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MA Painting

Unit 3 submission - Presentation Script

This entire year I have been investigating the idea of identity; on a personal level as well as the idea of a collective identity. Since, a year is too short a time to explore such a theme I decided to dedicate my entire academic year to this enquiry. Thus, my unit 3 project became a part of this ongoing investigation. In order to do so I drew information from two sources ; namely The citizen's archive of Pakistan and The SOAS archives and collections. I wanted to look at the archives in two different countries of relevance to see what or how information was shared with the common public about the idea's of culture, migration, displacement and colonialism.

My research began with my recent trip back home. I started with looking at how history has been preserved and distributed in the country today. Unfortunately, there aren't many organizations that are working to preserve our historical and cultural heritages, instead a few fledgling or newly established private organizations that have taken upon this task. In comparison, London, continues to house several artefacts pertaining to the British rule in India.

The idea of colonialization is a highly contested one where each side claims to have been in the right. By looking at these artefacts, some of my beliefs were challenged where as other theories confirmed.

Other than this what I have also come to learn is how hard it is to learn about your own history. Several emails, permits and documentation that have to be put in place in order to receive access to historical articles and items for a minimal amount of time. However, the ironic part is that it is easier to get access to fragments of this history in foreign country then my own.

Listed below are the specifics of what I have been looking at:

- I accessed the Oral history Project (project of the Citizens Archive) a collection of interview recordings from individuals that experienced Partition and the early days of Pakistan. Its purpose is to provide stories that serve as an alternate to historical literature.
- I got access to the SOAS archives and collections that consisted artefacts of the history of the subcontinent during the British Raj as well as post partition. SOAS Library Special Collections consist of archives, manuscripts, photographs and audio-visual recordings, relating to several countries or continents including Asia. I got to study personal letters, illustrations and transcripts from oral recordings. More specifically I looked at the British in India Oral Archive, transcripts of interviews conducted with individuals such as E.C. Armitage, Nehru and A. Bruce.
- I looked at the collection of over 300 Indian postcards that shows India's relationship with the British or more specifically from the 1900s to 1930s. They document two cities- Madras and Bangalore that were considered as the centres during the colonial era.

Findings:

- The citizen's archive of Pakistan was a platform which brought me in contact with personal narratives. Each story was a unique insight into the experience of partition or life in the early days of Pakistan. One of their projects is to collect stories from people of any artefacts or objects that are still in their possession that reminded them of Partition. This revealed itself to be more informative than the generic way it is described in textbooks around the country.

The stories are audio files painstakingly collected from the survivors of Partition. I will not be including them in my presentation as most of the narratives are in Urdu.

SOAS Archives:

- I came across a couple of letters talking about the incompetence of Warren Hastings by the English government officials. Two of the letters specifically emphasized on how the government would not have been conducting in the way it did, and he would not be chosen as a leader if the intention was to improve the conditions in the subcontinent. (slide 6)
- The second thing that was repeatedly highlighted was the numerous job opportunities and positions that were available to the English without any experience where as many locals were kept out of those posts. No explanation was given in the letters or conversation of why this happened. This is the most evident in L. Brander, where he talks about himself not having had former relevant qualification but easily got employment in Lucknow. (slide 7)
- The transcripts of talks repeatedly reveal a complete divide within the jobs allocated to natives and those that were given to the foreigners. Also, when asked about the social interactions with the locals, an employee in the Burma Mill Company responded by saying that the locals kept to themselves or were hesitate on interacting with the British in clubs or other social platforms. (slide 8)

Other than the written documents I came across postcards from the 1900s, a cheap and efficient way of correspondence at the time. About 6 billion postcards were exchanged in the brief period of 1900-1930, making them a rather important form of documentation. The mass production made the imagery chosen for the postcards hold great importance as it was majorly responsible for the portrayal of the subcontinent in countries that did not have much knowledge of the newly captured territories.

1) "The Morning Tub" (slide 7)

A depiction of a native assisting his master while he bathes. Ironically Indians were involved in the process of making the postcards but only featured Europeans in the state of luxury if at all. The native was always shown as serving them. (slide 7)

2) "Just like Master" and "Master's Whiskey" (slide 8)

These series were highly popular. Though they were claimed to be a humorous take on the servant/ master relationship they highlighted a much deeper problem- the apprehensions of the Europeans about what the locals would be up to in their absence.

3) (slide 10)

This image is of a Hindu ritual. The text on the postcard claims that the worshippers threw themselves under the wooden structure when in fact the author of the card has misunderstood the practice. This is evidence that the foreigners were not fully familiar with the beliefs or culture of their subjects. The religious ceremonies were often misrepresented and given a completely different context.

4)“The Madras Wives” and the “Madras hunt” (slide 11)

This is perhaps one of the most recurring images on postcards. I feel this is probably the most controversial of all the postcards I witnessed. To think the act of delousing each other was promoted as an activity that was an essential feature of the lives of natives. This image was widely distributed to represent the Indian lifestyle. Whether the images were ironic or typical, this is not a flattering image. It stereotyped the people as having problems with infestation and personal hygiene, making it a rather offensive portrayal.

Several such postcards have been found amongst which I feel like the one's mentioned above are highlighting some of the most significant aspects of the relationship between Indians and the British.