

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS

SENSELESS DESTRUCTION
BY TALIBAN



D.C. AHIR

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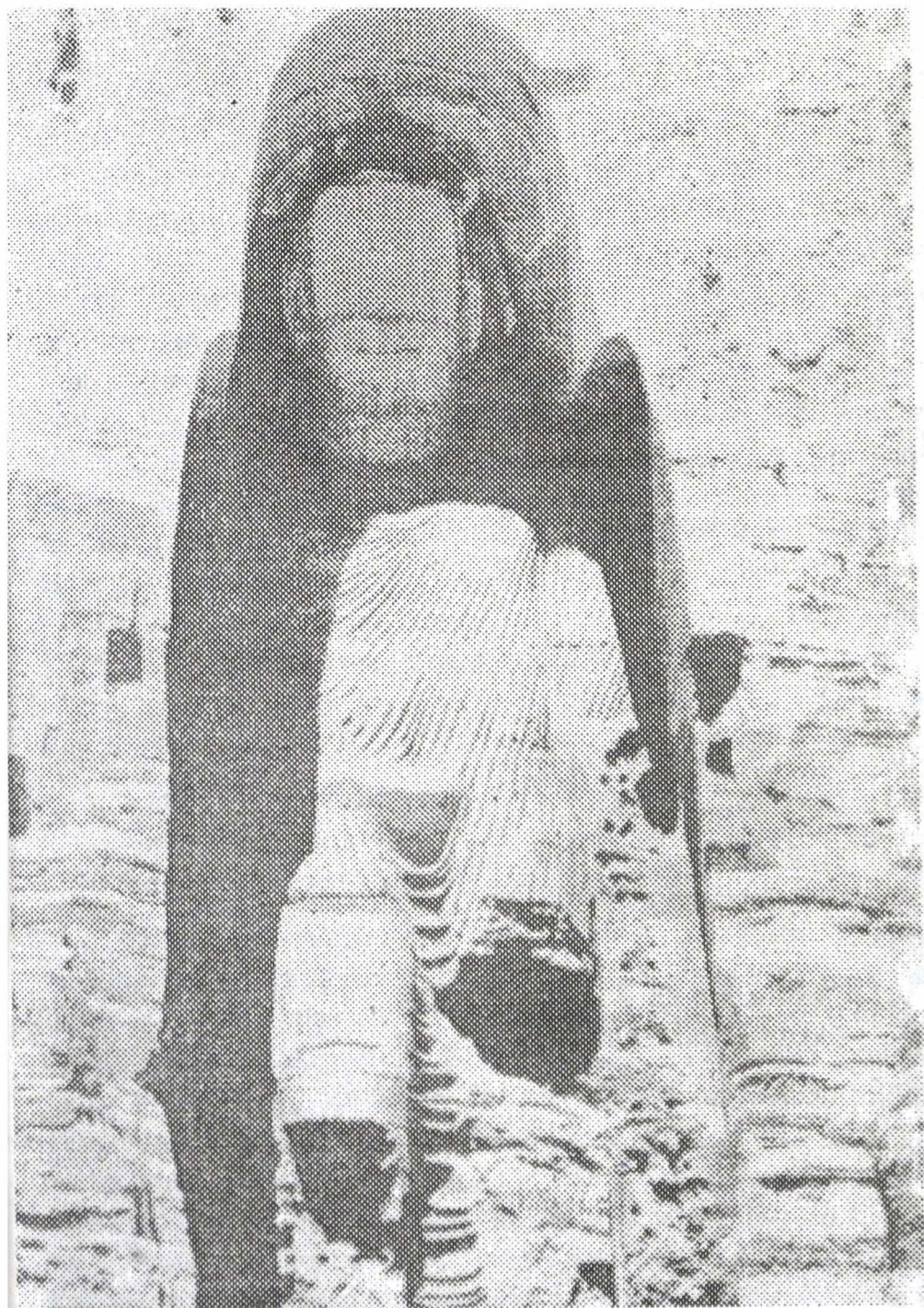
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Colossal Buddha, Bamiyan, 4th-5th century A.D. (Through E.A.M.)

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PREFACE

Buddhism was a living religion in Afghanistan for about 1200 years, from the 3rd century BC to 9th century AD, and it played a major role in the life and culture of the Afghan people during that period. The two giant Buddhas were carved on the cliff of a mountain at Bamiyan over 1500 years ago by the devout Buddhists of Afghanistan. After the advent of Islam in Afghanistan towards the end of the 9th century AD, the Buddhist shrines in Bamiyan were deserted by the Buddhists and decayed in the following centuries. But the Bamiyan Buddhas survived the vagaries of man and nature for over 1000 years during the Muslim rule. Significantly enough, the Bamiyan Buddhas were also repaired and restored in the 1970's by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) at the instance of the then Government of Afghanistan. Commenting on the restoration work undertaken by UNESCO, Derk Kinnane observed in 1972 in an article titled 'Smiling Giant of Bamiyan':

"Today there is no danger from man's violence to these monuments. But there is menace that natural processes could seriously damage, or even obliterate them."

Who could imagine the tragic destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by man's violence within three decades of their restoration by UNESCO. But, alas, the historical Bamiyan Buddhas are no more. These have been destroyed by the Taliban militia of Afghanistan who came to power in September 1996 after killing Najibullah, the then President of Afghanistan. The leader of Taliban is one Mullah Mohammad Omar who has been declared as the Amir-ul-Momineen (leader of the faithful). The Taliban are fundamentalists to the core and govern the country through Supreme Shura which is based in Kandahar, a city where Omar lives. The word of Mullah Omar is law for the Taliban rank and file.

The fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas was sealed on Monday, 26 February 2001, when the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar issued a decree ordering the destruction of all Buddha statues

in Afghanistan. Consequently, the Bamiyan Buddhas and all other Buddha statues in Afghanistan have since been destroyed by Taliban despite protests and appeals from all over the world. How sad it is that as a result of the madness of Taliban the Smiling Giant of Bamiyan has been reduced to rubble. Verily, a great cultural heritage of humanity has been lost.

Divided into seven chapters, this book presents in brief the history of the Bamiyan Buddhas and their senseless destruction by the Taliban, and world's reaction thereto. The first two chapters — Heritage of Buddhism in Afghanistan and Bamiyan Buddhas in 630 AD have been penned by me. The next two chapters titled 'Bamiyan: Where Once Buddha's Golden Lines Sparked' by Dr. Mohan Lal Sharma (1970) and 'Smiling Giant of Bamiyan' by Derk Kinnane (1973) have been taken from THE MAHA BODHI journal, published by the Maha Bodhi Society of India, Calcutta, and the fifth chapter titled 'Vandals From The Dark Ages: Understanding The Taliban' by V. Sudarshan is reproduced from The Weekly Magazine, OUTLOOK, New Delhi, March 19,2001. The last two chapters are based on the news and views as reported in The Times Of India, New Delhi, from 28 February 2001 to 15 March 2001, the period during which the historic Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Forces of Darkness.

I am thankful to the authors and publishers of the chapters III, IV an V derived from 'The Maha Bodhi' and 'Outlook'. I am also thankful to The Times Of India in which I found the best and extensive coverage of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Lastly, I am thankful to the publishers, Blumoon Books, who inspired me to document the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, a great Buddhist heritage, by the Taliban of Afghanistan.

20 March 2001

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CHAPTER I

BUDDHIST HERITAGE IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is situated on the North-West of India and Pakistan, beyond Peshawar. Over 2300 years ago Afghanistan was a melting pot of Greek, Persian, Indian and Central Asian cultures. The first Indian King to rule over Afghanistan was Chandragupta Maurya (324 BC - 300 BC) who defeated Seleukos (Alexander's general) and annexed it to the vast Mauryan Empire. Bindusara, Chandragupta's son, ruled Afghanistan for nearly 27 years, from 300 BC - 273 BC. Bindusara was succeeded by Asoka the Great (273 BC - 232 BC), who, after the Kalinga war, embraced Buddhism, and launched a vigorous campaign to preach and propagate the sublime teachings of love and compassion of the Buddha in various parts of India and the neighbouring countries. It was during the reign of Asoka that Buddhism was introduced into Afghanistan, and soon got roots there, particularly in the Yona country where the Greeks had settled. As we know, Asoka had supplemented the preachings by the missionaries by engraving Dhamma Edicts on rocks and pillars in various parts of the Mauryan Empire. "It is significant to note", as says¹ Dr. C.S. Upasak, "that as many as three inscriptions of Asoka have been found from Kandahar in Afghanistan. One of them was discovered from Shahr-i-Kona (or the old city) inscribed on a boulder at the foot of the hill called Chehl-Zina which is complete. It is *in situ* and is a bilingual and biscriptal inscription written in Greek and Aramaic languages and scripts. The Greek version of the edict begins with the name of the emperor *Priyadasi*, and got to be inscribed in the 10th year of his coronation. The Buddhist emperor exhorts 'piety' (*Dhamma*) and 'non-killing of living beings'. It is a Minor Rock Edict of Asoka. The second edict is fragmentary, written in Greek script and language. It was discovered by a German physician from the ruins of Old Kandahar city in 1963, now preserved in the National-

1. Asoka and Buddhism in Afganistan, in *Asoka 2300 - Jagajjyoti: Asoka Commemoration Volume*, 1997, Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha, Calcutta.

Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. It is engraved on a rectangular piece of porous limestone block. It contains the text of the end of Rock Edict XII and the beginning of Rock Edict XIII; and so, it may be regarded as a part of a large slab which once contained all the Fourteen Rock Edicts of Asoka, as found elsewhere at several places. We may hope to discover other portions of it from Kandahar. The third inscription of Asoka is also fragmentary one, written in Aramaic script on a stone block. It was bought in the bazar of Kandahar and its find-spot is unknown (now in an Italian collection) and contains only seven lines, a part of the Pillar Edict-VII in a mixed Aramaic and Prakrit languages."

When the Mauryan Empire disintegrated in about 184 BC, parts of Afghanistan were re-occupied by Indo-Bactrians. Buddhism in Afghanistan got a great impetus during the reign of Kanishka of the Kushana dynasty who ruled from 78 AD - 101 AD, and whose empire extended from Kandahar to Varansi. It is presumed that the cave-monasteries started coming up in Bamiyan during the reign of Kanishka, and the small Buddha statue (35 metres high) was carved either during his reign or immediately thereafter in the 2nd century AD. Towards the middle of the 3rd century AD, Iran's fire worshipping Sassanian dynasty took control of the Bamiyan region. But they let the Buddhist community in Bamiyan to continue to profess their religion. Even the local Buddhist king regained his semi-independent status. No wonder, the 5th century saw the carving of the big Buddha statue (55 metres high), and Bamiyan became the proud possessor of two colossal Buddha statues carved from a mountain.

In the 5th century AD, the invading Huns came. And before their advance was halted by the Guptas in the east and Sassanians and Turks in the west, they had a brief run in Afghanistan. They tried to exterminate Buddhism from Kabul, Swat, Peshawar and Gandhara, but Bamiyan probably lay off their route, as says C.S. Upasak. In late 7th century AD, the Arabs defeated the Sassanians, and took control of both Kabul and Kandahar. But the small Buddhist kingdom of Bamiyan remained intact for another century. Later, the Bamiyan

princes were converted to Islam. Under pressure, the Buddhist community of Bamiyan also converted to Islam. And the Buddhist relics were deserted and left uncared. Not only that, they came under attack also by the conquerors. In about 870 AD Yakub-bin-Laith destroyed many Buddha statues in Bamiyan, and possibly plucked the precious stones off the two giant Buddhas. Then Bamiyan was mercilessly ravaged by Chengez Khan in the 13th century. But the great Buddhas survived the ravages of weather and man for more than 1000 years under Muslim rule.

Fa-hian, the first Chinese pilgrim, who came to India via Afghanistan at the beginning of the 5th century AD saw in Afghanistan a large number of Buddhist monasteries with about 3000 Buddhist monks. And Hiuen Tsang (Yuan Chwang), the second Chinese pilgrim, who came to India 230 years after Fa-hian in 630 AD found Buddhism even more flourishing in Afghanistan. In Bamiyan, he found ten monasteries with several thousand resident monks. He also saw two giant Buddhas carved out of a sandstone cliff of a mountain in the area. In Kapisa, Hiuen Tsang saw 100 monasteries with about 6000 monks. Similarly, he also saw a large number of Buddhist monks and monasteries in other parts of Afghanistan. After the advent of Islam in Afghanistan towards the end of the 9th century AD, Buddhism lost ground in Afghanistan, and its shrines became part of history. Today, the Buddhist Heritage in Afghanistan is at the following major archaeological sites:

- BAMIYAN :** Famous for the two giant Buddha statues (since destroyed by Taliban). More than 1,000 Buddhist caves are found here.
- KAPISA :** Has the ruins of Kanishka's palace and dozens of stupas and panels of scenes from the life of the Buddha as well as Jataka stories.
- JALALABAD :** Has 44 Buddhist stupas, temples and caves and antiquities. The most notable of these is a skull bone of the Buddha, his robe and walking stick.

- GHAZNI :** Asoka is said to have built here 10 stupas. It has a Buddhist complex at Hunao Qala.
- HADDA :** Many sacred Buddhist spots dating from the 2nd to 7th century AD are found here.
- BALKH :** Ruins of many Buddhist shrines built during the reign of the Kushans in the 2nd century AD.
- SURKH KOTAL :** Site of a great temple built by Kanishka. Two km away is an important Buddhist site, dating to the 4th century AD, locally known as Takhat-e-Rustam (Rustam's Throne). A stupa cave crowns the hill which houses a monastery.

Verily, Afghanistan has glorious Buddhist heritage which is now under threat at the hands of Taliban.



CHAPTER II

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS

AS SEEN BY HIUEN TSANG IN 630 AD

Bamiyan lies to the north of Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. Being on the Silk Route, the great trade route that linked in ancient days India, Central Asia and China, Bamiyan was for more than 1000 years an important centre of trade and commerce. It was also a great seat of Buddhist culture and learning, studded with Buddhist caves and temples. The two colossal Buddha statues, one 35 metres high and the other 55 metres high, are said to have been carved by the devout Buddhists of Afghanistan in the second century AD and the fifth century AD respectively. The first eye-witness account of their grandeur and glory has been recorded for us by Hiuen Tsang (Yuan Chwang), the celebrated Chinese pilgrim, who came to India in the seventh century AD in search of true Dhamma.

