

13. Ibid.
 14. See David Sheppard, *Parson's Pitch* (London, Hodder Stoughton, 1964).
 15. Clayton Goodwin, *Caribbean Cricketers: from the pioneers to Packer* (London, Harrap, 1980).
 16. Frank Birbalsingh and Clem Shiweharan, *Indo-West Indian Cricket* (London, Hansib, 1980).
 17. W.E.B. Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York, Fawcett, 1961).

18. A. Sivanandan, 'Sri Lanka: a case study,' in his *Communities of Resistance* (London, Verso, 1990). First published in "Sri Lanka: racism and the authoritarian state," special issue of *Race & Class* (Vol. XXVI, summer 1984), pp. 1-38.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Ibid.
 21. *The Guardian*, op. cit.
 22. *The Guardian* (26 January 1999).
 23. 'Sri Lanka: a case study' op. cit.

BAMIYAN REVISITED

MEMORIES OF FOUR SRI LANKAN TRAVELLERS WHO VISITED BAMIYAN IN 1972

The reported destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001 is one of the first barbarisms of the 21st century. Its hideous drama shields for a moment our memories of sometimes similar, often more terrifying, in many instances more 'mindful' acts of violence that took place through the unbelievably cruel century that has just ended. Taliban becomes a modern world with a viciousness and mindless determination that shocks us as utterly as Auschwitz and Buchenwald did, just yesterday, in the lands of Bach and Beethoven. In condemning Taliban, deserving condemnation of the highest degree, we are also forced to look into the mirror of history. But how can we ever enter the Talibanized mind. Mesmerized by its total otherness, we can only stare into its eyes as it hits us on the head.

But memory also brings us from night into day. As I read the world's desperate statements and watch sunny pictures on TV of the Bamiyan valley in archive clips, I am taken back to another time, when the eye of the storm was at the other end of Asia and the B52 was doing similar things in Vietnam. "We had to destroy the city to save it," was the cry of an American general, expressing a moral certainty very similar to that of his Taliban avatar 25 years later.

To me, that time, the mid-1970s also brings back vivid personal memories of the peace of the Bamiyan valley, as we drove – three companions, M, F and S, and myself – along the continuous sequence of valleys, streams and villages that lay parallel to the 100-plus miles of road from Kabul to Bamiyan. Unlike the wide and smooth Russian and American-built highways that traversed Afghanistan, connecting Heart, Kandahar, Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif and the Khyber Pass, the road to Bamiyan was a stone-strewed track meant only for trucks and tractors. To drive at more than 15 mph was to put up with a constant battering of loose stones that hit the car's undercarriage like machine-gun fire. But the fierceness of the road surface was greatly mitigated by the gentle sun-drenched

fertility of the valley, the amplitude of water, and the well-stocked orchards – the prosperity of a traditional, fruit-growing and fruit selling culture.

Elsewhere in the country, we had driven along the almost traffic-less highways at full speed for hours, escorted in a miniature convoy by our Afghani architect friend, Obaidullah, whose car set the pace ahead of us. In contrast, M's diary records our slow progress along the tortuous Bamiyan road:

8.45 a.m. – 7585 – kilometer reading
 9.45 a.m. – 7600
 10.45 a.m. – 7617
 11.42 a.m. – 7632 – we stop at a chai khanna for hot tea

100 miles of stony, dirt road. Stones exploding beneath the car. Despite the heat, windows wound up at the approach of a vehicle to save us from clouds of dust. Sailing, trying to rest in the back, constantly sneezing.

In other parts of Afghanistan we had marvelled at the architecture. The technology of house building epitomized the wealth and confidence of the traditional Afghan economy. Exquisitely crafted, the thick walls were of mud, pressed in between wooden boards, which had left behind a neat and towering appearance, with high projecting balconies and lookout posts – each house a minor chateau, undoubtedly one of the great mud building traditions of the world.

Here we drive through narrow passes, with high, undulating, smooth-faced mountains – narrow paths zig-zag up the mountain face with women carrying goods on their heads, up incredible inclines... Suddenly fertile villages, rice, wheat, yellow expanses of mustard flowers... a boy drives five bulls, four in front and one behind, threshing grain,

removing hot faeces from a bull before it falls on the wheat... pretty girls, some exquisitely beautiful, with surma, purple, like iodine, around their eyes... but most women cover themselves as we pass. Donkey and sheep-owners have to move aside to let us by. Children, mostly boys, returning from school, wave to us, smiling. The pass narrows, dominated by a lookout post, like an eagle's nest. We stop to buy tiny, sweet, seedless grapes.

