

## Idols in the Archive

MANAN AHMED ASIF

A.

*Is a circumcision, for example, an exterior mark? Is it an archive?*<sup>1</sup>

Let me begin at the beginning.

MY LEFT EYEBROW HAS A scar. It is jagged, and usually the droop of the eyebrow hides it from view. I see it sometimes when I look in the mirror. When I see it, I am reminded instantly of my father. He was sitting, reading a newspaper, on the lawn of our Lahore house. It was near to 6:00 p.m.—late evening to dusk. I had recently conquered the art of biking and I was eager to show him how well I rode. I kept going past him on the bike, but he was engrossed in the paper. Finally I decided that to really get his attention, I would need to go *really, really fast*. I went a ways, and began to pedal furiously. Right as I gathered full speed and came up to him, I looked at him to see if he was watching me. He wasn't. That split second, however, was enough for me to lose control of the bike, which swerved radically to the left, and I went face-first into a column of bricks. He looked up as I stumbled up, my eye covered in blood. I have no memory of this, except for when I “see” my scar.

Body was the first archive I learned to read. I used to gaze at my grandmother's hands in wonder, knowing that each crease and crevice had a specific memory, a song, and maybe a story about Kashmir. She had a series of rings she would wear, never telling me why she chose one or the other on any given day. I knew each had a specific tale, a resonance, and I wanted to read it. As I grew older, bolder, and insistent, she did tell me. She told me about the ring she has from Srinagar, and the one that she sold after she migrated to Lahore, and the one that she left behind in Srinagar.

B.

Past was the most common currency and the most valid emotion that I ever encountered growing up.

As a teenager, I discovered that I liked to listen to stories. Not the tall tales of teenagers such as myself (I was good at tall tales) but those of the old men and women who dotted my landscape and among whom I moved with a careful mixture of dread and nonchalance. My grandfather, the bicycle-repair uncle, the *patwari*, theirs were all stories that evoked a distance from my present and a world that never would be mine. They

Manan Ahmed Asif ([ma3179@columbia.edu](mailto:ma3179@columbia.edu)) is Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University.

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 15.

were often stories of pasts left behind, possessions abandoned. I yearned to hear such partition stories, but they came with a unforeseen risk. I discovered that just as the stories that were provoked (by me) were instructive, they were also tales of domestic and economic drama that infested the daily lives of my family—in itself an archive of grievances, of gifts, of slights, of kindnesses—that required for its sustenance and maintenance a consistent and constant public/private articulation. Stories had to be told, so that memory could live, and memory needed to live, to act as a judge. I quickly learned that these inside-stories were secrets—dramas that were currently unfolding so that my Nano could be the archive of these familial contestations; she could not allow them to be recreated, retold, remembered elsewhere, by me. They constituted a dark archive. I was not supposed to tell them to strangers. This archive made me silent for ethical reasons—it did not belong to me. I had no right to tell their secrets, as they were not my secrets. The scar was not on my body.

c.

The evidence-room, he told me, was off-bounds, sealed, and rarely opened. It belonged to the Nawab of Bahawalpur, and the local police used it until the 1980s but it had been sealed since then.<sup>2</sup> “We just make sure that it still stands.”

I had told him that I was looking for temples—sites of worship long deemed blasphemous in that region. The temple structures were still there in Uch Sharif, in Ahmedpur, though the gods had fled. I wanted to see the walls, and the niches, and the curves. Some were now living rooms. Some were haunted by ghosts and inaccessible. Some were sealed up in property disputes. One was the evidence-room.

We sipped our teas loudly.

The question sat between us for a long time. I had no good answer for it, and a bad answer was no good. Why was I looking for Hindus in Uch?<sup>3</sup> The problem was that I had no idea how closely affiliated anyone was with the Lej jihadi I had glimpsed earlier.<sup>4</sup>

I said something about being a historian of space. “There is an idol—a *mūrti*—in the evidence-room,” he said, and the room went utterly quiet.

