


From the Purge of History to Heritage Interpretation: Making Sense of the Taliban's Iconoclasm at the Buddhist Site of Shakharai (Swat, Pakistan)

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Abstract: This article seeks to understand two opposite responses to the pre-Islamic tangible heritage, especially iconic, in the predominantly Muslim populated Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, formerly the North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan. The heritage site on which this study centres is called Shakharai or Jahanabad. It consists of stupa remains, caves and, above all, Buddhist rock carvings and inscriptions. The Taliban attacked the famous Shakharai Buddha three times between September and October 2007 and decapitated it. A nearby rock relief was also blasted in the early 2009. What this paper demonstrates is that both religious motivations and situations of current politics were responsible for these acts of destruction. However, these iconoclastic tendencies may not be seen as essential to any particular ethnic group. Historically informed alternative indigenous perspectives challenge the ideology of *otherization* and obliteration of heritage. What is finally argued is that this counter iconoclastic literary and cultural sphere, embodying a sense of identity and belonging to history, can be used in the process of peace-building and for the betterment of society.

Keywords: Destruction, Heritage, Shakharai, Violence, Buddha

Introduction

Heritage has always seen antipathy and structured violence in war zones. Who does not know about Somanatha, Baburi Masjid, the Bamiyan Buddhas and above all Da'esh's iconoclasm in recent years? All these acts of destruction entail, beside a religio-ideological irredentism, a strong tenor of politics involving issues of domination and resistance and legitimation of power. To all this, an interesting study from Swat, Pakistan, when the valley was in actual control of the Taliban (2007- 09), can be illuminating as far as the wider discourses around the politics of heritage are concerned.

The recent history of Swat is notorious due to the two years long presence and domination of the Taliban. The area saw tremendous human sufferings as well as violence against its historical and cultural heritage. The world is familiar with the gruesome situation of violence, the havoc militancy wreaked on the heritage sites, both Muslim and pre-Muslim, still needs serious attention. It is to be noted that the very beginning of the Talibanization was marked by a fundamental

tenet: to spur virtue and eradicate evil. Given this a number of decrees were issued and preventive measures taken concerning education, females' public appearance, music, drugs, magic and amulets, polio vaccination etc. It is in this overall context that the notorious iconoclastic violence at Shakharai presents itself for analysis.

This article presents the trajectory of the power exercised by the Taliban on the Buddhist and other socio-cultural icons of the area. It also contextualizes violence on the desolate Buddhist remains in the light of power politics and the Taliban's religious convictions. Finally, an engagement has been made with the discourse of the shared ownership of heritage and its potential utility in the process of peace and reconciliation and negotiation of conflicts.

This study is primarily informed by an interpretative approach aiming at understanding iconoclastic violence in both religious and political contexts. The phenomenon has been seen in the light of the Islamic concept of worship as offered by some twentieth century ideologues,

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Jihadist leaders and scholars. To this the political context, especially the America-led war against terror, seen in terms of imperialism/resistance and South Asian populous/majoritarian politics, has been added. In order to explore an alternative indigenous perspective against violence, and in pursuit of peace-building in broader context, insights have been offered with reference to the ownership of heritage.

A variety of primary data was collected over the course of several years. Many newspapers were thoroughly perused, in 2018, for contemporary news and reports. National dailies, lying in the Central Library of the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, such as *The News* (English),¹ *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Urdu) and *Jang* (Urdu) hardly provided any information while the *Dawn* (English) had covered the issue of the iconoclasm and heritage vulnerability. It was the rarely accessible daily *Azadi* (Urdu, Swat), consulted in the office of N.A. Khan at Mingawarah on 22 August 2018, which proved to be more revealing. Two other dailies, *Aaj* (Urdu, Peshawar) and *Wahdat* (Pashto, Peshawar), in the author's personal collection, also turned valuable as far as the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was concerned. The *Dawn* and *Azadi* helped us work out the trajectory of the attacks on the Shakhurāi Buddha while *Aaj* and *Wahdat* were fruitful in adding to the narrative of iconoclasm on either side of the Durand Line. In order to record eyewitness memory, several visits were made to Jahanabad/Shakhurāi. In-depth discussions were also held with teachers, journalists and literati from Swat between August and November 2018. Views of two common clerics were also randomly consulted. For official record, the Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, was visited twice, in August 2018 and April 2019, but nothing relevant was found. Similarly, the Department of Archaeology and Museums (Islamabad), visited in September 2019, was of no help except providing a paragraph-length important data. Social media was carefully followed over a longer period, from 2018 onward, in order to procure data for knowing the indigenous response to the Talibanization from cultural and literary perspective. The poetic verses in Pashto have been collected from the Facebook posts of Pukhtun poets, students and

social activists. The data thus procured has been interpreted and critically related to scholarly literature in the fields of South Asian history, politics and heritage. This engagement, having complementary dimensions, unfolds as the work proceeds in what follows.

Scholarly Background

The ideational circumstances and political expediencies (Elias 2007; Flood 2002) provide for interesting explanations of the Taliban's iconoclastic activities. However, similarly powerful seems to be individual actors' spontaneous and ostentatious responses in localized contexts. Ideational and individual acts seem to derive from scriptural and theological considerations with a vision for worship and strict monotheism. Anti-idolatry notions and the concept of worship can hardly be understood in separation from each other. Yet other multiple types of motivations as provided by socio-political situations and relations of power also greatly matter. They need to be taken account of in any kind of intra or inter group conflicts. In religious studies, it is termed as the functionalist view of religion; that is that religious conflicts often serve personal and political interests. This has particularly been demonstrated by Romila Thapar (2004) in her historiographical analysis relating to Mahmud of Ghazni's desecration of Somanatha. A similar line of analysis has also been followed by Flood (2002) in his work on the Afghan Taliban's destruction of images, especially the Bamiyan Buddhas. According to him, it is 'instrumental iconoclasm', a concept akin to the functionalist view of religion. Iftikhar Malik (2005) also demonstrates how religion has been used under political, identitarian and hegemonic expediencies in South Asia. These works — which may be seen in the context of the ongoing war on terror and majoritarian and populous politics in South Asia — aside, we shall also consider the Quranic concepts of *ṭāghūt* and *fitnah*, which have unstable meanings in different historical and political contexts (Rahman 2019).² Syed Qutb's concept of *jāhiliyah*³ with its presentist political dimension is also crucial in the context of the Islamic resistance movements (Goldberg 1991).

These insights go a long way in explaining and understanding the Taliban's iconoclastic violence in Swat.

