Islam, Buddhism, and the ‘fault lines’ of history

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On truth's path, wise is mad, insane is wise.
In love's way, self and other are the same.
Having drunk the wine, my love, of being one with you,
I find the way to Mecca and Bodhgaya are the same.
(Rumi, *Kulliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*)

My childhood memories of a broken Buddha sculpture spawned a bewildering array of questions—long before I came to know about the greatness of the apostle of *Ahimsa*. We were told that the sculpture, made of coconut pith, was the work of one Yahsan who was close to our family in Vakkom. Yahsan was believed to have gifted it to my father who had a penchant for such things. The broken sculpture of Buddha continued to be a part of our childhood antics. However, one day, our neighbour *ustad* (Arabic teacher) accidentally saw it in my hands. Then came a naïve stricture from him—it was "un-Islamic to have the Buddha 'idol' in a Muslim home." I couldn't twig the nuance of his avowal of 'idol' and 'un-Islamic' then. But the sculpture continued to beget more disturbing doubts and niggles. As we grew up, we learnt that the Buddha was a great philosopher, teacher and spiritual leader that India can always be proud of. Sadly, our *ustads* and *ulama* could not appreciate the greatness of such personalities in other faiths and cultural traditions. For me, it was the beginning of an encounter between the social facts of religious norms and the social statics of inter-cultural life-world experiences. The reality is that for some people in India, uttering the name of Buddha became antediluvian—with the encounter and struggles within, and with other 'fraternal' religions. Nonetheless, Buddhism remained a cultural rhetoric for generations in India even as it began to flourish as a religion in other countries. The nagging question is, still, if the teachings of Islam and Buddhism could be antagonistic to each other. It is equally a perplexing question why the followers of the Buddha themselves detracted from the path of their great teacher over time, and why the traditions of Hinduism couldn't recalibrate their cultural strategies to espouse the universal appeal of Buddhism.

Decline of Buddhism in India: Contesting Narratives

Studies and research on the decline of Buddhism in India are vast and varied (see, for a cross section of such works, Eliot 1912, 1921; Hazra 1998; Mitchell 2002; Lamotte 1976; Joshi 1970; Schopen 2004; Sarao 2012; Ahir 2005; Goyal 1987; Jaini 1980; Lal 2016; Damodaran 1967; Basham 1994; Katulkar 2016; Omvedt 2003; Mitra 1954). According to Swami Vivekananda, who had great respect and veneration for Lord Buddha,

> the spread of Buddhism was less owing to the doctrines and the personality of the great preacher, than to the temples that were built, the idols that were erected, and the gorgeous ceremonials that were put before the nation. Thus, Buddhism progressed. The little fire-places in the houses in which the people poured their libations were not strong enough to hold their

own against these gorgeous temples and ceremonies; but later on, the whole thing degenerated. It became a mass of corruption … (Vivekananda 2018b).

He said,

> Buddha brought the Vedanta to light, gave it to the people, and saved India. A thousand years after his death a similar state of things again prevailed. The mobs, the masses, and various races, had been converted to Buddhism; naturally the teachings of the Buddha became in time degenerated, because most of the people were very ignorant. Buddhist taught no God, no Ruler of the universe, so gradually the masses brought their gods, and devils, and hobgoblins out again, and a tremendous hotchpotch was made of Buddhism in India (Vivekananda 2018a).

Vivekananda, in his reply to the address of the Maharaja of Khetri, said:

> In spite of its wonderful moral strength, Buddhism was extremely iconoclastic and much of its force being spent in merely negative attempts, it had to die out in the land of its birth, and what remained of it became full of superstitions and ceremonials, a hundred times ruder than those it was intended to suppress. Although it partially succeeded in putting down the animal sacrifices of the Vedas, it filled the land with temples, images, symbols, and bones of saints (Vivekananda 2018c).

Elsewhere, Vivekananda pointed out that "Buddhism was the first missionary religion of the world but it was one of the teachings of Buddhism not to antagonize any other religion. Sects weaken their power for good by making war on each other" (Vivekananda 2018a). According to K. Damodaran,

> When Buddhism abandoned its own religious discipline and adopted the popular beliefs and customs and rituals which were prevalent among the Hindus also, it became vulnerable to attacks from within and without. Its philosophical base was also weakened when the materialist teachings of the Vaibhashika and the Sautrantika schools receded to the background and the Yogachara and Madhyamika with their world-denying subjective idealism became the predominant schools of Buddhism (Damodaran 1967: 237).

