

# Crossroad of Culture: A Contested Space of Culture and Cultural Terrorism – Bamiyan, Afghanistan.

Aisha Nabi

*Postgraduate student of Jamia Milia Islamia, Department of Political Science, New Delhi, India.*

**ABSTRACT:** *The Monuments across the globe represent the legacies of great empires and immortal tales which has stood against the test of time. The Buddhas of Bamiyan represent one such marvel which encompasses within itself a 1500-year-old history of the silk roads and the various exchanges which took place therein. In 2001, the Taliban demolished the two great statues of the Bamiyan buddhas which led to a massive loss in world history. There have been various deliberations about preserving the statues and their possible reconstruction. UNESCO has put significant efforts toward preserving the remains of the Bamiyan buddhas but a possible reconstruction still remains a theory. This study analyses the reconstruction of the Buddhas in the light of historical distance as proposed by Mark Salber Phillips. It suggests that historical distance is something which is given in any observation and thus cannot be created artificially and therefore emphasises the significance of the empty niches which represent events of history itself. It elaborates on the efforts of the preservation of the site by UNESCO and explores the link between the historical distance and the current significance of the Bamiyan Buddhas.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Bamiyan Buddhas, Cultural terrorism, Historical distance, Taliban.*

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE LEGACY OF THE SILK ROADS

The silk roads are vasts of trails and crossroads that laid a blueprint of what Eurasia would look like in the upcoming centuries. It would not only shape the economies of the kingdoms but rather transform their cultural landscapes. Famously known as a trade route which connected East to the West, the silk roads surpassed the notion of being a route for silk, spice and merchandise transportation and became the highway of knowledge, ideas, culture and belief exchange. The said founder of the silk roads, General Zhang Qian was sent by the Han emperor Wudi on a diplomatic mission to the West in 139 BCE to establish alliances against Xingnu when he first laid the route from China to the West and became a progenitor of a long history of trade and tradition (UNESCO, n.d.). Science, literature, technology and crafts circulated along these routes influenced one another and therefore led to the development of languages, religions and cultures (UNESCO, n.d.).

Buddhism is one of the religions that travelled from and across the silk roads. Its legacy once stood tall in the niches of Bamiyan with Buddhist art and monasteries jewelizing the land where the buddha in niches resided. The giant buddha sculptures known as the Bamiyan Buddha are estimated to date back to mid 6th century AD to the early 7th century. Both the sculptures which stand 800 m apart show a standing buddha. The eastern buddha which is 38m tall is also known as khink buddha and the western buddha which is 55m tall is also known as the Surkh buddha (Blaensdorf & Petzet, 2010). Some of the earliest records of the Bamiyan buddhas can be found

in Chinese travelogues, for example, The account of the country of Fanyanna (Da Tang Xiyu Ji), Fanyan in the biography of Shi Xuangang of monastery Guanfu in the capital Tang Gaosen Zhuan, and Fanyanna in sacred remains (Shijia Fanzhi) (Kuwayama, 2005). Da Tang Xiyu ji describes the magnificent buddhas ;

To the northeast of the royal capital is a mountain, at a secluded corner of which is a standing stone image of Buddha, one hundred and forty or fifty chi (Chinese feet) high. Its golden hues are sparkling and its precious ornaments are glittering. To the east is a monastery, which was built by the last king. To the east of this monastery is a standing brazen figure of Sakyamuni Buddha, about one hundred chi high, different parts of the body being cast and joined together to get a complete form (Kuwayama, 2005).

Its very sight captivated the viewer in its glory, a God standing tall within the carves of a mountain under whose protection was everyone in its sight. The Buddha was not a mere representation of flourishing Buddhism in the valley of Bamiyan but also a symbol of protection for all the merchants and travellers who were travelling these roads. It was a symbol of wealth and prosperity, and law and justice, for anyone who could lay eyes on that magnificent mountain. It was a symbol of familiarity for any traveller as it would translate as a symbol of identity. "Nothing can be compared with these statues in the entire world," said Yakut al Hamawi about Bamiyan in his geographic dictionary in the year 1218 (Blaensdorf et al., 2010). The Mongolian invasion of Bamiyan under the leadership of Genghiz Khan took place in 1221 which led to the destruction of the Bamiyan. The city was ravaged and the people were massacred by the Mongols due to the death of a son of Djaghatai Khan during this battle and the place was given the name maw-Baligh, that is Yaman Qal'a, Evil Place (Blaensdorf et al., 2010).

