

The Bamiyan Valley and its Buddhas Heartbreak over the Buddhas of Bamiyan



The Bamiyan villager Afghanistan



The Buddha at Bamiyan

AFGHANISTAN is a country with a very rich, fairly complicated, history. Because of its mountainous terrain, it was often on the borders of different empires and has played a part of different eras. Although ancient texts about the region exist, their interpretations give rise to some heated discussions. As excavations produced most of the objects known from this area, archaeological findings are an extremely important source of information. This is why illegal digging, which may cause the destruction of unknown contents of historical significance, is all the more regrettable.

Buddhism was introduced in this area in the third century B.C. by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. It found fertile soil in the former Gandhara province (now, east Afghanistan and north Pakistan) around the first and second centuries A.D. under the rule of the great Kushan ruler Kanishka. At that time, Afghanistan lay at the heart of the Silk Route, as everybody travelling over land from East to West had no option but to journey through it. Along its roads passed silk from China, delicate glassware from Alexandria, bronze statues from Rome, and beautifully decorated ivories from India. These kinds of objects have been excavated in Afghanistan.

Accompanying the caravans of precious goods, Buddhist monks came and went, teaching their religion along the route. From this very part of the world Buddhism established itself over the centuries in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, eastern Afghanistan was full of lively Buddhist monasteries, stupas and monks. In this rich and peaceful climate, a new art form emerged: the art of Gandhara, bearing the same name as the province in which it appeared. The origin of this art is a matter of debate, but Hellenistic influence was strong. During this period, the earliest Buddha images in human form also evolved in this Kushan/Saka area. Some scholars, like A. Foucher, argued that this transformation was engendered by the influence of Greek examples, but this assumption is also constantly being

challenged. In this Buddhist richness of inspiration stand the two masterpieces out head and shoulders above the others, the Buddhas of Bamiyan. These two giant Buddhas (53 m. and 38 m. high, respectively) in the beautiful Bamiyan valley, are situated 230 km NW of Kabul at an altitude of 2500 metres. The caravans on the Silk Route invariably made a stop in this valley. It was one of the major Buddhist centres from the second century up to the time when Islam entered the valley in the ninth century.

The two statues were hewn out of the rock (estimates of dates vary, but most probably around the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.). They were covered with a mud and straw mixture to model the expression of the face, the hands and the folds of the robes. This was then plastered and, finally, they were painted: the smaller Buddha blue, the larger one red, with their hands and faces gold. They must have been quite impressive for monks travelling through the harsh surrounding landscape, who finally reached the beautiful valley with the peaceful Buddhas making the gesture of reassurance.

The features of the Buddhas have disappeared. During the centuries iconoclasts have probably assailed them. The idea behind the destruction was to take away the soul of the hated image by obliterating, or at least deforming, the head and hands. Although there is no firm evidence the Buddhas were subjected to iconoclasm, this fate was certainly meted out to the frescoes surrounding the Buddhas, namely the numerous religious places and monk's cells also hewn out of the rock and covered with beautiful paintings. The faces in these were destroyed by one of the many groups of invaders who have passed that way. Alas their time came to an end at the time when civilisation is said to have developed a great deal more!

(source: Internet)

The colossal Buddhas at Bamiyan that are no more...

THE Chinese pilgrim, Hsuan Tsang, visited Bamiyan in 632 and has left us a description of the two colossal Buddhas carved in the cliff of tertiary conglomerate that flanks the valley. We have had an opportunity to examine the original method developed by the Bamiyan artisans for fixing the lime mortar shell, which was employed to show the folds of the monastic robes on the figures. "On the right thigh of the great Buddha the holes for the wooden pegs which supported the mortar still form a dotted line, indicating the original course of the folds or monastic garments. Cords were stretched from one peg to the next and these cords are still to be seen in places. These pegs and cords served as a support for the lime mortar

coating. In the spots where this support still remains, the drapery resembles padded ridges arranged in parallel lines from the left shoulder, diverging. However, from the parallel toward the centre of the breast to curve upward and return toward the right shoulder."