We went single file, through the bazaar to the end of an open field. Tucked into the side of a large structure, which looked like a high school or a dormitory, was a single room. The thick wooden, studded door was raised three feet from the ground and had a giant single-bolt lock semi-rusted into place. He opened it, and all four of us went inside, one by one. Someone lit a candle, though some light was peeking in from openings in the ceiling, illuminating the bags of evidence (see [figure 1](#)).

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of the princely states in India, see Barbara Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>See Manan Ahmed, “The Long Thirteenth Century of the *Chachnama*,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 4 (2012): 459–91.

<sup>4</sup>See Manan Ahmed Asif, “Ways of Seeing: Pakistan’s Paradox of Knowledge and Denial,” *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics & Culture* (June 1, 2011), <http://caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/ways-seeing> (accessed October 9, 2013).



**Figure 1.** Bags of evidence. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.



**Figure 2.** Murder weapons. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

D.

*The trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself.*<sup>5</sup>

The space was crowded with objects, each tagged with a sin (see [figure 2](#)). The murder weapons, or weapons confiscated (see [figure 3](#)). The booze (see [figure 4](#)). The cutlery (see [figure 5](#)).

<sup>5</sup>Derrida, *op. cit.* note 1, p. 57.



**Figure 3.** Murder weapons. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.



**Figure 4.** Bottled spirits. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

They told me not to touch anything since it would be “dangerous.”

The archive had a topo-nomology: some objects were higher than eye-gaze and seemed to have lingered the longest. I saw weapons long superseded in their effectiveness at killing or maiming. There were files, reams of papers, and (I saw with the sinking heart of a historian) rolled-up manuscripts. I made no move. There was no desire to touch, yet. The dust that had settled on everything was indicative of the life





**Figure 5.** Cutlery. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

in this archive, the stories that I wanted to excavate.<sup>6</sup> Here was a history of policing, a repository of all the sins in a small corner of the world. Every family's internal was external here. Someone like me, someone obsessed with stories, how long could I live in this room, by myself, I wondered.

Their eyes were on me, waiting for me to discover the idol—the Hindu god or goddess in whose search they thought I had traveled from Lahore (see figure 6).

It took me a while to figure out what to say. Who does not worship Plato? Who is the woman? I said, “This must have belonged to a political theorist, or a classicist.” Someone who put these busts in his or her library, which in itself would be hues of gold and amber, and smelled of leather? But that picture seemed more at home in Cambridge? I shrugged my head to refocus. “They worshipped this, yeah? May God Protect Us.” I gave a sheepish grin. Everyone watched solemnly as I took a photo. I took another and another to satisfy the archivist's need for proper documentation. On the marble bust were scribbled the case-file number and the jurisdiction precinct. The super-heading taped to the wall told me that this idol belonged to a murder case. Were these witnesses to a murder? I remembered the scene from the early thirteenth-century Persian text *Chachnama*, composed not a mile away from this archive. It describes an encounter between the Muslim commander Muhammad bin Qasim and an idol with rubies for eyes. Upon entering the temple, Muhammad bin Qasim is startled when he sees the shining eyes of the idol. He thinks it is a fire-demon. But when the idol does not move, Muhammad bin Qasim reaches out and snatches a bracelet off the hand of the idol, and asks the caretaker to tell the idol to take it back. “What kind of God do you have that cannot even stop me

<sup>6</sup>On dust and archives, see Carol Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).



**Figure 6.** Idols. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

from taking his property?” It is not a rhetorical question, but *Chachnama* records no rhetorical answer. To the Muslim commander, this idol was a strangely powerless God. Yet, I have always fixated on that initial startled reaction of the commander. The idol spoke before Muhammad bin Qasim did.