Hiuen Tsang was a very keen observer and has left for us the most valuable record of Central Asia and India in general and of Buddhism, the religion which he loved, in particular. Hiuen Tsang left China in 629 AD, at the age of 26, and took the same route to India, as Fa-hian, the first Chinese pilgrim (399-414 AD) had done, across the Central Asia, the Gobi desert and Hindu Kush mountain. When he crossed over to Turfan, the first kingdom in Central Asia, Hiuen Tsang was welcomed by the king, who was a devout Buddhist. At that time, the whole of Central Asia was Buddhist, and Hiuen Tsang saw hundreds of monasteries with thousands of monks in Turfan, Kara-shahr (Kashgar), Kucha, and Bactria. After crossing the Hindu Kush, Hiuen Tsang reached Bamiyan in 630 AD. He speaks highly of Bamiyan, and gives a vivid account of Buddhist monks and monasteries as well as the two giant Buddhas. He says¹:

FAN-YEN-NA (BAMIYAN)

"This kingdom is about 2000 li from east to west, and 300 li from north to south. It is situated in the midst of the Snowy Mountains.

The people inhabit towns either in the mountains or the valleys, according to circumstances. The capital leans on a steep hill, bordering on a valley 6 or 7 li in length. On the north it is backed by high precipices. It (*The country*) produces spring-wheat and few flowers or fruits. It is suitable for cattle, and affords pasture for many sheep and horses. The climate is wintry, and the manners of the people hard and uncultivated. The clothes are chiefly made of skin and wool, which are the most suitable for the country. The literature, customary rules, and money used in commerce are the same as those of the Tukhara country. Their language is a little different, but in point of personal appearance they closely resemble each other. These people are remarkable, among all their neighbours, for a love of religion (*a heart of pure faith*); from the highest form of worship to the three jewels, down to the worship of the hundred (*i.e., different*) spirits, there is not the least absence (*decrease*) of earnestness and the utmost devotion of heart. The merchants, in arranging their prices as they come and go, fall in with the signs afforded by the spirits. If good, they act accordingly; if evil, they seek to propitiate the powers. There are ten convents and about 1000 priests. They belong to the Little Vehicle, and the school of the Lokottaravadins.

To the north-east of the royal city there is a mountain, on the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha, erect, in height 140 or 150 feet.² Its golden hues sparkle on every side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness.

To the east of this spot there is a convent, which was built by a former king of the country. To the east of the convent there is a standing figure of Sakya Buddha, made of metallic stone, in height 100 feet.

To the east of the city 12 or 13 li there is a convent, in which there is a figure of Buddha lying in a sleeping position, as when he attained *Nirvana*. The figure is in length about 1000 feet or so. The king of this (*country*), every time he assembles the great congregation of the Wu-che (*Moksha*).³ having sacrificed all his possessions, from his wife and children down to his country's treasures, gives in addition

his own body; then his ministers and the lower order of officers prevail on the priests to barter back these possessions; and in these matters most of their time is taken up.

To the south-west of the convent of the sleeping figure (*of Buddha*), going 200 li or so, passing the great Snowy Mountains on the east, there is a little watercourse (*valley*), which is moist with (*the overflowings of*) standing springs, bright as mirrors; the herbage here is green and bright. There is a *sangharama* here with a tooth of Buddha, also the tooth of a Pratyeka Buddha,⁴ who lived at the beginning of the *Kalpa*, which is in length about five inches, and in breadth somewhat less than four inches. Again, there is the tooth of a goldenwheel king,⁵ in length three inches, and in surface (*breadth*) two inches. There is also the iron begging-dish of Sanakavasa,⁶ a great Arhat, which is capable of holding eight or nine *shing* (*pints*). These three sacred objects, bequeathed by the holy personages referred to, are all contained in a yellow-golden sealed case. Again, there is here the *Sanghati* robe, in nine pieces of Sanakavasa; the colour is a deep red (*rose-red*); it is made of the bark (*peel*) of the *She-no-kia* plant. Sanakavasa was the disciple of Ananda.⁷

Going eastward from this, we enter the defiles of the Snowy Mountains, cross over the black ridge (Siah Koh), and arrive at the country of Kia-pi-shi (Kapisa).

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1. SI-YU-KI. Buddhist Records of the Buddhist World, Translated from the Chinese by Samuel Beal, In Two Volumes (Bound in One), Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, Reprint: 1981, pp. 50-53, vol. 1.
2. These rock hewn figures of Buddha in Bamiyan have been objects of curiosity down to the present day. They were seen during the campaign in Afghanistan in 1843, and doubtless remain to the present day. The most recent notice of them is in General Kaye's paper. *Proc. Gog. Soc.*, vol. 1. (1879), pp. 248,249. He says: On the opposite side of the valley from the great (standing) image, about a mile to the west, a stony gully leads into the hills. A short way up this there is a nearly insulated rock, on the fiat summit of which there is in relief a recumbent figure, bearing a rude resemblance to a huge lizard," which figure the people now call Azhdaha, or the dragon slain by a

Muhammadan pir (see also *ib.*, p. 338). Hyder, quoting *Masalik Mamalik* and the *Farhang-i-Jahangiri* of Ibn Fakred-din Angju, says the two larger statues are 50 cubits high, one called *Surkh-but* (red image) and the other *khink-but* (grey image), and at some distance is a smaller one "in formae vetulae," called *Ncsr*. The *Ain-i-Akbari* says the larger of the two is 80 ells (cubits?) and the lesser 50 in height; Burnes's estimate is 120 and 70 feet. Wilford gives a tolerably minute account of Bamiyan and these figures. Masson mentions five statues.

3. The *Mohsha Mahaparishad*; a meeting, as it seems, held every five years for the benefit of the priests (Buddhist community). On these occasions there were recitations of the law, and offerings were made to the priesthood. These assemblies were generally made on some favourite mountain. It was also called *Panchavarshika parishad*. See *Abstract of Four Lectures*, p. 170.
4. A Pratyeka Buddha is one who has attained enlightenment, that is, become a Buddha, but for himself alone.
5. That is, a monarch of the four *dvipas* or *suvarnachakravartin*.
6. Sanakavasa, or Sanavasika, according to some Northern accounts, was the fourth patriarch or president of the Buddhist community (*Fo-sho-hing-tsan-king*, *xiv.*) Other authorities speak of him as the third patriarch. He lived 100 years after Buddha.
7. The ordinary succession of the patriarchs is, after Buddha, (1) Kasyapa, (2) Ananda, (3) Madhyantika, (4) Sanakavasa. The last named is sometimes identified with Yasa, the son of Kana, who was one of the chief leaders in the second council 100 years after Buddha.

CHAPTER III

BAMIYAN : WHERE ONCE BUDDHA'S GOLDEN LINES SPARKED *

— DR. MOHAN LAL SHARMA

The Buddhist stupas and monasteries and the massive statues of Buddha carved out of rock at Bamiyan in the heart of Afghanistan are still the wonder of tourists and scholars from all parts of the world.

Situated in the mid-point of Asia and at the crossroads between the north and south, east and west, Afghanistan naturally became in bygone times the meeting ground of different peoples and of various civilizations—Aryan (Bactrian or Rigvedic), Achaemenian, Greek Kushan and Buddhist.

The result was the birth of a hybrid culture that found its expression in different schools of art, employing a technique unquestionably borrowed from foreigners, but modified and moulded according to local requirements.

Greek culture found its way into Bactrian art in the fourth century B. C. when the country became part of the vast Macedonian Empire and came into direct touch with Greek culture and philosophy.

In the middle of the third Century B. C., during the days of Asoka the Great, Buddhism found its way into the country. It was on Afghan soil that Greek realism intermingled with Indian mysticism giving genesis to a new school of art known to historians and Indologists as the Gandhara School or more properly Graeco-Buddhist School of Gandhara, which undoubtedly had its centre at Hadda, six miles south of modern Jalalabad (Nagrahara of Buddhist days).

In the second century A.D., when Kanishka came to power, Afghanistan became a great seat of Buddhism. It was from here that this religion found its way to Sinkiang, China and Mongolia. Kanishka,

* The Maha Bodhi, February-March, 1970, pp. 59-62.

like Asoka, embraced Buddhism and became an active and liberal patron of that religion which was fast becoming a great World Religion. During his long reign, which lasted probably from 78 to 101 A.D., Buddhist art and religion flourished throughout his far-flung empire.

The famous school of sculpture known as the Gandhara or Graeco-Buddhist School made great progress. The most important change of the new schools was the deification of the founder of Buddhism, whose image became the object of religious worship.

Buddhism was, in origin, not only a religion but a philosophy of life and a code of morals. The Buddha, the Enlightened One, was not only god-like but also an inspired and inspiring teacher, who preached "The middle path" between indulgence and asceticism, avoiding both the extremes of gross luxury and grim austerity. The path can be easily followed by those who cannot completely give up worldly pursuits.

In Afghanistan Buddhism absorbed many elements of foreign culture. The primitive Buddhism of the Hinayana, a southern school, which was a system of practical morals and a tender regard for the sanctity of all living creatures, underwent tremendous changes. Greek as well as other foreign influences stimulated mythology and imagery and these sweeping changes became possible under the patronage of Kanishka. It was during his reign that the Mahayana School came into being and the centre of Buddhism shifted from India to Gandhara.

The Hinayana School adheres largely to the original faith as preached by Buddha himself, while the Mahayana School, a northern Buddhism, by its contact with Hellenism and other local elements underwent many changes and gradually developed into a new religion.

The old school never depicted Buddha in a human form; his presence was symbolized by an empty seat, a footprint, an umbrella, a riderless horse or even an empty throne. According to the new school Buddha is portrayed in human form and is worshipped.

Kanishka was a great builder and a zealous patron of Buddhism. He had two capitals; Kapisa (modern Begram, 35 miles north of

Kabul) was his summer residence, while Purushapura (Peshawar) was his winter headquarters. He adorned his capitals with magnificent buildings, stupas and monasteries.

In Peshawar, Kanishka is said to have built a beautiful Sangharama with a lofty stupa, about 150 feet in height, perhaps one of the most magnificent temples of the time. Innumerable monasteries were erected at Kapisa. One of these, Shalokia, was built by the Chinese princesses kept by Kanishka as hostages in his court.

The temple was in a fair state of preservation when Hiuen Tsang, the famous Chinese pilgrim, visited the country in the early part of the seventh Century A.D. He describes with great delight the wealth and splendour of these monasteries which dotted the whole country. The smaller statue at Bamiyan (35 metres in height), or at least the stupa at its feet (no longer in existence), which became the core of later Buddhist buildings in that famous valley, may be ascribed to the efforts of this great king.

Bamiyan in those days was a great seat of culture, similar to Nalanda, Ajanta, Ellora, and Odantapuri. Its remains, when properly unearthed and studied, might throw immense light on the development of Graeco-Buddhist culture in the country and will undoubtedly solve some of our most intricate historical problems and riddles.

Bamiyan was also a great commercial centre in those early days. Lying on the great trade route that linked India with Balkh, much of the Indian foreign trade in spices, pearls, ivory, and cotton piece goods passed through this city. The intercourse between India and the countries of the West and China can be traced through this country and via Bamiyan from those remote ages until the invasion of Cenghiz Khan in the early part of the thirteenth century.

Bamiyan is only 145 miles north of Kabul and a motor-road now leads to it through the charming valleys of Kohdaman and Ghorband. At a distance of some 110 miles from Kabul there is a steep ascent, called the Shibar Pass, which in winter is often blocked with snow. About 19 miles ahead of the pass, the road branches off; the one to

the right leads to Mazar-i-Sharif and Katghan, while the second to the left leads to Bamiyan.

The road to Bamiyan runs parallel to the river of the same name in the opposite direction and skirts a range of hills of different colours, red predominating. After six miles an old mud fort perched on a steep rock attracts the attention of the passer-by. This is the city of Zahak-i-Maran. A little further the valley widens and a city of caves appears.

This is the historic city of Bamiyan, now in ruins, lying at the foot of a reddish hill, some 9000 feet above sea-level. Bamiyan is indeed the dividing line between two massive mountain ranges—the Hindu Kush and the Koh-i-Baba.

The valley of Bamiyan, deep sunk in the great plateau, is between 8000 and 9000 feet above the sea. To the south lies the snowcapped array of Koh-i-Baba, running to 16,000 and 17,000 feet. Rocky and toothbreaking as may be most of the passes, they are all passable at certain times and seasons; but in the winter months they are closed by deep snow and fierce blizzards. The deep valleys traversing this storm-ridden plateau are often exceedingly beautiful and form a strange contrast to the dull and barren rocky ridges that appear on all sides.

It is the mystery of its unrecorded history and the local evidence of the departed as well as existing glory of Buddhism, which make Bamiyan the most interesting valley of Afghanistan. Though today completely ruined it speaks eloquently of its one-time, former grandeur. Each year sees some striking revelation of its past history or some lovely addition to the magnificent collection in the Museum of Kabul. But much still remains to be excavated to throw more light on the deeper secrets of its past, glorious history which is still pretty much shrouded in mystery.

Massive ruins still look down from the bordering cliffs and for six or seven miles these cliffs are pierced by an infinity of caved dwellings. Little is left of the ancient city, except its acropolis (known as Shahr-

i-Gulghola-the City of Uproars), which crowns an isolated rock in the middle of the valley.

Enormous figures of Buddha (53 and 35 metres high) with smaller ones in different directions are carved out of the sedimentary rocks on the sides of the Bamiyan gorge. Once coated with cement or plaster and possibly coloured and gilded; these images must have strongly appealed to the imagination of the weary pilgrims, who prostrated themselves at their feet. "THE GOLDEN LINES SPARK ON EVERY SIDE," says Huien Tsang, who saw them in the year 630 A.D., when he counted more than ten monasteries and a thousand monks in the valley of Bamiyan.

Of the two massive images, the smaller, over 100 feet in height, is the older. It seems that it was begun in the second century A.D., probably under the patronage of Kanishka. The bigger one of about 160 feet is of a later date, probably around the fourth or fifth century A.D.

The niches of the Buddha contain marred but withal beautiful frescoes, dating from about the same period. These are very interesting from the archaeological point of view, as they show an important stage in the long process that brought art of India to Afghanistan and blended it with Greek, Roman, and Sassanian elements before it ultimately found its way through Sinkiang to China and distant Japan. Aesthetically striking as these statues of the Buddha (or Buddhas) are, there is about them, too, a religious aura which defies analysis.

