although decided before 15 August 1947, the Punjab Partition Committee and the Arbitral Tribunal worked out the details in stages. It was not until 1949 that Chopra actually collected East Punjab's share, spread over three trips to Lahore. 'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office during 1948–49', p. 2, File 51, Basta 59, Punjab State Archives, Patiala.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to this office have been issued [sic]'.[33] He also received news from the Under Secretary (Rehabilitation) about orders 'for transfer to this office of still another collection of a muslim evacuee from Jullundur district'.[34] In consequence, Dr Chopra made speedy arrangements to 'attend to all these matters'.[35]

How and why was this property being transferred to the Record Office? Pakistan and India—West and East Punjab—had both established offices to take custody of evacuee property in September 1947. The original idea was that the Office would hold evacuee property in trust so it could be reclaimed by its owners. The arrangement reflected official recognition that many people might have temporarily moved to safe locations during the rioting that accompanied partition, rather than with the intention to permanently migrate to the 'other' Dominion. But as scholars have shown, it rapidly morphed into an institution—and subsequently a law—that served to dispossess the very people whose interests it was meant to protect,[36] in addition to bystanders such as overseas Indian Muslims with property in India[37] or parts of India that had nothing to do with partition but were drawn into its slipstream.[38] This assessment remains valid, notwithstanding further scholarship that has uncovered regional variations in the motives behind such legislation, or the local factors that may have been at play.[39]

By the time Chopra received his instructions in January 1949, both East and West Punjab had, in competition, enacted amendments to the original legislation. While 'technically' permitting the return of property (whose definition and scope had also been expanded to include 'cash deposits and the contents of bank lockers' in East Punjab, among other things) to the original owners, in practice it became 'increasingly circumspect'.[40] Meanwhile, evacuee property legislation was extended from the 'disturbed' areas affected by partition to other 'troublesome' areas like Hyderabad. The Evacuee Property Ordinance promulgated on 18 October 1949 was a step up from previous legislation in terms of its geographic and legislative scope. It 'effectively nationalised, at a stroke, all property vacated by Muslims in India, outside Bengal, Assam and the north eastern states' and authorized the use of such property for refugee rehabilitation or other 'public purposes'.[41] Requiring only the slightest evidence of a person 'intending' to migrate in order to attach their property, it had far-reaching ramifications, providing the means and the precedent for the state to

[33]'Tour Programme of KR', p. 3, File 73, Basta 70, Punjab State Archives, Patiala.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Joya Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship, 1946–1970', *The Historical Journal*, 55:4 (2012), pp. 1049–1071.

[37]Taylor Sherman, 'Migration, Citizenship, and Belonging in Hyderabad (Deccan), 1946–1956', *Modern Asian Studies* 45:1 (2011), pp. 81–107; Taylor Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India: Negotiating Citizenship in Postcolonial Hyderabad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[38]Rohit De, 'Evacuee Property and the Management of Economic Life in Postcolonial India', in *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia*, (eds) Michael F. Laffan, Nikhil Menon and Gyan Prakash (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 87–106.

[39]For instance, Aishwarya Pandit, 'From United Provinces to Uttar Pradesh Heartland Politics 1947–1970', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2015, pp. 173–221, makes this point.

[40]De, 'Evacuee Property', p. 92.

[41]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', p. 1065. It became the Administration of Evacuee Property Act (1950), enacted on 17 April 1950, available at https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5420.html, [accessed 7 March 2023].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

make a direct intervention into its citizens' homes and, over time, shaping 'the Indian state's more quotidian engagements'.[42]

The irony of the Office of the Custodian acquiring and dispersing property that it was, in fact, established to protect is now recognized. What has escaped historical scrutiny, so far, is the nature of some of the property the Office handled. Thus far, scholarly work in the burgeoning field of evacuee property literature has dealt with immovable property in the main. But as much as property and land were a 'cornerstone of refugee rehabilitation and…[creating] the new post-partition order',[43] it emerges that movable evacuee property was no less important.[44] Moreover, it emerges that the movable property worth having was not constituted only of cash assets, jewellery, or raw materials and other saleable items (the typical list that appears in diplomatic or legislative correspondence),[45] but also objects of cultural value. They provided the foundation on which to rebuild Punjab through cultural rehabilitation; to give it identity and a sense of history rooted in objects, even if places and territories were no longer accessible.

This was a large-scale operation. Evacuee property was, without shame or hesitation, classed as 'government property' in the Record Office's list of sources. That the East Punjab government was classifying the movable property of Muslim migrants as a government source as early as 1948 is extraordinary. Punjab's Historical Records Office began to acquire it even *before* East Punjab's share of records were collected from Lahore.[46] Within a month, Chopra recorded that the Additional Custodian of Evacuee Property, Jullundur, had written of 'a large quantity of historical matter [books and manuscripts]…lying at' Karnal, Kunjpura, and Panipat. Chopra's office was asked to examine it 'with a view to bringing a portion of it which might be suitable' and eliminating 'on the spot' those portions deemed irrelevant to the Archives.[47] By the end of 1949, his office had inspected 'property at Jullundur, Karnal, Panipat, Rewari, Gurgaon, Amritsar, Ambala, Rohtak and Simla'.[48] The East Punjab government had not waited for, or needed, the sweeping powers of the Evacuee Property Ordinance of October 1949. By then, it had already decided—and what is more, implemented—a policy to appropriate evacuee art for 'public purposes'. But it is a revelation that these purposes went beyond the 'recovery of the "economic life" in the province',[49] to encompass the recovery of its historical roots and thus identity.

The rapaciousness of the move is startling. So is the discovery that the East Punjab government considered the consolidation of historical material *as important as* managing the refugee crisis, which was known to be placing enormous strain on the

[42]De, 'Evacuee Property', p. 89.

[43]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', p. 1066.