Thomas Hyde was the first European who mentioned the Bamiyan buddhas in his writings in 1700 based on Arab literary sources. Nearly after a century Wilford and Elphinstone wrote regarding the same based on literary sources. It was William Moorcroft and George Trebeck who went on an expedition to Afghanistan in 1824 and wrote about the tall buddha in the niches which was followed by the works of Alexander Burnes and Dr. Gerard (Blaensdorf et al., 2010). The problem with these accounts was that they identified the statues as two figures or idols with no connection to Buddhism. The statues existed but their relevance seems to have been lost through the passage of time. Eventually, the lost history was found which paved the way for a series of actions and reactions that would ultimately define the fate of this bygone chapter of the history of mankind.

"Do you prefer to be a smasher of idols or a seller of idols?" (Boggs, 2017) asked Mullah Omar to the Muslim population of Afghanistan on February 26, 2001, when the Metropolitan Museum of Arts proposed to pay for the Afghan artefacts. When the Taliban started to gain political power in Afghanistan, they talked about the preservation of Afghan artefacts and heritage sites, including Bamiyan and hence it is safe to say that Buddha on the crossroads of Afghanistan was not a mere idol but held a greater significance, that is, it stood as a cultural heritage. What happened was the exact opposite of what was proposed. The Buddha niches succumbed to the attacks of the Taliban, a glorious representation of world history that had fallen. UNESCO as the Taliban claimed was willing to protect the statues but refused financial aid to the people of Afghanistan. The actions of the organisation were interpreted to be idolatry and therefore followed by a cultural slaughter which has been discussed on various platforms with many interpretations.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research follows a qualitative methodology and a case study approach through a study of primary and secondary sources. According to Robert Stake's *The Art of Case Study Research*, a Qualitative case study is a "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important

circumstances” (Yazan, 2015). It aims to concentrate on a single entity and describe that entity in depth. Each case requires to have a pre-defined boundary which reflects the nature and time period that is covered by the case study, the relevant social group, organisation or geographical area of interest to the investigator, the types of evidence to be collected, and the priorities for data collection and analysis (Crowe, Cresswell, Roberstson, 2011).

This approach helps to understand multiple paradigms and various interpretations of data in order to get a better understanding of the subject at hand. The study primarily focuses on secondary sources of data such as government documents, journals, scholarly articles, and newspaper reports in order to get a conceptual and critical perspective. Qualitative observation helps in systematic observation of the data collected and hence gives scope for an extensive and thorough understanding of a subject under study.

### III. UNESCO IN BAMMIYAN, AFGHANISTAN

The Bamiyan Valley is a visual representation of numerous developments which include artistic fervour and religious developments from the 1st to the 13th centuries that characterised ancient Bactria. It is a testament to vanishing kingdoms and decades alike on which almost a 1500-year-old history can be traced and identified.

The numerous Buddhist monastic ensembles and sanctuaries, as well as fortified structures from the Islamic period, testify to the interchange of Indian, Hellenistic, Roman, Sasanian and Islamic influences. (UNESCO, n.d.)

The site also testifies to reactions to the symbolism of ancient artefacts such as the destruction of the two Buddha statues in March 2001 by the Taliban. It was in 2003, which is after three years of the demolition of the Buddhas, the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List and List in Danger. It was put under the criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and vi as this landscape holds a treasure of cultural exchange within its visual artefacts and murals (UNESCO, n.d.) . The criteria as per defined by UNESCO are given below :

**Criterion (i):** The Buddha statues and the cave art in Bamiyan Valley are an outstanding representation of the Gandharan school in Buddhist art in the Central Asian region (UNESCO, n.d.).

**Criterion (ii):** The artistic and architectural remains of Bamiyan Valley, an important Buddhist centre on the Silk Road, are an exceptional testimony to the interchange of Indian, Hellenistic, Roman and Sasanian influences as the basis for the development of a particular artistic expression in the Gandharan school. To this can be added the Islamic influence in a later period (UNESCO, n.d.).