Drawing attention to the tirades against Buddhism in the days of its decline, Damodaran wrote:

> And it became increasingly difficult for Buddhism to withstand such onslaughts, coming as they did in the context of the changing social conditions with which it found itself out of tune…In the eighth century AD., Sankara, the master idealist, launched his powerful philosophical offensive and Buddhism soon collapsed in the land of its birth. However, the standard of the Buddha continued to fly high in other regions of East Asia, like China, Japan, Siam, Burma and Ceylon (Ibid: 238).

Discussing Buddhism's disappearance from India, Vinay Lal wrote:

> though Buddhism had already entered into something of a decline by the time of Hsuan Tsang's visit to India during the reign of Harsha of Kanauj in the early seventh century, it has also been argued that its further demise, particularly in the early part of the second millennium AD, was hastened by the arrival of Islam. On this view, Buddhism found competition in Islam

> for converts among low-caste Hindus. Even Ambedkar, whose animosity towards Hinduism is palpable, was nonetheless firmly of the view that Islam dealt Buddhism a death blow (Lal 2016).

As Vinay Lal pointed out, Ambedkar's views on this were more emphatic and, for many, they were even problematic. Writing on the decline of Buddhism in India, Ambedkar said:

> The disappearance of Buddhism from India has been a matter of great surprize to everybody who cares to think about the subject and is also a matter of regret. But it lives in China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Annam, Indo-China, Ceylon and parts of Malaya-Archipelago. In India alone, it has ceased to exist. Not only it has ceased to live in India but even the name of Buddha has gone out of memory of most Hindus. How could such a thing have happened? This is an important question for which there has been no satisfactory answer. In dealing with this subject people fail to make a very important distinction. It is a distinction between the fall of Buddhism and the decline of Buddhism. It is necessary to make this distinction because the fall of Buddhism is one, the reasons for which are very different from those which brought about its downfall. For the fall is due to quite obvious causes while the reasons for its decline are not quite so obvious (Ambedkar 2014:229-30).

Ambedkar elaborates this:

> There can be no doubt that the fall of Buddhism in India was due to the invasions of the Musalmans. Islam came out as the enemy of the 'But'. The word 'But' as everybody knows is an Arabic word and means an idol. Not many people however know what the derivation of the word 'But' is. 'But' is the Arabic corruption of Buddha. Thus the origin of the word indicates that in the Moslem mind idol worship had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha. To the Muslims, they were one and the same thing. The mission to break the idols thus became the mission to destroy Buddhism. Islam destroyed Buddhism not only in India but wherever it went. Before Islam came into being Buddhism was the religion of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar and Chinese Turkestan, as it was of the whole of Asia. In all these countries Islam destroyed Buddhism (Ibid).

Ambedkar also quoted Irish Indologist Vincent Smith's words: "The furious massacre perpetrated in many places by Musalman invaders were more efficacious than Orthodox Hindu persecutions, and had a great deal to do with the disappearance of Buddhism in several provinces (of India)" (Smith 1924: 419-20). Ambedkar further wrote:

> Not all will be satisfied with this explanation. It does seem inadequate. Islam attacked both, Bramhanism and Buddhism. It will be asked why should one survive and the other perish. The argument is plausible but not destructive of the validity of the thesis. To admit that Bramhanism survived, it does not mean that the fall of Buddhism was not due to the sword of Islam. All that it means is that, there were circumstances which made it possible for Bramhanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the onslaught of Islam. Fortunately for Bramhanism and unfortunately for Buddhism that was the fact (Ambedkar 2014:229-30).

According to Ambedkar, there were three major "circumstances which made it possible for Bramhanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the calamity of Muslim invasions." He says:

> In the first place Bramhanism at the time of the Muslim invasions had the support of the State. Buddhism had no such support. What is however more important is the fact that this State support to Bramhanism lasted till Islam had become a quiet religion and the flames of its original fury as a mission against idolatory had died out. Secondly the Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resuscitated. On the other hand, it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Bramhanic priesthood. In the third place the Buddhist laity was persecuted by the Bramhanic rulers of India and to escape this tyranny the mass of the Buddhist population of India embraced Islam and renounced Buddhism.
>
> The Musalman invaders sacked the Buddhist Universities of Nalanda, Vikramasila, Jagaddala, Odantapuri to name only a few. They raised to the ground Buddhist monasteries with which the country was studded. The Monks fled away in thousands to Nepal, Tibet and other places outside India. A very large number were killed outright by the Muslim commanders. How the Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of the Muslim invaders has been recorded by the Muslim historians themselves (Ibid).