There is an unmistakable religious atmosphere around Bamiyan and, in effect, the whole of this valley even today. In the days of old when travellers, after tiresome days spent battling across the Hindu Kush, where nature is fierce and seems ready to crush man at any moment, suddenly saw opening in front of them the valley of Bamiyan—lush green, peaceful, full of gushing streams, crowned by the majestic Koh-i-Baba—they must have thought it to be the gift of the Buddha in the wilderness of these barren mountains.

Though now in ruins, Bamiyan is one of the curiosities of the world. It was a flourishing city when the Moslems came there, and it was a great seat of commerce and learning until the beginning of the thirteenth century. The early Moslem writers speak of it in glorious terms. Yaquibi, for instance, describes it in detail and speaks of the frescoes that adorned the niches and caves. The local people, he says, called the big statue the Red Buddha, while the smaller one was known as the Grey Buddha.

The city with all its inhabitants was swept off the face of the valley by Cenghiz Khan, the Mongol, early in the thirteenth century A.D. It is said that one of his grandsons, Mutugen, son of Jaghatai, was killed in action during the siege of Bamiyan. When the town surrendered after a long time, Cenghiz, in revenge, ordered that no living being, man or animal, was to be spared. The ruined town was then called Mao-Baligh, the bad town. Though no longer a great religious centre, Bamiyan is fast recovering glimpses of its past glory if only as a great, modern tourist resort thanks to the facilities made available by today's transport.

CHAPTER IV

SMILING GIANT OF BAMIIYAN*

— *DERK KINNANE*

In a tranquil valley in the remote mountains of Afghanistan stands the world's largest statue, a representation of the Lord Buddha, 53 metres (173 feet) tall.

The smiling giant and the niche that shelters him are carved from the rock of a cliffside forming part of the southern slope of the Hindu Kush. On the same cliffside, 1,200 metres (4,000 feet) to the east, another, seated Buddha, 35 metres (120 feet) high, looks over the valley and town of Bamiiyan with its small farms and river. The ochre-coloured bluff, the dun earth and the rich greens of cultivated plots and rows of poplars are set off by a clear blue sky. During the main tourist season the weather is temperate and bracing the altitude being about 2,600 metres (8,500 feet).

Providing picturesque countryside with one of the world's most impressive artistic monuments, the valley of Bamiiyan is a place of serenity, where the pounding stress of modern urban and industrial life seems very distant. A place to draw tourists, certainly. And, well aware of this, the Afghan government called in UNESCO to study how Bamiiyan could be made into a major tourist attraction — without spoiling its present charms.

Two UNESCO experts visited Bamiiyan in July 1970: Piero Gazzola, the Italian who is President of the International Council of Monuments and Sites, and Jean-Baptists Perrin, a Frenchman from the International Federation of Landscape Architecture. They drew up a programme for the careful development of the Bamiiyan area which interested the Kabul authorities. Thus, their proposal that an old and not very pretty hotel be pulled down and replaced by a new one is being acted on. As the experts recommended, the new hotel is to be a low-lying, one-storey series of pavilions : an unobtrusive building rather than a tall one jutting out of the landscape.

* The Maha Bodhi, February-March, 1973, pp. 65-68.

The Afghan Government also has under study a plan not to limit the development of the site to the immediate area of the great statues. The plan would cover an area as far east as the 'Red Citadel', Shahr-i-Zohak, about 18 kms (11 miles) distant from the Buddhas and the modern town of Bamiyan which lies at their feet.

The ruins of the citadel of Shahr-i-Zohak and of Shahr-i-Gulgola, south of Bamiyan, are testimony of a time when the valley was far from peaceful. Bamiyan was once an important centre on the route between India, Central Asia and China in the east and Iran and the Greek, Roman and Byzantine world in the west. For over 1,000 years it flourished, a prize sought by a succession of conquerors. Then, in 1,222, Mutukin, a favourite grandson of the conqueror. Cenghis Khan died in a battle for Bamiyan. When Cenghis succeeded in capturing it, he avenged Mutukin's death by ordering the annihilation of all living beings in the vicinity. Bamiyan was utterly destroyed. In time, new settlements arose, but the valley was never again a place of cultural and commercial importance.

Pilgrim recorded gold and jewels

Six centuries before the wrath of the Mongols was unleashed a scholarly pilgrim from China visited Bamiyan and wrote that the great statues glistened with gold and jewels indeed, traces of gold remain on them to this day. The pilgrim, Hsuan Tsang, may have stayed in one of the remarkable monasteries cut into the cliffside surrounding the statues. Fascinating to the culturally-minded tourist, these systems of man-made caves comprise individual monk's cells, sanctuaries, vast meeting rooms and connecting corridors, laid out either on a rectangular plan or around a central point. Their decoration exemplifies the diversity of artistic influences found at Bamiyan. For example, the ceiling of some of the chambers are made up of the false beams carved in a pattern used by the inhabitants of the Pamir mountains beyond the Hindu Kush to the north-east but deriving from conventions originating in Armenia, Anatolia and Georgia to the west.

Buddhism may have come to Bamiyan soon after 260 B.C. when the suzerain of the region, the Emperor Asoka of India, accepted

this religion. But the impetus to build the great monuments probably arose during or after the reign of Kanishka, the ruler who in the second century A.D. made his state, covering the northern part of the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan, for a while the most powerful realm in Central Asia. Kanishka, who belonged to the Kushans, a dynasty of Central Asian Oly was also the champion of Mahayana or Great wheel Buddhism and spent vast sums on devotional works.

The Kushan association with Bamiyan is suggested by the style of the statues of Buddha which reflect those of this dynasty's great art centre at Gandhara, in what is now the vale of Peshwar in northwestern Pakistan. The massive proportion of the larger Buddha, the right hand raised in the protective gesture abhaya mudra, and the stylized draping to represent his man's robe recall Gandharan art — an art which sought to synthesize Indian and Hellenistic influences. A curious technique used at Bamiyan was to make the folds in the Buddha's robe by hanging heavy ropes over the carved surface holding them in place with pegs, and then covering them with stucco.

Gazzola and Perrin find no influence of the art of Iran's Sassanid dynasty in the larger Buddha. But in the smaller one they detect the Sassanian style in the treatment of garments and ornaments. 'This fact indicates that in this region the Sassanids, who allowed Buddhism to continue, followed the Kushans' they report. The architectural style imitated in the cave chambers and other evidence, the experts believe show that Bamiyan became a centre for the transformation and the spread eastward of Iranian influences, mixed with Indian ones, which eventually, further modified, reached China and even Japan.

'It is nearly impossible to give precise dates for the different periods', Gazzola and Perrin say. 'However, an evolution is evident : Sassanid Iranian elements came to be added to Greco-Buddhist traditions. Evidence on the site, the product of this fusion, shows that for a time the Sassanian influence predominated but, very quickly, the character of the latter works was modified by additions from Indian art of the Gupta period' (The Gupta dynasty of Indian rulers rose in the 4th century and fell some 200 years later).

Larger Buddha Carved Last

On the whole, the caves closest to the smaller Buddha antedate those near the bigger one. Thus the 35 metre (120 foot) Buddha could have been begun around the 2nd century A.D. while the later works those near the 53 metre (173 foot) Buddha would belong to a more recent period of activity the 5th or perhaps 6th century, they report.

It was during the latter epoch that Hsuan Tsang paid his visit. In 630 the monk had seen Bamiyan and was travelling eastward across India before eventually going back to China. In 632 far to the west in the desert city of Medina, the Prophet Muhammad died, having established the authority of Islam in Arabia and prepared the way for the whirlwind of Muslim expansion that followed. About the time that Hsuan Tsang finally returned home in 645 the first Arab armies were penetrating Afghanistan.

The advance of Islam was slower in the Hindu Kush than in neighbouring regions, but in the century following Hsuan Tsang's visit Muslim Princes ruled in Bamiyan. For a while Buddhism continued to have its followers and there were still Buddhist devotional statues to be carried off — which was done by Yakub ibn Laith, a ruler belonging to a local Iranian dynasty, when he seized Bamiyan in 871. He took the 'idol' to Baghdad, the then seat of the caliphate. But the great statues — and the emptied monasteries — remained and endured.

Wind brings deterioration

Today there is no danger from man's violence to these monuments. But there is a menace that natural processes could seriously damage, even obliterate them.

The cliff which houses the Buddhas is made up of a conglomerate of rocks that consist of three main groups. A red coloured band at the bottom, a yellowish rock in the middle and grey rock on top. Great shifts in temperature, erosion by wind and by water seeping down from the surface of the plateau where the cliff supports have caused what is an increasingly dangerous deterioration of the

cliffside. Indeed, although the side has kept more or less the same appearance it had when the statues were carved, it has in fact moved back a considerable distance. Trickling water created fissure that eventually spread and joined with geological cracks isolating parts of the rockface on its other three sides. Sooner or later, this free-standing rock crumbled.

Gazzola and Perrin recommended that a careful study be made of how to go about strengthening the cliffside.

Sometime around 1940 a brick buttress was erected against the rockface just to the west of the smaller Buddha to prevent the collapse of a 1,000 cubic metres of the cliffside as a result of a fissure that had already wrecked one of the stairways linking cave sanctuaries. Unfortunately, the buttress has not worked. The fissure is getting larger and the buttress itself has developed a crack.

Grave problems also beset the conservation of the larger Buddha and a team of Indian experts, at the invitation of the Afghan government, are working on reinforcing the two statues and on their artistic restoration.

Summing up, the UNESCO experts urge that first of all a team of experts in the different fields connected with such major restoration, conservation and development should draw up a detailed plan for Bamiyan to be submitted to the Afghan government for approval. Implementing such an ambitious plan would require technical and material aid from many countries and the United Nations should be asked to help say Gazzola and Perrin.

Mountain Park Urged :

The next steps, they recommend would be to reinforce the cliff, complete the restoration work underway, lay out tourist routes and conserve the ruins of Shahr-i-Zohak and Shahr-i-Gulgula. They also call for the creation of a Himalaya Park in the surrounding countryside, where the flora and fauna of the region could be enjoyed, and the construction of a good road, replacing the present, rather bumpy

one, linking Kabul and Bamiyan. If possible, the road should continue to the beautiful lakes of Band-i-Amir not far from the valley.

Gazzola and Perrin firmly urge that the agricultural economy in the valley be maintained, protected and aided. It is only through the farming activities of the local people that Bamiyan can remain a living place and not turn into a lifeless open-air museum.

While a market and a school, like the old hotel, should be pulled down because they are eyesores. These facilities should also be replaced. 'It is a question of making Bamiyan live better by keeping its general aspect and maintaining economic activity based on, agriculture and commerce while complementing this with a modern activity : tourism, they say.

'Afghanistan has the rare possibility of reconciling the demands of tourism development highly important to its economy, and at the same time exploiting exceptional natural and cultural endowments, the UNESCO experts declare. — (UNESCO Features).

CHAPTER V

VANDALS FROM THE DARK AGES

UNDERSTANDING THE TALIBAN

— V. SUDARSHAN

It was in September 1996 that the world first caught a glimpse of the Taliban's lust for blood and vengeance. Kabul had fallen and the Taliban had vanquished the (anti-Soviet) mujahideen. Marauding bands of gun-totting youth took over the presidential palace and beat the former communist President Najibullah, then under house arrest, senseless. They then castrated him and tied his bleeding body to the jeep before driving the vehicle several times around the palace compound. Najib was then shot dead. They meted the same treatment to his brother. But their rancour still didn't subside. They hung the two bodies from a concrete traffic control post outside the palace, located near the UN headquarters there.

The following day, a stunned world saw pictures of the two bodies hanging with steel wire nooses, unlit cigarettes dangling from their lips. The message was clear: a virulent strain of Islam was about to sweep through Afghanistan.

Six years later, the Taliban's self-claimed heavy artillery barrage on the Bamiyan Buddhas is yet another manifestation of their medieval outlook. Even 11 days after the order to destroy the statues was issued, there is still confusion about the extent of the damage. The Taliban are the only source, and they claim that 75 per cent of the two statues had been destroyed before. The rest of the task, say the Taliban, will be completed soon.

The world is hoping that it is still possible to prevent complete destruction of the statues. Hectic diplomatic activity was already under way last Thursday. A Japanese parliamentary team was trying in Islamabad to get to Kabul and UN's special envoy Francis Vendrell was hoping to meet the Taliban leadership. UNESCO official Pierre la France met Afghan foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil in Kandahar but failed to get any assurance about Bamiyan.

The Taliban's advent to power began when it replaced the mujahideen who had been propped up by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the Saudis and the Americans to fight the Soviet-backed Kabul regime of Najibullah. In fact, in March 1987, after the mujahideen, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, launched their attack on Tajikistan, the then CIA director, William Casey, made a secret trip to Pakistan to review the operation.

Nine years later, however, the mujahideen warlords were a corrupt, squabbling lot. It was into this ideological vacuum that Mullah Omar made his entry, and his band of followers started an Islamic 'reform' movement. This came to be known as the Taliban, or students (of Islam) who formed the core group of Mullah Omar. Drawn largely from Afghan refugees who had fled their country following the Soviet invasion and Pakistani impoverished classes, they were young men who had studied in madrassas dotting the Pakistan-Afghan border. These seminaries taught an obscurantist version of Islam drawn from the orthodox Wahabi school. For them, jihad was an instrument of political and social change.

In 1996, Mullah Omar was anointed by his fellow Taliban travellers as Amir-ul-Momineen (leader of the faithful). He had started off as a latter-day Robin Hood, till Nasirullah Baabar, Benazir Bhutto's interior minister, began to back him with money and firepower. Once Islamabad weighed in, the rest followed, as is usual in Afghanistan. The arrangement was simple: Pakistan backed the Taliban and the Taliban took over Afghanistan, beginning with Kandahar in 1994. Thousands of mesmerised students from the madrassas flocked to the new messiah.

After taking over Kabul in 1996, the Taliban imposed their version of Sharia on everything from nail polish to sodomy. But the process was till then not devoid of debates. For instance, unsure of how to punish sodomy, the Taliban initially wanted to throw the offenders off a high roof. But, then a new solution was offered. The punishment was first recorded in February 1998: three men accused of sodomy were first partially buried in the ground, adjacent to a large mud and

brick wall. Then a Taliban tank toppled the wall, burying the men alive. It was innovative, effective, and most importantly, spectator-friendly. Later *Anis*, the Taliban newspaper, wrote that Mullah Omar "attended the function to give Sharia punishment to the three buggers. . ."

