



Culture Talk

A cultural crime

HAFIZUR RAHMAN is alarmed at the increase in museum thefts and says that it is depriving the country of precious artefacts.

*Pak. Culture
The Nation
9.6.02*

In highly developed countries, culture is a very fertile field for crime. Taking just one example, the theft of a classic painting may put the owner to a loss of a million dollars. And this is going on all the time. Art museums, albeit strictly guarded with electronic safety alarms, offer prime targets to burglars and robbers. Add to this the connected crime of copying the works of famous masters and passing them off as originals. And, to use a pun, this is only one side of the picture.

In Pakistan thieves and robbers of curios and antiquities lag behind no one else, and, to the best of their ingenuity, are at it all the time. Although awareness about the value of cultural treasures is not widespread in this country, yet those who have chosen to adopt this profession keep themselves abreast of latest developments. I am told by a friend that dealers and middlemen in stolen Gandhara antiquities in Peshawar and Mardan talk about the age and provenance of their goods like expert antiquarians.

The biggest anti-social and illegal act in the domain of Pakistan's culture is the constant, never-relaxing, export-cum-smuggling of ancient artefacts, mostly of Gandhara origin. I have written about it so many times that there's no point in repeating it. If not stopped altogether it can certainly be reduced if the Customs at airports were doing their duty strictly.

I must mention that it has two broad aspects. One is the smuggling per se in which the artefacts are sold outside the country by agents appointed for the purposes. The other is incalculable "diplomatic" smuggling in which foreign diplomatic personnel posted in Pakistan are not happy unless they

take away in their baggage at least a million-rupee worth of Gandhara sculptures. There is no accountability of this, for these foreigners have diplomatic protection.

Second on the list of cultural crimes is the unauthorised digging that is taking place day and night in the Peshawar-Mardan-Swat region which was once upon a time a the centre of the extensive Gandhara empire, covering parts of western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan. All newspapers a couple of weeks ago carried a colour photograph of a big array of unlawfully excavated artefacts seized by Customs Intelligence men when it was on its way from Peshawar to Rawalpindi en route to a foreign destination.

The story, as narrated to the press by the Customs people, stated that two Afghans had been arrested in connection with the haul of artefacts, and their statement gave rise to the fact that a big gang (one of many operating in the area) was involved in the operation. The trouble is that, in all such cases, it is the poor carrier who is proceeded against in the courts while the real culprits are somehow never apprehended. As Pakistan, you and I need not be surprised at this, for this is the way of the minions of law and order.

According to a Peshawar daily, Mardan division has more than 700 archaeological sites of various periods, and since the government is not able to operate this large number most of them fall prey to private diggers. Illegal excavation at a place called Kashmir Smast has, during the last year, yielded a bronze Buddhistic statue and coins of the prime of the White Huns. The statue is said to have fetched 28 lakhs of rupees from a foreign buyer.

The looters have gone scientific.



Electronic coin detectors are being used to locate and dig out coins because these are the single most precious artefact that can easily be hidden and covered anywhere without attracting attention. Also it finds ready buyers among the agents of foreign smugglers who are active day and night in the area in search of good purchases for their principals who may be abroad or living in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. What a story this would make if the correspondent of a foreign newspaper was interested!

The next big and lucrative field for cultural crime are the museums in Pakistan. There is not one from where artefacts on display have not been stolen. And there is not one case of theft or burglary which has



been successfully traced by the police to the criminals. Unfortunately the real criminals in all such casts are the staff themselves who provide easy access to those who break in and their culpability extends to providing them information about the really valuable items.

Precious pieces of cultural importance have been lifted from the Lahore Museum, the National Museum in Karachi and the Peshawar Museum. I don't know what happens. Either the top authorities feel obliged to protect the museum staff, or whether they too are implicated, but I have yet to hear of the thefts being traced to the real criminals. In these days of foolproof alarm systems one fails to understand how people can break into museums, unless they are in league with the staff concerned.

I have before me a news report emanating from Larkana, stating that the Larkana District Council has urged the government, in a unanimous resolution, to trace and arrest the burglars who had pinched 40 priceless seals and other artefacts from the museum at

Moenjodaro. Mohaib Pirzado, one of the union council nazims of the area, alleged that this was not a case of simple theft but a conspiracy against the Indus civilisation in which an international gang could be involved. So, even Moenjodaro has not been spared by the looters.

All these instances call for immediate attention on the part of the Culture Ministry so that the entire question of museum security - whether the museum is the prestigious National Museum in Karachi or the humble Gandhara museum in Chakdara - should be gone into by a committee of experts, since in every such case part of the blame falls on experts employed by the museums themselves. This is not a complicated matter, nor would the methods recommended by the committee involve an expenditure of crores. The only thing is that it requires priority, and poor culture is always low in priority.

Talking of museums, I have heard of a really sad case pertaining to culture. It appears that a regular museum was to be established at Mardan because of the flood of artefacts available officially with the government and those that could be procured without much cost from the market. One-time Chief Minister, Aftab Sherpao, nowadays again in the news for the criminal charges against him, sanctioned the purchase of 12 kanals of land in Mardan satellite town in 1995 and allocated funds for its construction. For some unknown reason the project was abandoned, which is a cause for complaint among the citizens of Mardan city and the entire division.

What do readers say: does criminal neglect also fall in the category of crime against culture? ■