Vinay Lal says that one could thus,

> find Ambedkar embracing the "sword of Islam thesis": "The sword of Islam fell heavily upon the priestly class. It perished or it fled outside India. Nobody remained alive to keep the flame of Buddhism burning." There are, of course, many problems with this view. The "sword of Islam" thesis remains controversial, at best, and many reputable historians are inclined to dismiss it outright. Islam was, moreover, a late entrant into India, and Buddhism was showing unmistakable signs of its decline long before Islam became established in the Gangetic plains, central India, and the northern end of present-day Andhra and Karnataka (Lal 2016).

Imtiyaz Yusuf (2015) tried to revisit some of these narratives on Islam—being responsible for Buddhism's decline—by citing the example of 'Nalanda syndrome.' While acknowledging that the Turkic warrior Bakhtiyar Khilji (who belonged to the Ghaznavid Turkic invaders of India) had destroyed the Nalanda University in 1193, he said that the Indian sources, however, did not call the Turkic invaders as 'Muslims' but as 'Turuska' i.e. Turks and as *mleccha* (impure), being depicted non-Sanskrit-speaking people who fell outside of the caste hierarchy (Yusuf 2015; Dutt 1962: 357-58). Yusuf also concurred with Romila Thapar's view that the contemporary "reified, monolithic and static" meaning of labels—*Hindu* and *Muslim*—was not prevalent in pre-colonial India. Thapar says that such labelling emerged in nineteenth century versions of Indian history and its classification into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. These portrayals of Indian history disregard the contiguous relations between northern and western India, and Central Asia. Noticeably, the Arabs, Turks, Afghans and others were referred to *Tajika*, *Yavana*, *Saka*, *Turuska* and *mleccha* as they vied with one another across the Silk Route trade between China and Byzantium (Thapar 2001: 1001). Thapar further argued that the Turkic warriors from Central Asia who were nomadic pastoralists invaded India not for religious but for economic reasons. Richard M Eaton also noted that the Turkic warriors invaded India for looting its wealth, and the Mughal period, since the rule of Akbar onwards, offers a lot of evidences, whereby "Mughal rulers treated temples lying within their sovereign

territory as state property; accordingly they undertook to protect both the physical structures and their Brahmin functionaries…by appropriating Hindu religious institutions to serve imperial ends - a process involving complex overlapping of political and religious codes of power - the Mughals became deeply implicated in institutionalised Indian religions, in dramatic contrast to their British successors, who professed a hands-off policy in this regard" (Eaton 2000;Yusuf 2015).

Several other narratives of Buddhism's waning, and subsequent departure from the land of its birth dwelt upon its relations with Hinduism or Brahmanism. S. R. Goyal seems to have argued that "hostility of the Brahmanas was one of the major causes of the decline of Buddhism in India" (Goyal 1987). According to Vinay Lal,

> the Saivite king, Shashanka, invariably appears in such histories as a ferocious oppressor of the Buddhists, though the single original source for all subsequent narratives about Shashanka's ruinous conduct towards Buddhists remains Hsuan Tsang. Shashanka is reported to have destroyed the Bodhi tree and ordered the destruction of Buddhist images. Hindu nationalists appear to think that many Muslim monuments were once Hindu temples, but partisans of Buddhism are inclined to the view that Hindu temples were often built on the site of Buddhist shrines (Lal 2016).

However, Randall Collins, Richard Gombrich et al. took the position that Buddhism's rise or decline cannot be linked to Brahmins or the caste system insofar as Buddhism was "not a reaction to the caste system" (Collins 2000: 205-06; Gombrich 2012: 344-45). A.L. Basham argued that the persecution was not the sole cause of decline of Buddhism in India (Basham 1994: 267). Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru did not find any struggle or strife between Buddhism and Brahmanism (Nehru 2010: 187). For scholars like Lars Fogelin, the weakening of Buddhism would have economic reasons, wherein the Buddhist monasteries with large land grants focussed on non-material pursuits, self-isolation of the monasteries, loss in internal discipline in the *sangha*, and a failure to efficiently operate the land they owned (Fogelin 2015:229–230). However, according to Gail Omvedt, "Buddhist sources point more specifically to a great deal of violence in the millennial-long conflict of Buddhism and Brahmanism." Hsuan Tsang, for instance, provided many accounts of violence, including the narrative of the Shaivaite king Shahsanka "cutting down the Bodhi tree, breaking memorials stones and attempting to destroy other images" (Omvedt 2003: 170).