[44]Movable property does feature in some studies, but not in the current context. See Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013); Puri, *Partition Voices*; Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation*.

[45]For example, Raghavan, *Animosity at Bay*; Joseph Schechtman, 'Evacuee Property in India and Pakistan', *Pacific Affairs* 24:4 (1951), p. 412; Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, p. 96.

[46]As mentioned previously, it was not shifted until 1949. 'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office During 1948–49', p. 2.

[47]G. L Chopra to Chief Secretary, 8 February 1949, 'Tour Programme of KR', p. 7.

[48]'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office During 1948–49', p. 3.

[49]De, 'Evacuee Property', p. 92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

province's personnel and infrastructure.[50] The desire for a deep-rooted and tangible past encompassing objects and records was critical enough to preoccupy both the minds and machinery of government. Historians of modern South Asia have not previously noted this drive, nor probed its manifestations.

Chopra's hectic inspections were a direct result of the Custodian issuing a notice on 5 February 1949 requiring all his subordinates, down to the district level, to report on historical material within their remit *in two weeks*:

> The Historical Records Office, East Punjab is interested in books, papers and other items of moveable property lying in evacuee stores that may be of historical importance. You may therefore, intimate immediately if you have some books and other such papers in your stores to this office and to the office of the Historical Records, East Punjab, The Manse, Simla, so that a representative of the department may call at your office and inspect the books and the documents. Such of the books and documents that may be of interest to that department, may immediately be transferred to that department and in due course the valuation of the same will be done.[51]

The instructions leave no room for ambiguity. This was a government-sponsored project, and if further proof were needed, consider the title of the file in which the letter quoted above is archived: 'Salvaging Objects of Historical Interest from the Belongings of Muslim Evacuees Through out [sic] the Punjab'. It is also evident that at least the Custodian and his subordinates understood that 'books, papers' and 'historical' items constituted movable property. It makes their absence from evacuee property studies to date all the more notable.[52]

Despite the Record Office's haste to secure items of potential interest, there were hiccups along the way. Chopra had to stay vigilant—he paid attention to press notices of auctions—to ensure that his Office was not deprived of old coins and other spoils (alternately, 'safeguarding historical objects' as he phrased it).[53] Where was this money going, and who was buying these objects? What kind of material—aside from books, manuscripts, or coins—was being auctioned? One could speculate that any official monetary gains went towards the 'compensation pool' that the Government of India created by consolidating all Muslim evacuee property, from which it proposed to recompense incoming Hindus and Sikhs. But this arrangement was only formalized in October 1954, through the Displaced Persons (Compensation and Rehabilitation) Act,[54]

[50]Durga Das (ed.), *Sardar Patel's Correspondence, Vol. IV* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1972), especially Chapters IX, X; Menon, *Integration*, p. 243.

[51]Copy of a letter from the Custodian to all Deputies, dated 5 February 1949, 'Salvaging Objects of Historical Interest from the Belongings of Muslim Evacuees Through out the Punjab', p. 97, File 3, Basta 54, Punjab State Archives, Patiala.

[52]It is important to note that these particular records mention objects as quoted—that is, 'books' as a category rather than individual titles. It is therefore virtually impossible to correlate items in the collection today with the objects referred to here.

[53]G. L. Chopra to Sardar Harbans Singh, Deputy Custodian Evacuee Property, 30 August 1949, 'Salvaging Objects of Historical Interest from the Belongings of Muslim Evacuees Through out the Punjab', p. 193.

[54]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', p. 1066.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a full five years after these events. Was the Government of East Punjab running its own scheme?

East Punjab and evacuee property

There are many unanswered questions about the imperatives driving the state accumulation of dispersed movable evacuee property at this time. Studies of the lived reality of the border in Bengal,[55] and the varied accounts of the experience of partition, can make for harrowing reading, exposing the tremendous gap between an order and its implementation on the ground. Refugees were often 'made', encouraged by an 'ecology of fear' and 'routine violence', to migrate.[56] Insidious networks of smuggling, corruption, organized crime, and violent militias were exacerbated by a solidifying border (especially in Punjab) that often resulted in people losing all their possessions before they could reach safety, assuming they did so alive.[57]

Incoming refugees occupied evacuee property with tenacity, and the ferocity with which they fought for their right to remain has been recognized as a key factor that determined the Government of India's decision to prevent Muslim migrants' return—it had 'already lost the argument on the ground' and needed evacuees' homes to house incoming Hindus and Sikhs.[58] This has been described as an example of the ground-up shaping of the rights of citizens, and a failure of the liberal policies and intentions of the two governments.[59] Likewise, across the border in Pakistan, there were too many Muslim refugees for the new nation to absorb, and both countries needed evacuee assets to accommodate new arrivals. Scholars have noted the interrelated nature of evacuee property legislation in India and Pakistan, often characterized as 'tit-for-tat', as the measures grew more draconian and exclusionary.[60]

The academic focus on houses and agricultural land (compounded by the loose interpretation of 'movable property')[61] has led to a lacuna in our understanding of exactly how quite so many books and manuscripts accumulated with the Custodian of Evacuee Property. It seems extraordinary that gangs would have robbed fleeing refugees of books rather than jewellery, or that their victims were carrying them (in preference to more practical or precious items).[62] But we do know that for some

[55]Joya Chatterji, 'The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–52', *Modern Asian Studies*, 33:1 (1999), p. 225–241.

[56]Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, Chapters III and V.

[57]Copland, 'The Master and the Maharajas'; Ansari, *Life after Partition*; Lucy P. Chester, *Borders and Conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), especially Chapter VIII; Ilyas Chattha, 'Competitions for Resources: Partition's Evacuee Property and the Sustenance of Corruption in Pakistan', *Modern Asian Studies*, 46:5 (2012), pp. 1182–1211.

[58]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', pp. 1063–1064.

[59]Ibid., pp. 1065–1067.