It was Omar who ordered the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. His word is law in Afghanistan. As Wakil Ahmed (one-time food-taster, driver, personal attendant and spokesman of Mullah Omar) told an Arabic magazine *Al-Majallah* in 1996: "Decisions are based on the advice of the Amir-ul-Momineen. For us consultation is not necessary. We believe that this is in line with the Sharia. We abide by the Amir's view. Even if he alone takes this view. . ."

Little is known about Mullah Omar. He is a Pashtun born circa 1959 at Nodeh village near Kandahar. After his father died, he moved to Singesar village in Mewand district of Kandahar and started a small madrassa. He fought against Najibullah between 1989 and 1992, and was wounded four times. Omar has three wives, the second one a teenager whom he married in 1995. His five children study in the madrassa he started and his family lives in Singesar. He is well-built and wears a black turban and beard. These details are fuzzy because he has reportedly never been photographed.

Omar reportedly keeps near him two huge tin trunks, one which contains afghani, the local currency, the other American dollars. Together the trunks form the treasury of the Taliban movement. Journalist Ahmed Rashid notes in his insightful book (*Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*) that this renders the task of "making a national budget next to impossible — even if the expertise is available, which in any case is absent."

What then keeps the Taliban afloat financially, apart from opium money? Rashid provides some figures: "In 1997-98 Pakistan provided the Taliban with an estimated US\$30 million in aid. This included 600,000 tonnes of wheat, diesel, petroleum and kerosene fuel which was partly paid for by Saudi Arabia, arms and ammunition, aerial bombs, maintenance and spare parts for its Soviet-era military

equipment such as tanks and heavy artillery, repairs and maintenance of Taliban's air force and airport, road-building, electricity supply in Kandahar and salaries. Officially, Pakistan denied it was supporting the Taliban." The US, on the other hand, winked at the Taliban all through their Kandahar-Kabul sojourn, till various women's groups made it impossible for the Clinton administration to politically flirt with and then embrace Mullah Omar.

The Taliban leadership is a disabled lot. Omar himself is blind in the right eye. He lost it in 1989 when a Russian rocket exploded close to him. Again, the governor of Kandahar, Mullah Mohammed Hassan, a founder member of the Taliban, has a peg leg and the tip of one of his fingers is missing, lost to shrapnel wound. Justice minister Nuruddin Turabi and former foreign minister Mohammed Ghaus are both reportedly one-eyed wonders as well. Kabul mayor Abdul Majid doesn't have one leg and two fingers. And they seem to lead by example. According to 1998 figures, the number of families headed by a disabled person was 63,000. Under the Taliban the only productive industry relates to factories making artificial limbs, crutches and allied products.

But such disabilities have only hardened the Taliban leaders. In a system of instant corrective measures, the Taliban's cures are often drastic. One woman had the top of her thumb amputated. Her crime? She wore nail polish. As recently as February 26 this year (2001), 22 barbers were arrested in Kabul for surreptitiously giving men Leonardo DiCaprio hairstyles. In 1998, there was an instance when three Afghan boxers were banned from a competition in Karachi, because they would not shave off their beards to meet the boxing rules. They feared that if they returned home clean-shaven the Taliban morality police would chop off their heads.

Inexplicable are the ways of the Taliban. Spectators are not allowed to clap or cheer at sporting events in Afghanistan, not that there are many, anyway. They can only chant Allahu Akbar. And should a game coincide with prayer time, the players must break for prayers. An edict further enjoins: "Both the spectators and players should offer prayers in congregation."

There is scarcely anything that is not proscribed under the Taliban. TV is banned, as is smoking, movies, wedding parties, any sort of mixed-sex gathering, cameras, photographs, children's toys, kites, dolls, employment for women, any kind of make-up jewellery, plucking of eyebrows, white socks (for some strange reason the Taliban have decreed white socks to be sexually arousing), high-heeled shoes and laughing loudly. There can be no pictures or portraits hung at home. When the Associated Press reported in 1996 that music is banned, it quoted education minister Mullah Abdul Hanifi saying it was "because it (music) creates a strain in the mind and hampers the study of Islam". Education for girls is also banned. Tailors are banned from measuring women for clothes. Women cannot go outside without a burqa and even then must be accompanied by a male relative. Commentators have wryly noted that it is probably simpler to enumerate the things Taliban have not banned than to make an exhaustive list of banned substances, which, for some reason, includes paper bags, too.

To put it simply, under the Taliban, culture is banned. Celebration of the Afghan spring festival, Navroz, is proscribed. It used to mark the first day of the Persian solar calendar (pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian in origin), when the people visited their relatives' graves. The Taliban has presided over a phenomenal number of deaths. In 1998, for example, the Red Cross reported that the number of Afghan families headed by a widow had reached 98,000. According to available figures, the infant mortality rate is 163 deaths per thousand births, the highest in the world. A quarter of all children do not reach their fifth birthday. The number in other developing countries is one-tenth of this. Nobody has yet come up with conclusive figures of the mounting dead.

And yes, women cannot work, except in some health-related sectors. This has been tough. Before the ban came in 1996, 70 per cent of the teachers in Kabul were women, so were 50 per cent of civil servants and university students, and 40 per cent of all doctors. Now, there are no educated or professional classes in that country.

The Taliban now mans everything. There is an irony here. The word Talib means student; taliban is its plural. Although schooling is not banned, at least for the boys, the schools are all shut. By December 1998 the UNICEF reported that the country's educational system had collapsed. In its assessment, nine in every 10 girls and two out of every three boys had not enrolled in school.

This is partly because of the Taliban leaders, most of whom hail from poor provinces which had no schools. This is true of Mullah Omar too. With no teaching going on, these student-followers of Mullah Omar are running amok amputating, beheading, stoning to death, whipping, enforcing the Sharia as they see it. Most Muslim countries are mute witnesses but they aren't tacit supporters either. The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), for instance, has not recognised the Taliban regime.

After the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, its Olympic-size stadium reports full house regularly. But it is not for witnessing sporting events. The assembled spectators at the Kabul stadium witness amputations, stoning to death of women found guilty of adultery, summary executions and the like, not games. The Taliban expect the Afghans to watch and learn a lesson or two about the kind of Islam Mullah Omar wants practised. But spectators cannot applaud. In case there is applause, the Taliban have the discretion to chop the offending hands off.

In 1996, all males were given six weeks in which to grow a full beard — or face the consequences. This was tough for some ethnic groups — especially the Hazaras — who are only minimally hirsute. But this is not the reason why the Hazaras are dying at the hands of the Taliban, sometimes hundreds at one go. The Taliban has been accused by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan of massacring several thousand Hazaras and other minorities while taking over Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamiyan because the Taliban, besides religion, also discriminates along ethnic and linguistic lines. In November 1998, the minuscule Sikh and Hindu minorities were asked to wear an identification band.

CHAPTER VI

DESTRUCTION OF BAMMIAN BUDDHAS : BLOW BY BLOW ACCOUNT

The Times of India, New Delhi

(28.2.2001 - 15.3.2001)

1. 28.2.2001 Taliban decree may wipe out parts of Indian history
2. 1.3.2001 Taliban to destroy Buddhas despite outcry
3. 2.3.2001 Taliban begins demolition
4. 3.3.2001 Buddhas being bombarded
5. 4.3.2001 Buddhas begin to crumble
6. 5.3.2001 It's all over for Bamiyan Buddhas
7. 6.3.2001 Isolation frustrates Taliban
8. 7.3.2001 Despite Eid - Taliban dynamite Buddhas
9. 8.3.2001 UNSC slams Buddha destruction: Lanka offers cash
10. 9.3.2001 Taliban: Nothing can save Buddhas; UN still hopeful
11. 10.3.2001 Pakistan sending minister to Afghanistan
12. 12.3.2001 Sorry Mr Annan, it's too late: Taliban
13. 14.3.2001 UN lobbies OIC to halt further carnage in Afghanistan
14. 15.3.2001 Bamiyan Buddhas laid to rest

February 28, 2001

TALIBAN DECREE MAY WIPE OUT PARTS OF INDIAN HISTORY

By Maneesh Pandey

New Delhi: The decree issued Monday by the ruling Taliban militia supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar ordering the destruction of all statues in Afghanistan, which the Taliban view as un-Islamic, has shocked the conservationists worldwide.

Afghanistan was a centre of learning and trade before Islamic conquerors invaded it. In terms of heritage, it is famous for two massive Buddha statues (55 metres and 35 metres) in the central province of Bamiyan.

They are believed to be among the tallest "Standing Buddhas" in the world. Besides, the region is home to six bilingual Ashokan rock edicts, Buddhist viharas, stupas and remains of the Kushana period.

But all these will cease to exist, if the Taliban goes ahead with its plans. The decree would leave nothing, but only debris of a bygone era, feel experts.

For India, the region is of great significance, as it till date houses some of the finest specimens of Indian civilisation and culture, says R. Sengupta, ex-director of conservation, ASI. Sengupta headed the Indian Archaeological mission to Afghanistan in the late '60s. "Time and again India has helped its historical neighbour with expertise in restoration of the latter's heritage in pre-Taliban days and had earned wide appreciation too," says Sengupta, who spent nine years (from 1969-77) in Afghanistan as part of the Indo-Afghan restoration project. There are several sites, he says, "which are of special interest to India.

Notable among them: Bamiyan, Ningrahar (modern name Hadda), Jalalabad and Kapisa (modern name Begram)."

Bamiyan, situated 250 kms. north-west from Kabul, nestled between the mountain ranges of the Hindukush and Koh-i-Baba at 2,850 metres, was on the famous "Silk Route" that connected Western

Asia with the sub-continent. "Being a convenient halting place for trading caravans, and monastic establishments and Buddhist images spread all around, it soon turned out to be a major Buddhist centre of meditation and worship and continued to be so until Chengis Khan's invasion in 13th century," says Sengupta.

Jalalabad, bordering Pakistan and now a strategic battlefield of the Taliban and opposition Northern Alliance, was once a famous Buddhist pilgrimage site. Similarly, Hadda (ancient name Ningrahar) was famous for stupas, viharas and Buddhist sacred objects.

The place is mentioned in the vivid accounts of Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang. Another important site was Begram (ancient name Kapisa).

Once the summer capital of Kushana, the site unearthed thousands of objects of ivory and coins belonging to the Kushana period.

The Kabul Museum, which was once adorned with smaller Buddhist figures, priceless statues, records and artefacts and was a much sought-after centre for research among archaeologists, is reportedly non-existent today.

The UNESCO office in New Delhi was quick to react. The world body has appealed for the preservation of the region's unique cultural heritage, which reflects a history marked by the complex influences of Persia, Greece, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

It said, in a statement, the centuries-old heritage has increasingly suffered from conflicts and disasters that have plagued the country in recent times. The planned destruction would rob Afghans of their cultural identity further, it said.

March 1, 2001

TALIBAN TO DESTROY BUDDHAS DESPITE OUTCRY

By Mohammad Bashir

KABUL: International outcry over the Taliban militia's plan to destroy ancient Buddhist statues has failed to sway the Afghan

leadership from its Islamic mission, the foreign minister said Wednesday.

Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel said Taliban supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar's decision to destroy pre-Islamic statues in Afghanistan, including the world's tallest Buddha, was irreversible.

The US State Department and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan are the latest to add their voices to the chorus of condemnation of Omar's decree, which was announced Monday night.

"You who have lived in Afghanistan and have experience — have you ever seen any decision of the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) reversed?" Mutawakel asked.

Omar ordered the total destruction of all statues throughout Afghanistan, once a key stop on the ancient Silk Road and melting pot of Eastern and Western cultures, in line with a fatwa from local Islamic clerics. The most famous of Afghanistan's statues are two ancient Buddhas carved into a sandstone mountain in central Bamiyan province.

Almost 2,000 years old, the largest of the two is the biggest standing Buddha in the world at 50 meters. The figures, the landlocked country's biggest tourist attraction in the 1970s, survived numerous historical conquerors but have suffered during the past 20 years of conflict.

Omar's decree also affects other pre-Islamic sites in central Ghazni province and Nangarhar in the east, where historic statues have survived rampant smuggling. The Taliban minister said the fundamentalist Islamic militia did not want to anger the international community.

"We are not destroying them to face or to confront the world. We have our own internal issues and law, according to which we are acting", he said. "If the world has concerns, we are ready to listen to them and we will tell them of our explanations if they want to listen. It is their right to be convinced or not to be convinced."

US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said the Taliban's order "directly contradicts one of Islam's basic tenets — tolerance for other religions."

"The US is distressed and baffled by this announcement by the Taliban," he said.

Annan appealed to the Taliban not to carry out its edict, saying the UN General Assembly "has repeatedly called on all Afghan parties to protect the cultural and historic relics and monuments of Afghanistan, which are part of the common heritage of mankind."

Annan appealed to the Taliban leadership "to abide by their previous commitments to protect Afghanistan's cultural heritage in general, and the two great Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan in particular," his spokesman said.

Buddhists in Japan and Thailand have also called on the Taliban to rethink the decision. Sri Lanka launched a major diplomatic offensive to save the historic Buddha statues. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar asked his envoys in India, Thailand, Myanmar and Nepal to have urgent consultations to work out a common international strategy to deal with the threat, a statement said.

UNESCO chief Koichiro Matsuura on Wednesday urged Taliban to reconsider its decision. "Carrying out this decision would be a real cultural disaster that will cause irreparable harm to a heritage of exceptional universal value," Matsuura said. "This heritage is central to Afghanistan's memory and identity and is a landmark in the history of other civilizations."

Senior Taliban authorities reportedly destroyed at least a dozen statues, including a 2000-year-old Buddha, at Kabul museum recently.

The Taliban seized Kabul in 1996 and have imposed a puritanical mix of Pashtun tribal and Sharia law in a bid to create their idea of a true Muslim state. Their regime is recognised only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and is not represented at the UN nor the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

March 2, 2001

TALIBAN BEGINS DEMOLITION

KABUL: Ignoring an international outcry, Afghanistan's puritanical Taliban Islamic militia began demolishing statues across the country Thursday, including two towering ancient stone Buddhas.

Afghanistan Radio quoted Taliban Information Minister Qudratullah Jamal stating the Taliban had started destroying statues in Kandahar, Bamiyan, Herat and Kabul Museum, following a fresh decree from its Chief Mullah Omar. "We will use all means, including cannons and tanks to destroy the statues," he said. Jamal said the destruction of scores of pre-Islamic figures was designed to stop the worshipping of "false idols," throughout the country.