K.T.S. Sarao, a Buddhist scholar in Delhi University, makes a critical analysis of the vast corpus of literature depicting Islam as the reason of the decline of Buddhism in India (Sarao 2012). He pointed out that scholars such as T. Postans (1843), A.K. Warder (2000), H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson (1867), Henry Cousens (1925) et al. had taken the view that the militant nature of Islam had caused many issues for Buddhism in India. For instance, according to Postans, during their conquest of Sind, the Arabs "exercised the most unrelenting cruelty and intolerance" whose "fanaticism . . . induce[d] them to make converts" (Postans 1843). Warder wrote that Buddhism "was swept out of India . . . because it had no answer to the violence of Islam" (Warder 2000). Muslims . . . the 'buddha-smashers' on their religious campaigns took

particular care to seek out and destroy Buddhist institutions (Ibid). H.P. Shastri also argued that "Muhammadans . . . destroyed the Buddhist monasteries, appropriated the monastic lands for the use of soldiers and massacred monks by thousands, and burnt libraries wherever found (Shastri 1911). Likewise, Elliot saw Islam "as a religion of terror and devastation, murder and rapine." Arab Muslims of Sind were "furious zealots" who undertook the conquest of Sind in pursuit of plunder and proselytism, and enforced their rule through the rack and the threat of circumcision (Elliot and Dowson 1867). According to Sarao, early archaeologists tended to view, erroneously, the treatment meted out by the Muslim rulers to the non-Muslim people in Arab Sind as "heavy-handed, violent, and coercive" (Sarao 2012:153). Henry Cousens, for instance, held the view that the Arabs' "full of zeal for the spread of their newly established religion laid a heavy hand upon the religious buildings of the Hindus and Buddhists" (Cousens 1925: 10). Sarao cited instances that many other archaeologists also, "on seeing a Buddhist site in ruins or on uncovering fragments of Buddhist sculpture, drew the conclusion that such a condition was the result of the destruction by the Arab iconoclasts" (Sarao 2012:153; also see Frere 1854:356). Moreover, "lack of a relic casket in a stupa which as a matter of fact most of the stupas never had, was viewed as either having been looted by the Muslims or removed by the Buddhist monks for protecting it from being plundered by them (Bhandarkar 1915:91-92; Sarao 2012:153).

Sarao noted that "it was taken as a matter of course that the Arab Muslims, being Muslim, had to be fanatically anti-Hindu and anti-Buddhist" (Sarao 2012:154). He draws our attention to Koenraad Elst's view that "It is not 'Brahmanical onslaught' but Islam that chased Buddhism out of India. . . . The Buddhists drew the wrath of every Muslim *but-shikan* (idol-breaker), even where they hadn't offered resistance against the Muslim armies because of their doctrine of non-violence" (Elst 2002: 63-64). Sarao also said that V.A. Smith (1928: 221), B.R. Ambedkar (2014:229-30) and many others subscribed to the thesis of 'sword of Islam' (Sarao 2012:156). Noted archaeologist H.D. Sankalia used rather abrasive words against Islam when he wrote that though internal degeneration had already affected Buddhism, "death blow was given by the mighty-blood-smeared hand of Islam" (Sankalia 1972: 241). However, Sarao pointed out that though there was evidence to show that

> Buddhist *viharas* were attacked by Arab and Turkish invaders and some of them were literally wiped out of existence, it must be remembered that the attacks were neither organized nor systematic. The Islamic sources do not talk much about such attacks. Such a silence in these sources does not necessarily emanate from a motive to hide. The reason for this is that such methods of extirpation of the *kafirs* being considered meritorious acts, the Muslim chroniclers would not have hesitated to mention them. Nevertheless, it was to be expected that such occasions of political uncertainty were habitually accompanied by some amount of massacre and forced conversion. In some cases, there is also evidence to show that these central Asian tribesmen with no knowledge of edifices in their desert homeland, mistook these buildings for military strongholds. In at least some instances, this may partially account for the enormity of the massacres. Another reason must have been the enormous wealth accumulated by these monasteries which proved good baits for the attacks. Opulence of the monasteries had given them the reputation of being some sort of El Dorados and hence, objects of special attention by the plundering hordes (Sarao 2012: 160).