[60]Zamindar, *The Long Partition*; Newal Osman, 'Partition and Punjab Politics, 1937–1955', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2013; Chattha, *Partition and Locality*; Chattha, 'Competitions for Resources'; Rakesh Ankit, 'Junagadh, India, and the Logic of Occupation and Appropriation, 1947–49', *Studies in History*, 34:2 (2018), pp. 109–140.

[61]Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, p. 95.

[62]For a sample, including a discussion of the rationale for what people carried, see Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

refugees, books were a top priority. The Partition Museum in Amritsar, for example, holds in its collection a copy of the *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai* (verses by Mirza Ghalib illustrated by Abdur Rahman Chughtai), which was one of the few precious objects Basant Kishan Khanna, his wife Leelavati, and their children carried from Lahore when they fled on 14 August 1947, thinking they would return soon.[63] But refugee accounts seldom specify the possessions that either circumstances or individuals forced them to surrender.[64]

It is of course possible that researchers have not previously thought to ask, or have omitted details in publication, thinking them unimportant. But it is evident that these acquisitions recast our understanding of the workings of evacuee property legislation and the experiences of 'citizen refugees'[65] and destabilize the certainties that found regional and national identity. Oral accounts indicate that some people managed to return and retrieve possessions from their abandoned homes, sometimes enabled by faithful friends or because conscientious new occupants preserved them. In fact, the presence of movable personal effects in one's house was one of the few ways through which temporary migrants could attempt to prove ownership and challenge (usually without success) requisitions by the governments of India and Pakistan.[66]

In point of fact, India and Pakistan had agreed, by 1953, to allow the duty-free removal of personal and household effects, barring 'machinery or machine parts, merchandise and trade goods, unsown cloth…in excess of personal needs, cattle, cash in excess of permitted quantities, and bullion', all of which could either be reclaimed (requiring a migrant to return) or sold within the country of original residence.[67] But the anti-minority rhetoric that had been building up since partition characterized such attempts as efforts to shift capital, destabilize the economy, and thus as 'anti-national'. Movable property was 'redefined' and imbued with 'nationality'; 'property, which had hitherto been owned by individuals, now came to be seen as belonging to the nation'.[68] Thus in an ironic twist, while their owners, a human resource, became unwanted evacuees and forced refugees, cultural resources became a coveted asset to rebuild and reassert regional and national identity.

By and large, people moved in a hurry, with no time to pack or make arrangements to move their possessions later. But there were also numerous cases of people from the better educated, informed, and wealthier classes being able to liquidate and transfer their assets to 'safe zones'[69] (providing ammunition for accusations of anti-national intentions). But notwithstanding the fact that it may have been chiefly the poor and illiterate who were left to fend for themselves (or even prevented from moving in the 'national interest'),[70] there was enough material for the Record Office staff to go

[63]Partition Museum website: https://www.partitionmuseum.org/museum/refugee-artefacts/#partitionmuseum[gal]/2/, [accessed 7 March 2023].

[64]For instance, Ahmad Salim, *Lahore 1947* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2001). Or Puri, *Partition Voices*, p. 188.

[65]Sen, *Citizen Refugee.*

[66]Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, Chapter III; Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship'.

[67]Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, pp. 95–96.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*; Salim, *Lahore 1947*; Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation*; Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, pp. 41–42.

[70]Shahani, 'Sind and the Partition of India'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through. The archives have not (yet) revealed how large numbers of such objects were funnelled through to them.

Recent work on the personal objects that encapsulate partition for refugees, and on the affective nature of partition, reiterates the visceral impact that objects can and do have.[71] Who, then, were the people or agencies that bid for and acquired the material rejected by the Record Office? What effect did the provenance or physical presence of these objects have? These evocative questions have never been considered; while they must lie outside the scope of the present discussion, they bear further investigation.

Studies of partition and state formation in independent India and Pakistan have noted the significant gaps between central policy and implementation on the ground.[72] Indeed, research suggests broad continuities between colonial and postcolonial regimes, in the gap between 'the disordered character of local reality and the abstract logic of governance'.[73] But this is not a question of one or two individuals making a communally biased decision, contravening government policy. Rather, the chasm between the mandate of a government office (buttressed by inter-governmental agreements) and its implementation stands exposed.

And it was deliberate. None of the files containing this information is marked 'secret', nor does the tone of communication suggest any view to conceal. Chopra became agitated over auctions of evacuee property after seeing press notices,[74] so it is evident that the information was in the public domain. Further, while scholars have noted Pakistan's protests at Indian moves to attach land and houses (and vice versa), no one seems to have fussed about public auctions of movable property. Was it a blatant disregard for orders, and were such auctions held in Pakistan? Was the Custodian taking matters into his own hands (empowered, of course, by the Government of India)?[75]

There is enough evidence to assert that there were mechanisms and rationales in place to collect and manage movable property in far greater numbers and variety than we have hitherto realized. The centrality of evacuee property in shaping both citizens and states in South Asia means that this is a crucial area of research that awaits investigation—we still only know the outlines and are yet to flesh out the details.

[71]Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Partition's Post-Amnesias* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013) discusses the role of terracotta or pottery, and of literally rooting oneself to the land; Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation.* In permitting a role for 'embodied' knowledge, by which he means knowledge acquired through the senses, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that museums serve 'late democracies' better than archives or history departments. He does not apply the argument to South Asia, but it could be one way of thinking about partition-related objects in Punjab's museums. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Museums in Late Democracies', *Humanities Research*, 9:1 (2002), pp. 5–12.

[72]Sherman, Gould and Ansari (eds), *From Subjects to Citizens*; Pandit, 'From United Provinces to Uttar Pradesh'; Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship'; Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*; Roy, *Partitioned Lives.*

[73]Jon E. Wilson, 'The Domination of Strangers: Time, Emotion and the Making of the Modern State in Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46:30 (2011), p. 52.

