

The Fragments of Bamiyan

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All that is left of the statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan are fragments. The most recent news suggests that these fragments are perhaps ending up in the bazaars of Peshawar, where traders are reportedly vying for the pieces to sell to tourists. A report in the *Hindustan Times* on 2 April 2001 states that the dealers are convinced that these fragments “would be prized in the same way as pieces of the Berlin wall.” No one doubts, notwithstanding the immense difficulties of German reunification and the resuscitation of neo-Hitlerite sentiments among considerable segments of the German youth, that the Berlin Wall had to come down, but surely we cannot say the same of the Bamiyan Buddha statues? By what reckoning did the Bamiyan Buddhas become a Berlin Wall for the Taliban? Moreover, when walls break into fragments, does it not behoove us to ask how fragments can create their own walls? Are the stories that fragments tell necessarily fragmentary?

Writing shortly after World War II, Adorno described the meditations that make up *Minima Moralia* as “fragments from a damaged life”. Adorno did not think it merely impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz; all the grand Enlightenment narratives appeared as so much debris, even offensive and chillingly optimistic. Not only had war devastated Europe, but his own civilized countrymen, the intellectual heirs and descendants of Goethe, Beethoven, Schiller, Kant, Hegel, Novalis, Herder, Schumann,

and Schubert, had descended to the nadir of human experience in dispatching, with all the energy and ingenuity that a regime enamored of social engineering, the precise orchestration of life, and bureaucratic efficiency is capable of, six million Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and mentally ill people to their death. Adorno must have thought a good deal of *fragments* those days: scarred lives, broken families, shattered buildings, and charred landscapes stared at him in the face, and -- not less alarmingly -- the lofty hopes which promised the sovereignty of reason and saw the story of humankind as an increasing progression towards the attainment of liberty and democracy stood largely in ruins. His contemporary and fellow theorist, Walter Benjamin, who perished in the war and scarcely saw the worst of what the troubled project of modernity could sow, had nonetheless the prescience to declare, "There is no monument of civilization that is not at the same time a monument of barbarism."

The idea of "fragments" has a chequered history, and in recent years South Asian intellectuals have furnished some other fragments of the story. Both Gyanendra Pandey and Partha Chatterjee have reminded us that the nation has its own "fragments", those sectors who have been excluded from the enterprise of the modern nation-state, or are repeatedly thwarted in their attempt to claim the privileges attendant upon citizenship. Relegated to the periphery, these fragments -- women, religious and linguistic minorities, Adivasis, the lower castes, Naxalites, and radical dissenters, among many others -- have at different times and in varying literatures been known as the oppressed, the excluded, and the people without history. Thus some scholars have asked whether Pandey's eloquent article, "In Defense of the Fragment", is anything more than a postmodern variant of what the Americans call "multiculturalism", or an eloquent plea to allow

minorities and the underprivileged their rightful place in the political and social life of the nation. It is sometimes suggested that the avowed attachment to such terms as “fragments” is a sign of postmodern excess, yet another endeavor to decentre the grand narratives -- none grander than the idea of the nation-state -- bequeathed by modernity. Yet the customary languages by which we seek to designate the excluded or -- in the idiom of the day -- the subaltern classes scarcely convey the resonance that the term fragment does: around fragments lies the debris of much history. Whatever postmodernism’s disenchantment with the totalizing narratives of nation-state and history -- history of which Europe is always the central reference point -- it is useful to recall that even the militant Hinduism of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad thrives on the idea of fragments. The most prominent, not to mention brazenly provocative, Hindutva websites demonstrate an extraordinarily keen interest in those Hindu temples which are alleged to have been destroyed or reduced to ruins by Muslim invaders. The Hindutvavadis understand, perhaps more than their adversaries, that the more compelling and cementing narratives are written around tales of destruction, around the fragments which remain and betoken imagined as much as real histories. So charmed is the VHP by Hindu temples rendered extinct, mutilated, or left in ruins that it construes these sites as the sure sign of a Hindu presence, a reminder of the fact that the Hindu has everywhere been the victim of more malignant and aggressive religions and ideologies.