**Criterion (iii):** The Bamiyan Valley bears an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition in the Central Asian region, which has disappeared (UNESCO, n.d.).

**Criterion (iv):** The Bamiyan Valley is an outstanding example of a cultural landscape which illustrates a significant period in Buddhism (UNESCO, n.d.).

**Criterion (vi):** The Bamiyan Valley is the most monumental expression of the western Buddhism. It was an important centre of pilgrimage over many centuries. Due to their symbolic values, the monuments have suffered at different times of their existence, including the deliberate destruction in 2001, which shook the whole world (UNESCO, n.d.).

Bamiyan's preservation and revival began with the twenty-fifth session of the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee on 25-30 June 2001 (UNESCO, 2001), in which the opening session included an extended discussion on the destruction of Bamiyan statues. Within no time it became a global issue with wide media coverage which called for immediate action to be taken. Even though the quest to save Bamiyan by UNESCO started way before its demolition and no dialogue could convince the Taliban to do otherwise, the fight lost to the Taliban sure wasn't the end.

The Fourth Expert Working Group on the preservation of the site was held in Kabul in 2005. A group of international and Afghan experts issued a list of activities which were to be implemented for the preservation of the site. After its formation in 2002 within the framework of the coordination mandate which was entrusted to UNESCO by the Afghan government, it began to coordinate activities which came under the UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust project named 'safeguarding of the Bamiyan site' (UNESCO, 2005). It became a mandate for all the cultural projects which were taking place in the country by UNESCO under the umbrella of the Afghan government.

This project operated in five phases and the main partners involved in the project are the Government of Japan, the Government of Germany, the Government of Italy, the Government of Greece, the Aga Khan Foundation, the Hirayama Foundation and the Society for the Protection of Afghan Cultural Heritage (SPACH) (UNESCO, 2017). The goal of the project remained ambiguous and changed constantly with the passage of time. The focus initially was on the destroyed Buddhas 'and how they could be reconstructed, but it slowly transformed into a plan of preservation for the remains that were left to be protected within the site of Bamiyan. It included architecture from both Gandharan and Islamic eras. There was a transition from repairing what was destroyed by the hands of global terrorism to preserving the site in the current destroyed form as a memorial of Taliban rule and also as a memory of the fleeting nature of ideologies and governance, therefore, preserving what was left in the emptiness of the niches. The reconstruction of Buddha was highly debated but could not be put into action due to financial and cultural factors. The state of Afghanistan was not stable enough to support the project financially and it was debated that a reconstructed Buddha would not have the same significance as the marvel which once stood there. Andrea Bruno, an Italian architect emphasised the same.

Bruno believes the niches should be preserved as a monument to the crime of their destruction. "It is a kind of victory for the monument and a defeat for those who tried to obliterate its memory with dynamite", he says. He argues that reconstruction would be culturally insensitive. "Here the Muslims strictly oppose images - to recreate the Buddhas would be an insult even to non-Taliban Afghans. We must show good manners, he says" (Hegarty, 2012).

The first phase of the project was a virtual success. The cliffs and niches were consolidated, cave and mural paintings were protected, training was provided to afghans of various backgrounds and a base was created for the inception of cultural tourism in Bamiyan.

The second phase aspired to build on the success of the first phase but couldn't fulfil the promises that it had proposed entirely, for example, the income generation for engineers and archaeologists didn't meet the expectation. Nonetheless, the Management Plan for the site as a World Heritage property and a Master Plan for the Safeguarding of the Bamiyan site was finalised.

The third phase ensured security to the Bamiyan site and technical assistance provided by UNESCO; ICOMOS-Germany; Aga Khan Foundation (Bamiyan); ISPRA; National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (NRICP) Tokyo and Nara; RWTH Aachen University, Technical University of Munich with general contribution from the Government of Japan (UNESCO, 2011). The expectations were not met and it was

reported by the locals that there is hardly one guard who would take care of the statues and certainly that's not enough to ensure the protection of what remains of the Buddhas.

Phase four of the project aimed to reach a certain level of state of conservation for the gradual removal of the property from the list of World Heritage in Danger. In 2011 it was concluded by Afghan officials and international experts at a meeting of the 9th Bamiyan Expert Working Group hosted by UNESCO, that the World Heritage site is potentially ready to be removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger by 2013 but the reality was far from it (UNESCO,n.d.).