[74]'Salvaging Objects of Historical Interest from the Belongings of Muslim Evacuees Through out the Punjab'.

[75]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', p. 1060; 'Evacuee property was thus made an area of governance outside the rule of law: a true state of exception where executive authority was wholly unchecked': ibid., p. 1066.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

By the end of 1949, the Historical Records Office had amassed 'over half a million files and cases, 4,500 books, 400 manuscripts, 1022 coins and 100 other documents'. It was a collection, the Keeper noted with self-congratulation, that was 'as good as can be found anywhere in Northern India'.[76] Furthermore, it was,

> no longer a repository of merely old Secretariat records but [had] rapidly grown into a central Archive in which all kinds of historical materials, both from official and private sources [were] being received from all over the province and properly preserved.[77]

The attention paid to quantities was a way to make the connection with Punjab's past tangible. But it also reveals the scale of the yields from evacuee property. For if the old office contained Secretariat records alone, then, given what we now know, Muslim migrants were the source of many of the 'new' books, manuscripts, coins, and documents Chopra listed with quiet satisfaction.

In addition to their personal property being thus appropriated, evacuee individuals were rendered nameless and faceless. Chopra's report dehumanizes them by referring to 'the evacuee dumps' that he or his team visited, to select and 'rescue' many important items, which his office later 'suitably preserved'.[78] The list itself, sadly, was absent from the copy of the report I consulted. So, while we cannot be sure of the detailed nature of these items, we should not assume that they reflect the region's Islamic heritage, exclusively—or even primarily.

The overwhelming image is of finding treasures in rubbish heaps, eerily reminiscent of Nazi concentration camps. Nazis officers rooted through the 'garbage' that comprised the personal possessions and the bodies of their victims to find whatever valuables they could claim (heaped in 'dumps') for the war effort and economic gain[79]—'public purpose'[80] in another form. But unlike post-Second World War attempts to return art collections to their pre-War owners, there was no question of restitution here, even in theory.

Evacuee property legislation as a whole has determined the way in which citizenship has come to be defined, especially for religious minorities in South Asia.[81] The sweeping powers and 'curious legal status' of the office of the Custodian of Evacuee Property (it was outside the purview of the judiciary) have cast a long shadow on the larger question of asset redistribution and certain citizens' right to privacy, occupancy, mobility, and movable and immovable property after independence.[82] This article has established that the shadow extends even further, to shape museum collections and the histories they are able to tell. But the full import of what this might mean requires

[76]'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office During 1948–49'.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid.

[79]I have seen these at Auschwitz/ Oswiecim in person.

[80]Wording of Ordinance No. XXVII of 1949. Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship', p. 1065.

[81]Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*; Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship'; Zamindar, *The Long Partition*; Pandit, 'From United Provinces to Uttar Pradesh'.

[82]De, 'Evacuee Property', p. 102.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

further investigation. For instance, in contrast to traditional approaches to South Asian museums through archaeology, art history, and anthropology, how viable would a new route of enquiry, framed in terms of individual versus institutional rights to property, be?

These are not mere academic matters. Few mechanisms acknowledge donors in Indian museums, which makes it even less likely that they will recognize the contributions (willing or otherwise) of nameless migrants to a 'foreign' land. The discoveries outlined in this article have, at least, serious ethical repercussions for Indian museum professionals.[83] Any attempts to address them will come up against the problem of how to rationalize evacuee—later 'enemy'—property as foundational to national and regional identity.

However, museums also exemplify the tangible power of objects to forge connections between people; they thus offer possibilities for reconciliation at an individual level with South Asia's troubled history. There are numerous examples from around the world, from Bosnia Herzegovina to Northern Ireland, of museums and art being harnessed towards post-conflict resolution.[84] It remains an essential component of the international mandate for museums,[85] which renders its absence in South Asia a glaring omission.

East Punjab's 'other' sources of acquisition

Private individuals in East Punjab (Hindu and Sikh), by contrast, had more agency. Their names appear in the correspondence (if not in the report summaries). They often warranted their own files, and (it must be emphasized) received compensation for their contribution to the collecting effort. The government mounted a 'vigorous' awareness campaign,

> to rouse the people to a sense of importance of historical materials which they might possess. The press, the radio, correspondence with individuals and personal contacts with them—all these and other means of publicity were employed to discover and obtain objects of history.[86]

[83]For example, a new gallery (*Alamkara*) about the history of ornament at the National Museum, New Delhi, displays jewellery split at partition, without mentioning its history. I have seen this myself, but also see Sudeshna Guha, 'Decolonizing South Asia through Heritage-and Nation-Building', *Future Anterior*, 16:2 (2019), pp. 30–45.

[84]For example, Elizabeth Crooke and Thomas Maguire, *Heritage after Conflict: Northern Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2018), or Tatjana Takseva, 'Building a Culture of Peace and Collective Memory in Post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo's Museum of War Childhood', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 18:65 (2018), pp. 3–18. Also see Glenn Hooper (ed.), *Heritage at the Interface: Interpretation and Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018).

[85]Exemplified by the constitution of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the parent body of the ICOM (International Council of Museums), even if curatorial and educational approaches to the task have evolved since 1945 when UNESCO was formed. 'UNESCO in Brief—Mission and Mandate', UNESCO website, available at https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco, [accessed 7 March 2023].