He said militiamen started wrecking the almost 2,000-year-old Buddhist masterpieces in the central province of Bamiyan, including the world's tallest standing Buddha measuring 50 metres, after sunrise. The Taliban soldiers were also at "work" in the Kabul museum and elsewhere in the provinces of Ghazni, Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar.

The decree for the destruction of statues was issued after consultation with religious leaders and the Taliban Islamic Supreme Court, the Minister said. The orders for destruction have been issued "because these statues have remained as a shrine of infidels and they are worshipping these statues still. . . God Almighty is the real shrine . . . all false shrines should be smashed," the decree said.

The edict announced Monday by the militia's supreme leader, Mulla Mohammad Omar, calling for the destruction of all statues in line with "Islamic" laws, has caused shock around the world.

The two massive Bamiyan Buddhas, carved into a sandstone cliff near the provincial capital in central Afghanistan, stand 50 metres and 34.5 metres tall and were built around the second century.

Appeals for their preservation have come from India, the US, France, Germany, Thailand, Japan, Sri Lanka, Iran and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. India on Thursday sent a former foreign secretary

to a UNESCO-sponsored meeting in Paris to discuss the destruction of the Buddhist statues.

Koichiro Matsuura, chief of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), said their destruction would be a "real cultural disaster that will cause an irreparable harm to a heritage of exceptional universal value."

But Afghanistan's foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel said the edict was irreversible. "Have you ever seen any decision of the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) reversed?" Mutawakel asked.

Afghans, baffled at first by the decree and now its implementation, quietly and sadly condemned the destruction. "Destroyed cities can be rehabilitated. But once the statues are gone, they can never be replaced," said a resident of Kabul.

March 3, 2001

BUDDHAS BEING BOMBARDED

KABUL: Afghanistan's ancient Buddha statues in central Bamiyan province came under a barrage of rocket and tank fire from the ruling Taliban militia on Friday as the world watched in horror.

The militia fighters attacked the two "tallest standing Buddhas" with rockets, tanks and even automatic rifles. A militia source said "people were firing at them out of their own sentiments." Elsewhere, the Taliban soldiers started destroying all statues throughout the country in compliance with a decree issued by their supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar.

Minister of Information and Culture Qudratullah Jamal on Thursday said historic statues in the Kabul museum and elsewhere in the provinces of Ghazni, Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar were also being destroyed. Appeals to spare the Afghan relics have come from all over the globe, including UN and many museums and Buddhist organisations. However, their pleas have been turned down by the puritanical militia. Even the UN effort, to persuade the Taliban to halt the destruction, has been virtually rendered fruitless.

UN special mission to Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell discussed the Taliban's edict calling for the destruction of all pre-Islamic statues and shrines with the militia's foreign minister. Wakil Mohammad Muttawakil. "But he (Vendrell) did not get any positive response," a UN spokesman said.

Even the Taliban's closest ally, Pakistan pleaded for the preservation of the ancient works of art. Thailand suggested that an international organization cut a deal with the Taliban to buy ancient statues targeted for destruction. "Why doesn't UNESCO or an organization interested in antiquity make an offer to the Taliban," said Thai foreign ministry spokesman Pradap Pibulsonggram. The Thai government has also put its weight behind a Paris-based Buddhist organization that has called for a halt to the destruction. Other Thai Buddhist groups have also expressed their sorrow.

Japan added its voice Friday. "The Japanese government is deeply concerned," said Kauhiko Koshikawa, spokesman for Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. "Those statues are assets to all human beings."

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and the Italy-funded Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage have called for the preservation of the statues. And French President Jacques Chirac has called the Taliban's actions "disastrous."

Nepal was deeply shocked and concerned at the destruction of the images of the "apostle of peace."

March 4, 2001

BUDDHAS BEGIN TO CRUMBLE

KABUL : Using heavy explosives and rockets, the Taliban militia destroyed the heads and legs of two Bamiyan Buddhas, and threatened to demolish all statues in Afghanistan by Monday. Despite international pleas to save the priceless treasures, Taliban's information minister Quadratullah Jamal said "two-thirds of all statues in Afghanistan have already been destroyed and the remaining will be destroyed in the next two days".

"Our soldiers are working hard. The Bamiyan Buddhas will come down soon. We are using everything at our disposal to destroy them." Carved in the third and fifth centuries, the two statues are relics of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past. Both the statues were damaged by artillery fire during Afghanistan's civil war.

Jamal did not have details about which statue was targeted first and whether the heads of both statues had been removed or of only one. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York offered to preserve the statues. The Taliban have not responded to that offer. Also on Saturday, a special envoy of UNESCO met Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's ambassador in neighbouring Pakistan, to register the world's outrage over the destruction.

Pierre La France, special representative of the UNESCO, said the destruction of the statues would only worsen the Taliban's already troubled relations with the world community. But Zaeef said there was no reversing the order, "It's a decree by the ulema (clerics) and the government can't stop its implementation," Zaeef said.

The Taliban was unmoved by international appeals to save the statues as historical artifacts. Some Islamic countries have termed the Taliban order to destroy the historical relics as embarrassing for Islam. Even Taliban's closest ally, Pakistan, joined the international appeal to save the statues.

An estimated 6,000 statues were housed in the Kabul Museum. It's believed, most have been destroyed, though the Taliban have refused to allow anyone inside the war-ravaged building. Two armed Taliban guards keep watch outside the building.

In Teheran, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi said: "Unfortunately, the Taliban's destruction of statues has cast doubt on the comprehensive views offered by Islamic ideology in the world."

In Egypt, the chief Muslim cleric, Grand Mufti Nasr Farid Wasel, told the London-based Arabic daily *Al Hayat* that keeping the statues was not forbidden by Islam. In comments published on Friday, he

said such statues, like Egypt's Pharaonic monuments, bolstered the economies of Islamic countries through tourism.

March 5, 2001

IT'S ALL OVER FOR BAMIIAN BUDDHAS

KABUL : Taliban officials said Sunday that Afghanistan's ancient Bamiyan Buddhas were nearly destroyed and ruled out any hope for their preservation, ignoring pleas of the UNESCO special envoy Pierre Lafrance.

Foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil said he had detailed discussions with Lafrance in Kandahar but could see no reason to stop the destruction, the Afghan Islamic Press reported.

"The edict will be implemented *Inshallah* (God willing):. Mutawakil said. He rejected offers from several countries as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "why should we give them to anyone? They are against our beliefs. We have museums here and we will keep our cultural and historical artifacts there," he said.

Minister of information and culture Mawalawi Qudratullah Jamal said the destruction of "un-Islamic" ancient statues was continuing throughout the country. He said large portions of the two massive Buddha figures in central Bamiyan province had already been reduced to rubble, along with thousands of other statues throughout the country. "Work is in progress on them. They are massive if you see them closely," he said.

Witnesses said Taliban soldiers were using anti-aircraft weapons, tanks and explosives to pound the statues. Residents of Bamiyan said Taliban soldiers began attacking the statues at least three days earlier.

"I could see the Taliban soldiers firing anti-aircraft weapons at the two statues. That was three days ago," said Safdar Ali, a resident who arrived Sunday in Kabul from Bamiyan. "The soldiers wouldn't let us get too close so I couldn't see how much was damaged. We just left the area," he said.

Journalists have been barred from visiting the Kabul Museum and the Bamiyan province where the Taliban have recently engaged in heavy battles with armed opposition forces.

The Islamic militia last week began smashing statues around the country to prevent idolatry, but LaFrance said Saturday there was a "faint glimpse of hope" they could still be saved. He cited conflicting reports from Taliban officials about the extent of the destruction so far. The Group of Eight and the European Union expressed "dismay and shock" at the destruction and urged Afghan leaders not to implement "this deeply tragic decision."

Jamal said that while the action against the statues had nothing to do with the regime's craving for international recognition, the UN would have more influence in Kandahar if it did not still recognise the ousted government. "We tell the UN to go and ask (ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani) for the statues' preservation, because they recognize him," he said.

LaFrance, the former French ambassador to Iran and Pakistan, on Saturday met the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad and expressed the world's outrage.

March 6, 2001

ISOLATION FRUSTRATES TALIBAN

By Jean-Claude Chapon

KABUL : The Taliban's efforts to erase Afghanistan's pre-Islamic heritage are fueled not only by religious fundamentalism but also by resentment over their international isolation, analysts here said. Deprived of recognition and under fire for their human rights record, the Islamic militia are also furious not to have received any credit on the world stage for cracking down on opium production, they said.

The Taliban, who seized power in 1996, are recognised only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and are not represented at the UN or the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Most countries continue to recognize the ousted government of former

president Burhanuddin Rabbani, which occupies Afghanistan's seat at the UN.

Taliban Minister of Information and Culture Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal insisted Sunday that the destruction of the statues, including two centuries-old giant stone Buddhas in Bamiyan province, had nothing to do with the regime's craving for international recognition. But he indicated that the UN would have more influence with the Taliban, who control some 90 per cent of Afghan territory, if it did not continue to recognise the ousted Rabbani government.

Noting the international isolation of the Taliban, the foreign minister said pointedly: "We tell the UN to go and ask Rabbani for the statues' preservation because they recognize him." An Afghan intellectual close to the Taliban said the order to destroy the statues — which Taliban supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar had previously said would be protected — was the result of increasing frustration on the part of the regime.

March 7, 2001

DESPITE EID — TALIBAN DYNAMITE BUDDHAS

KABUL : Taliban officials said dynamite was being used against Afghanistan's famous Bamiyan Buddhas despite the Eid-uz-Zuha Islamic holiday and fresh international protests Tuesday. The Taliban's ambassador to neighbouring Pakistan, one of only three countries which recognises the fundamentalist regime, told the Afghan Islamic Press that dynamite had been employed to finally break up the Buddhas.

"The destruction begun on Sunday and nearly one fourth of the two statues has been destroyed," ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef said, adding the work continued through the start of the holiday on Monday.

"He said Tuesday that Taliban's supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar had rejected a proposal to build a concrete wall in front of the two Buddha statues in central Bamiyan province.

"The statues will be destroyed in compliance with the order ... and so far there is no proposal under consideration." Zaeef said. Taliban officials have said militiamen have been attacking the colossal stone Buddhas with rockets, tanks, gunpowder and tools such as spades and hammers, although the extent of the damage is impossible to verify.

Observers have been refused permission to go to central Bamiyan province, where the two statues, including the largest standing Buddha in the world, were hewn into sandstone cliff more than 1,500 years ago. The Taliban militia, which rules most of Afghanistan under a puritanical version of Islamic law, last week ordered the annihilation of all statues to prevent idolatry, sparking an international outcry.

Ahmad Bahram, a spokesman for anti-Taliban opposition group Hezb-e-Wahdat, confirmed only that the Bamiyan Buddhas had been shelled. "We have heard that they have fired a few shells at the statues but they have not yet used dynamite," he said.

The US on Monday reiterated its appeal for the Taliban to leave the statues alone for future generations, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said. Contacts were made with the militia's representatives in Pakistan but the Americans were quickly rebuffed, he said.

"Afghanistan's ancient statues are an important part of the world's cultural legacy and the cultural heritage of Afghanistan," he said.

France also said it was pressing on with efforts to save the Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan. "We are maintaining close contact with all those who are striving to prevent the destruction of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic statues... in particular with the countries that have official relations with Kabul," the French foreign ministry said. In mostly Buddhist Thailand, the government on Tuesday said it "gravely condemns the acts of brutal vandalism and strongly urges the Afghan leaders to immediately stop the destruction of cultural and historical heritage."

Diplomats in Pakistan have privately indicated they do not believe the destruction is as extensive as the Taliban have said, and a UNESCO special envoy late Monday insisted the Bamiyan Buddhas could still be saved. But Mulla Omar, in an Eid address Monday, defended his edict and said the destruction of "false idols" was a matter of pride for Afghans. Meanwhile at Phnom Penh, UNESCO official Lyndel Prott said the planned destruction of ancient Buddhist statues in Afghanistan show the international community must unite to protect the world's heritage.

March 8, 2001

UNSC SLAMS BUDDHA DESTRUCTION; LANKA OFFERS CASH

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council condemned the order by Afghanistan's ruling Taliban to destroy pre-Islamic relics as an "incomprehensible and wanton" act of violence against the country's cultural heritage.

Council members on Tuesday joined other UN bodies, governments, religious and cultural organizations in urging the Taliban to halt the destruction of an important part "of the world's cultural treasure."

Ukraine's acting UN ambassador Valeri Kuchyanski, who read the council statement, said the latest information the council had was that "the Taliban authorities started the preparation for the destruction but we have not received the actual confirmation that the destruction took place."

Efforts are being made to prevent the destruction of the non-Islamic shrines and artifacts, he told reporters. Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has been in contact with the Taliban through an intermediary in Afghanistan trying to negotiate the possibility of moving the biggest and most important Buddha statues to other places at the museum's expense, Kuchynski said. But the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, reiterated Tuesday that the Feb. 26 order by the leader of the Islamic religious militia, Mullah Mohammed Omar, to destroy all statues in

the country as adolatrous will be carried out desipte the international outcry.

The Security Council statement also expressed " grave concern" at the famine and continued suffering of the Afghan people, who are facing the worst drought in a generation. Council members deplored the civil war "and the absence of effective government that might address this humanitarian disaster."

Meanwhile in Colombo, Sri Lanka offered to finance if possible international operation to save the priceless Buddha statues threatened with destruction by the Taliban militia. President Chandrika Kumaratunga wrote to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan making the offer to join in any collective drive to save the statues, here secretary Kusumsiri Balapatabendi said.

He said the President noted that India had offered to provide shelter to the statues the Taliban wanted to destroy and the Sri Lankan government was fully supportive of India's position. UN special envoy to Afghanistan Pierre Lafrace believes there is little hope of persuading the Taliban militia to preserve the country's ancient statues, a report said Wednesday.

The UNESCO special representative told the BBC that the fundamentalist Islamic militia had shown little interest in reversing their order to destroy priceless Buddha figures. But he cited "very reliable" sources as saying the famous Buddha figures in central Bamiyan province had not been damaged to the extent the militia has publicly claimed.

Sri Lanka, which is the seat of Theravada Buddhism, has also asked Pakistan to use its influence over the Taliban.

March 9, 2001

TALIBAN : NOTHING CAN SAVE BUDDHAS; UN STILL HOPEFUL

KABUL: An international diplomatic campaign will not succeed in saving Afghanistan's ancient Buddhist statues, Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil said on Thursday.