Phase five of the project which began in 2017, the goal ventured back to the idea in which it was initially formed, that is, the reconstruction of Buddhas. UNESCO in contribution with the Government of Afghanistan and Tokyo University of the Arts convened a three-day closed technical meeting which was followed by a public Symposium in Tokyo, Japan, entitled "The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues: Technical Considerations and Potential Effects on Authenticity and Outstanding Universal Value"(UNESCO, 2017).

A three-day programme was held in Salalah, Oman, in December 2018 under the patronage of H.E. Abdulaziz bin Mohamed Al-Rowas who is the Advisor for Cultural Affairs to the Sultan of Oman. Around 30 experts took part in the "International Technical Meeting on the future of the Bamiyan World Heritage Property" in order to discuss the future of the cultural landscapes and archaeological remains of the Bamiyan Valley. The objective was to improve awareness of ethical concerns regarding the recovery and reconstruction of the buddhas with an aim to remove the property from the list of World Heritage in Danger. The experts visited the "Land of Frankincense" in Salalah, including the Al Baleed and Khor Rohri museums in order to reflect on the applicability of the Omani archaeological park model to the Bamiyan Valley( UNESCO, 2018). The committee decided that a study should be conducted to look into similar cases of world heritage properties around the globe and further proposals should be invited in order to acquire a detailed assessment of the heritage conservation ethics that comes along with the process of reconstruction of cultural heritage. It laid emphasis on the removal of Bamiyan from the World Heritage List in Danger as a priority at the moment and a detailed action plan with a time frame to achieve the same().

In 2007 the World Heritage Committee gave four corrective measures which would eventually lead to the removal of Bamiyan from the List of World Heritage in Danger. These include site security by the State party, the long-term stability of the buddha niches, the conservation of the archaeological remains and the formation of a master plan for the management of the Bamiyan (UNESCO, 2020). On the 90th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between Japan and Afghanistan, the government of Japan announced a USD 3.8 million dollar support in the cause of prevention and protection of the site in Bamiyan. It is the 6th phase of providing aid to Afghanistan within UNESCO/Japanese Funds-In-Trust cooperation which primarily aims at stabilising the rear side of the niche of the western buddha while preserving the remaining mural paintings at various locations in the Bamiyan Valley (UNESCO,2020).

UNESCO has been progressively working towards the goal of preserving the site while trying to evaluate all the possibilities for its future. The future of the Bamiyan buddhas is in flux in which there is no one possible way, an ideal solution, of achieving it. The measures that UNESCO has taken along with the afghan government reflect the complexity of the situation. The object of value here is not something which has walked a linear path over the history of the silk road, it rather has survived reigns and ideologies which constitute significant periods in world history. With the preservation of what remains of the buddhas and the rest of the Bamiyan Valley, UNESCO has positively contributed to recreating a bygone cultural identity of the people of Afghanistan that people could identify with as a common cultural heritage for a positive national identity. The role of UNESCO in making it a global issue and inviting aid for the cause has actively contributed to preserving the niches of the glorious past of Bamiyan. Although contested by many scholars who claim the demolished Buddhas 'to be a

negative cultural heritage because of the chaotic activities of the Taliban, the niches stand as proof to the test of time of which there is no absolute truth or virtue. The niches serve as the facilitator of a memory which was materialised initially, but even after its destruction it still is an ode to the legacy of the Bamiyan.

With reference to UN Secretary-General's dictum "Our challenge is to help the Afghans help themselves"(Boggs,2017), it can be said that the involvement of UNESCO has positively affected the attempts at the preservation of the Bamiyan site as a cultural heritage while bringing the population of Bamiyan closer to their lost legacy and therefore acting as a successful medium between the people of Bamiyan and the historical route of the silk roads.

#### **IV. Analysis and Conclusion**

"Every representation of past has to engage with the problem of positioning its audience in relations of proximity or detachment to the events and experiences represented" (Seixas & Phillips, 2004).