This rendering of the drapery in close padded ridges is virtually that of the Mathura sculptors. It goes without saying, naturally, that the work at Bamiyan is decidedly earlier than that of Mathura. Nothing could be more natural than that the artists of Mathura were inspired by the statues at Bamiyan justly famous at that time throughout the Buddhist world. (Abridged from a research paper by J. Hackin)

Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission

POLITICAL BACKGROUND: XIV

ON the 22nd of February, 1971, the President convened a meeting of the Governors and Martial Law Administrators at which were present also some high ranking military and civilian officers. A monthly meeting of this kind was a fairly regular feature of the Yahya regime and at this meeting, as usual, the President gave a review of situation speaking of the un-compromising and rigid stand of Shaikh Mujibur Rahman and stated that in the circumstances a meeting of the Assembly could serve no useful purpose. Admiral Ahsan and General Yaqub were the only persons to raise a somewhat discordant note in the general chorus of agreement with the President but, in view of the fact that the problem that was being discussed arose from East Pakistan and that these two persons were not only the only two officers from the Wing who were present but were also the highest representatives of the Government in that area, we should have thought that their views would have been listened to with more respect. However, the President took the two aside along with General Hamid and General Pirzada and there told them of his decision to postpone the assembly session. Admiral Ahsan speaks of his impression gathered

at this meeting that the provision in regard to the 120-day limit for framing the Constitution was for some reason inflexible and that in no circumstances could it be relaxed; in that case, it was patently necessary that all controversies be settled before the Assembly meeting rather than during the course of its meeting. It was clearly pointed out to the president that such an announcement would only intensify the already high feeling. What is worthy of note is not merely the fact that the President postponed the Assembly on the 1st of March but that he had taken this decision to do so at least as early as the 22nd of February.

The assembly having been adjourned on the 1st of March with the sole object of enabling parleys to take place before it met and some kind of deadlock having already arisen between Mr Bhutto and Mujib, one should have thought that the President would consider it urgently necessary to meet both these gentlemen with a view to ensuring a settlement. Mr Bhutto at least at that time had expressed no unwillingness to meet either General Yahya or Shaikh Mujibur Rahman; the immediate need, therefore, was that General Yahya should meet Mujibur Rahman. Yet, upon being urged to do so even as

dated the 7th of March, 1971, the President categorically said that he was unwilling to go to Dacca then and that the only concession that he could give was the announcement of a new date for the assembly. Obviously the announcement of a fresh date at that juncture could hardly have had the same effect as if it had been fixed at the time of the announced postponement. Indeed when the new date was announced Mujibur Rahman's immediate reaction was to make four demands for considering whether or not the Awami League would attend the session:

- 1) Immediate withdrawal of Martial Law;
- 2) Immediate withdrawal of all military personnel to their barracks;
- 3) Enquiry into the loss of life; and
- 4) Immediate transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people (prior to the National Assembly session).

When we asked General Yahya as to whether he did not see the undesirability of a postponement sine die he professed to be unable to understand why he was accused of doing so. He pointed out that he adjourned the assembly on the 1st of March and that as early as the 6th March, 1971, he fixed the 25th of March as the next date for the assembly. Comment is superfluous.

On 23rd March, 1971, General Yahya summoned a conference of the leaders at Dacca for the 10th. Again, Mujib refused to attend and thereafter General Yahya fixed the 25th for the meeting of the Assembly. General Yahya reached Dacca on 15th March but not all his aides came with him and met Mujibur Rahman on the same day. It is a curious feature of the various talks that followed that, by and large, the several parties did not meet together in the presence of General Yahya who interviewed them separately. It is as if General Yahya was at the same time a negotiator between the parties as well as a person who held the power, transfer of which was being negotiated with the parties. In any case Shaikh Mujibur Rahman himself and Mr Z.A. Bhutto never, except for one occasion, met each other or the President at the same time. The first round of meetings started when Mujibur Rahman met General Yahya on 15th of March, 1971.

In the meantime the law and order situation had gone completely out of hand of the authority and the Central government had collapsed. Gradually Shaikh Mujibur Rahman was gathering into his hands the actual reins of Government. During this period he issued a series of directives, the first of these which is

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LAST November I was at the Women's World Forum in Valencia (Spain) on Violence against Women. In the panel where I presented my paper on domestic violence, Huma Saeed of Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) talked about Taliban atrocities against women in her country. What she said was nothing new we had all read dim reports or heard about rights abuses by the Taliban but to hear a first hand account left the thousand plus participants of the conference in pin drop silence. Here at the beginning of the third millennium, in a "civilised" world, and in a country with a rich cultural heritage horrors were being perpetrated against humanity that surpassed medieval Dark Age legends. Being immersed in our problems and petty little achievements, we the world community, the so-called "intelligentsia" and the global feminist movement had actually forgotten the Afghan tragedy. After all it was not happening to us nobody had stopped me from working, from going to school, from participating in sports and no one was going to slash my breasts publicly and get away with it with impunity. The oppression by the Taliban has not directly affected our physical and psychological integrity, and therefore, other than making small murmurs of protest, we have remained

fairly detached from the plight of the Afghan people. Compare and contrast this relative indifference to the righteous anger against the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the flurry of activity globally to save them.

