Sindh : Past Glory, Present Nostalgia

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DONALD M. STADTNER

For many scholars Pakistan is merely a crossroads linking East and West, a reflection of the longstanding concentration on the Buddhist art of Gandhara in the nation's northern reaches. Southern coastal Pakistan, however, has arguably played a far more influential role in shaping Asian art and history, a conclusion formed after paging through these thirteen essays that make up this splendid new volume by Marg Publications.

Pakistan was not only a crucible for diverse influences but also a fountainhead for cultural forces which spread in different directions. That Indian civilization emerged from the great Indus Valley cities, now in central and southern Pakistan, marks just the beginning of the country's impact. It is to the credit of Marg, based in Mumbai, to recognize that the traditions of the Sindh province of Pakistan are woven together inextricably with those of its neighbours. The editor of the volume, Pratapaditya Pal, carefully selected contributors who reflect the most current scholarship. Pal also cast a wide net, with essays ranging from Indus Valley potsherds and antiquities to a discussion of tasty Sindhi pickles in an essay devoted to local culinary traditions. Few stones are therefore left unturned.

Pal's Introduction provides the conceptual framework for the essays, encapsulating Sindh's history together with a review of the major religious movements, starting with Buddhism and moving on to Islam in the eighth century. Pal now believes that a well-known brass Surya in the Cleveland Museum of Art, long attributed to Kashmir should be associated with ancient Multan and was perhaps modelled on the now lost wooden image of Surya that was the principal deity of the Sun Temple. Dilip Chakrabarti's essay traces the broad outlines of the Indus Valley period, illustrated with splendid colour photographs drawn from the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, or the former Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. He endorses the most commonly accepted version of the culture's slow demise, occasioned by a change in the course of the Indus. The demanding topic of coinage is taken up by Shailendra Bandhare who pinpoints the earliest extant coins in Sindh, those struck by Indo-Parthian rulers, such as Gondophares. Sindh fell later to the Sassanians, issuing coins with a fire altar suggestive of the Zoroastrian faith. The Amirs of northern Sindh, based in Multan, created coin types very similar to Pratihara *drammas*, apart from Kufic inscriptions. The story of Sindh coinage is taken all the way into the British period where coins bore a rampant lion, a symbol of the *raj*.

Pal's essay examines a number of artistic highlights from Sindh, notably the spectacular brass figure of Brahma in the National Museum, Karachi, and a group of ivory figures now largely in the British Museum. Sabyasachi Mukherjee directs his attention to the most important Buddhist monument of Sindh, the famous Mirpurkhas stupa, furnishing valuable conjectural ground plans and two plausible reconstructions. He concludes by relating the stupa to Devnimori in Gujarat and tentatively assigns the Mirpurkhas monument to the late 4th - 5th century CE. Many clay votive tablets excavated from the site were clearly made in eastern India, indicating that pilgrims visited distant Sindh. These tablets appear much closer to Pala examples, attributed by Mukherjee to ca. 7th – 8th centuries, suggesting that the site continued for some time after the 5th century.

Ibrahim Shah tackles a former Shaiva temple at ancient Debal, the modern Banbhore, situated some 60 kilometres southeast of Karachi on the coast. Little remains today, apart from architectural fragments and stone *lingas*, making it difficult to ascribe a firm date for the temple. The vast subject of Islamic architecture of Sindh is taken up by Alka Patel. The earliest phase, 8th through the 12th centuries, lies largely in ruins, notably the mosques of Debal and Mansurah. The spectacular tomb of Rukn al-Din in Multan from the 14th century together with other structures in upper Sindh, reveal the blending of local conventions and tradition from outside. The great Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, left his mark on Sindh with a large mosque at Thatta. The archaeological remains from Banbhore are the subject of Mumtaz Currim's essay which unravels the major excavation reports. It was originally visited by Alexander Cunningham and Henry Cousens and later by N.G. Majumdar, but the first large scale excavations did not occur until the late 1950s. Ceramics, coins and stone inscriptions are individually examined. One large jar with spouts reveals Sassanian style roundels filled with animals and birds, fashioned in low relief.

Textiles are treated by Noorjehan Bilgrami who combines the old and new in her discussion, especially the traditional resist printing by wooden bock, or *ajrak*. She describes this process, and the various techniques, such as embroidery. Sindh is also famous for quilt making, or *ralli*, which is often associated with Sufis, since quilts are in theory made up of old pieces of materials, representing humility. The British left their mark on Sindh, and this is the subject of Rosemary Raza's essay. Many of her illustrations are drawn from the British Library, including old photographs. Nandita Bhavnani takes up the history of Karachi which arose in the 18th century under the name of Kalachi. The British took advantage of the internal politics of the nascent city and seized the port in the 1830s. Antique black-and-white and sepia photographs evoke the era. Even in the 19th century Karachi's population reflected the cosmopolitan nature of British colonial Asia, with Punjabis, Marwaris, Jews, Parsis and others soon settling there and flourishing. Native Sindhis dwindled to a minority in Karachi, somewhat reminiscent of indigenous Burmese in Rangoon during the same period, overtaken by immigrants from India and China. After Partition in 1947 the city saw waves of Mohajirs, a fact of history which has changed the face of the city. Modern Sindhi art in the 20th century is the subject of two essays, by Salima Hashmi and Yashodhara Dalmia. Dalmia's essay is devoted to the life and works of the celebrated artists, Nalini Malani. Last but not least is a review of the regional cuisine, especially the impact of Karachi's Hindu community. Sherina Advani partially illustrates her essay with charming old drawings taken from a Sindhi cookbook from the early 1960s, before microwaves and noisy electric blenders had invaded the kitchen. Advani has even included some tasty recipes, for Seyal Gosht and Mithhi Chutney.

This unique volume underscores not only the remarkable diversity of Sindh but also its connections with its neighbours. Sindh was indeed a crossroads between civilizations, like Gandhara, but it has also generated a unique culture that is still very much in evidence. The photographs are well chosen and crisp and the footnotes accompanying the essays provide guides to further reading. The handsome layout of the volume complements the quality of the illustrations and the articles. Regional studies like this are few and far between and we look forward to more such volumes issued by Marg Publications.