[86]'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office During 1948–49', p. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Government efforts included advertisements 'in the leading dailies of Northern India' resulting in 'a wide response' with 'several collections of books, manuscripts, paintings and coins' being brought to the Department's notice. Chopra, in the name of the Department, pursued, persuaded, and negotiated with people to loan or sell, using letters such as this one:[87]

> I am directed to invite your very kind attention to a matter of our national concern. As you are aware the old Punjab Historical Records Office with its museum, situated in Anarkali's Tomb has been left behind in Lahore. It is very doubtful if our East Punjab Government will get any share of the contents of that Archive, but our government have decided to build up denovo a historical archive in Simla worthy of our cultural heritage.[88]

The letter went on to detail the 'uphill task' that this constituted, listed what kind of material was being sought, and claimed the 'active help' of the addressee. The 'Keeper Records' hoped that their 'fine national and cultural sense' would help them 'appreciate the nature of [the] endeavour' and concede to his request to at least copy materials.[89]

In one case, Chopra went to Delhi to examine 'a very valuable collection of historical relics' owned by a 'Shri Jainarain Singh, P. C. S retired', who had got in touch with the Chief Secretary's office. Singh in turn was 'successful in persuading another gentleman Ch. Hari Singh to show…[Chopra]…his old collection of manuscripts and books', and wrote twice to urge Chopra to return to Delhi for the purpose.[90] Furthermore,

> but for the fact that in several cases the prices quoted are too high, the actual intake would have been larger than it has been. Nevertheless two big collections comprising 2220 and 80 objects respectively and a few smaller ones [were] obtained at a total cost of no less than Rs. 40,000/-. These include out of print publications, hitherto unknown manuscript histories, Sanads, Jagirnamas, paintings, coins and statuets [sic].[91]

One cannot overstate the scale of the effort made in infrastructural and monetary terms. Spending Rs 40,000 in January 1957[92] would be the equivalent of over three

[87]Template letter dated March 1948. I presume Chopra, simply printed as 'Keeper Records', is the writer. 'Collection of Historical Material from E Panjab State, 1948', p. 1, File 52, Basta 70, Punjab State Archives, Patiala.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

[90]G. L. Chopra to Chief Secretary, 6 September 1949, 'Salvaging Objects of Historical Interest from the Belongings of Muslim Evacuees Through out the Punjab', p. 41.

[91]'A Report on the Progress of the Punjab Historical Records Office During 1948–49', p. 3. As an aside, the report does note the time all this took, as collections had to be assessed for authenticity and historical importance. In other words, despite the urgency to acquire, time was made to select.

[92]The earliest year from which I have been able to find an inflation calculator is available at https://fxtop.com/en/inflation-calculator.php, [accessed 7 March 2023].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

million (Rs 30 lakhs) today.[93] Eight years previously, in 1949 (when Chopra recorded the above purchases), it would have been worth even more in today's terms.

That the Punjab and national government spent millions on refugee rehabilitation is well-known, though this is often downplayed by recipients who, according to Ian Talbot, attribute their subsequent success to their own hard work and resourcefulness.[94] It is instructive to compare the outflow on historic materials (of which the above account is but one of many) with that on refugees. For instance, Talbot notes that Rs 15 lakhs (1,500,000) was set aside for small grants of Rs 500 to petty shopkeepers, which would have served 3,000 people.[95] The instance of purchase quoted above represents 2.6 per cent of this fund, representing grants to 80 people. While the overall sums spent on refugee rehabilitation and relief (over Rs 190 million) must have outstripped expenditure on object acquisition (the sums of which must remain speculative in the absence of adequate data), they nevertheless make clear that collecting was a priority of the utmost seriousness for the East Punjab government.

A mere two years after partition, when violence had abated but the demands on the East Punjab government were by no means over, it nevertheless believed in the importance of investing in cultural heritage, over and above what it was able to acquire 'on the cheap' from evacuee sources. The Department's reports attest to this. Describing the wide range of activities undertaken until the end of the 1960s,[96] they make clear not only the labour and tedium that went into running and maintaining an archive but the monies that the state was willing to disburse on collections, infrastructure, and personnel.

The difference in the Department's or the East Punjab government's attitude to acquisitions from individuals can best be understood by considering the ways in which states or regimes exercise power. Scholars in diverse fields, ranging from anthropology to political science, art history, archaeology, and history, have unpacked the colonial encounter to demonstrate the rupture, change, and overarching forms of knowledge that it created in South Asia. This work has highlighted the manner in which the colonial project rendered local subjects faceless and nameless. Individuals were reduced to an illustrative type or a cipher in the enumerative, knowledge-gathering, world-shaping projects beloved of the colonial regime. Alternately, they were written out of the collaborative ventures that in truth most undertakings were. Other scholars

[93]Indeed, the government was still spending on acquiring collections in 1959. 'Paintings Purchased', *The Times of India*, 22 October 1959 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 23 May 2017). In addition to this, in the 1950s, the civil servant M. S. Randhawa persuaded the government to set aside an annual acquisition fund for Pahari paintings, with which he began collecting for the proposed Punjab Museum at Chandigarh. The details are relevant to the larger story of East Punjab's collections, which is outside the scope of this article, but the point to note is the significant spends on collections. See M. S Randhawa to P. N. Kirpal, Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Education, 18 April 1967, File 17/36/67—SR Ministry of Home Affairs, pp. 5–8.

[94]Ian Talbot, 'Punjabi Refugees' Rehabilitation and the Indian State: Discourses, Denials and Dissonances', in *From Subjects to Citizens*, (eds) Sherman, Gould and Ansari.

[95]Ibid., p. 128.

[96]'Govt of PEPSU, 1949', File 54, Basta 54, Punjab State Archives, Patiala. Despite the title of the file, it contains the monthly reports for 1948–1949. The last report I was able to find is for 1967.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have pushed back against this, to (re)inscribe native voices, agency, resistance, and subversion in this story, even while acknowledging continuities and adaptations.[97]

Both arguments are valid. The resulting deliberations (from what are presented as polemical positions) have served to enrich our understanding of the impact of power, by opening up a spectrum of possible interpretations. Yet it is the very shape of the debate that makes my point: historians and curators regard the act of naming and crediting native informants as the appropriate way to redress the many erasures of colonial sources. Today, whether it is the Holocaust Museum in Berlin, the Auschwitz/Oswiecim concentration camp, or collaborative projects with source communities undertaken by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, the overwhelming emphasis is on identifying, naming, and therefore acknowledging individuals.