We reach Bamiyan at 4.30 in the afternoon, and trudge around the bazaar looking for a hotel. We take a room with one electric light but no electricity, only a candle, and put S to bed before setting out to see the Buddhas before it gets too dark. The wide, flat Bamiyan valley stretches out before us, rich agricultural land with the backdrop of the cliff, honeycombed with ancient grottoes and the great 53-metre image, and then some distance away, the cliff slightly angled, the smaller Buddha. With little time left to visit the monuments that evening, we begin to prepare ourselves for two days of archaeological exploration.

We went in search of the Indian conservation team working on the site. Three of them, one an engineer, another an artist, greet us warmly. Conversation, coffee, pakoras. They have taught their Afghani cook some Indian cooking. We sit in near darkness, until the generator comes into operation. Then Dr Tarzi, Director-General of Archaeology in Afghanistan, arrives, having just come in on the plane from Kabul, an attractive, intellectual man. We have to speak to him in French. He does many sketches, explaining Bamiyan to us, describing the work that is going on. Drinks are brought out, we are invited to dinner. Three more Afghans arrive, the Director of Monuments, the artist and the expert who 'rolls' the frescoes, who had trained in the USSR. We are all exhausted with work, travel, description, explanation, darkness, the effort of talking and translating English and French. Everyone eats very little, so as to leave for others – rice, nan, chicken, potato and lime chutney.

The three of us walk back in pitch darkness. The whole village is in bed. But we find S in a state when we arrive, she has been worried stiff. The inn owner is up in arms. People have been sent out searching for us.

The colossal Buddha images at Bamiyan preside majestically, but so gently and subtly, over the Bamiyan valley. Giant works of imagination and devotion, they are amongst the greatest monuments of the Buddhist world, marking one of the western boundaries of the diffusion of Buddhism. They are difficult to date precisely. Some place them as early as the 3rd and 4th centuries (others the 7th and 8th), amongst the earliest examples of a rare but widely-distributed Buddhist tradition of colossal rock-cut sculpture, best seen here in Afghanistan, in China (the Mogao Grottoes – better known as Dunhuang – Yungang, Longmen) and in Sri Lanka (Avukana, Maligavila, Sasseruva, Tantrimalai, Polonnaruwa, and Dove). With a few exceptions, such as the free-standing Maligavila

image in Sri Lanka, the distinctive feature of this genre is that the figures, whether standing, seated or recumbent, are cut in the living rock, standing out from a cliff or rock-face to which they are usually attached. The Indian equivalent is the free-standing Jain image of Gomatesvara at Sravana Belagola. In another medium, Japan has the colossal metal Buddha images in Nara and at Kamakura.

Bamiyan also represents a particular variation of Buddhist rock-temple architecture in which a rock-face is honeycombed with temples, shrines and monasteries, partly cut out of the rock itself and partly formed by an elaborate network of timber stairs, galleries, balconies and halls attached to the rock-face. This is widespread in Central Asia and China, across the overland Silk Route, and also in Sri Lanka. At Bamiyan – unlike in the 'Thousand Buddha' complexes at Mogao, or many other Chinese sites such as Maichisan – the timber structures have not survived. As in Sri Lanka, only the rock grottoes and the barest remains of the masonry basements and postholes used in the timber construction, provide evidence of what was once a distinctive, but today little-known, architecture of a quite extraordinary type.

The sculptured form of the Bamiyan Buddhas also uses a composite technique. The main figures were carved out of the rock, which is a hard but somewhat crumbly conglomerate. Clearly, the original sculptors themselves had to contend with the collapse of parts of the figure. We see that the lower right leg of the larger Buddha has fallen away, possibly during the carving of the sculpture itself. A series of holes was drilled in the cliff-face so that this section of the statue could be fashioned in some other material, most likely mud and straw around a timber armature. The statues are thought to have been covered in a mud plaster (mud with a stucco coating), which allowed for the moulding of fine details. The images were once painted in bright colours; the robe of the larger Buddha was once red and the smaller blue. Both had golden faces and hands. Now, stripped of pigment, they had a chaste, classic majesty.

This construction technique itself gives us the possibility of restoring the images at some future date in more enlightened times, in the way that some European cities were restored after they were bombed in World War Two. In fact if the images are not completely destroyed, the same ancient technique could be used to bring the statues back to their pre-Taliban form. Although the historicity, authenticity and power of the original, and the rich archaeological information the images and the surrounding cliff-face and grottoes contain, will be irretrievably lost by destruction, neglect and misuse, adequate documentation exists to reproduce a fairly exact form of the great images – poor compensation for a colossal act of official vandalism.