His statement came as Japan launched a new bid to save the statues and a day after a UNESCO envoy said the irreplaceable relics had not yet been badly damaged, holding out hope they may yet win a reprieve.

Muttawakil insisted that a decree by the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar ordering the total destruction of all statues in the country was "ir-reversible". "We have said that we would not spare pre-Islamic or post-Islamic Buddhist artefacts," the minister said from the militia's southern stronghold of Kandahar.

"The Emirate has been established for realization of Islamic Sharia (law). And we will implement the verdict. "The verdict refers to a ruling by a Taliban court following advice from Afghan Ulema, or religious scholars, on the issue.

Muttawakil again brushed aside the idea of building a concrete wall to conceal the Bamiyan Buddhas from view. "The verdict calls for their destruction," he said.

A three-member Japanese delegation arrived in Islamabad Thursday enroute to Afghanistan in the latest bid to persuade the Taliban not to demolish the statues in the central Afghan city of Bamiyan. UNESCO special envoy Pierre Lafrance said on Wednesday he would return to Afghanistan this week in a second bid to persuade the Taliban to spare the statues. He was pessimistic about his chances of success but said reliable reports had indicated the statues had not yet been badly damaged. Militia officials have said the Bamiyan Buddhas are being destroyed with everything from tanks to dynamite. But with the province sealed to outsiders it is impossible to verify what exactly has happened to them.

Lafrance, the special representative of the UN's culture and education branch, met two officials in Kandahar on Sunday and the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan on Wednesday. His second visit will be to Kabul.

In Colombo. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayaka said Thursday he will travel to Pakistan this weekend in an attempt to

save Buddhist statues in Afghanistan from destruction. Wickremanayaka said Germany was moving a resolution co-sponsored by Sri Lanka urging the UN General Assembly to save the statues. "We are inviting the international community to react to the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security," Wickremanayaka told Parliament. "If the Taliban does not want to retain these statues, Sri Lanka is willing to take them and preserve them for posterity." Wickremanayaka said he would join Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in Pakistan on Saturday to try to save the statues held sacred by Sri Lankans, a majority of whom are Buddhists.

China joined Thursday the world in condemning the Taliban. "It is the shared responsibility of all countries in the world to preserve the cultural heritage," foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said.

March 10, 2001

PAKISTAN SENDING MINISTER TO AFGHANISTAN

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan is sending a high-level delegation to Afghanistan for talks with Taliban chief Mulla Mohammad Omar in yet another attempt to stop the destruction of Buddhist statues, a foreign office spokesman said Friday.

The delegation headed by Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider will leave for Kandahar on Saturday, the spokesman said adding that he would meet Mulla Omar, the reclusive war veteran, to convey the sentiments of the government and people of Pakistan over the issue.

"The minister will reiterate the appeal of the government and people of Pakistan to Afghan authorities not to destroy the statues in line with the spirit of Islam and international sentiments," the spokesman said. The fundamentalist Islamic militia announced Friday the giant 1,500-year-old Buddhas in Afghanistan's central Bamiyan city would be dynamited. The statues had already come under fire from tanks, rockets and automatic weapons.

Pakistan, the closest ally of the Taliban and one of only three countries which recognize the fundamentalist Islamic regime, in two

successive appeals last week urged the Taliban militia not to destroy the historical artefacts.

The news of Haider's proposed visit comes a day after Pakistan leadership summoned Taliban ambassador to Islamabad, Mulla Abdul Salam Zaeef, to convey its displeasure over the destruction of the heritage monuments. Pakistan's attempts to mediate were seen here as an effort by Islamabad to deflect criticism that it had done little to prevail on Taliban despite repeated appeals from the world community.

Meanwhile, opposition sources said Friday that Taliban militia are blasting the Bamiyan Buddhas with tank shells and dynamite. Opposition sources based only 40 km west of the two ancient statues in central Bamiyan province said the Taliban had resumed the destruction following a break for a religious holiday.

"They were attacking both the statues with tank shells and were using dynamite," said Ahmad Bahram, a spokesman for Hezb-e-Wahdat, a Shiite opposition group which briefly captured Bamiyan last month. Three envoys were sent from the Japanese government Wednesday and are believed to be travelling by road from western Pakistan to the southern Taliban bastion of Kandahar Friday.

They are carrying a letter from Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono to Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil urging the militia to heed to the world's calls to preserve Afghanistan's pre-Islamic statues.

Japan has also called on Pakistan and eight Gulf nations to use their influence to stop the destruction. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is also planning to send an appeal for help from UNESCO director general Koichiro Matsuura.

March 12, 2001

SORRY MR ANNAN, IT'S TOO LATE : TALIBAN

By Kathy Gannon

ISLAMABAD: The Taliban religious militia has now completely demolished two giant statues of Buddha hewn from a cliff face in

central Afghanistan, international aid workers said Sunday, despite desperate pleas from abroad to spare the relics. Despite the international outcry, the Taliban appeared Sunday to have carried out their plan.

At a news conference in the Pakistani capital, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the Taliban's Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil told him that "all the moveable statues have been destroyed" and that the giant mountain carvings of Buddha were being demolished.

And in an unprecedented gesture, Annan walked out from his meeting with Muttawakil after he failed to convince him. An international aid worker who attended the talks said earlier that Muttawakil had told Annan that nothing was left of statues. The destruction, however, has been corroborated by Taliban officials in southern Afghanistan and by an aid worker who said his information came from witnesses in the area. It has been impossible to independently verify the reports because the Taliban have refused to allow anyone in the Bamiyan Valley area, where the statues stood.

After meeting with Annan, the Taliban foreign minister was asked whether the demolition had been completed. "There might not be so much left," he told reporters, without elaborating.

"This is totally an internal religious edict that has been excessively exaggerated in the outside world," Muttawakil said at a news conference.

On Saturday, the Taliban had said the statues were 80 percent destroyed.

Abdul Hai Muttamian, a spokesman for the Taliban's reclusive leader, said that delegations pleading for preservation were too late: The statues were almost gone.

"Everyone is coming now is too late. We have destroyed 80 percent of the statues. There is only a small amount left and we will destroy that soon," Muttmain said. Upon his arrival in Pakistan on

Saturday, Annan said he would convey the world's outrage at the destruction. By Sunday, it appeared to be too late.

"I walked away from our meeting not very encouraged," said Annan. Relations between the United Nations and the Taliban have never been good, and they have worsened with fresh sanctions imposed in January to press for the extradition of suspected terrorist Osama Bin Laden. The Taliban have refused to hand him over.

The Taliban's Radio Shariat on Saturday said there would be no change to the order. The statues violate the tenets of Islam as laid out in the *Quran*, the broadcast said.

Islamic nations also expressed their outrage at the destruction. Egypt sent its chief Muslim cleric Grand Mufti Nasr Farid Wasel to Afghanistan to appeal to the Taliban to change their order. On Sunday, a Taliban official in Pakistan who spoke on condition of anonymity said the Islamic world had simply waited too long.

March 14, 2001

UN LOBBIES OIC TO HALT FURTHER CARNAGE IN AFGHANISTAN

PARIS: The director general of UNESCO was to hold an emergency meeting Tuesday with members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to try to find a way to save Afghanistan's remaining statues, a statement from the agency said. Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia have already destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, two huge pre-Islamic monuments, after branding them false idols. The UN cultural agency's Koichiro Matsuura wants to find a way to protect the rest of the country's artistic heritage.

"During this meeting Koichiro Matsuura will give an update on the situation and examine emergency actions to safeguard other treasures," a statement released here said. The 55 member states of the OIC joined with governments and cultural bodies around the world to urge the Taliban to spare the statues, which the militia regards as un-Islamic.

Meanwhile in Colombo, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremnayake headed for Pakistan on Tuesday to lobby Islamabad and pressure the Taliban to save the Bamiyan Buddhas. Officials here said the PM was undertaking the visit despite reports that the Taliban Islamic rulers in Afghanistan had destroyed the priceless statues.

Sri Lanka decided to send Wickremnayake to Pakistan, one of the three countries to recognise the Taliban administration, in the hope of saving the Bamiyan statues. Wickremnayake is due to hold talks with Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

Over the weekend, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar held talks with Musharraf and expressed Colombo's concerns for the Buddha statues.

March 15, 2001

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS LAID TO REST

By Siddharth Vardarajan

KABUL: Finally laying to rest any last glimmer of hope about the fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Taliban on Wednesday said that although 100 per cent 'work' has not yet been completed, the statues have more or less been destroyed.

In his first meeting with journalists since the controversial order to destroy the statues was issued, Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil said dynamite was being used since artillery fire was not enough. "In some portion, cement and steel rods are there. Though I cannot say exactly, a greater portion of statue is no longer left."

Information Minister Qodratollah Jamal was, however, quoted as saying by the Afghan Islamic Press that "even traces of the statues are not visible now."

Muttawakil said that the edict has been under consideration for six years and pertained to all statues depicting life form. However, he

gave an assurance that this would not apply to statues which might be worshipped by Afghan's small Hindu and Sikh Communities inside their temples.

"Their statues will not be smashed as they are worshipping them as part of their religious rituals. Hindus and Sikhs can fulfil their religious worshipping without any concern," he added.

Muttawakil parried questions on how the Taliban would react if a country like Spain, where there are no Muslims, were to destroy ancient mosques in Cordoba and Granada.

"The Spanish law might not allow such destruction," he said. But what would happen if Spain were to change its laws, he was asked. Muttawakil finally admitted that "the situation will have to be judged then, but obviously we will be unhappy". Shifting ground, he then attacked the international community for focusing only on bad news from Afghanistan. Asked whether the destruction of the statues was good news or bad, he said: "It depends. For them it is bad, for us (it is) good."

CHAPTER VII

INDIA'S REACTION TO TALIBAN ACT

*As Reported by
The Times of India, New Delhi*

1. 28.2.2001 India condemns fatwa
2. 2.3.2001 'Cultural carnage' screams India
3. 3.3.2001 Restrain Taliban, PM urges world leaders
4. 3.3.2001 Parliament condemns attack
5. 3.3.2001 Heritage experts condemn Taliban
6. 3.3.2001 Faithless Vandalism
7. 4.3.2001 The Taliban is a state of mind, ours as much as theirs
8. 4.3.2001 A page of history has been torn
9. 4.3.2001 Dalai Lama regrets destruction
10. 5.3.2001 The Buddha Smiles
11. 5.3.2001 They know not what they are doing
12. 6.3.2001 Buddha smiles, but only on a stamp
13. 6.3.2001 Protests against Taliban 'barbarism' mount
14. 6.3.2001 Forces of darkness fight history on the Afghan front
15. 8.3.2001 The Taliban Terror - India's Record is not Spotless

February 28, 2001

INDIA CONDEMNS FATWA

India Tuesday condemned the Taliban militia's decree ordering the destruction of all statues in Afghanistan, including the Bamiyan Buddhas and other relics, terming it as an assault on the common heritage of humankind.

In a strongly-worded statement here, the external affairs ministry said the decree, reportedly issued by Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban militia, once again profiles the militia's "narrow and obscurantist ideologies".

It said, "We condemn this edict and call upon the Taliban to ensure that the Bamiyan Buddhas and other relics are fully protected.

"The Taliban edict constitutes an assault not only on the Afghan tradition but on the common heritage of humankind."

It noted that Afghanistan has through history stood at the crossroads of civilisations and it bears imprint in greater measure.

March 2, 2001

'CULTURAL CARNAGE' SCREAMS INDIA

By Maneesh Pandey

NEW DELHI : Indian heritage experts and lovers are shell-shocked at the Taliban's demolition spree. Describing it as "cultural carnage" driven by "sheer fanaticism", they call for a cautious approach in the face of such vandalism.

Calling it "pathetic", R. Sengupta, former director of ASI who served long in Afghanistan as part of Indo-Afghan restoration project, described the situation as "particularly sad for India. They were some of the finest specimens of Buddhist civilisation and culture," he said.

Some feel this act may be more than a cultural issue. According to Asish Banerjee of INTACH : "The whole action has a political

motive". He didn't elaborate it further but few others, requesting anonymity, were unanimous in saying that it might "spill over in our land" and Kashmir may be the new theatre. "It's extremely tragic" says S.K. Singh, India's ex-ambassador to Afghanistan. "The destruction of any global property is an issue of utmost concern. They have not only destroyed the world-famous heritage but shattered the sentiments of millions of Buddhist followers," he adds.

The sites targeted are Bamiyan, — home to the two "tallest standing Buddhas" and other Buddhist masterpieces — the Kabul museum, Ghazni, (from where a sculpture of *Mahisasura Mardini*, Goddess Durga slaying the demon buffalo, dating 7th and 8th century AD was unearthed), Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar.

The UNESCO office here has condemned it as an extremist act. Prithviraj Perera, director of culture in UNESCO, said the previous government had in fact proposed the Bamiyan Buddha statues for nomination as world heritage to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee. This could be an act of vengeance too, he said. "The whole world will react with indignation but those who respect the dignity and rights of other cultures, will not react by similar destructions," said Perera. R.C. Agarwal of ASI felt "it was a destruction of creativity and a big blow to the ethos of the land. It's not a matter of like and dislike. The world cherished it. What would happen if the non-Islamic countries start destroying Islamic architecture?" he questioned.

Radha Banerjee of IGNCA takes the demolition as a big blow to Buddhism — known for compassion and friendship. She said, "It was through Afghanistan, Buddhism spread to various countries, including Iran, Central Asia and China. Such a diffusion was made possible through that land only and what's happened today is painful."

"It's pathetic and a further shame for us Afghanis while facing the world," condemns Masood Khalili, envoy to the Afghan Govt-in-exile in New Delhi. "This will rob the Afghanis of their distinct culture and slap on us yet another crime tag of cultural terrorism, if narco

and religious terrorism were not enough," he said. Slamming the Taliban for its fanaticism, he said : "Breaking of statues, hanging of women (reported last week), discriminating civilians on religious lines is not part of our (Afghan) culture. It belongs to some aliens who are claiming part of our land," says Khalil.

March 3, 2001

RESTRAIN TALIBAN, PM URGES WORLD LEADERS

NEW DELHI : Prime Minister Vajpayee has written to various world leaders, urging them to raise the collective voice of humanity to stop the senseless destruction of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan ordered by the Taliban.

Significantly, the Prime Minister said in his letter that countries which have influence with the Taliban should be asked to reason with the hardline Kabul leadership to withdraw the decree.

It is well known that Pakistan is a close ally of the Taliban, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the other two countries which recognise the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. The PM has cleverly tried to get Pakistan involved and put the pressure on Islamabad to do something.