So not only does the 'long partition' continue; it does so in a way we have not yet considered, situated at the heart of the process by which East Punjab sought to reconnect with its roots, heritage, and identity—in tangible form.[98] The state in East Punjab dispossessed and rendered Muslim evacuees nameless by the way in which it collected for Punjab after partition, with no conceivable mode of redress. Those forced to donate, lost any claim on the culture and history that these objects represented, and along with them, their links to particular geographical roots or affinities.

Collecting, citizenship, and identity

Although it reflects the importance of records to the apparatus of government, what else might explain the urge to collect and archive? One motivation might be the 'fiercely acquisitive' nature of national identity, and contesting claims over icons or markers of heritage shared with others.[99] An exhibition constitutes a political arena in which to assert and contest definitions of identity and culture, and art museums perform ceremonial and ritual functions.[100] Simon Knell, in a similar vein, has commented on how museums constitute a space for performing the myths of nationhood, made 'so much more believable' because we see 'real' and 'authentic' objects in front of us, 'not merely props'.[101] For East Punjab's existence to be real, then, and the logic of partition and nationhood to be believable, it *needed* to collect.

In addition to the compelling stage offered by museums, powerful local factors may have been at play too. Anne Murphy has explored the 'rich meanings of Sikh objects',

[97]Scholars from a variety of disciplines have written on these themes. Two classic examples are Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[98]Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition;* Zamindar, *The Long Partition.*

[99]David Lowenthal, 'Identity, Heritage and History', in *Commemorations*, (ed.) Gillis, p. 49. For examples of the different, sometimes clashing, interpretations of heritage, see Hooper (ed.), *Heritage at the Interface.*

[100]Ivan Karp, 'Introduction' and Carol Duncan 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (eds) Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 1–18, 83–103.

[101]Simon J. Knell, Peter Aronsson, Anne B. Amundsen, Amy J. Barnes, Stuart Burch, Jennifer Carter, Vivianne Gosselin, Sarah A. Hughes and Alan Kirwan (eds), *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through which 'the past is experienced and proved, and history narrated and performed for a transnational religious community, within a religious setting as well as cultural, artistic and political ones'.[102] Her wide-ranging analysis investigates Sikh notions of history and historiography, and she also makes the point that the compulsions of the colonial encounter stimulated novel forms of historical memory—in this case, the preoccupations of the Gurudwara Reform Movement, which required that 'Sikhness and history had to be proven and directly related to land'.[103] In her endeavour to 'explore the formation of the Sikh community through the commemoration of the past and the construction of a historical consciousness out of a range of memorial forms',[104] she focuses on the 'marking of Sikh territory, based on the past'.[105] It led to 'land [being] turned into territory…[by being] inhabited, appropriated, or recognised in some form'.[106]

I speculate that what Murphy characterizes as a special Sikh notion of territoriality could spill over to influence how many Punjabis related to the land,[107] and how they imagined their territory, augmented by the bond of a shared Punjabi language.[108] Murphy also notes the secondary role and importance of historical objects, since they 'escaped some of the pressures put upon the site as the embodiment of the historical'[109] (being regarded as personal property), and only recently beginning to attract attention for their historical worth and value as 'memorial technologies'. But if Sikhness—and maybe, by extension, Punjabiness—was so intimately entwined with 'territorialised place',[110] I suggest instead that it was in response to the violent sundering and wrenching away from territory occasioned by partition (and the consequent search for roots) that historic objects gained in value. East Punjab, then, may have been especially fertile ground for collecting. If, as Murphy further suggests, the 'territorialised landscape of the Sikh past created was…a museumised space, produced for consumption of the land', demonstrated by the gurudwara guides' 'tour-museum sensibility', and the phenomenon of the 'historical museum' in gurudwaras,[111] East Punjab's denizens had also been 'prepped' to need a museum in a unique way.

As newly minted Indian citizens (that too, on a frontier), it was thus perhaps 'natural' for Chopra, his colleagues, and the larger public, unmoored by partition, to desire the opposite: to search for roots and a sense of belonging through an established past. Collecting (or contributing to collections) offered a powerful, tangible way to articulate citizenship, claim belonging, and imagine East Punjab. This argument is rendered

[102]Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5.

[103]Ibid., p. 248.

[104]Ibid., pp. 7–9.

[105]Ibid., p. 251.

[106]Ian J. Barrow, *Mapping History, Drawing Territory: British Mapping in India, c.1756–1905* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 13, cited in ibid.

[107]On how the public sphere was constructed in colonial Punjab, structured as religious versus secular, see Ann Murphy, 'Defining the Religious and the Political', *Sikh Formations*, 9:1 (2013), pp. 51–62.

[108]It retains its power today and can contribute to improving relations between the two Punjabs. See Alyssa Ayres, 'Language, the Nation and Symbolic Capital: The Case of Punjab', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 27:3 (2008), pp. 917–946.

[109]Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past*, p. 248.

[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid., p. 256.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more compelling when we consider the practices of exclusion discussed herein, which were built into the system. Muslim refugees were dispossessed of their cultural heritage as they were of their claim to East Punjab, as a consequence, and in corroboration, of partition.