Another argument has it that Islam saw "both Brahmanical-Hindus and Buddhists as being *ahl-al-kitab* (People of the Book), to whom a degree of legitimacy could be offered" (Hamid 1989:147). Other scholars noted that invasions and attendant atrocities were "attributable to political and economic expediencies." Sarao cited the view of Mohammad Habib who felt that "economic and imperialistic considerations rather than religious zeal" were the "inspiring motive" behind these invasions (Nizami 1974). Yet, most of the narratives of the Muslims in Brahmanical and Buddhist sources were 'stereotype' and 'formulaic' (Sarao 2012: Talbot 1995: 692-722). R.M. Eaton recorded that of the sixty thousand odd cases of temple demolition by Islamic rulers, often cited by Sangh Parivar, only about eighty instances could be identified "whose historicity appears to be reasonably certain" (Eaton 2000b: 128-131). Eaton further said that "Hindu rulers attacked Hindu states, demolished temples and seized idols; Muslim rulers perpetrated barbarities against Muslims." His core argument appeared to be that "almost all cases of violence were invariably political, i.e., to establish symbolic as well as real authority. The decline of Buddhism in south India is also hard to explain in the light of the attacks by Arabs and Turks" (Sarao 2012: 162). Sarao points to Schalk's statement that Islam hardly had a presence in south India (Ibid; Schalk 2002). There were no examples in the history of medieval India of peasant resentment against patrons of Buddhism leading to civil wars, says Sarao. According to him, "well-documented research has shown that Buddhism had already begun to decline by the time Islam arrived in India. Though the empirical reality and ruthlessness in some cases of the Turuska conquest cannot be denied, it would be completely unhistorical to hold it as *raison le plus dècisif* for the decline of Buddhism in India" (Sarao 2012: 163).

Given the history of cultural exchanges between Buddhism and Islam, which spanned over several centuries, it would be too naïve to argue that Islam was responsible for Buddhism's decline. An analysis of the decline of Buddhism in different parts of India clearly reveal that Buddhism saw the beginning of its decline during the post-Kusana period. This got intensified further in the post-Gupta period. By the twelfth century, it had reached its nadir. But this process was not alike in all regions and places in the country. Moreover, Buddhism did not vanish entirely from the plains of India, and we could still see evidences of its existence in the late medieval and modern times in many regions of India. Drawing on the works of Kulke (1997), Jaini (1980), Inden (1981), Eliot (1921), Chattopadhyaya (1998), Sogen (1912), Joshi (1977), Verardi (2003), Mitra (1954), Champakalakshmi (1998, 2004) et al., Sarao (2012) outlines the following major causes of its decline in India, individually or collectively:

> 1. Moral and ethical degeneracy in the Samgha; 2. Animosity of the Brahmanas; 3. Persecution by Brahmanical-Hindu Kings and withdrawal of royal patronage; 4. Sectarianism and the rise of Mahayana and Vajrayana; 5. Attacks by Arabs and Turks; 6. Role of Sufism; 7. Rise of Bhakti movement and revival of Brahmanical-Hinduism; and 8. Samgha-Laity relationship, decline of urbanization, and evolving material milieu (Sarao 2012: 238).

The 'Muslim' factor in the decline of Buddhism in India could thus be found in Sarao (2012) also, in the context of the Arab/Turkish attacks and in the background of the rise of Sufism, among all other factors. However, he says that "the anti-particularist, anti-clerical, and anti-ritualistic thrust of the teachings of the Sufi poets laid the foundations of bringing non-

Muslims into the Islamic fold" (Ibid: 254-55). This, perhaps, needs a bit more elaboration in the context of the Buddhist influence on 'Sufi Islam.'

Buddhism, Islam and Sufism

Johan Elverskog's *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* explains that the history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction is "much richer and more complex" than many assume. Elverskog, who served as the Chair of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, writes: "Far from being diametrically opposite, Buddhism and Islam have much in common, and Buddhist and Muslim thinkers alike have long tried to solve the tensions that arose between their communities. Yet it is clear that the problems of prejudice and suspicion and intolerance still often characterize relations between Islam and Buddhism" (Elverskog 2018).