On the other hand, reducing the Taliban's iconoclasm at Shakhurāi totally to their puritanical considerations will be an oversimplification of a complex religio-political situation. Still, such a context must not be ignored. We often hear that references to the image-breaking by Prophet Ibrahim (AS) and Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) are being made. Similarly, some verses, concepts from the Holy Qur'ān and many *aḥādīth* (singular, *ḥadīth*) are quoted to justify annihilation of idols. The concepts of *tāghūt* and *jāhiliyah* have been so interpreted as to enjoin upon Muslims a continuous struggle for the purification of human society from all kinds of idolatry and man-made socio-political systems (Campion 2017; Rahman 2019). Some well-known Muslim ideologues and scholars interpret the Islamic concept of worship in a way that leaves no room for any form of *shirk* (polytheism/idolatry). It aims at the purification of the soul and body so as to inculcate in human beings a sense of self-esteem. Mustafa Ahmad al-Zarqa (1999: 110), a leading twentieth century scholar, elaborates this concept: through belief in the all-powerful One God 'Islam seeks to purge human intellect of the filth of idolatry and superstitious fancies. In fact, polytheism and idolatry which are opposed by Islam degrade man to a level which is incompatible with his dignity.' He (1999: 110) also includes in the fold of *shirk* other imperceptible beliefs such as 'the performance of ritual prayer [. . .] in front of a tomb' or 'swear[ing] in the name of anyone except God. All this is owing to the uncompromising hostility of Islam to idolatry.'

In a similar vein, another South Asian Muslim scholar, Abul A'la Maudūdī, explicates the concept of *tawḥīd*, the existence of no god except Allah. From his discussion nothing different than al-Zarqa's argument emerges (Maududi 1995: 86-104; see Rahman 2019: 172-97 for the analysis of his works and religio-political ideas). A great ideologue of Muslim Brotherhood, Syed Qutb (1999), insists on the centrality of *tawḥīd* to the entire system of social justice in Islam. All socio-economic relations, people's rights and duties and

the mutual relationship between individual and society derive meaning from the fundamental reality of the Unity of God. Qutb has added a strong presentist dimension to the Quranic concept of *jāhiliyah*. According to him, the ruling Muslims press for 'the kind of uncritical loyalty due only to God. For the state to demand such loyalty and to insist on such authority strikes a blow at the foundation of revealed monotheism and restores premonotheistic idolatry' (Goldberg 1991: 16). Anti-idolatry verses and instances from the Holy Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* are abundantly referred to in this connection. All this fits to the substantive view of religion which argues that 'conflict and violence are inherent to religion' (R.L. Stein and P.L. Stein [2005] 2017: 280).

Both the puritanical and instrumental iconoclasm is an anathema to the present-day dominant concept and practice of heritage and related issues. I would like to formulate a 'cultural heritage interpretation', centred on Shakhurāi, in support of peace and mutual coexistence against the negativities of the imperial, majoritarian, nationalistic and fundamentalist approach towards history. And for this, we shall understand heritage, following Russell Staiff (2014: 2), as 'a dynamic entity, not a stable category'. We also need to relate this notion to one which sees heritage as a verb, not as a noun (L. Smith 2006). It is this conceptual tool of fluidity in the meaning of heritage, which can be used to enable Pakistanis, and also Afghans, own anew, which has long become the 'other' in their social and collective memory. And it would necessitate taking on board the many stakeholders having conflicting interests in the heritage. Likewise, a bottom-up approach to participation in archaeological and heritage activities is also required (Coningham and Lewer 2019: 5). Laurajane Smith's (2006) concept of heritage as a 'discourse' is foundational that argues for a symbiotic relationship between ideas and actions with respect to heritage. In other words, the 'authorized heritage discourse' of professional and political elites needs to welcome and accommodate what she calls a people-oriented 'popular discourse.'

Timeline of the Taliban's Attacks

Shakhr̥ai, also popularly called Jahanabad,⁴ is a quite open locality situated at the mouth of the Malam Jabah valley at about a 12 km distance north-east of Mingawarah. It houses various remains of the Buddhist period, especially the Buddha statue, and if seen in the context of extended environs — namely, Manglawar and Nangrial — a more socio-religiously and politically important picture would appear. The site was subjected to repeated violence by the Taliban in 2007 and 2009.

The Taliban's violence on cultural heritage has many dimensions. It affected both pre-Islamic icons and Muslim shrines. In Swat also both were targeted. The Buddhist landscape at Shakhr̥ai witnessed repeated attacks. The colossal image of the Buddha was raided thrice (Fig. 1). It may be pointed out that until now the general understanding was that two attacks had been made.

However, a recent look into *Azadi* revealed that a third destructive attempt had also been made.

The first attack happened on Tuesday, late night, 11 September 2007. Daily *Azadi* published the news the next day (September 12). Its heading says that the historical image of the *Buddha at Jahanabad*, near Manglawar, was blown through a severe blast. This reporting is full of confusion as the news oscillates between partial and total damage caused to the relief. However, the local police officer's statement that it had not caused harm is correct. This intended act of destruction was assigned to local militants. The police officer called it an act of maligning Pakistan in the comity of nations. The same was also reported by the daily *Dawn* (Khan 2007a). 'Local people said one explosive device had been planted on top and another in the foot of the rock. The images were not damaged, but a portion of the rock was.' It further wrote that according to local people 'it



Figure 1. The defaced Shakhr̥ai Buddha. Photograph by the author

was the handiwork of local militants'. The *Dawn* (September 13, 2007) also published an important editorial warning about the threats to and safety of the archaeological heritage (see below).

The second attempt to destroy the Shakhurāi Buddha occurred on 29 September 2007. Daily *Azadi* (September 30, 2007) called it an attack with two bombs at midnight. Afterwards the statue was fired. It was reported that its remaining part was somewhat destroyed. According to the *Dawn* (Khan 2007b) 'the blast did no harm to the image', information which the police could not affirm due to their restricted movement. The local people had been ordered to leave the surroundings to avoid any trouble. A third raid was also reported by *Azadi* on October 29, 2007. Bombs were used by unknown persons causing partial damage. Unlike reports on the previous occasions, this attack was very briefly treated by *Azadi*, perhaps due to intensification in violence. The *Dawn*, however, does not report it.

Besides damaging the Buddha image, the Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi relief also saw the Taliban's anger (Figs. 2, 3). Unlike the Buddha, it was hit in the early 2009, shortly before the last decisive operation, *Rāh-i-rāst*, was started against the militants. It was an act of a local militant, called S. Ali. To this may be added another living site of healing, Mykhūnu Gaṭah, a boulder used for curing *mykhūnah* (corns). It was also drilled and blasted in 2009 by a group of the Taliban.

