'Mughal Mania' under Zia ul-Haq
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Without going deep into the details of the selective brand of Islamization the state promot ed, let us say that the regime was above all a dictatorial: eleven years of military rule (1977-1988) that ended only with Zia ul-Haq’s death. Zia’s Islamisation programme was mainly twofold. Firstly, it comprised a deliberate attempt at reforming selective aspects of the penal code inherited from the British through the Hudood Ordinances (1979), the Law of Evidence (1984) and the Blasphemy Law (1986). It was then a kind of juridical biclodge that tended to harm above all women and religious minorities. Secondly, it used propaganda through the media (television, radio, and schoolbooks) in favour of religious education, Arabisation (Zia ul-Haq himself put on an Arabic accent when he was speaking in Urdu), sanctity of the mosque, canonical Islam, and women’s modesty (wearing traditional clothes in order to protect women in commercial and cinema). During the 1980s, Pakistan’s national television was notorious for John Wayne movies: a ho-mosocial universe where, except for the sal oons, women were virtually absent.

Pakistan’s response to the state Islamisation process at different levels, in art (SOME – extremely vocal – women’s groups, intellectuals and journalists spoke out against the policies, but among them were also women who were not part of the generation of women painters, music bands, fashion designers, etc.). The latter is a universe which, as a matter of fact, cannot do much without words or the image of women. It was in the 1980s, at the zenith of Zia’s dictatorship, that the trope of the Mugal Empire, or rather a specific reflection of the lost Mughal splendour, became a kind of passage obligé for a certain section of the media. It should be noted here that the Timurid dynasty, widely known as the ‘Mughal’ dynasty, founded by Babur in the mid-16th century, dominated India politically at the 18th-century and culturally up to 1857 (which marked the Sepoy Mutiny). But by the second half of the 19th century, effective Mughal power was no more than a memory. What is now considered Pakistan was then at the periphery of Mughal India, the heart of which was Delhi, Faizpur Sitori and Agra (located in present-day India). The rombyant exception was Lahore, which for 13 years (1585-1598) was the main seat of the 16th-century Great Moghal Akbar (1542-1605) and one of the major imperial cities during the Mughal period.

The ‘Mughal’ miniature The most prestigious art school in Pakistan, the National College of Arts (NCA, a 19th-century institution built by the British), became one of the centres for the revival of the Mughal nostalgia during Zia ul-Haq’s era (when the image of the Moghal was used as a key to emancipation). In short, at a time when women’s emancipation was the perfect gift for visiting dignitaries. It was defi nitely under the regime of Zia ul-Haq that ‘Mughhal mania’ really took off at the NCA, where art was pro mlti-dimensional which the colonial period in its own right.

The NCA, which is a semi-governmental institution, al ways a center of liberalism (or objection able) Sassy, according to Turkman, was one of the most important and co-educational institution where the golden youth of the country was studied, female students and teachers never donnéd the veil (even at the peak of Zia ul-Haq’s rule for girls), tight ‘n’ t-shirts and cigarettes are commonplace. In short, in a milieu where study of traditions stood as a bastion of tyranny. That this interpretation might be somehow anarchistic and historically inaccurate is not of concern here. The purpose is to show how a kind of counter-discourse – advocating the periph ery rather than the centre, pluralism rather than a singular dogma, traditional poetry rather than universalist shitam – an alternative way of presenting ‘authenticity’ which does not necessarily deny but rather questions the state’s propaganda, became an extremely powerful force during Zia’s time. It is ironic that more than 150 years after the collapse of Muslim rule, the empire or (the vestiges of the empire) struck back in certain Pakistani media. Now, this consumption and reconstruction of the past is in accordance with what Hobbsbawm has described as the ‘invention of tradition’. Admittedly these me dicant spheres were – consciously or uncon sciously – bypassing the censorship board (the Islamists successfully invested in the 1980s) by using a historically defined, pro drome, mundane, but nonetheless resolutely Is lamicate register. The concept of Islamicate, civiliza tion can only be characterized as “en-Islamic”. It can be defined as a young nation like Pakistan (the raison d’etre of which is still a matter of pol emics) this inventive derivation of a prestigious Muslim grandeur and decadence allows, in Hobbsbawm’s words again, “to establish con tinuity with a suitable historic past”.

The strategy has also become a quest. Through the media and artistic space, Pakistan’s artists seem to have presented a more pluralistic view of what being a Muslim and a Pak istani could mean.

Notes

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