Vajpayee dashed off letters to members of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - US President George Bush, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. He has also written leaders of Buddhist nations like Japan, South Korea, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Myanmar as well as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The Prime Minister said the decree "represents a further obscurantist regression — an assault on centuries of Afghan tradition and upon an irreplaceable civilisation inheritance of all mankind. We are disturbed to see reports that the demolition is already in progress."

March 3, 2001

HERITAGE EXPERTS CONDEMN TALIBAN

By Rekha Dixit

MUMBAI : Heritage experts and Islamic leaders in the city have raised their voice against the Taliban's campaign to destroy ancient Buddhist sculptures in Afghanistan.

Condemning the destruction of world heritage sites, they pointed out that if every dominant faith in a country began razing sculptures and structures of other faiths, there would be no ancient relics left on earth.

"Going by the same logic, someone would one day want to demolish the pyramids of Egypt, or just any other structure," said Ishaq Jamkhanwala, president of the Anjuman-i-Islam trust. "The Taliban is living in the Dark Ages and has not understood the teachings of Islam, leave alone learning to respect the religious sentiments of others."

Islamic scholar Rafiq Zakaria told this paper that the Taliban sponsored desecration was a very serious issue as it went against the basic tenets of Islam. "The Holy Quran is very specific on this subject. It clearly denounces the desecration of sacred sites of other religions, pointing out that such intolerance could be targeted at Muslims too. These fanatics in Afghanistan are bringing disgrace to the Islamic faith."

He said India should take firm action to prevent the demolition from escalating by joining forces with the United Nations. "We have to strike at the root of the trouble, which is Pakistan. Pakistan is after all, both the instigator as well as the protector of the Taliban," Zakaria said.

Director of the Prince of Wales museum Kalpana Desai noted that the cultural heritage of a country was not necessarily in tune with the faith practised by the majority of people. "Ancient relics must

be preserved for the sake of art alone and not because they are shrines of a particular faith."

Desai pointed out that most of the sculptures being targeted in Afghanistan were from the Gandhara period, dating back to the second and third centuries AD. "They are a fusion of the Graeco-Roman style with the Indian style that developed after cultural interactions between the two civilisations," she said. Heritage activist Cyrus Guzder denounced the Taliban move as a "tragic one which cannot be condoned". He said, "The ancient works of art are not the property of Afghanistan alone, but are part of the world's cultural heritage. Many countries can trace their culture to these relics and to destroy them under some fanatical frenzy is outrageous."

March 3, 2001

PARLIAMENT CONDEMNS ATTACK

NEW DELHI : Both the Houses of Parliament on Friday condemned as "senseless and barbaric" the Taliban attack on Buddhist relics in Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The houses passed identical resolutions and sought United Nations' intervention to put an end to this state of affairs.

In the Rajya Sabha, leader of the House and external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, moved a resolution on the Taliban's attack on the 2000-year-old statue of Buddha and other Buddhist relics in Bamiyan. Singh said that India is ready to bring these world renowned monuments here and keep them safely for the sake of the people of Afghanistan.

Joining the discussion on the resolution, Rajya Sabha deputy chairman Najma Heptullah said Islam does not preach destruction. She added that the government should send a strong message to UNESCO which is supposed to protect world heritage sites. Heptullah also reminded that India had earlier helped the Afghan government to restore these relics and hence they should be transferred to India.

Pranab Mukherjee of the Congress joined Singh and Heptullah in seeking the transfer of the relics and urged the government to take

measures to get the treasures in India till "sanity is restored" among the present rulers of Afghanistan.

Making a passionate speech on this issue, National Conference member Sharief-ud-din Shariq wondered about the kind of Islam practised by Taliban. Members belonging to all parties participated in the discussion which condemned the acts of vandalism taking place on Buddhist sites in Afghanistan.

March 3, 2001

EDITORIAL

FAITHLESS VANDALISM

Ignoring the protests and outrage voiced by many countries, including Pakistan, the Taliban has announced that demolition of the Buddhist sculptures at Bamiyan and elsewhere in Afghanistan has already begun. The justification for this act of vandalism is the assertion that idols are un-Islamic. The Pakistani newspaper, *Dawn*, has pointed out that these sculptures are not idols, as they are not worshipped. But as far as the Taliban leadership is concerned, such reasoned arguments have fallen on deaf ears. Coming as it does in the wake of UN sanctions on the Taliban regime, this outright rejection of humanistic norms and cultural values will inevitably be interpreted as unequivocal defiance of the international community. The Taliban appears to be bent on validating the western thesis about the "clash of civilisations". These statues and sculptures date back to a period before Afghanistan came under Islam. They are part of Afghan heritage, and through these acts of destruction the Taliban leadership presumably wants to wipe out the pre-Islamic history of its own people. This cultural obliteration recalls the Nazi propagandists' decree to burn all books that did not conform to their thought and philosophy. Consequently, the global community would be justified in treating the Taliban as an international security problem and take a united stand against it before it goes any further.

The world will now be watching the reactions of other Islamic governments and the Islamic clergy. If they do not come out to condemn this outrage as un-Islamic, and isolate the fanatics acting in the name of Islam, it would serve only to strengthen the dogmatism of all those who subscribe to the "clash of civilisations" formula. In other words, this act of vandalism 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. The Taliban has besmirched the name of Islam; all those so-called Jehadi organisations in Pakistan who have links with the Taliban will also come to be associated in public perception with this senseless iconoclasm. It is also a clear warning to the Pakistani leadership and people as to what may happen in their own country if extremist fanatical groups are not vigorously curbed. General Musharraf admits that such fanaticism exists in Pakistan, but contends that it is restricted to a small minority. The danger is that such fanaticism can be infectious, if it is not checked at the very start. It should also be borne in mind that the Taliban was not a native Afghan phenomenon; it was grown and nurtured, and continues to be sustained, in the Deeni madrasas of Pakistan. The stance adopted by Islamabad vis-a-vis the Taliban on this issue will be the litmus test of General Musharraf's self-proclaimed Islamic moderation. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the only countries which recognise the Taliban; the current development casts a special responsibility on them. Without their help and support the Taliban cannot sustain itself for long as Iran; the central Asian republics, and all moderate Islamic nations have shown their disapprobation of the iconoclasts in Kabul. The Taliban is not defending the true faith; it is grievously undermining it.

March 4, 2001

THE TALIBAN IS A STATE OF MIND, OURS AS MUCH AS THEIRS

Jyotirmaya Sharma

The pro-Soviet leftists in the 70s wanted to de-Islamicise Afghanistan. The Afghans resented their atheism. Faith for them was

a symbol of personal as well as cultural identity. This gave birth to a religious war or jihad against the Soviets. For the Americans, the mujahideen were not terrorists at that point of time : they were freedom fighters. Communism, nationalism and short-sightedness produced the Taliban.

In India, politics masquerades as religiosity and religion has got politicised. The Taliban and the Sangh Parivar are, at one level, empirical entities. At another level, they are states of mind. Intolerance, destruction, violence and irrationality come as naturally to them as breathing.

For every Mulla Muhammad Omar in Afghanistan, there is a corresponding Giriraj Kishore in India. Similarly, for every felling of the Bamiyan Buddha, there is a parallel in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India. The Buddha looks on, amused.

It is the politics of 'friend' and 'foe' which has brought this about. And nationalism. Exclusivity, fear of complexity and plurality as well. Why get so hysterical over the destruction of a few statues in Afghanistan? Why not get equally charged by the razing to the ground of the Babri Masjid? Because power is an addiction and can only be attained through dividing people, by shedding blood, by vitiating every gentle norm in society.

The Talibanised minds of the self-appointed saviours of the Hindus have no concern for monuments and heritage either. Almost every museum in India is a super-glorified godown; invariably, every monument has been converted into a spittoon and a urinal.

Nobody but a handful of idle moralisers are bothered. Heritage is neither 'mine' nor 'thine', it is ours. But we are either oblivious or resentful of the past. This is self-hatred. Why do we hate ourselves? Because we fear complexity and plurality.

It is unethical modernity — represented by the former Soviets and the present-day Americans — which has pushed the young men in Afghanistan into a kind of medievalism.

Every tyrant, bigot and zealot has a hit-list where culture figures at the very top of this list. For every tyrant carries with him two essential objects : a gun and a pocket calculator. Culture, on the other hand, unsettles.

It holds a normative mirror in front of us. Talibanisation has nothing to do with the form of government prevalent in a country. One look at the Shiv Sena activists on Valentine's Day rubbishes all the virtues attributed to democracy.

The Buddha stands smiling at the spectacle of his statues being bombed. An earnest reporter asks for a sound-bite, that supreme form of reductionism.

The Buddha obliges. He says : "It is by destroying, stilling, stopping, renouncing and abandoning all imaginings, all supposings, all thoughts of 'I am the doer', 'Mine is the doer', all latent 'I am', that a Truth-finder is freed with no residuum for rebirth remaining. You would like to possess something that was permanent, stable, eternal, not liable to change, that would stand fast like unto the eternal. But can you see any such possession? Neither can I."

March 4, 2001

'A PAGE OF HISTORY HAS BEEN TORN'

By Maneesh Pandey

For Indian archaeologists, it was a dark day. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the puritancial Taliban militia has come as a personal blow to those who've ben associated with this country and its rich cultural heritage; through their writings or as part of restoration teams involved in preserving them. And they are all pained to see the "Great Teacher" facing Taliban tanks and rockets.

As M.N. Deshpande, former director general (DG) of ASI, says: "A page of history has been torn from the world of civilisation."

The veteran archaeologist still remembers the day he went with Atal Bihari Vajpayee (then external affairs minister) to hand over the

restored Bamiyan Buddhas to the Afghanistan government. He takes pride in the fact that India was among the nine foreign archaeological missions stationed there in the 1960s which earned special appreciation from the then Afghan government for restoring their heritage, particularly the Bamiyan Buddhas.

"The neighbourly bond was cemented further. It boosted prospects for cultural tourism and within a short span of time, money started pouring in from the tourists," says Deshpande. "It was not always work, but sometimes a picnic, too," remembers R. Sengupta, an archaeological expert and head of the ASI restoration mission in Bamiyan. He becomes emotional as he recalls those "beautiful days", the Afghan's hospitality and the wonderful delicacies that he favoured. M.C. Joshi, another former DG of ASI, calls it the "most unfortunate incident" and a blow to UNESCO's theme of "global heritage".

He questions the Taliban's interpretation of Islam, and says the uncultured step by the Taliban is contradictory to the tenets of Islam. "The Taliban militia have totally ignored the fact that even Islamic invaders like Ghazni or Khalzi never touched any monument.

They were only against worshipping, saying it was un-Islamic. Deserted temples or monuments were never touched. That's why Ellora survived even after being so close to Daulatabad," says Joshi.

Assessing the loss, Joshi says it's not only a blow to the rare pieces of art but to the history of land. "The cosmopolitan culture which evolved from Bamiyan and became an inherent part of the Silk Route — Jalalabad, Kapisa, Kandahar, Herat and Kabul — having traits of Indian, Iranian and Hellenistic traditions will be wiped off the pages of history."

S.P. Gupta, chairman of the Indian Archaeological Society, agrees with Joshi : "It is a loss to humanity and not a particular country".

He wondered what he would teach on Gandhara art now to his students at the National Museum Institute. Even the neighbouring

archaeologists were quick to react. Senake Bandarnayake, Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi and an archaeologist himself, still hoped that the international outcry would yield some fruitful results.

"That would at least help in restoring the finest specimen of man-made artefacts and sculptures for humanity."

March 4, 2001

DALAI LAMA REGRETS DESTRUCTION

I am deeply concerned about the possible destruction of the Bamiyan statues of Buddha at a time when there is closer understanding and better harmony among different religious traditions of the world. Even though the destruction may be for religious reasons, I believe they are of historical importance not only to the people of Afghanistan but to the world at large. Finally, as a Buddhist I feel it is unfortunate that objects of worship are targets of destruction.

March 5, 2001

EDITORIAL

THE BUDDHA SMILES

The Buddha would have been amused at the headlines describing the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statue by the Taliban. The Buddha cannot be blasted nor can he be bombarded. To mistake the likeness of the Buddha made by human hands and not to take part in a communion with the essence of the Buddha is to miss the message of impermanence, non-spirit and suffering of the Mighty Intellect. The artist who visualised the Bamiyan Buddha would have first invoked, as per tradition, the moods of friendliness, compassion, sympathy and impartiality. He would not be driven by considerations of self-expression nor ideas of connoisseurship and aestheticism. The state of mind and the importance of the idea itself was all important. All these virtues are sadly amiss in the hearts and minds of those who are breaking ancient monuments in Afghanistan as well as those who seem to be protesting about such vandalism. In the

Divyavadana, Upagupta asks Mara, who has the power of assuming shapes at will, to take the likeness of the Buddha. Upagupta bows in reverence to this figure, which shocks Mara. Upagupta says that he is not worshipping Mara but the person represented by Mara : "Just as people venerating earthen images of the undying angels do not revere the clay as such, but the immortals represented therein." The least that can be said about the events in Afghanistan is that these are the triumph of the slave mentality, the main characteristic of which is the spirit of revenge. The ideal typical slave is incapable of forgetting, unable to love, admire or respect. Such individuals constantly impute wrong to others and perpetually blame the whole world for real and imagined wrongs. They cannot give or create.

In other words, there are Taliban-like organisations, individuals and symptoms within India which are as intolerant and brutal as their counterparts in Afghanistan. The sangh parivar for long has represented and actively promoted this negative strand in Indian society. Acharya Giriraj Kishore's reaction to the happenings in Afghanistan is indicative of the cult of hatred and mindless recriminations that the sangh parivar has promoted. Where were these self-righteous guardians of Indian heritage when the Babri Masjid was destroyed? If the statues in Bamiyan are 'our' heritage, then so is the Babri Masjid. Instead, the Taliban and the sangh parivar have sought to divide the world into 'us' and 'them', between 'friend' and 'foe'. What is common to both is a very literal interpretation of Islam and Hinduism, without remotely understanding the essence of either faith. Also, the sad state of our museums and monuments suggests that our concern for heritage is extremely superficial. What the Taliban has done in a couple of days is being systematically done slowly and steadily for the past fifty years. "We shall not stand on the Buddha's head at Bamiyan, upright in his niche like a whale in a dry dock", lamented the writer Bruce Chatwin in 1980. Sad indeed. But this gives us an opportunity to look inwards and set our house in order.

