

by Shezi

# Knowing Lahore through material evidence

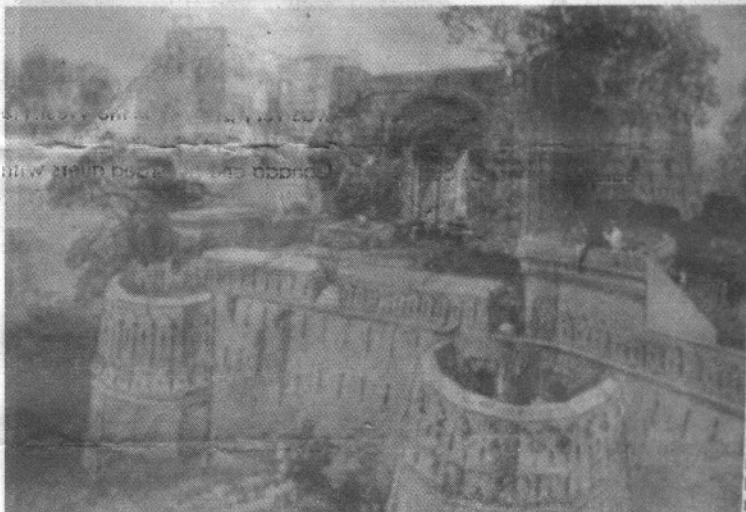
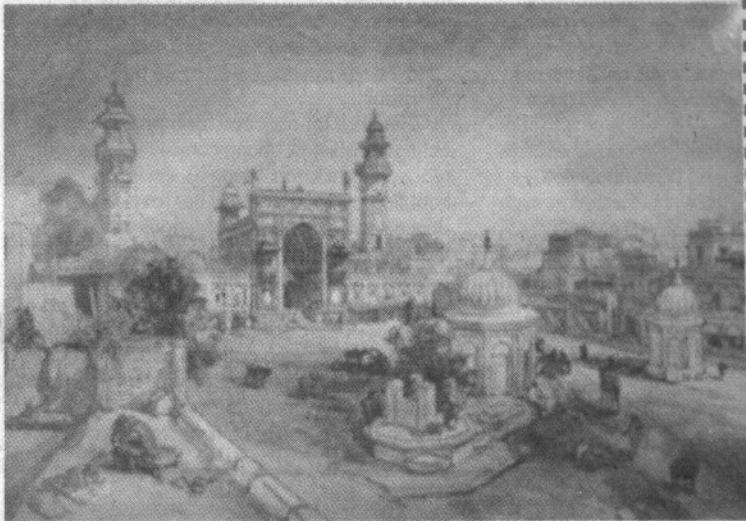
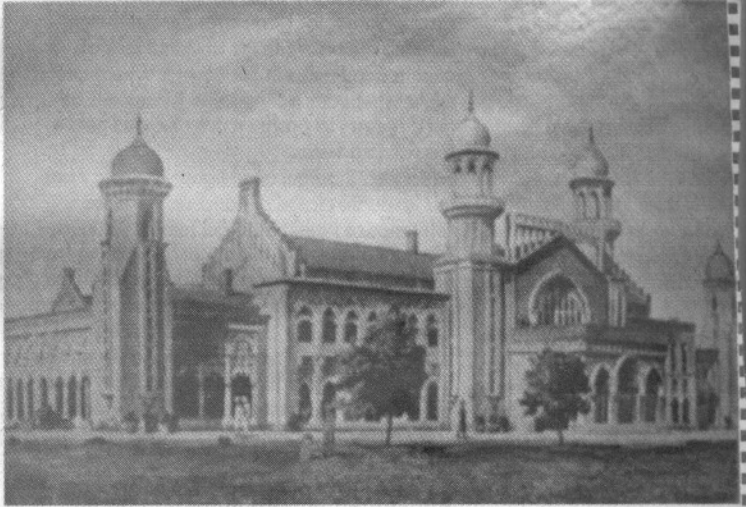
*Lahore  
Nation  
30-3-02*

**M**etaphorically speaking cities have a living character of a breathing entity capable of growth and evolution. A look back in the past of a city, one with which we have an emotional and aesthetic bonding, could be perhaps as interesting as to apprehend the life of a dearly loved human being. There were two events in this beautifully vibrant city of ours that offered two perspectives to look into the past of Lahore. A: an exhibition arranged by Lahore Museum 'Antiquities of Lahore' and another was a brainstorming but rather frustrating event on Lahore vis-a-vis its 'land management'.

The Environment Section of the Fledgling City Government arranged the latter. I call the event frustrating for the major reason that over the past very many years one has seen almost zero outcome of such meetings and the thing that matters most—'implementation', could hardly be seen manifested in the state-of-things.