The politics and ethics of collecting for East Punjab

Donald Preziosi has noted that the process of collecting, re-collecting, and de-collecting is itself significant, and that the various stages intertwine. There is a deliberate erasure of the previous meanings and functions of objects by the very act of collecting objects,[112] *every time* they are collected. But if this 'normalizes' the erasure of evacuee ownership from East Punjab's archival collections as a universal feature of how we collect, it does not absolve museums and archives of their responsibility to recover collection histories. Museums do not exist in a bubble. They are enmeshed in the politics and society around them; this point may have become obvious and better broadcast in recent years, but was never *not* the case. While this is by now a well-rehearsed argument in the context of colonial museums in South Asia, it requires emphasis in the era of the nation state:

> Claiming to be apolitical caretakers of art is a political choice. Claiming to be anational safeguarders of universal treasures ignores the national history that brought those treasures under the care of the nation to begin with. Not confronting the effect of curatorial or collecting choices, and not acknowledging the consequences of what is displayed and what is absent, of what is talked about and what is silenced, is also a deeply political act.[113]

Thus far, the focus of this article has been on the historical relevance and implications of East Punjab's collecting policies in the immediate aftermath of partition, but these discoveries have significance for much else besides: museum historiography and practice in the region, and how South Asian collections are exhibited elsewhere. They also have a bearing on current debates about the uneven implementation, experience, and legacy of decolonization as a whole (not just of the museum).

'We live in an age of apology and recrimination',[114] in which previously victimized or marginalized groups have come to demand—if not always with success, but with more visibility—redressal for past wrongs in various ways, ranging from public apologies to compensation or reparations. When considering the 'effects of historical memory on the political affairs of nations',[115] and evaluating the factors that might lead a country to choose from a spectrum of responses ranging from apology to redressal to refusal,[116] historic objects have a central role available to them. Not only do they

[112]Donald Preziosi, 'Myths of Nationality', in *National Museums*, (eds) Knell et al., p. 59.

[113]Peggy Levitt, *Artefacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), p. 140.

[114]Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 8.

[115]Ibid., p. 1.

[116]Ibid., p. 30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'encode' memories, allowing them to be shared, but also 'exposure to cultural artifacts carrying different memories and that are based in historical facts can lead to a shift in the collective memory over time'.[117] Despite their failings, therefore, museums retain their power and potential to effect positive change.[118]

Significant shifts have occurred in museum practice and international legislation to accommodate the debate on the ownership and restitution of cultural property, producing diverse scenarios.[119] In South Asia, in the colonial context, 'cultural' (much of it archaeological and courtly) and 'ethnographic' categories of objects are most likely to be found outside the subcontinent. Typical demands for restitution and repatriation from India focus on the former—the sword of Tipu Sultan and the Kohinoor diamond to name two famous examples. In comparison 'ethnographic' objects receive far less public and government attention as 'lower' value objects, and requests tend to be made directly from source communities to holding institutions.[120] It is largely (though not exclusively) 'ethnographic' collections (which include human remains), by contrast, that are at the centre of the current international storm over decolonizing museums and the question of returning looted or illegally procured collections.

In response, museums, national governments where applicable, and international bodies like the United Nations have evolved a range of strategies: from digging their heels in; to acknowledging difficult histories and initiating belated research projects to recover provenance; enacting legislation or international agreements on cultural property; facilitating long-term loans; and finding creative ways to enable restitution, including the use of digital technology. There are challenges and complications, such as the question of who is authorized to speak for whom, and who the stakeholders in such situations are. These matters are the mere tip of the iceberg: not only is this a cursory review of a large and complex issue, it is a live one which museums, their publics, and their governments are in the midst of shaping; a debate that we do not yet know the outcome of.

Yet while there is a substantial—and growing—body of work in the museum, heritage, and culture fields on why historic erasures were significant and how museums have or could address them,[121] no study of South Asian museums considers the role of the postcolonial nation *itself* in such matters. I argue that the objects

[117]Ibid., p. 31.

[118]This has been described as the 'optimistic' perspective on exhibiting culture, coexisting and in a productive tension with the 'critical'. Shelley Ruth Butler, 'The Politics of Exhibiting Culture: Legacies and Possibilities', *Museum Anthropology*, 23:3 (2000), pp. 74–92.

[119]Selected examples include Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (eds), *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), see especially the Introduction for a summary of the current status; Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Lyndel V. Prott (eds), *Cultural Property and Contested Ownership: The Trafficking of Artefacts and the Quest for Restitution* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016). See Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and compare the prefaces to the three editions (it was first published in 1989).

[120]Dr Mark Elliott, personal communication, February 2018. Also see Guha, 'Decolonizing', for a comment on this.

[121]To cite one example, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to investigate the legacy of Canada's Indian residential schools. It resulted in several detailed reports and findings, but also Calls to Action, some of which were specifically aimed at museums and archives calling upon them to make visible and safeguard this history, available at http://nctr.ca/, [accessed 8 March 2023].

unmoored by partition and collected for East Punjab's museums constitute a third, even 'postcolonial', category of objects that *the state and its apparatus* dispersed in the course of nation-making.

Given the significant legal resources that both India and Pakistan have invested over the years in shoring up their claims over evacuee property, it is unlikely that Indian museums will ever acknowledge such objects as illegal acquisitions. But the evidence is clear: they were *unethical*. Recent efforts by partition survivors and their descendants to recover and record the varied experiences of that 'long' moment have attested to the catharsis it can afford. So, although 'at times it may make sense' to seek closure over shared historical events, and at others, prove 'impossible or too costly to do so',[122] the museum collections of East Punjab continue to offer real possibility, and hope, for reconciliation.

Conclusion

Studies of the evolution of citizenship in South Asia have demonstrated that it has emerged from a dialogue between the state and its citizens—if Vazira Zamindar 'insists' that it was top-down, Ornit Shani and Joya Chatterji make convincing cases for the individual and group efforts that exerted pressure in the opposite direction, thereby shaping democratic institutions and legislation from below.[123] Others have shown how the mechanisms of governance and their implementation mediated individual experiences of the state, and the rights and duties of citizens.[124]

There is also convincing evidence of the 'many nationalisms' that existed prior to partition and independence in 1947,[125] which offered alternate conceptions of what the nation could be. When considered in conjunction with the language of national importance and patriotic duty that the Record Office deployed when writing to potential donors, it becomes possible to see that the process of participating in collection-building offered a way in which to articulate one's citizenship, affirm belonging, and imagine the nation. Conversely, using nameless evacuee property for collection-building was an act of disenfranchisement: denying citizenship, belonging, and the right to imagine the nation or region. Comparing pre- and post-partition visitor figures for the Lahore Museum with those of East Punjab would expose the extent to which ordinary citizens (as opposed to donors and department officials) participated in this particular form of nation-building. Unfortunately, the relevant figures were not available, but that there was a commitment to and investment in engaging them is now beyond doubt.

