

National Institute of Folk & Traditional Heritage (Lok Virsa) in Islamabad, Pakistan

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Cultural diorama on wedding rituals of 'Cholistan' at Lok Virsa Heritage Museum (Photo by Asif Javed Shahjahan)

The National Institute of Folk & Traditional Heritage, popularly known as Lok Virsa, was established by the Government of Pakistan in 1974 with a mandate to collect, document, preserve and disseminate Pakistan's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Within three decades, Lok Virsa has grown from a fledgling endeavour, to creating a science of folklore into a developmental complex whose projects and activities span over the roots of the entire nation.

Lok Virsa has established the first ever Pakistan National Museum of Ethnology, popularly known as the Heritage Museum, in Islamabad depicting and presenting the living cultural traditions and lifestyles of the people of Pakistan. The museum weaves together strands of the entire nation's distinctive culture, integrating images, sound and cultural landscapes from the most remote corners of the nation. It is the cornerstone of Pakistan's philosophy of unity in diversity. The museum traces the historical links and integrates the cultural influences of Pakistan through different halls and passages. It has a covered area of 60,000ft² featuring exhibition halls making it the largest museum in Pakistan.

Lok Virsa has also established a Pakistan Monument Museum at Shakarparian hills, Islamabad, which depicts the birth, the socio-political history of Pakistan from 1937 to 1948 and the rationale for Pakistan. The purpose of the museum is to pay homage to all those who sacrificed their today for a better tomorrow and to project the cultural face of Pakistan to the world. This museum explains Pakistan in a historical

perspective, not only to visiting foreigners, but also to Pakistanis and the future generations of Pakistanis as well.

A Heritage Library is the most original creation in Pakistan which has been set up in the vicinity of the Lok Virsa complex. Housing more than 20,000 books, manuscripts, rare materials, etc. on Islamic heritage, Sufi writings, Pakistan's cultural heritage, and oral traditions, it is the only library in the country with this high of a concentration of books and journals pertaining to Pakistani folklore, ethnology, cultural anthropology, art history and folk arts & crafts.

The Research Centre of Lok Virsa encourages research in regional languages, folk literature, cultural history, arts, crafts and various aspects of folklore such as folk songs, seasonal songs, work songs, folk romances, folk tales, children games, legends, nursery rhymes, children tales, animal fables and legends attached to mountains, lakes, rivers, ruined castled, traditional festivals, superstitions & beliefs, customs & rituals, celebrations at birth, weddings & funerals, etc.

Lok Virsa calls upon all master artisans, folk musicians, folk dancers & performers from the rural areas and remote regions of the country at the Artisans-at-work festival, popularly known as Lok Mela, each year. Over 100,000 eager participants come to visit this festival. Lok Virsa supports craftsmen and musicians by giving cash awards and proud recognition to them as living national treasures.

A professional video studio at the Media Centre has been established by Lok Virsa. The equipped mobile units of the centre can reach any

part of the country to capture an event.

Lok Virsa is one of the largest publishers of traditional music and culture. Audio and video cassettes, CDs, VCDs and DVDs produced by Lok Virsa are available on the market. Lok Virsa has edited, compiled and produced 36 cultural documentaries and 500 audio cassette labels of the nation's cultural heritage.

In order harness culture for education and to educate the younger generations as well as students about the rich cultural heritage of Pakistan, the Heritage Museum launched a Museum Educational Programme in collaboration with leading universities and colleges. Under this programme students are invited for field research and dissertations in different subjects including ethnology, ethnography, cultural anthropology, sociology, arts, culture, etc. in fulfilment of their M.Sc. and M.Phil degrees.

Lok Virsa has initiated a project on Children's Folklore Society at the school level to impart and communicate the characteristics of the Pakistani folklore with the objective to raise awareness levels of school children about their own folklore and to develop their interest in a broader perspective. The society aims to foster the awareness and continuation of folklore and folk life of Pakistan's diverse cultures through informal cultural programmes, activities and study tours.

Over the years, Lok Virsa has established a network of community based organisations, cultural societies, regional writers, researchers, scholars and above all citizens from all parts of the country for their effective participation in the activities and programmes of Lok Virsa.



A master artisan weaving at work during a crafts exhibition (Photo by Asif Javed Shahjahan)