The giant buddhas of Bamiyan which once basked in glory within the comfort of the niches in the Bamiyan Valley were demolished by the Taliban in the year 2001. It stirred historians and people alike all across the globe and spurred a rage against the activities of the Taliban towards the remaining cultural heritage of Buddhism in the valley. Within the two decades that have passed, there has been various national and international deliberation on the preservation and the possible reconstruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The question that seems to dictate the flow of the reconstruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan is whether they can be rebuilt. The statement here does not only reflect the financial commitment which would be required by the project but also the ideological, cultural, historical and political concerns of the reconstructed buddhas of Bamiyan.

The 1500 years old legacy of the buddhas is what the empty niches represent. If reconstructed, it would possibly " give the visitor a sense of the past that is socially more comprehensive and visually more immediate"(Seixas & Phillips, 2004). The concern that follows is whether this reduction of historical distance gives birth to something which is altogether different from the buddha which once resided in the cliff of Bamiyan. Distance is attributed to the function of temporality which is basically a sense of clarity which comes with the passage of time (Seixas & Phillips, 2004). This passage of time allows an observer to look at the artefact in the light of various years that it has lived for and therefore creates a distinct sense of identity which gives the artefact its meaning and value in the present time setting. This sense of identity does not only impact the artefact under study but has a significant effect on the people, community, tribe and the other beneficiaries which are associated with it either directly in the present setting or indirectly in the remote past.

Narratives have the power to keep a word alive. These narratives are relevant as long as they can be comprehended in the present time and therefore narratives have always evolved over a period of time and hence are different from history. Since Buddhism became an inaccessible truth in the Bamiyan Valley, the buddhas were lost to a different narrative which established them as 'Salsal', prince of Bamiyan and Shamama', a princess from a remote kingdom. Since their love could not meet a happy fate in this world, they chose to become statues to stay close to each other and immortalise their love (UNESCO, 2018). After the Muslim invasion of the Bamiyan in the 11th century AD under Ghazanavid Dynasty (998-1030) the existence of

buddhas in the niches as a symbol of Buddhism was unsustainable due to the strict opposition of Islam against idols and iconolatriy. Hence an evolution of a new identity can be seen, a symbolism which spoke a tale which became the cultural heritage of the Muslim population of the Bamiyan Valley.

David Lowenthal differentiates the birth of such narratives from history and “calls it heritage and he sets its foreshortening of the historical past in opposition to the critical perspectives of genuine history. Most people can not deal with a past that is too alien; instead they enlist it present causes, domesticating it with legends that project the present back, the past forward. The result is a kind of communion with the past that we think of as history, but is actually heritage (Seixas & Phillips, 2004).

After the rediscovery of the Buddhist identity of the statues, it transformed into an amalgamation of history and heritage. This subjectiveness was dependent on the perception of the viewer. It could be history or a cultural persona of the statues in Bamiyan. It is important to point out here that both these identities are a result of distance and it is this distance between the viewer and the viewed which gives value to the viewed. A reconstructed buddha would be just a replica trying to represent a journey of which it was never a part of. It diminishes its cultural value while at the same time destroys its historical epiphany.

According to Peter Novick, to understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, protagonists’ motives and behaviour. Historical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the historicity of events that they took place then and not now, that they grew out of circumstances different from those that now obtain (Seixas & Phillips, 2004).

The Bamiyan buddhas have been a part of decades during which the concept of territoriality was rather vague. Kingdoms believed in expanding their territories which would be the ultimate show of their power. Different ideologies, religious and cultural alike collided to form the world that we live in now. The empty niches of Bamiyan are a testament to the clashing of civilisations. The emptiness in itself creates an aura which absorbs the viewer in its history. The destruction is proof of what the cliff has survived throughout its journey through the ravages of time. Its preservation is certainly a pushing concern but rebuilding it might amount to a loss of history as the new buddha can never be the same as the old one. It would lead to a superficial control of distance and “the control of distance involves much more than aesthetic or emotional impact alone. It also carries with it significant ideological implications”. These ideological implications can be diverse and easy to manipulate due to the control over the distance of this particular chapter of history in humankind. The outcome remains uncertain but the implication is rather clear that the empty niches represent a grandeur of the 1500-year-old history of people, cultures, religions, science etc and therefore must be preserved as it is, destroyed in substance but alive in its legacy.

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