Making Sense of the Taliban's Iconoclasm

The Swat valley has seen recurrent waves of violence in its long history. In its most recent past, the conflicts of the 1970s between the landlords and tenants posed a great challenge (Lindholm 1996). The vulnerability of the area during the Afghan war aside, the last decade of the previous century saw the emergence and activities of Maulānā Sūfī Muhammad's Taḥrīk Nifāz-i-Sharī'at-i-Muhammadi (TNSM). A continuation



Figure 2. The boulder once containing the Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi image. Photograph by the author

of this may be seen in the Swat chapter of the Taliban under the leadership of Maulānā Sūfī's son-in-law, Mullā Fazlullāh, from 2007 to 2009. The Taliban movement was affiliated with Tahrīk-i-Taliban Pakistan. Its militants were in actual control of the area between 2007 and 2009. Various military operations were launched against them of which the last endeavour in the mid-2009 was decisive (see for militancy in Swat and the surrounding regions Hopkins and Marsden 2013).

Various analyses and explanations of the Talibanization in Swat have so far appeared. Some have addressed themselves to nuanced class analysis while others have found in it a religious drive in response to American aggression over Afghanistan (Nichols 2013; Sultan-i-Rome 2015). The official narrative of Pakistan variously links the issue with Pukhtun ethnicity and anti-Americanism. In this whole hotchpotch, the powerful actors seem to have eschewed the indigenous perspective: how the people of Swat perceive and understand the crisis.

It can hardly be denied that a feeling of marginalization at local level motivated some

individuals either to join the militants or to assist them. But similarly strong evidence is available that hereditarily powerful and landed families were also part and parcel of the Taliban militants (personal observation). Apparently religious people were in the vanguard of the movement, but criminals of different degrees had also their big visibility not only in its ranks and files but also in its top leadership. In some cases, *tarbūrwalī*, rivalry between cousins, would also have played as a motivation factor. However, imperialism/resistance and majoritarian politics call for special analysis. And herein the local narrative of militancy in Swat adds handsomely to our understanding of the conflict in the region (Sultan-i-Rome 2013). This type of analysis in the present article shows the extreme vulnerability of cultural heritage in the crisis-ridden societies of the postcolonial world.

The Taliban's iconoclastic violence in Swat can be seen in the wider context of the recent theological and ideological pursuits in the Muslim world. However, the practical precedent in our case is the Afghan Taliban's destruction of the



Figure 3. The *Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāni* image (now in Swat Museum) as restored by Italian Archaeological Mission. Photograph Courtesy: Luca M. Olivieri

Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. It is considered as an ideal act by proponents of anti-idolatry persuasion. Though, there is no clear evidence that the Taliban had accepted responsibility for attacks on the Shakhurāi Buddha (pers. comm. with N.A. Khan and F. Khaliq, 22 August 2018), their decrees and activities in other contexts help us assign the raids to them. A most significant example, beside banning music, curbing education⁵ and imposing *pardah* etc., is the Taliban's decree about the tradition of magic, amulets and formulaic healing (*Azadi*, January 12, 2009, as quoted in Khan 2017: 39). Such practitioners were threatened to stop this un-Islamic practice, no doubt al-Zarqā's imperceptible forms of idolatry. A widely popular talisman-expert of Malam Jabah valley, known to this author, left his residence in the last months of the Taliban's control only to return after the last military operation. Another one was murdered in the Khwazakhela area (pers. comm. with A. Khan, January 2022). It may also be argued that S. Ali's personal decision of blasting the Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāni also speaks a lot about the Taliban's involvement in the Buddha's decapitation.

S. Ali's iconoclastic action was solely his personal decision. He was not assisted even by a single accomplice.⁶ The boulder was blown to pieces in broad daylight. Could this overtly dogmatic act be taken also as circumstantial evidence for the Buddha's erasure by the Taliban? All the three attacks on the latter happened at night around one and a half years earlier than S. Ali's act. The state writ had not yet reached to its lowest ebb. During my fieldwork, some residents of Shakhurāi reported that each time a huge crowd of militants would manage to cover all the surroundings. Daily *Azadi* all the times talked of the destruction as at the hands of 'unknown persons/perpetrators'. The *Dawn*, on the other hand, vaguely mentioned militants regarding the first attempted destruction. Reporting the second attack it categorically wrote, 'Militants in Swat made another attempt to destroy' the statue. Similarly, during my fieldwork in the locality a resident (pers. comm. with FR, 29 August 2018) shared names of some local militants who were involved in one of the three attacks. It is to be noted that the destruction of the Shakhurāi Buddha

was noticed throughout the world, the blasting of Padmapāni, probably due to its lesser status, did not receive any attention.⁷ But it was, perhaps, also due to the highly precarious law and order situation in 2009. The unfortunate Bodhisattva's decimation could be hardly mourned by people who were in tears over their own purges.

When the Bamiyan statues were being destroyed, I myself, while a college student, argued with many persons that destroying heritage was detrimental to Afghanistan, and humanity at large. I argued with a follower of Sūfī Muhammad (FW of Manglawar) that if the statues had been spared by Mahmūd of Ghazni, then the Taliban, as sons of the soil, should also follow suit. But his position was that Mahmūd was unable to do so; now when the Taliban had every means to obliterate the idols, they were doing so. The topic was also heatedly debated in print media at that time. Religio-political and Jihadist leaders in Pakistan, such as Maulānā Samī-ul-Haq, etc., also expressed their opinion about the decision of the Afghan Taliban. However, in the first place Mullā Umar's and Mullā Abdul Salām Za'īf's initial pronouncements may be discussed. Umar ordered decimation of the idols in the length and breadth of Afghanistan. Keeping images, he declared, was forbidden in Islam. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice issued a communique expressing concerns over the possible idol-worship in future in addition to the fact that such had previously happened in Afghanistan. It was in line with the concept of *tawhīd* that Mullā Umar decreed to smash the idols everywhere in the country (*Wahdat*, February 27, 2001). The decision was also seconded by Mullā Za'īf, the Taliban ambassador to Islamabad. He felt worried that the images could also be worshiped in the future. Since all the people in Afghanistan were Muslims, there was no need to keep the idols. The matter would, therefore, be dealt with as per the *Ulamā's fatwa* (*Wahdat*, February 28, 2001). Since the international reaction was prompt, Mullā Umar quickly denounced it by reiterating that the Taliban would certainly enact the injunctions of Islam and the idols would be accordingly smashed (*Aaj*, February 28, 2001).