I have to admit I'm having trouble assimilating the fact that somehow these statues these things of beauty, and objects symbolic of culture and heritage have more value than nameless, faceless but living, walking, talking human beings. At present Afghanistan is a whole nation of women and men deprived, through state action, of their basic human rights and none of us is protesting this abuse as loudly as we did the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. In which absurd moral system do inanimate objects come to have more value than humans do? How is the loss of statues sadder than the annihilation of human potential and lives? Why are symbols of a glorious past more important than what we are today? Are the statues more important than the Afghan people because third world women of colour are primarily at the receiving end of the Taliban tyranny? Is it because Afghanistan is a Muslim country? Do Muslim lives have less value than the lives of people of other religions? If rich, white, Christian women in, say South Africa, were suddenly told that they couldn't go to school anymore would the rest of the world react as mildly as it did when the

same thing happened to poor, brown, Muslim Afghan women?

There are apparent double standards in the judging and shaming of different races, religions and cultures. When bombs exploded in the World Trade Centre in New York, Muslim fundamentalism was associated with the worst forms of terrorism to exist in the world today but the bombing of Iraq by the Americans was morally justified. When an Israeli is killed, it is an act of terrorism but when a Palestinian is killed it becomes an act of Jewish self-defence. I hate to do this, but on this one point I agree with the Taliban standpoint that global outrage was insignificant when the Babri mosque was torn down by Hindu zealots, and, by the same token they cannot understand the hullabaloo when they raze Buddhist monuments to the ground.

Even those of us who live and work in the third world as so called "intellectuals", fall into the same trap of gaining this distanced perspective as a result of our Western education. Abstract notions of history and heritage cannot alleviate the very real here-and-now pain of human suffering. And we end up making light of this human pain when we only talk about and protest the destruction of inanimate things such as the Bamiyan Buddhas. If the Taliban can do what they are doing to their own people in the name of Islam, is it surprising that they are not placing much value on

their pre-Islamic legacy? Where was the protest from the learned Muslim clergy when Afghan women were prohibited from attending school? If the Muslim world kept quiet then, they certainly do not have the moral authority to wax eloquent now. How come we, the Bangladeshi "Intelligentsia", are issuing press notes protesting the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan but have so far been barely concerned about the misery of the Afghan people?

Protesting violence and the deliberate infliction of pain to living humans is not an issue of charity, and it is not a question of being noble or good or honourable. It is a cry for justice, it is an act of resisting crimes against humanity. Although these particular crimes are being perpetrated in another country on another people, we cannot pretend that they don't affect us. If there is injustice in this world and we don't protest, we become accomplices in its perpetuation. When the history of our times is chronicled, it will be recorded that the prevalent ideology was that some human lives had lesser value than museum artefacts, and we will all have been party to the creation of that legacy.

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An act of desecration

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THE entire civilized world was stunned hearing the news of Buddha statue demolition by the Taliban regime of Kabul. Of special interest to rest of the world was the large statues of Buddha of Bamiyan, a place 90 miles west of Kabul. The order of destruction came from no other than the one-eyed Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's supreme leader. After consolidation of power in last few years, the Taliban are undisputed rulers of this rugged hill country. It is now sad to hear that the Taliban are turning their 'religious fervor' to destroy some best known icons of Afghanistan.

Early this month a beaming Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal, who happens to be the minister of information and culture in the Taliban-led government announced to the reporters the "successful" demolition of Buddha's statue in Bamiyan. He said, "The head and legs of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan were destroyed" Barry Bearek of NY Times news service dispatched the report from New Delhi. In Kabul, the minister also said, "our soldiers are working hard to demolish the remaining parts. They will come down soon." From such statement coming from the minister of information and culture it seems as if that the Taliban are bent on destroying all the relics from the past and if it continues this way then there will be nothing left in that country as far as culture is concerned. Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal may soon find his portfolio reduced to ministry of information because there won't be anything left in that 'Islamic nation' that could point towards culture.