But fragments do not a whole make, as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas so palpably demonstrates. What histories, counter-histories, and myths can we, then, write from the fragments that remain of these Buddhas that, chiseled into the face of a mountain, stood forth in majestic silence for well over a thousand years? The most

sustained modern myth about such acts of terror -- terror, not the terrorism that becomes the pretext for yet another display of American self-aggrandizement and chastisement, for terror it is when beauty is so cavalierly sundered apart -- is to suppose that they are expressions of feudal rage, a regression to the barbarism of the pre-modern age and manifestation of the “medievalism” to which many under-developed nations are still believed to be bound. This argument is conjoined with the observation that one could not have expected otherwise from a regime which is sworn to uphold a rigid and puritanical conception of Islam, though the edict of February 26 -- “These idols have been gods of the infidels” -- handed down by Muhammad Omar, the supreme commander of the Taliban, appears to furnish, to those who wish to read it as such, an indictment of Islam as a whole. Indeed, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas brings with astonishing ease to many lips the epithet, “Islamic medievalism”. If the dominant stereotypical conception of Islamic fundamentalism, which gorges on tales of Taliban fanaticism, the evil genius of Osama bin Laden, Muslim terrorist networks around the world, the contamination of the noble idea of education in tens of thousands of *madrassas*, and the relentless subjugation of women and girls, is to be believed, ‘medieval Islam’ is a wholly belabored idea: Islam was always medieval. The ‘modern West’ and ‘medieval Islam’ are supposed to stand in natural and diametrical opposition to each other.

For all the wide acceptance of the twin ideas of ingrained Islamic fundamentalism and feudal or medieval rage as the two most constituent elements of the narrative which seeks to explain the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, it is heartening to note that some commentators have dismissed these gross reductionisms. One strategy is to take recourse to other strands of political commentary: for instance, it is scarcely irrelevant

that the Taliban are under strict sanctions mandated by the American-dominated Security Council, though many member states of the UN rightly took the view that the only productive way to engage with the Taliban is to enter into a dialogue with the regime. These sanctions have doubtless compounded the Taliban's difficulties, and are seen as particularly onerous and unjustified at a time when Mullah Omar is credited with having helped to destroy the poppy (used to make heroin) crop whose eradication was sought as a precondition for the restoration of normal relations between the Taliban and the West. Indeed, the area of Afghanistan under Taliban rule has recently been certified by an UN inspection team as 'poppy free'. Thus the destruction of the statues is construed as an expression not only of the Taliban's anger but of its sense of betrayal, its feeling of isolation, and its profound disappointment that it should not have been suitably rewarded on the one occasion when it subscribed to some norms of international political engagement. Two decades ago, *realpolitik* bound together Afghanistan and the United States in a modern variation of 'The Great Game', and one should not be allowed to forget that Ronald Reagan welcomed the Mujahideen to the White House as "freedom fighters"; at this juncture in history, it is still the relentless zero-sum of politics which makes the United States and its adversary Afghanistan look strikingly akin. The fanaticism of the powerful and the fanaticism of the powerless have much in common.

The fanaticism of the Taliban should by no means be allowed to stand forth metonymically for the barbarism of the pre-Enlightenment age or the alleged fanaticism of Islam. In the early seventh century, if the testimony of the Chinese scholar Hiuen-tsiang is reliable, Bamiyan was flourishing as a centre of Buddhist learning, and it was home to thousands of monks settled in several monasteries. Though Kabul and Kandahar