Anti-idolatry opinion in Pakistan has been

widespread in puritanical circles (Elias 2007). Maulānā Samī-ul-Haq termed the Taliban's decision consistent with the Islamic worldview. However, he also was thinking about sparing the images for seeking (moral) lessons from the past. Samī-ul-Haq also thought that if the idols were sold to interested states, it would stabilize the Taliban's economy (*Waḥdat*, February 28, 2001; *Aaj*, February 28, 2001).⁸ We shall also note that the Maulānā's concept of Jihād is intertwined with the notion of *tawḥīd*. He interprets *al-fitnah* as 'terrorism and the worst terrorism is suggesting the partner with Allāh', *al-zālimīn* as 'the polytheists and wrong doers' and *ṭāghūt* as 'evil'. Since these interpretations occur in the elaboration of his concept of Jihād, they provide an exegetical basis regarding iconoclasm (Haq 2015: 171-75). Of utmost importance here is Maulānā Sūfī Muhammad's statement. He said that iconoclasm was intrinsic to the philosophy of Islam. He affirmed the Taliban's decision and termed it as compatible with *Sharī'ah*. Sūfī Muhammad invoked instances from Islamic history in order to buttress his statement. The Prophet of Islam had broken statues after the conquest of Makkah and, subsequently, had reiterated it to Hazrat 'Alī. For Maulānā Sūfī, the Taliban's pristine Islamic system had perturbed the infidels. They did not brook seeing Islamic injunctions to be materialized (*Waḥdat*, March 3, 2001). These are important observations made by an uncompromising and hardliner scripturalist. One may be reminded at this point that the Afghan Taliban were initially not, altogether, against pre-Islamic heritage. This will be discussed later in this article.

Flood's (2002) instrumental iconoclasm may be seen in the context of neo-imperialism and South Asian majoritarianism and populism. First, much of the present problems result from the structural violence of Western imperialism. America being the latest entry in its long history. Postcolonial situations have been kept in control through manipulated assistance and intervention by the powerful West. If neo-colonialist tendencies are responsible for much of the political and economic instability in postcolonial states, Western powers may also be held accountable in relation to the heritage crisis. Edward Said ([1978] 2003: xviii)

draws our attention to this fact. In the US 'the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and "others" has found a fitting correlative in the looting, pillaging, and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums.' He observes that the 'other' history cannot be easily erased in an effort to inscribe our own views instead. The constructed Orient has experienced it repeatedly and it still continues. Truer in the case of Bamiyan, as Flood has convincingly demonstrated, this observation is also not untrue about the damages received by heritage in Swat.

Though carrying the stigma of obscurantism and fundamentalism, the Afghan Taliban were initially not dismissive of the deep history of their land. Even Mullā 'Umar and other officials did not disown it. It were the international community's severe sanctions on Afghanistan, which led the Taliban to blast the very site they had particularly pledged to protect (Pattanaik 2002). According to the Foreign Minister of Taliban, 'The fresh attacks by the rebel forces in Bamiyan is a gift of the sanctions' (138). Moreover, affirmation of the Bamiyan Buddhas' annihilation by Pakistani clerics, such as Samī-ul-Haq and Sūfī Muhammad, get importance regarding the Taliban's iconoclastic acts at Shakhurāi. All this shows how the idea of ideological irredentism and politics of heritage have been active in the systematic erasure of history.

Another historical problem relates to the populous and majoritarian politics in South Asia. Majoritarian identities derive from the colonial readings and interpretations of Indian history. The impacts of state level politics have penetrated deep into the social psychology of the people of the region. Iftikhar Malik holds that *madrasahs* and temples provide combatants for this war. 'The enemy could be from within or across the borders, but still immoral and pernicious! The enemy within, in particular, lacks authenticity and patriotism and is thus the root cause of all the ills' (Malik 2005: 3). This type of rhetorical character of the Swat crisis has a very powerful reflection in speeches and messages of the Taliban leaders.

Mullā Fazlullāh and his close aides used to malign socio-political elites of the country by questioning their legitimacy (personal observation). A significant instance of this is an open letter, in Urdu, published by Fazlullāh in *Azadi* (September 16, 2007). He declares that he was citizen of the pure and hereditary Muslim society of Pakistan, a country created for establishing the supremacy of Islam. He was a patriot having the resolution to follow Islam in all walks of life. Fazlullāh narrates that he participated in the Jihād against the American invasion of Afghanistan and, on his return, was imprisoned for two years. On his release, a mission to promote good and eradicate evils was started, which greatly reformed the society. He blames that the US-backed government did not brook this fraternity and started to conspire against him. On the government's failure, and in the larger interest of the nation, the Taliban signed a treaty. Still, Islam remained under attack and brutalities were committed in the Lāl Masjid and the Jāmi'ah Hafsa. Eighty-five thousand forces were sent against them into Swat. To their utter failure, conspiracies — such as bomb blasts and threatening letters being sent to people — were still being hatched against the Taliban. The Taliban wanted to make it obvious that unity and peace were in the interest of the nation and the country. The property and life of the Muslims were sacred and shedding their blood was against the injunctions of Islam. The Taliban's struggle was for the supremacy of Islam and not in contradiction to this end. They worked against corruption. Fazlullāh assured people that his mission aimed at protecting Muslims' property. He enunciated that he was fulfilling his duty through propagation and with consideration. If the government were to create obstacles and harass his companions, then he would reserve the right to defense.

The letter speaks for itself. It needs to be understood vis-à-vis the politics of what Iftikhar Malik has called 'populism or majoritarian fascism'. This phenomenon embodies serious internal socio-economic fissures with a strong inimical temperament towards a real or imagined external adversary. The internal enemy includes socio-political elites who lack credibility and