Let us look closely at the history of this turbulent nation. After Talibanization the rugged country of Afghanistan is now known officially as Dowlat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan. About 50 per cent of the population are Pashtuns (mostly Sunnis) and the rest are Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. The Sunnis are 75 per cent of the people of Afghanistan and the rest are Shiites. No wonder, the country is under the clutch of fundamentalist Mullahs, who swear by Hadiths.

There is a good reason why one would find Buddhist relics in this rugged arid mountainous region. This land used to be under Persian Achaemenian empire of Cyrus II the Great during the 6th century BC and was conquered in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great. After Alexander's demise, part of the area came under Seleucid control and part under the Maurya empire of northern India. According to recorded history, the Seleucid satrapy of Bactria (Balkh) forged its own kingdom and created a unique fusion of Greco-Roman and Indian cultures, which gave birth to the great paintings and sculpture of Gandhara school. One look at the photographs of the tallest statue of Buddha in Bamiyan will reveal the elements of Gandhara art. In this sculpture, Buddha was dressed in a Greek attire. The Mullahs and Mawlawis of Afghanistan who only attended Madrassahs

hardly know about the Gandhara art. To them these are eyesore as far as Islamic teachings are concerned. Thus, they wanted to get rid of these artifacts. Mullah Omar just thought the sooner they are destroyed the better would it be for his nation of Islam.

The Gandhara style of Buddhist visual art thought to be developed in what is now northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan between the 1st century BC and the 7th century AD. The style, which is hybrid of Greco-Roman and Indian origins, seems to have flourished largely during the Kushan dynasty and was contemporaneous with an important but dissimilar school of Kushan art at Mathura in Uttar Pradesh, India. This is the opinion of art historians of our part of the world.

The art historians opined that the Gandhara region had long been a crossroads of cultural influences. During Indian emperor Ashoka's reign (3rd century BC), the region was known to be a place of intensive Buddhist missionary activity; and, in the 1st century AD, rulers of the Kushan empire, which included Gandhara, maintained contacts with Rome. To illustrate Buddhist legends, the Gandhara school incorporated many motifs and techniques from classical Roman art such as vine scrolls, cherubs bearing garlands, tritons, and centaurs. The art historians say that basic iconography, nevertheless, remained truly Indian. Therefore, the tall and small statues of Buddha in Afghanistan depict Indian art even though Greco-Roman motifs embellish these priceless statues.

It is a sad testament that these

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Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

All health information to keep you up to date

Around the world
Antioxidants help heart attack victims

People who suffer heart attacks may need high doses of powerful antioxidants to aid their recovery, Israeli researchers report. In a new study, 38 heart-attack victims had lower blood levels of the antioxidant vitamins A, E and beta carotene after suffering an attack than 20 healthy controls. And when the heart-attack patients were treated with a thrombolytic drug, their blood levels of vitamin E, in particular, dropped even further, researchers reported in the recent issue of the Journal of the American College of Nutrition. Vitamins A, E and other antioxidants like beta carotene are thought to protect the body's cell from the damaging effects of oxygen free radicals, which are produced in the body during the natural chemical process of oxidation. Because of oxidation, cholesterol-filled cells can build up in the blood and find their way into blood vessels and arteries, blocking blood flow and eventually leading to a heart attack. While further research is needed to corroborate the new results, adding antioxidants to the treatment of heart-attack patients may be able to avert this damage and save even more heart muscles.

Source: JICP's Mednews

Next: Before the doctor comes

Followed thereafter directives issued from time to time which in effect purported to control all activity in the province including the working of government offices. In general, government agencies including the courts were prohibited from working at all but exceptions were made limited clearly to the carrying out of essential functions. Bank working was severely curtailed, transactions between the province and the outside world particularly West Pakistan completely prohibited, even personal accounts were permitted to be operated within very severe limits. Provincial taxes were to continue to be paid as also was central taxes but the latter were not to be credited to the Central government but deposited in special accounts of the Eastern Mercantile Bank Ltd, and the Eastern Banking Corporation Ltd.

Next: POLITICAL BACKGROUND-XV