were overrun by the Arabs in the late seventh century, Bamiyan remained under Buddhist rule for at least another century. The conversion to Islam among Bamiyan's political elite transpired under the Abbasids. Bamiyan's two gigantic Buddhas, which were installed at least three centuries apart, the latter between 500 and 700 AD, were spared by Mahmud of Ghazni. Subsequent invaders, such as Genghiz Khan, appear to have been less indifferent, and there seems to be some evidence that he had cannon fire directed at the Buddhas. Numerous commentators, keen on validating the commonly held view which ascribes to Aurangzeb a puritanical hatred for the infidels, have noted that he initiated an assault upon Bamiyan, but those who wish to bestow ecumenical credentials upon him point to the fact that notwithstanding his military activity in the Deccan over two decades, he left untouched the Ajanta and Ellora caves. But in all of this there is little to substantiate the view that in the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is writ large the medieval mentality. The recent bombarding of the National Library at Sarajevo, and indeed the decimation of nearly the entire city, which was "multicultural" for long before the capitals of Western Europe acquired a semblance of pluralism and tolerance, stands forth as testimony to the fact that modernity has been much less hospitable to diffused, unbounded, and multiple identities than we have commonly supposed. If the idea of cosmopolitan pasts -- Bamiyan lay on the silk route, and here merged multiple number of ethnic, religious, and linguistic histories -- is now under assault, and yet "universal" cities appear to be emblematic of late modernity, then the burden is to establish how modern cosmopolitanisms differ from pre-modern cosmopolitanisms. The universalisms of late modernity must be juxtaposed not with the supposed particularisms of the pre-modern

era, but rather with the less oppressive universalisms of those times that we mistakenly characterize as pre-Enlightenment.

It is not less significant, since much is often made of Islam's supposed irrationality, that all the Muslim states have emphatically repudiated the Taliban's actions, and even Saudi Arabia, which fancies itself as the guardian of an authentic and orthodox Islam, declared itself unequivocally opposed to the destruction of the Buddhas. The Arab group in UNESCO termed the Taliban's action "savage". Nothing in the Sharia, or in the pronouncements of various Islamic schools of law, encourages the destruction of monuments which are not the sites of religious worship and cannot therefore be construed as "idols". Most poignantly, the call to *jihad*, which is described by the Taliban as having furnished it with the warrant to take action at Bamiyan, has been stripped of its endearing promise. The authorized translation of the Holy Quran, published by the King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, states that the essence of *jihad* consists in abiding by a "true and sincere faith, which so fixes its gaze on Allah that all selfish or worldly motives seem paltry and fade away". It warns against the vulgarization of the concept by explicitly opposing "mere brutal fighting" to "the whole spirit of *Jihad*", and calls upon the believer to wage *jihad* against himself or herself, so that one can learn to listen to the voice of Allah or (in the idiom of Gandhi) to the "still inner voice" within. Yet, despite this lofty conception of *jihad*, the onus appears to have been placed upon Islam to exonerate itself. This "act of vandalism", editorialized the *Times of India* (4 March 2001), "is likely to be detrimental to the larger interests of the entire Islamic world unless the governments and clergy of those countries speak out strongly against the Taliban." Well-intentioned as is this sentiment, it is a marvel that

Islam should be called upon to demonstrate its innocence. No one took it as axiomatic that when the Bosnian Muslims were being butchered, and the monuments of their culture were razed to the ground, that Christianity had to endeavor to save its name by publicly and repeatedly disassociating itself from the actions of its self-appointed emissaries. Though the editorial appears to be understandably generous in pronouncing that the “Taliban is not defending the true faith; it is grievously undermining it”, there is a presupposition that Islam, perhaps more than any other faith, is always on the brink of falling into a fanatical mode.

What interpretive and ethical framework remains, then, for understanding the madness that has transpired to efface the gentle colossus that stood at Bamiyan? One has heard the phrase “brotherhood of fundamentalists”: the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Bamiyan Buddhas can be distinguished in some respects, but fervent secularists do not doubt that the advocates of Hindutva, the Taliban, Zionists, and the evangelical Christians in Kansas who succeeded in having creationism placed alongside evolutionism as an account of the origins of the universe in school textbooks are all molded from the same clay. They see in the tragic events of Bamiyan the insistent and maniacal unfolding of fundamentalism. Though the gross inadequacies of this view are all too evident, just as secularism remains impenitent about its own intolerance for competing worldviews, the comparison between the Hindutva advocates and the Taliban is illuminating in some respects. Traditionally, one mark of distinction between religion and politics was to describe the former as “self regarding” and the latter as “other regarding”, but what is striking is how far the Taliban and Hindutvavadis are concerned with the religion of others rather than with their own faith. Many of the most zealous spokespersons for

Hindutva give the distinct impression of being less interested in Hinduism than in Islam, and the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas betrays a similar anxiety. It is not so much the admixture of religion and politics, of which no less a person than Gandhi was a firm proponent, that is problematic as much as the transformation of religion into "other regarding" and politics into "self regarding".