authenticity. They have been accomplices with Western, especially American, hegemons. Nativism with a religious orientation works against this nexus. All this also is determined by a sense of deprivation and marginalization (Malik 2005: 3-6). We also need to contextualize Fazlullāh's letter against what Tariq Rahman (2019: 198-237) has recently illustrated: links of ideological fraternity between the brand of Middle Eastern Islamism inspired by Syed Qutb, 'Abd al-Salam Faraj and Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Jihādī groups in Pakistan. And it is through the metaphorical use of the concept of iconoclasm that not only actual historical images of divinities but also the present-day 'idols of power' (Mincheva 2017: 165) are subjected to the violence of an asymmetrical and unconventional warfare (Campion 2017; Goldberg 1991). This situation is rather common to the whole of South Asia. Amongst others, the *rath yatra* of Hindutva politics is an ongoing problem of serious nature.⁹ It resulted in the demolition of Bāburī Masjid in December 1992 when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power in U.P. Along with the Hindu volunteers, politicians belonging to the BJP, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishva Hindu Parishad were also present on the occasion (Bose and Jalal [1998] 2011: 190-91). Romila Thapar (2004: 13-14) observes about its symbolic value in the context of current majoritarian manipulations. The destruction 'was projected as the obvious and visual symbol of this [Hindu-Muslim] antagonism. The destruction of the mosque was justified by some groups as the Hindu reply to Mahmud's iconoclasm.' She argues that this view is not historically true as it is not supported by the developments which have since then taken place. Criticisms have also been leveled against using faith and belief to historicize the Rāmājanābhūmī under political expediencies. The role of the Archaeological Survey of India and archaeologists have also been questioned and repudiated as far as historical evidence concerning the Rāmājanābhūmī–Bāburī Masjid controversy is concerned (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 268-303). The *rath yatra*, or a riot *yatra* as critics term it, not only ushered in an era of sufferings for the Muslim community of India; damages on its heel came to the non-

Muslims, especially Hindus, in Pakistan. Across the country, demonstrations were held against the demolition of the Bāburī Masjid. Minorities were enmeshed in a state of rage and anger as many lost their lives. Temples were devastated *en masse*. Leading politicians were in the forefront of the processions, not unlike the presence of the Hindutva leaders at Ayodhya. Swat also convulsed with anger. Since Hindus there have had a negligible presence, a Gurudwara in Mingawarah was attacked and the *Granth* was desecrated. Non-Muslims also were subjected to violence in Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Even in 2001, remains of an important 7th/8th century Hindu temple, at the top of Barikot-ghwandai, Swat, were damaged by militants of TNSM (DoAM, 2013). The events all through the decades before and after the year 2000 set a broader political context for the manifestation of the Taliban's anger at Shakhurāi. The above quoted letter of Fazlullāh sheds good light on this argument. It gains further support from a report of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Islamabad. 'Taliban tried to blow the Jahanabad [Shakhurāi] Buddha to commemorate the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas' (DoAM 2013). However, we may not but see all this in a context: 'The Islamic dimension [. . . as] an integral part of Pakistan's political mindset . . .' which is associated with the present-day internationalized Muslim militancy and violence beyond any regard for borders (Roy 2002: 134-147).

Negotiating 'Cultural Heritage Interpretation' in Pakistan

The Buddhistic vestiges at Shakhurāi shall remind us the calls for a vital utility of religion in conflict resolution. There are optimistic voices for reconciliation and peace through the positive use of religion. Rebecca and Philip Stein ([2005] 2017: 291) discuss examples of conflicts instigated either by puritanical designs or politics of religion. They argue that despite its positive role, religion is also inherently prone to create conflict and spur violence. Since conflicts are natural to human society, it is the way they are dealt with which matters. In order to understand the nature of conflict we are required to take

into consideration its whole context so as to formulate a successful response. 'As such, efforts at peacebuilding need to address these factors and can harness the functional aspects of religion to help resolve conflicts' (291).

Such voices are numerous throughout the world. In South Asian context, scholars, public intellectuals and other activists assertively demystify the monolithic identities built through manipulations of selective historical data. A more glaring example of this is centered on the Somanatha temple. Thapar (2004) demonstrates as to how the two overarching, and at the same time antagonistic, Hindu and Muslim identities have been constructed by the vested interests. Historically, Indian society had been characterized by the presence of multiple parochial groups whose behavior towards each other was shaped more by economic rather than by religious considerations. It was only since the early 19th century that history and heritage were maneuvered to create enmity between Muslims and Hindus. Mahmūd's raid on Somanatha temple played a crucial role here. It was presented in such a way as to give a sense of *trauma* to Hindus. Thapar writes that '[t]he colonial assessment of the raid on Somanatha and its aftermath, as being traumatic and germinating Hindu-Muslim antagonism, was useful to colonial political policy.' It has been since the mid-20th century that the Hindu nationalists capitalize upon this constructed memory in their politics of exclusion. Indian secularism has failed to withhold against the tide of Hindutva politics. The composite culture of India received a severe blow with the demolition of the Bāburī Masjid and the Indian Supreme Court's recent verdict about its disputed land. Moreover, 'Congress's organizational decline' and Islamization in Pakistan are also held responsible for the increasing communal conflicts (Malik 2005; Talbot 2017). On the contrary, there are attempts to explore ways for making sense of history regarding its wider public benefits. To successfully address current precarious political situation in India and Pakistan, and Afghanistan for that matter, valuating the shared heritage can help us find alternatives. H. Rajyopadhye (2018, 2020) has recently tried to explore 'the shared

civilizational past' of the Indian subcontinent not just as an academic activity but with the vivid aim of practical use of heritage in people's interest from across the nation states' boundaries.¹⁰ Others have also shown that the politics around sacred sites, especially temples, are too complex to be reduced to the exaggerated and distorted narrative of communal conflicts and exclusionary considerations (Eaton 2002).

Against this backdrop, we may present our argument with the help of the sacred landscape of Shakhurāi. But in the first place, it may be allowed to refer to war slogans and battle-cries during the Swat conflict. The Taliban had done wall chalking everywhere, not presently available, maligning and challenging their opponents, both local people and security personnel (personal observation). In a similar vein, security forces had their own formulaic slogans. I would just mention, while excluding the displayed photographs of their martyrs, two couplets, one each in Urdu and Pashto.

تو گھس تو سہی میرے وطن میں برے ارادے سے
تیری دنیا کو آگ لگا دوں گا شہید ہونے سے پہلے

I challenge if you intruded into my motherland
with bad intentions

I would set fire to your world before I get
martyrdom (Fig. 4)

پہ جہان د ننگیالی دی دا دوہ کارہ
یابہ اوخوری ککری یابہ کامران شی

The brave one has these two alternatives on
this earth

He either sacrifices himself or succeeds in his
mission

An extremely belligerent attitude can be observed in both these verses. They are the best examples of an open challenge between state institutions and militants. Here we may also point out that in Pakistan militants are considered synonymous with Pukhtuns and vice versa. So, the message, in one sense, as sent by the couplets is directed towards all Pukhtuns. Owing to this, a general local resentment and victimhood has found to express itself through Pukhtu/Pashto poetry in the past couple of years. On the whole, there is an understanding and awareness about the

multiple forms of the so-called 'war on terror'. The Pukhtu poetry of the age of 'war on terror' better embodies the local sense of victimhood and anger against all the explicit and implicit perpetrators. Simultaneously, there are also songs expressing a longing for peace and tranquility. Furthermore, a consciousness about history and heritage is also discernable in some poetic works. For instance:

A poet takes pride in the ancient history of his land (understandably Gandhāra):

چی عربو ژوندی لونه بنخولی
زه بدھا وم، سریتوب وم هغه وخت

When the Arabs were burying their daughters
alive

At that time, I was the Buddha, the epitome of
human values

Another poet, Amir Razāq Amir, says:

انسانی تھذیب زلے دے جنگونو
وباگانو، بلاگانو او رنخونو
دابتان چی پہ کنڈرو کینی موندے شی
تصویر ونه دی زموںبره د نیکونو

Human civilization has been fatigued by wars
Also by pandemics, catastrophes and diseases
These sculptures which are recovered from
the ruins

Are images of our ancestors

Still another line of thinking is found in a short poem by a poet and writer from Swat (Rokhan 2007) during the initial months of Talibanization. He conveys a three-fold message. First, that police and army-men belong to us. Since they are stationed for our safety, causing injury to them is equal to self-harm. Next, we shall not accept instigating any chaos in Swat; we wish it to be the land of flowers rather than to be blood-ridden. The educated ones have the responsibility to maintain peace in Swat; we want to see people happy here. Lastly, we shall wage *Jihād* for self-reformation and not against others. Let us deliberate upon our deeds so as to know where do we stand vis-à-vis human ethics and the injunctions of Islam. Islam is the religion of peace and safety. To kill a single person is tantamount to the purge of the entire humanity; rescuing a wretched one renders life to the whole people.¹¹ Similarly, Fazal Khāliq,

a journalist from Swat having a deep interest in the area's heritage, puts into question many misconceptions people generally are holding about images. His persuasions aim at preserving the pre-Islamic sacred and cultural landscape of Swat (Khaliq 2018: 103-119).

Drawing on Flood's (2002: 645) insight that figuration has always been a contested issue between the Muslims, the above verses may be seen as a specific indigenous perspective about the pre-Muslim heritage in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The sentiments expressed here primarily relate to an ethno-cultural pride, attachment with place and identity considerations. However, it can be still a good omen if this sense of history, as argued by K. Paddayya (2018: 305-485), is channelized in a positive manner. By 'positive manner' I want to caution that there have always been dangers intrinsic to the reinless use of memory in power/identity politics (Misztal 2003: 138).

This new historical consciousness calls for serious attention especially in the light of L. Smith's (2006) 'multilayered performance' and Staiff's (2014) 'heritage interpretation'. It can do many things. First, it negates the colonial stereotyping essentially associating Pukhtuns with acts of vandalism and iconoclasm, a problem

which needs investigation. Second, if there is a determination to defeat war-mongering attitudes, policy making in this direction can be much result-oriented. Third, pertinent to this line of argument is a recently drawn Pakistani flag on a huge boulder closer to the Shakhurāi Buddha (Fig. 5). What a timely symbiosis of two starkly distinct but, at the same time, kindred icons. At first glance, the intended idea behind making the flag by the side of the Buddha would appear to be that of signifying *difference* and *otherness*. Notoriously known for its current purely Islamic orientation, Pakistan has gotten an extremely negative image during the last two decades due to its dubious role in the so-called war against terror. However, its flag was originally designed to represent Muslimness of the new nation along with due recognition of its minorities. The idea of progress and prosperity was also embedded to it. This ideational commitment gains a further meaningful significance in relation to the Buddhist character of the landscape at Shakhurāi. Both the flag and the Buddhist icons belong to this land, and to its people for that matter. The images of the Buddha and Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi represent peace, love and compassion. They are known as being guardians, protectors and helpers of



Figure 4. War cries as depicted at various places in Swat. Photograph Courtesy: Muhammad Imran



Figure 5. Pakistani flag drawn next to the Shakhurāi Buddha. Photograph by the author

human beings. This divinely assurance is further amplified by the inscriptions from Buddhist *dharma* on nearby two rocks (Fig. 6). They say (Bühler [1896-97] 1979):

1. Alas! Transient are the aggregate constituents (*of beings*), whose nature is birth and decay! For, being produced they are dissolved; – their complete cessation is bliss.
2. Not to commit any sin, to acquire merit, to purify one's mind, – that is the teaching of Buddha.
3. (*Let him be one*) who guards his speech, is well-restrained in mind, and commits no evil with his body. Keeping these three roads of action clear, one may gain the path taught by the Sages.

It is pertinent to work out a logical relationship between the Pukhtun historical consciousness, as expressed in the poetry, Pakistani flag/state

and the Buddhist iconicity at Shakhurāi. The trio belongs to this land. Being inhabitants of the area, Pukhtuns are owners to its historical heritage. They can be easily made to own it through a mechanism of education and pedagogy. Since they are citizens of Pakistan, the state has the responsibility to educate them, in line with the signification of the flag, in the history and culture of their land. Such an effort, as opposed to the idea of conflict and violence, can potentially give alternative models of tolerance and mutual coexistence. At the state level, Pakistan itself would find strength through accepting its layered history and identity. This pluralistic and inclusive heritage discourse and interpretation can invalidate antipeace ideas and activities. This approach is termed as a 'sociological or people-oriented turn' in the field of historical and heritage studies. It is necessary not only due to radical transformation of cultural and historical landscapes by the process of modernization 'but