Coming to the exhibition, one positive aspect of seeing the ceremonial 'red ribbon' being cut by a top bureaucrat is that a naïve heart like mine begins hoping against hope that the egregious red tape-ism too disappears one day for good after such kind and public-friendly gesture of our top hats and high brows. However, as an aging viewer remarked, every one wants to collect as many a gaily feathers before laying the official cap to its rest of retirement. Our dynamic top boss of Punjab promised that he was all ears for the problems of Museum and that 'he' had given a bright scholarly guy to this institution and expressed full confidence in his person.

How flattered my naïve heart felt on hearing these remarks is simply beyond words! True enough, the Museum is becoming slightly interactive—a series of lecture, some exhibitions and a dialogue with the media could be safely put in this bracket of 'signs of movement'. Some of the recent lectures held at its auditorium have been



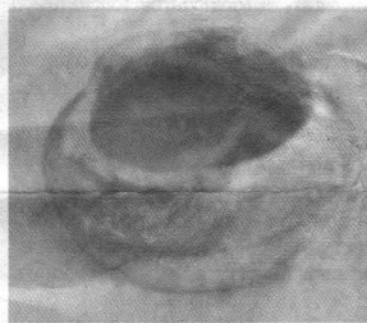
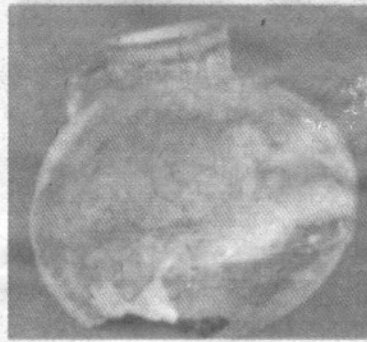
held at its auditorium have been professionally handled and meticulously planned. 'Antiquities of Lahore' put together an array of interesting relics—photographic reproduces of paintings, lithographs and historic photographs, arms, attires with calico printing, etc.

Besides some Sikh period Calico printed items there were these modern samples of blockprinting which has abandoned the use of vegetable / natural/organic dyes to be replaced by synthetic/ chemical dyes. It was this indigenous 'art' that adorned the gorgeous garments of royalty. Seeing these relics was like taking an account of the city through a window opened onto its checkered history.

Artifacts from various galleries of Museum such as Islamic, Hindu, Arms, Arts and Crafts, Paintings, Ethnographic, Coins, Pakistan Movement and Manuscripts Gallery were drawn for this exposition. The organizer, a Research Officer presently with the additional charge of security of the Museum said this exhibition could have been more diverse with a much greater cooperation of the gallery curators. Some exhibits were from the private collection of Fakir Syed Aijazuddin and Prof.Dr.Farrukh Ahmed Khan.

One aspect left much to be desired— there was ample room for improvement in the display of the artifacts. Merely putting together some items doesn't mean it becomes an exhibition. A curator and a befitting display are some of the basics that were neglected or rather the compromised aspects of this exhibition. Could such aspects be overlooked conveniently and benignly for institutions with frugal development budgets? For these are national institutions traditionally led by cash-strapped officials.

Much more, these institutions suffered ill repute and loss in the hands of those 'officials' who were entrenched in survival politics and were disreputable for their records of 'ill-housekeeping'. A very interesting aspect of the exhibition was the collection of old maps of Lahore Division, the older city and the walled city itself, which showed



the lush gardens, an environmental buffer zone, that once girdled this age-old part of the city. There was another map showing Lahore Division as it existed in 1850- 55. Drawn, temporarily, from the custody of Archives department Punjab, the Punjab Public Library and private collection the maps were a treat for discerning and impressionable eyes. It was

interesting to note the way some cities were spelled —

sojranwalal, Seedalkot. People were seen crowding before postcards and photographic reproduces showing the Mall, the Old Tollington Market, various city halls like Lawrence Hall, Montgomery Hall, Town Hall, Old Anarkali, etc., etc.

Amongst the people a heartening scene was to watch an elderly person calling upon his third generation of grandsons and daughters to see how their city once looked and to where they belonged originally—the walled city that also figures prominently in this exhibition through various historical buildings like Masjid Wazir Khan and Soneri Mosque, various city gates that once fortified this place. Elderly Mian Attaullah (that's what I learned he was called), an Assistant Commissioner in early 50s said this is the kind of thing (exhibition) we must have to show our heritage to the younger generation! A big plus of holding an exhibition at the Museum premises is that no extra initiative is needed to see an art collection here and the people just walk in while moving in and out of other Galleries.

Concluding it all, one could hardly debate a point stated repeatedly by many Lahorites on several occasions, which is the need for a 'City Museum'. After living here for centuries and being a part of its history, this is something what the Lahorites deserve for themselves and for the growing generations. And this is more important than so-called 'Food Streets' which are after all a commercial venture to say the least. We deserve and need more 'buffer zones'—open, breathing spaces laden with foliage and flowers. We deserve some care from the authorities in terms of stringent regulation to make the 'air' we breathe less polluted. There are myriad lessons to be learnt from the past! It's still time to streamline the future course for this ever-growing urban giant now expanding southwards with a considerable speed and commercial gusto. 🍀