The conservation team we met at the site were carrying out both preventive conservation and restoration. They explained to us that one of the main problems was the disintegration and erosion of the rock due principally to the effect of melting snow flowing down the cliff-face. We discussed the possibility of the more insidious

impact of erosion through stress caused by thermal variation – construction and expansion of the rock due to extreme temperature variations, from frozen winters to fierce summer, as well as cold nights and hot afternoons. We asked them about wind and sand effects. M's journal records briefly:

Many Afghani workers, carrying stone for chipping, on their backs or on donkeys, up great heights. Another method, a tin tray suspended from two poles. The feet of the large Buddha being restored with stone and later plastered. Saw Mr. Korde's drains, to prevent water erosion.

We were fascinated by the conservation work. The task, we felt, was a hard job in a distant and difficult-to-reach place. A time-bound conservation program was one thing – to keep experts and technicians in place on a permanent basis and to sustain regular monitoring, intervention and maintenance, another. It needed not just funds and skilled human resources, but supportive policy commitment and appropriate institutional arrangements – harder to find than anything else.

The rock-cut cells and halls inside the cliff were as fascinating as the great sculptures. We saw fragments of plaster and paintings in many places and vowed to go back to the libraries to study the published documentation on this fascinating rock-cut architecture. Inside the cliff is a narrow staircase that leads up to the head of the great Buddha. The view over the head is spellbinding and we take photographs. The rich valley lies spread out before the image, vividly illustrating the centuries-old economy that, together with the trans-Asian Silk Route trade, must have sustained the communities that built and nurtured this great complex of monasteries.

High steps cut into rock, like a tunnel inside the cliff. We climb up towards the head of the statue, passing many large apertures which light up our path and give us views of the image. Nervous, because the drop is much too much to be trifled with. Many caves around the feet of the small Buddha, each with a different kind of ceiling. Higher up a prayer hall with a curved wall and flat ceiling to diffuse light. We leave the caves around midday, having spent the whole morning visiting the site and photographing it.

We are all silent and thoughtful after the visit, reflecting, each in our own way, on the vivid sense of history that the experience has left us with, wistful that we have to go away, eager to study Bamiyan more intensely. We try, in our minds, to reconstruct the great monastery and the society that created it. The colossal scale, the present abandonment and isolation, the dynamics of change, the archaeological retrieval. We think of the enigma that Dr Tarzi spoke

to us about – the 1000-foot long recumbent image recorded in the writings of the ancient Chinese pilgrims. Tarzi says it is somewhere in the Bamiyan complex. But where is it, can you show it to us, can we explore the site, we ask.

The journey back to Kabul is even more uncomfortable than the drive out, but we are sustained by the great experience and also by the tasks that await us. We have permission to photograph the Begram ivories in the Kabul Museum and only a very short time in which to do it. The Kabul Museum had one of the greatest collections of Buddhist sculpture in the world, sculpture so distinctive of Afghanistan – much of it, alas, now thought to be lost forever.

The Talibanization of the Bamiyan images and of the Kabul Museum brings back to us all these thoughts and experiences. Newspapers all over the world have carried such extensive coverage of Bamiyan that the Taliban have done more to bring the great Buddhas to the attention of the world than a hundred scholarly papers. Two comments stand out from a pile of cuttings that covers a table:

Zealots hacked off their faces, but, if anything such acts of religious vandalism rendered the faceless images even more powerful and god-like, I, like every visitor to Bamiyan, was awestruck. (Julian West, in *The Island*, 5 March 2001)

When European ministers of culture express their revulsion against the actions of the Taliban, they, too, are on shaky ground. For, the cultural vandalism of Europe over half a millennium has been so breathtaking as to make the iconoclasm of the Taliban appear as a minor act of destructiveness compared to the elegant European art of laying waste of civilisations; after all statues are statues. The extinguishing, not only of cultural artefacts, but also of the living flesh and blood that created them, was the great expertise in which Europe had no rival... (Jeremy Seabrook in *Hindustan Times*, 11 March 2001).

The Buddhas are now silent, their absence as eloquent as their presence. In a very Buddhist way, the vandalizing of the Bamiyan images not only demonstrates so dramatically that everything in this world is subject to the laws of decay and change, but also brings about a new awareness: of these images themselves: of the great achievements of Buddhist art across the centuries and across Asia; and also of the doctrine of the Buddha, the *dharma* that teaches us about impermanence, change, tolerance and compassion. Bamiyan becomes a mirror that forces us to look at ourselves – what we have done and not done, what we should be doing and not doing. ■