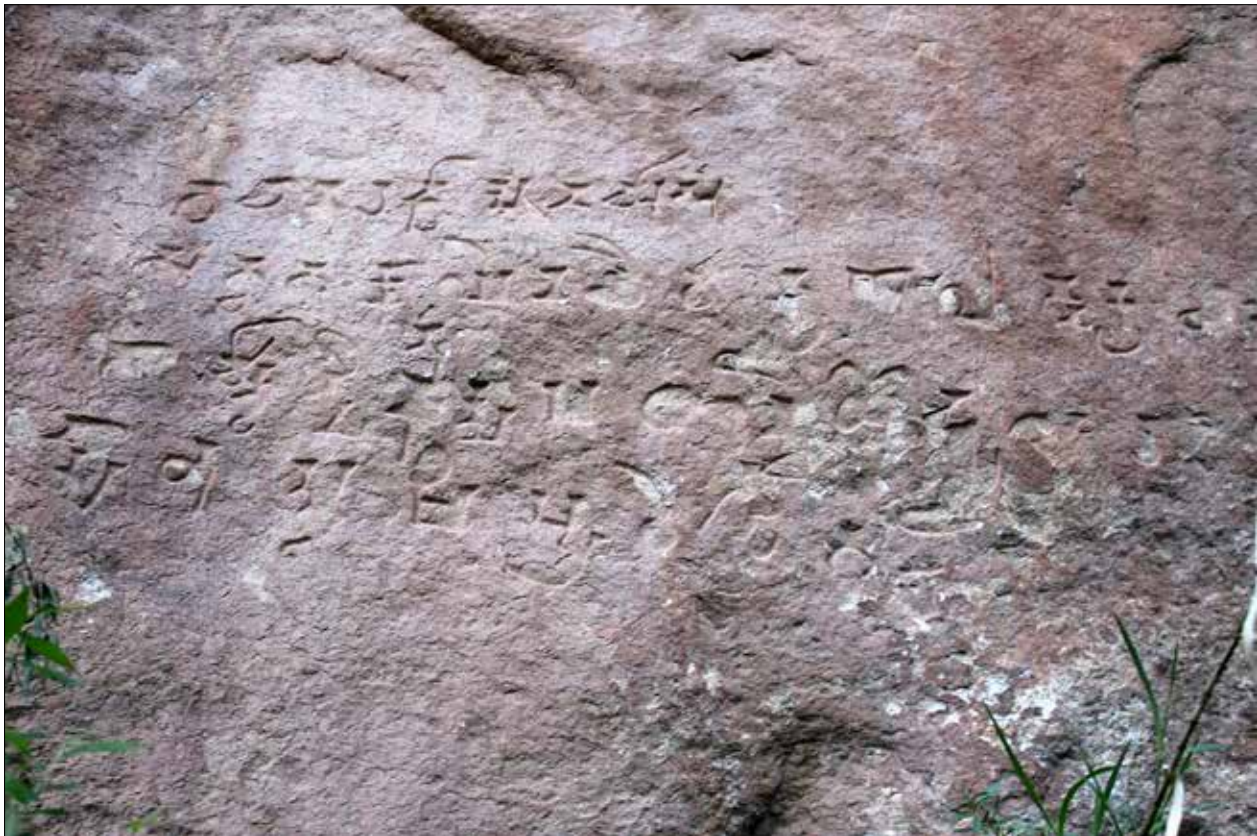


Figure 6. Rock inscription at Shakhurāi. Photograph Courtesy: Majid Masaud

also because of the increasing tendency to use the past by vested interests for narrow politico-religious purposes.' It is rightly asserted that 'the study of the past in India [Pakistan and Afghanistan as well] is too important to be left solely to the confines of academies but needs to enter into a dialogical process with the society at large' (Paddayya 2018: 337).

Particularly in the case of Pakistan, Sir Mortimer Wheeler ([1950] 1992) since the division of the subcontinent had felt the need to make the new nation own its deep history and composite cultural heritage. He made such a representation of Pakistan in a precise and articulate manner. Later on, Professor Ahmad Hasan Dani, a well-known Pakistani archaeologist, pursued the same idea in a more sophisticated way. A very recent study also demonstrates that Buddhism and Buddhist archaeology was consciously related to the national and historical identity of Pakistan in the early two decades. It was an attempt to use history in the best interest of the newly-created state (Amstutz 2019). Since the whole project seems to have been tacitly directed against India and its Hindu majority, it may be termed as devoid of people-friendliness. It is also not known as to how much successful its dimension of cultural diplomacy with the countries of Southeast Asia was. However, the utter drift of the country into a security syndrome, as well as Zia-ul Haq's Islamization, resulted in 'the murder of history' (see Aziz [1993] 2010). The state has also been increasingly criticized for its alleged involvement in religious militancy. In this situation, heritage faces imminent threats. After the first attack on the Shakhurāi Buddha, the daily *Dawn* (13 September, 2007) cautioned the authorities on the enormity of the situation. It wrote that the abortive attempt shall serve 'as a wake-up call'. The heritage sites and museums in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and tribal areas were 'particularly vulnerable and must be protected from any possible targeting by the misguided zealots.' The *Dawn* further wrote, 'The obliteration of history to serve the cause of bigotry must be condemned at the official level and meaningful efforts made to secure all such endangered, silent sentinels of a heritage built on tolerance and respect for a shared past.' Unfortunately, all such calls went unheeded

at that time and the result was a series of instances of heritage erasure.

Conclusions

The rich archaeological and historical heritage of Swat equally fascinates laypersons and academics. It warrants social and historical insights both for public as well as academic pursuits. Shakhurāi is one such potential site. The last of the three iconoclastic attempts by Taliban, dated October 29, 2007 — the other two being enacted on 11 and 29 of the previous month — proved catastrophic: the Buddha's face was erased. The nearby Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi stele was destroyed in the early 2009. These acts of destruction were obviously triggered by both religious and political motivations. But each such act has received an alternative response embodying a sense of belonging to the past.

Anti-idolatry notions from the Holy Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* and instances of iconoclasm from early and mediaeval Islamic history as well as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Mullā 'Umar seem to have pushed militants to obliterate the Buddhist images in Swat. However, it was the politics of domination and resistance and the relations of power centered on heritage and history, which made the difficult mission easier to materialize. And it is here that an axis of belief and politics, around which the ground fighters and political, state and religio-political actors work, does emerge. As referred to above, S. Ali's iconoclastic wrath directed at the Shakhurāi stele demonstrates an ordinary combatant's motive for gaining merit. This stele could have been blown to pieces at the time when the Shakhurāi Buddha was repeatedly attacked. But as it could not serve the larger political and ideological objectives, it remained safe until an individual exerted his uncommissioned and spontaneous anger on it. Similarly, rock reliefs at Nangrial, at a very little distance east of Shakhurāi, also could easily be annihilated. However, no harm was done to them. What all this does say is the fact that generalizations about motives behind iconoclastic violence hold no ground. Even a single instance, like the Shakhurāi Buddha's defacement, makes different meanings for different actors: merit

making for the ground attackers, ideological irredentism for leadership of radical movements and real politics for South Asian power elites. The religious and ideological motives are overtly stated; however, the impulses and practice of real politics always remains as unclaimed and covert complicity. I would conceptualize the situation as embodied by the last one as majoritarian-heritage deterrence. Heritage targeting in the subcontinent, especially since December 6, 1992, is embedded to the politics of majoritarianism and communal interpretations of history. However, the larger society may not be seen as yielding to such blatant violence as well as ulterior designs. And herein lies the fact of opposing responses and approaches to image and icon, or the general religious *other*, in Muslim societies. It is clearly demonstrated by the Pukhtu verses above: a different perspective from militants' version as inscribed at Shakhurāi, and Bamiyan for that matter.