March 5, 2001

THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY ARE DOING

By Maneesh Pandey

NEW DELHI : History repeats itself. The tradition of *but shikani* (idol or statue breaking) started by Arab marauders, in their quest to rule the Indian subcontinent, is well documented. This was done on the plea that idol or religious object worshipping was un-Islamic. What followed was cultural mayhem — destruction of famous temples and loot of their wealth.

After almost 1,000 years such intolerance has resurfaced. Only the actors have changed. It was the Ghaznis, Ghoris or Khalijis yesterday; today it is the Taliban militia in Afghanistan.

They have justified the destruction of all statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan by claiming that the 'heritage under fire is un-Islamic'. But experts in Islamic studies cast doubt on the Taliban's understanding of Islamic sayings on heritage. Montgomery Watt's *Muhammed at Mecca* and Robinson's *Muhammed* which talk about Islamic ideology in detail show that Islam was, in fact, very conscious of heritage.

There is a clear demarcation between living and dead monuments. Islam is only against places where worshipping continues and not against any deserted monument. This was what even Mahamud of Ghazni believed and this tolerance continued till Aurangzeb, points out Satish Chandra, a historian and an expert on the Islamic period.

He says : "Their justification that is un-Islamic and against the Sh'ariat is itself contradictory and wrong. Even Ghazni ruled that the old or dead monuments were not to be destroyed, except in war if they were becoming an obstacle."

A clearer picture emerges from the *Benaras farman* of Aurangzeb (now at the National Library, Kolkatta). At the outset of his reign,

Aurangzeb reiterated the Sh'ariat position on temples, synagogues, churches, etc., that "long standing temples should not be demolished. But no new temples (are) to be built." It further says : "Old places of worship could even be repaired since buildings cannot last forever."

This position of Aurangzeb, known to be a strict Islamist himself, is clearly spelt out in number of *farmans* issued to the Brahmins of Benaras and Vrindavan, said Chandra.

He added : "Mughal period references don't highlight any such destruction of dead monuments. Even Aurangzeb ordered firing of cannon shots at the Bamiyan Buddhas, but he didn't destroy them."

Other references too highlight the same philosophy, "Sikander Lodhi (15th century) tried to destroy some old monuments at Kurukshetra. The Afghan ruler was persuaded not to do so by the Ulemas, saying they're standing there for long. And he accepted the Ulemas' ruling," said Chandra.

The destruction has clearly embarrassed the Islamic world. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the highest platform of the Muslim world, urged the Taliban on Saturday to abandon its decision to destroy the country's pre-Islamic statues.

The common reaction was "ravaged cities can be rebuilt, not heritage." OIC states : "Historical relics, regardless of where they are located, are part of the cultural heritage of the whole of humanity, and they must be preserved."

March 6, 2001

BUDDHA SMILES, BUT ONLY ON A STAMP

By Hima Kausar Alam

HYDERABAD : The Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan has sent shockwaves through the world community. But there's one Hyderabadi who is simply devastated.

Musham Damodar, amateur historian and professional philatelist, who has in his possession a rare Afghan stamp of the Bamiyan

Buddha, is a saddened man. Looking at the 12.4 millimetre piece of coloured paper, he sighs, "I wish they had not destroyed the statue."

A 42-year old philatelist, does not remember how he came to acquire the stamp of the Bamiyan Buddha, issued by the government of Afghanistan in 1985 on the 10th anniversary of the World Tourism Organisation. "It was one of the many stamps I purchased, something I do regularly," he says. The stamp was then priced at 10 Afghanese, "but is priceless today," he says. Did he ever imagine that it would one day be one of the most valued pieces in his collection? "No, never," He says. In fact, he had even forgotten where he had put it.



"When I read the news about the destruction of the statues, I searched for two days for the stamps in India. "With the postal system of Afghanistan being almost non-existent, this stamp is out of circulation there too," he says. "The treasuries where the stamps were kept have also been looted, so this stamp is not available even in Afghanistan," Damodar claims.

Giving the details of the statue and its location, Damodar says the statue belongs to the Lokottara Vadhis sect of Buddhists. "The Svat Valley where this statue is located is akin to our Ellora caves, with a number of statues and paintings around the area," he said. Has he ever been to Afghanistan to see the statue?

"No, but I have seen most of it through my stamps. At least all the important monuments there," he said. And if the statue is brought to India, will he go to look at it? "Definitely," comes the reply.

March 6, 2001

PROTESTS AGAINST TALIBAN 'BARBARISM' MOUNT

NEW DELHI : Agitated poets, historians, painters and scholars gathered in the Capital on Monday to protest against the Taliban's bombarding of Buddha's statues in Afghanistan. Organised by *Sahmat*, the protesters denounced the "barbaric acts of Talibans" as they gathered on Monday evening, shouting slogans.

The protesters carried boards with slogans like, "Fundamentalism breeds fundamentalism", "Stop destroying historical monuments", "Stop this insanity" and "Down with fundamentalists".

Said media personality Vinod Dua, who was also part of the protest, "It is a condemnable act. I hope perpetrators of the December 6 episode will realise that they were also viewed in the same way as the Taliban are being viewed now." He was obviously referring to the Babri Masjid demolition by *kar sevaks* in Ayodhya eight years ago.

Renowned poet Kaifi Azmi, who was also present, said, "Secularism and tolerance have been shattered by such acts. What Hitler could not do, the Taliban are doing." He added that the streaks of Fascism that exists even in our country, ought to be condemned. Secretary of Indian History Congress, Shireen Moosvi, said, "The new millennium has started with barbarism.

March 6, 2001

FORCES OF DARKNESS FIGHT HISTORY ON THE AFGHAN FRONT

By Farrukh Dhondy

The American comics of old characterised the fire of big repeating guns onomatopoeically as Buddha-buddha-buddha! Even at the time, I marvelled at the unwitting sacrilege, little realising that one day the forces of darkness in the world would actually employ machine guns to blast to smithereens the two hundred-foot statues of Buddhas which have stood in the mountainous, rocky alcoves of Afghanistan for 2000 years.

The Taliban have ordered the destruction of all idols. They will destroy Buddhist temples, shrines, statues. All traces of the Hindu, Zen and Taoist religions, all traces of the cultural influence of the great civilisations whose representatives crossed these frontiers, from Alexander through to the Mongolians, the Indians and the Chinese who traversed the silk routes, are to be wiped out. Pol Pot and Attila the Hun ride again, this time in the name of Islam.

Will the rest of the Muslim world join the protest of civilisation against this vandalism? With the burst of machine guns that powders the rock of the Buddhas, these ugly people will pulverise the image and even the fabric of living Islam. The Taliban, who claim to be scholars of Islam and to be following the dictates of the Koran, are, in one mindless and meaningless gesture, declaring their brand of Islam to be an enemy of history. Their history begins and ends in sixth century Arabia. No good saying to them the world is older than that, my friend.

No good, because theirs is the hardened attitude of a revealed religion and their interpretation of it, which is rejected by other Muslim scholarship and Muslim history, sets Islam against culture. It may be true that Muhammad Ghorri and Muhammad Ghaznavi in their armed forays into India destroyed Hindu temples and slaughtered the aristocracy and priesthood of Hindu society. It may be true that some Muslim monarchs or despots saw it as their religious duty to eradicate idolatry from nations which practised it.

But isn't it different in Afghanistan today? The armies the Taliban are fighting are Muslim. There is no significant population of Buddhists whose souls need saving from these great monuments of the past. It is possible that news of the worship of these idols, by passing Hollywood actors who have converted to Buddhism, has reached Mulla Mohammad Omar and that he is setting out to save their souls from idolatry. Or perhaps the Taliban hope to threaten the US into lifting sanctions using the Buddhas as hostage.

The irony of the situation is that corrupt Pakistani generals have, through greed, acted as the unwitting saviours of Afghanistan's heritage and have smuggled statues, figurines and works of Buddhist or more ancient art to fashionable auction houses and unscrupulous museums for a price. There are some unsung Schindlers in Lahore or Islamabad. Their thefts will disperse the works of art and take them to alien contexts, but it will at least save them from the vandalism of the fundos.

I can't pretend to begin to know or understand what Koranic sanction these barbarians at the gate think they have for such destruction. It's a question I would dearly like to put to my knowledgeable Muslim friends. Does Islam indeed decree the destruction of all other faiths, or is that belligerence only sanctioned when the Muslims are in power and in the majority? That is a theological question whose answer is important, but of less consequence than asking how a great religion will co-exist with the realities of human history. It is a question that the Muslim world will have to explore and come to terms with in Afghanistan, Iran, Indonesia, where the interaction between Saudi-funded Islam and the continuing pre-Islamic civilisation of the islands has resulted in murderous conflict, and in Egypt, where there are those who would dynamite the pyramids given half a chance. Such barbarism can be kept at bay, contained within its borders with difficulty, suppressed from without but, it can only be fundamentally addressed and challenged from within, Islamic theologians of the world, disunite!

March 8, 2001

THE TALIBAN TERROR — INDIA'S RECORD IS NOT SPOTLESS

Swami Agnivesh and Valson Thampu

When religious light strikes the likes of Mulla Mohammad Omar, the supreme leader of the Taliban, the result can only be apocalyptic. Religious zeal may take two divergent paths. A man may prove his religiosity by living the noble ideals and values of his faith. This, however, is a demanding option. The cheap alternative is to exalt one's God by bringing down all other Gods. If you project yourself as the enemy of your neighbour's God then, may be, your God could be fooled into believing that you are his man. This simplistic logic explains why many are willing to kill or die for their religion, but none cares to live by its light.

The Taliban might offer the excuse of Islamic law or theology to hide the nakedness of its fundamentalism. Islam does not believe in idols; but that should not be selective or literal. Idolatry (the worship

of idols) can take many forms. Whenever irrational importance is attributed to a material object, no matter what its shape, idolatry results. Idolatry is a sin because it caricatures the nature of God. The idea that God resides only in certain places and that one has to go there (as in the case of shrines, pilgrimages, Haj etc.) to meet him or to secure religious merit, is essentially idolatrous. All religious groups are made to idolise shrines, scriptures, and saints in varying degrees. These become the means by which the priestly class formats the religiosity of their folds.

Genuine religious reform must start within one's own religious home. Idolatry is incompatible with reason and human dignity, being ruthless with idolatry within one's own fold is the best argument against idolatry everywhere else. That was what the genuine reformers of religions tried to do in the past. But in times of spiritual decay, self-criticism becomes an unpardonable sin. Today condemning and coercing everybody else has become the proof of religious virility, and it yields instant profit and popularity.

The current Taliban offensive has two broad features which it shares with all the fundamentalist convulsions in our country. First, it is subjective and selective. It absolutises one's unilateral assumptions on what is outside the scope of one's religious competence and responsibility. Second, it articulates religious sentiments in the language of aggression and destruction. Violence is fundamental to religious fundamentalism. When the fundamentalist mindset acquires the muscles of militarism the result is bound to be nightmarish.

The idea of vandalising the Bamiyan Buddhas is akin more to the military spirit than to the ethos of Islam, which is, literally, the religion of peace. It is native to the martial spirit that the domination of one ethnic group over the other is incomplete without the humiliation of the Gods of the vanquished. The Taliban is not a religious entity, though it dons the cloak of religion to cover the nakedness of its aggression and irreligion. The greatest danger to a religion is its own fundamentalist caricature. One has to pity Islam as it undergoes the vulgarisation of Talibanisation in Afghanistan.

That notwithstanding, it is an entertaining piece of irony that the most vehement condemnation of the Taliban misadventure has come from the sangh parivar quarters. It proves yet again that the bitterest oppositions are between two identical forces. It should not surprise us, then, the protagonists of Ayodhya in December of 1992 see the Taliban project as a 'dastardly deed'. This is one of those unique moments in which the condemnation of others becomes blatant self-condemnation.

In the end, the real issue is neither Ayodhya nor the Bamiyan Buddhas. From a fundamentalist standpoint, both are useful only as tools for whipping up the communal frenzy that is expected to serve at least two purposes. First, it helps to divert the attention of the people from their own burning issues. Ridding the land of some shrines is deemed a more urgent priority than feeding the hungry or clothing the naked. Second, it helps to establish the perverse logic by which people can be degraded into tools to serve the hidden agenda of their pseudo-religious ventriloquists. Though this is a frontal insult to human dignity and integrity, fundamentalist projects succeed in retaining the blind loyalty of the masses for a period of time. This is achieved mainly by playing up the popular craving for aggression and violence that is endemic in an age of spiritual decay. The Taliban principle has deep psychological roots. The popular honeymoon with fundamentalism lasts until its destructive scope is fully played out.

In the end, it is important to realise that the Taliban is not just a beast that prowls at a distance. It is a potent reality at work in every religious constituency that is monopolised by vested interests. The prime 'Taliban motive', so to speak, is to foster a cultic outlook in order to anchor the people on a contrived illusion. But for the Bamiyan Buddhas, how many of us would have ever thought of Mulla Omar at the present time? Nearer home, what other survival kits does the sangh parivar have other than Ayodhya and the bogey of conversions?

The claim of Sayed Rahmatullah Hashmi, the Taliban spokesman in the US, that the bombardment of the statues of Buddha is "in

retaliation to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992" is a clever after-thought, calculated to embarrass the Vajpayee government in the eyes of the world. Mr. Vajpayee is theoretically right in denouncing the Taliban move as "a further obscurantist regression — an assault on centuries of Afghan tradition". But he has to secure the moral right to be so indignant. As long as his party continues to whitewash the black deed that tarnished India's global image, we cannot hope to be taken seriously in our protestation against the Taliban's actions.

Of course, all civilised people must decry and discredit the Taliban syndrome beyond our borders. It is a phenomenon programmed for destruction and endemic under-development. But the logic of fundamentalism dictates that its followers at home will be at the fore-front of this ritual for whatever political mileage they may derive from it. But those who remember the first 15 pages of Veer Savarkar's book, *Hindutva*, do not need to be persuaded that it was not only in Afghanistan that the Buddha and his followers were administered a raw deal.

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS



Remains of the Day : The cavern where the Bamiyan Buddha stood, is now empty. After many unsuccessful attempts to destroy the statue with rockets and anti-tank guns, the Taliban finally used explosives.

Courtesy : The Times of India, 21 March, 2001.

A country without history is like a man without memory. But what can one say of those who have wiped out a part of their own memory? Words fail to express human anguish over the tragedy.

Verily a picture of void left by barbarism.

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