The post-partition history of East Punjab was complicated, as it was made and remade more than once within two short decades. From 1948–1956, East Punjab

[122]Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics*, p. 4.

[123]Zamindar, *The Long Partition*; Chatterji 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship'; Ornit Shani, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Rohit De, *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[124]Sherman, Gould and Ansari (eds), *From Subjects to Citizens*; De, 'Evacuee Property'.

[125]Joya Chatterji, 'Nationalisms in India, 1857–1947', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, (ed.) John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 242–264.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

coexisted with the Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), a federation of the princely states of Patiala, Kapurthala, Jind, Nabha, Faridkot, Malerkotla, Kalsia, and Nalagarh. The two were subsequently merged, following which the region was trifurcated into modern-day Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana in 1966.

While it lasted, PEPSU was a remarkable experiment full of other possible national imaginaries, in the service of which the PEPSU princes' mobilization of museum collections remains less researched and underappreciated. Although a thorough investigation specific to East Punjab and PEPSU is outside the scope of this article, the wider subject of the incorporation of princely collections into national museums has received at least some scholarly attention—and thus partial acknowledgement.[126] Although the princes as a group were considered 'losers' at independence and thereafter, there could not be a more sobering contrast between the comparatively respectful treatment that postcolonial museums accorded princely 'contributions' to national collections, as opposed to the erasures and silence over those of fleeing refugees.

What is the culpability of the postcolonial state—as much as the colonial one before it—in engaging in questionable collecting practices and exclusionary processes? Given the ground-breaking discovery that movable evacuee property (most of which had belonged to fleeing Muslims) provided the bedrock for East Punjab's museums and archives, is it *ethical* for museum professionals to ignore that opportunity (alternately, avoid shouldering the responsibility)? Is omitting the acquisition story of Punjab's museum collections mere political expediency to be condoned, or does (and should) it have legal implications, or consequences? How does it affect our reading of the postcolonial state's treatment (or appropriation) of its other marginal communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis? These questions are of pivotal importance for curators and art historians, both *of* and *in* South Asia, who are yet to interrogate their collections' *postcolonial* histories in general, but those of partitioned regions in particular.[127]

Given that much of the academic literature on nation-state formation, citizen-making, governance, and legal systems is premised on how the state dealt with evacuee property,[128] what is the broader scholarly impact of these discoveries? To evolve a nuanced view, this study, although an important beginning, must be expanded to include West Punjab, stretch to encompass divided Bengal, and consider undivided, yet partition-affected Sindh.

[126]Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, Chapter 7.

[127]Barring a handful of studies, existing art historical and museum scholarship has tended to skip over the crucial period between 1947–1960. In addition to works already cited, see Kavita Singh, 'Museums and the Making of the Indian Art Historical Canon', in *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art*, (eds) Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul D. Mukherji and Deeptha Achar (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2003), pp. 335–357; Kavita Singh, 'The Museum is National', in *India: A National Culture?*, (ed.) Geeti Sen (New Delhi: Sage Publications/India International Centre, 2003), pp. 176–196; Phillips, 'A Museum for the Nation'; Aparna Megan Kumar, 'Partition and the Historiography of Art in South Asia', PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018. Two books on collectors whose collections were acquired for the nation are Giles Tillotson, *A Passionate Eye: Textiles, Paintings, and Sculptures from the Bharany Collections* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2014) and Pratapaditya Pal, *In Pursuit of the Past: Collecting Old Art in Modern India, circa 1875–1950* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2015).

[128]Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship'; Roy, *Partitioned Lives;* Sherman, Gould and Ansari (eds), *From Subjects to Citizens*; De, 'Evacuee Property'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Over the last decade and more, several scholars have sought to shift the narrative away from high-level politics at New Delhi, to 'middle tier' bureaucrats in the regions.[129] Yet, as this article has shown, the ability to shape the events and outcomes of partition extended well beyond, to include professionals like archivists and institutions such as museums. They were neither mere spectators at, nor simplistic casualties of, the great divide. In consequence, we have widened our perception of who 'achieved' the goals of partition and independence—and there exists scope to expand the roster further.

The essential relationship between historic objects, citizenship, notions of belonging, and imagined identities is now incontrovertible. Moreover, it is evident that these links, forged in the aftermath of a polarizing partition, *continue* to be imprinted upon the histories that we are able to write; the identities we can build, of the region and the nation; and the narratives that they enable and disable. They depend on what we have in our museums and archives, who put them there, and why.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Professor Joya Chatterji and Dr Norbert Peabody for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. At *Modern Asian Studies*, Professor Sumit Guha and the anonymous reviewers were encouraging and demanding, which has made this a stronger piece.

Competing interests. None.

[129]Here, I am referring to historians of partition, notably Joya Chatterji and Pallavi Raghavan, who have 'credited' cross-border networks of politicians and bureaucrats, in the main, with enabling partition. Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition;* Raghavan, *Animosity at Bay.* Also see Sengupta, 'Breaking up Bengal'; Yaqoob Khan Bangash, 'Implementing Partition: Proceedings of the Punjab Partition Committee, July–August, 1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, 55:6 (2021), pp. 1883–1925.

Cite this article: Venkateswaran, Mrinalini. 2023. '"East Punjab must not lag behind": Partition, museums, and identity in independent India'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(4), pp. 1277–1299. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000580