The Taliban's behaviour towards the pre-Islamic heritage of Swat seems to have been formed, beside by religious notions, by the structure of imperial presence in the region and hate politics being prevalent in modern South Asia. The Bamiyan Buddhas, the Bāburī Masjid and the Shakhurāi cultural icons were devoured in an identical manner. The syncretic and composite in society is being singled out, otherized and annihilated. Obscurantism certainly reigns supreme. The larger society has been taken in hostage by a few in the echelons of power. In this desperate situation, the only rays of hope emanate from the idealism related to the shared cultural heritage. We may hope that it can undo the negativities that have resulted from the politics of hate of the past decades. Education in heritage and history can go a long way in this respect. In particular, we would like to say that people along the Pak-Afghan border can be easily made to develop a sense of belonging to the history and heritage of the land they have been inhabiting, at least, since the last millennium. Due to their decades-long bitter experiences they would be happier to welcome what is shared humanity. But all this would need concerted efforts on the part of political and military elites, scholars and writers and artists and pedagogues.

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Notes

1. It is strange that the dailies, such as *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Urdu) and *The News* (English), do not carry the news of the Taliban attacks at Shakhurāi Buddha. The latter, however, published a column on it in its Sunday magazine, dated 30 September 2007. That the first attack had occurred on 11 September and the second on 29 September shows that the said article was written between the two attempts of destruction. (see Mushtaq Yusufzai, 'Demolishing history', *The News* on Sunday, 30 September 2007).
2. Common meaning of *al-fitnah* and *ṭāghūt* can be evil conduct and non-Islamic forms of rule, respectively.
3. *Jāhiliyah*'s simple meaning is ignorance and unbelief.
4. It needs to put here a note of clarification about the history and topography of Shakhurāi. It is situated on the left bank of the stream called Ūgad Khwar. It is bounded on the west and east by Bātrā, a small locality, and Ūbu-gaṭ, famous for containing inscription, respectively. Towards the north, Shakhurāi extends up to the mid-hill. Parallel to it on the opposite bank of Ūgad Khwar, the cultivable lands along the Malam Jabah road, carrying different historical names, are collectively known as Mairah while the adjacent mountain is called Dharmāla (having, in turn, recently developed small settlements with different names). However, this entire area is now popularly known as Jahānābād, a designation that leads astray our understanding of traditional toponyms determined by

landscape. It was Jahanzeb Pacha, the Naib Sālār in the army of the Swat State, who purchased a considerable swathe of land towards the eastern limit of Shakhurāi. The Pacha built his bungalow here and named his estate, after his name, as Jahānābād. Subsequently, Jahānābād came to subsume the various toponyms on both sides of Ūgad Khwar. Both Stein and Tucci write that the huge, seated Buddha image as well as other scattered carvings and inscriptions are at Shakhurāi. The later generation of scholars has mentioned this Buddhist complex as *Jahanabad/Jehanabad* (old *Shakhurāi*) or *Shakhurāi* (modern *Jahanabad/Jehanabad*). Still, the equation of Jahanabad with Shakhurāi and vice versa is questionable and needs further investigation from physical and toponymal point of view. For this study, we would prefer the use of Shakhurāi to Jahanabad as the former is rooted in history. We maintain that all the remains previously mentioned by Stein and Tucci and subsequently by others are concentrated at Shakhurāi. It may also be noticed that a part of eastern Shakhurāi belongs to the Maturizi section and the rest of it to the Babuzi section of the Yusufzis.

5. The Taliban may be said to have hardly had developed any uniform and linear approach towards education. Their response to it varied according to their strategic tactics and engagements with the state. To state that women were barred from getting education would be rather an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon. It is commonly said that a ban had been in place in this respect. References are made to the number of destroyed girls' schools and the various announcements by Fazlullāh and his aides. The fact of the matter, however, is that male students suffered even more than female students. *Madrassah* education also saw the same restrictions. And the overall context of this general gruesome condition, irrespective of gender and modern/Islamic education, was military

operations, curfews, razing schools to the ground and other acts of violence. One thing that had obsessed the Taliban about female education was adherence to *pardah* as per Islamic injunctions. However, towards the end of 2008, the Taliban had turned more hardheaded and in December, the same year, a ban, planned to be in force since 15 January 2009, had been announced about female education. Soon, flexibility was shown by allowing girls' education up to primary level. In the meanwhile, educational institutions were closed due to the long winter vacation, which was followed by a peace treaty between the militants and the government. In this way, the intended ban was never ever translated into a reality.

6. S. Ali, later, died in the military detainment. He could have been a best case study, if he were alive, for understanding acts of violence committed in individual capacity. 'Such individual acts go by many different levels, not all of which are compatible.' See for such calls (C. Smith *et al.* 2016: 169-70).
7. I was astonished when in a recent session an ex-high official of the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums, Pakistan, confessed that this destruction had not been reported to him. Lack of information about the Bodhisattva's disappearance, until it was first mentioned in 2010 and 2011, is also attested by others. (See, Rafi Ullah 2010; Khan 2011; Filigenzi 2015: 53, fn. 60). Thanks to the Italian Archaeological Mission that the blasted pieces of the stele were removed recently to the Swat Museum and repaired (Fig. 3). The Mission also has restored the Buddha's face at Shakhurāi.
8. The Maulānā seems ignorant of the fact that legal and ethical matters have been in place concerning transaction in archaeological objects. Hence, the suggestion was highly wild in nature (cf. the New York City's Metropolitan Museum's offer to the Taliban, Flood

2002: 651). The economic aspect of iconoclasm is intriguing as Hāfiz Husain Ahmad, Central Deputy General Secretary of Jam'iat-i-Ulamā-i-Islam, also said that in the mysterious caves around the Buddhas, the Taliban had found a precious treasure. It was this wealth that had perturbed America and other pagan states rather than the actual iconoclasm (*Waḥdat*, March 19, 2001).

9. *Rath yatra*, originally a religious ceremonial procession, is nowadays used in India for political demonstrations having processions of motor vehicles over long distances.
10. Nardi (2018) has particularly focused on the heritage uses in the conflict-ridden Swat. However, the study suffers from some fundamental weaknesses such as not being critically informed by issues involved in heritage destruction and heritage discourse from the perspective of regional, national, majoritarian, imperial and radical politics.
11. The Rokhān's views stem from the Qur'ānic verses and *aḥādith*, which have been differently interpreted by modernist Muslims and proponents of radical/political Islam (see Malik 2005: 40-82; Rahman 2019).

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