**Figure 7.** Indian empire. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

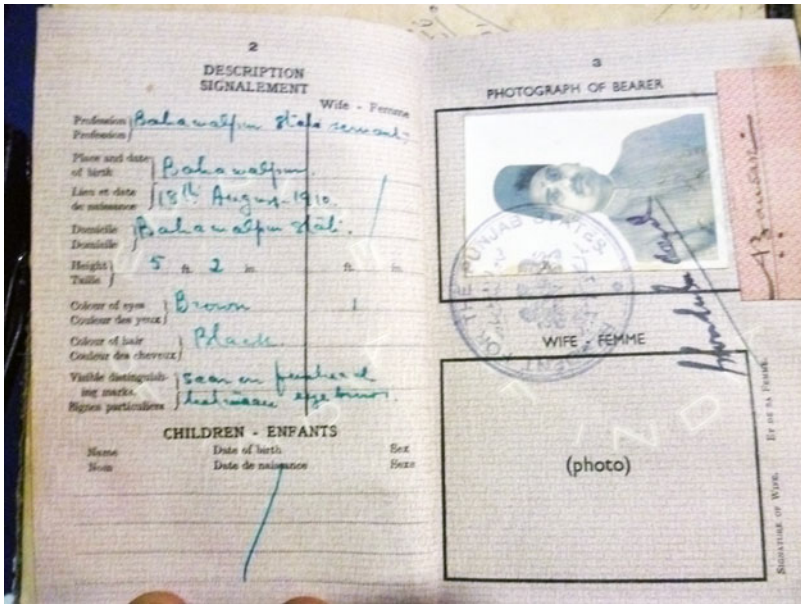


Figure 8. Photograph of bearer. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

E.

I spied a passport in the corner of a half-opened drawer (see figure 7). And another. Mr. Ahmad Baksh and Mr. Allah Bakhsh Ansari (see figures 8 and 9). They had received their passports in Lahore in 1941. Allah Bakhsh Ansari was born in Bahawalpur on August

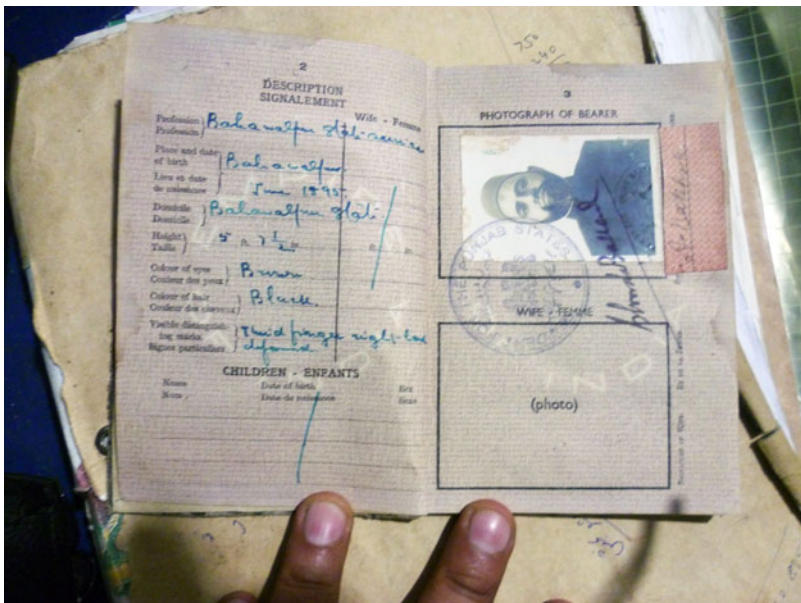


Figure 9. Photograph of the co-bearer. Photo by Manan Ahmed Asif.

18, 1910, and his “visible mark” was a “scar on left eyebrow.” Allah Bakhsh was the private secretary to His Highness the Nawab of Bahawalpur. On that passport, he had traveled to Iraq, and to Palestine. At some point in 1946, they had both been detained, and their passports confiscated. The piece of paper listed nothing more than: “Suspicion of spying. Interrogate.”

The history of the Bahawalpur Princely State’s integration into Pakistan is little known outside of Bahawalpur. It was one of the richest princely states that agreed in 1947 to become part of Pakistan, but it continued to maintain a semi-autonomous regime of power in Southern Punjab. What would they be spying on, these spies? Pakistan’s official narratives do not highlight the princely states, precisely because Kalat, Swat, and Kashmir do not fit the triumphalism of the Muslim League. Bahawalpur is stranger still.

Hesitatingly, I asked if there were any files from before partition. He shrugged, saying, “I am sure they are here in these bags. We should go out now. No one is allowed inside. The kids who play around say they hear all kinds of noises.”

We returned to the chai, which had cooled down considerably, and started slurping it again.