What the Taliban have disowned is the pluralistic pasts of both Afghanistan and Islam. It can reasonably be argued that Afghanistan is much more than its present Islamic existence, though perhaps the more arresting formulation is that woven into the Islam of Afghanistan (not to mention neighboring Pakistan) are all the previous strands of Afghanistan's history. Islam in Pakistan and Afghanistan is afflicted with profoundly disabling anxieties about authenticity, cosmology, and identity; it persists, not always self-consciously, in seeing itself as a second-hand, inferior version of the Prophet's religion as it is housed in Mecca and Medina. This Islam has almost nothing of the confidence of Indonesian (and especially Javanese) Muslims, who have embraced the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as their own and have interwoven Islamic practices into "Hindu" cosmologies. Java has no Hindus, and yet a massive statue of Arjuna's chariot being driven by Krishna adorns one of the central thoroughfares in Jakarta. Such a dialectic of presence and absence is perhaps itself the source of anxiety: commentators point to the absence of Buddhists in Afghanistan to express their bewilderment that the Bamiyan Buddhas should have been construed as a threat, but it possible to imagine that even a faint Buddhist presence might have been more reassuring to the Taliban and helped to save the Buddhas.

Ironically, much as the Taliban would be loathe to admit it, their most eloquent spokesman is the hyper-rational Naipaul, who has stated with supreme confidence that all non-Arab Muslims are mere converts and consequently imperfect specimens of their faith. This suggests that the pathology of rationality is at least as interesting a discursive field as the pathology of irrationality; self-hatred is by no means a prerogative of those whom we wish to condemn as irrational. Previously Naipaul, writing in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, the vehicle of the secular, liberal intelligentsia of the United States and some wider worlds, spoke of the destiny of humankind to embrace what he calls “our universal civilization”, a civilization predictably rooted in the values of the modern, secular, liberal West. Taken together, Naipaul’s pronouncements point to no conclusion but this: either the peoples of the non-West can choose to enter into the “universal civilization” or, by their defiance, they can place themselves outside the pale of the community of the civilized. Even Samuel Huntington’s hysterical framework of the “clash of civilizations” seems charitable by contrast, since many are inclined to see in the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas a clash between the civilized and the uncivilized. Such an impoverished view of the Taliban must be unequivocally rejected not only because it is deeply injurious to an entire people, but because discursive views, strengthened by the vast paraphernalia of modernity, from media in its various manifestations to the force of sanctions, have the power to create the very object of their inquiry.

When the other becomes so radically other in our sensibility, it is an ineradicable sign of our unwillingness to adhere to a vision of a communicative universe; it points to the moral defeat of all humankind. When the Bamiyan Buddhas were reduced to rubble,

it was not Islam that was degraded; it was not even Buddhism which was demeaned. To admit as much is not only to take solace in the observation that the Buddha is much larger than his statues, and that the actions of the Taliban cannot dint the armor of the Buddha's supreme intelligence, benevolence, and compassion. The Buddha's teachings have always stressed the impermanance of the material world, and it is not for nothing that the monks blow away the sand mandalas over which they have labored with such care. Other sensibilities, however, demand a more political reading. Had the Indian media, for instance, been less parochial in its intellectual disposition, it might have been more careful in lavishing sole attention upon acts of cultural desecration in South Asia, while ignoring the numerous tragic events with which the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Bamiyan Buddhas share a family resemblance, stretching from the destruction of Sarajevo, the callous (and much worse) representation of war victims as "collateral damage", the exceedingly modern massacres in Rwanda carried out through primitive weapons, and the genocidal elimination of Iraqis through the purported non-violence of a sanctions regime. Politics has for long been a zero-sum game, but the categories of contemporary political knowledge and practice -- "rogue states", sanctions, "the international community", among others -- have tightened the noose around the powerless. That is one aspect of the politics of knowledge surrounding the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Bamiyan compels us to ask: what are the conditions of the soul's survival and well-being in modernity? That, however, is the subject for another meditation.