In less than two centuries of the Arab rule, a significant section of the Buddhist population in Sind and other areas, which now come under Pakistan, had converted to Islam. Islam also became the most important religion in Kashmir and eastern India (including the areas now come under Bangladesh). Even as Islam reached Kashmir, Buddhism had already become enervated, entirely "marginalized, and politically entirely insignificant" (Sarao 2012: 166-67). More so, the remnants of Buddhism in the region became slowly assimilated into Islam mostly with the engagements of the Sufis who sought to transcend the differences between Islam and Brahmanical-Hinduism or Buddhism (Ibid). Some scholars argued that Sufism did play a major role in the conversion of Buddhists to Islam in northern and western India. They also maintained that Indian Muslims are the descendants of these converts. But, Sarao wrote, "these conversions were from among the tribal populations and the Brahmanical-Hindus" (Ibid:251). Over years, Buddhism had become side-lined when the Sufis began their activities which lasted nearly five centuries. It was with the beginning of such interactions and cultural exchanges, sustained by the humility and humanism of the Sufis, that Islam gained advances, particularly among the masses. Over time, Sufism began to spread far and wide, from Baghdad to Persia, Indian Subcontinent, North Africa, and Muslim Spain. In the next three-four centuries, Sufism gained momentum in several regions and countries. This period (in particular the thirteenth century) is regarded as the 'Golden Age' of Sufism as it was during this time that the major influential figures of Sufism brought out their monumental classics of Sufi literature (Aquil 2007; Aquil 2010; Islam 2002). The Bhakti movement in India also embodied the Sufi tradition (Seethi 2011).

Many scholars found similarities in the philosophical precepts of both Sufi mysticism and the teachings of Buddhism. Historian Ibn Khaldun writes: "The Sufi approach is based upon constant application to divine worship, complete devotion to God, aversion to the false splendour of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, property, and position to which the great mass aspire, and retirement from the world into solitude for a divine worship. These things were general among the men around Muhammad and the early Muslims (Khaldun 1969: 358). Sufi Islam has been seen as 'love-oriented' whereas the theological Islam as practised and legitimised by the mainstream Ulama is viewed largely as 'law-oriented.' If the Sufi God is

'God of love,' in theological Islam it is a punishing God for the disobedience of *shari'ah,* the Islamic law. Muslim masses are, therefore, attracted by the Sufi Islam than the theological Islam which has intellectual appeal and orientation (Engineer 2008). The early Sufis engaged themselves in the practice of abstinence–moving away from the temporal to spiritual, characterised by intense devotion to God (Bahadur 1999). The Sufis also lay great deal of emphasis on meditation and reflection which brought them closer to Indian traditions. However, unlike Indian tradition, they did not practice complete renunciation (Seethi 2011). Over years, Sufism evolved itself into several *tariqas* (orders), and its followers, due to their unconventional approach to God, have experienced persecution in some countries as their 'acts' were found to be blasphemous (Ibid).

Plausibly, Sufi traditions have been religiously inclusive. Wherever the orders prospered, popular Islamic religion focused on the tombs of saints and sheikhs. People used to organise processions, seek healing miracles, and mostly importantly women are welcome among the crowds. While proudly Islamic, Sufi believers have always sought to be in dialogue with other religions. According to some scholars, Buddhist influences did reach the Arab world prior to the arrival of Prophet Mohammad. To justify this, they argued that the Prophet had given his seal of approval to the continuance of some of them. For instance, consider going round and round the shrine at Mecca seven times by the Haj pilgrim. Circumambulation or *parikrama* of a shrine, and that seven times, is not inherited from Christianity or Judaism. It was carried to Central and West Asia by the Buddhists. The dress code of the Haj pilgrims is also worth-noting. He shaves his head and wraps an unstitched white cloth round his waist and over his left shoulder, exactly in the fashion of a Buddhist monk (Ghosh 2008). Shaving the head or wearing an unstitched cloth was certainly not a part of the Judaic-Christian tradition. Alexander Berzin noted that Hamid Abdul Qadir in his *Budha al-Akbar Hayatoh wa Falsaftoh (Buddha the Great: His Life and Philosophy)* assumed that the Prophet Dhu'l-Kifl, implying 'the one from Kifl,'indicated twice in the Quran (*Al-Anbiya* 85 and *Sad* 48) as patient and good, refers to Shakyamuni Buddha. However, while most scholars see Dhu'l-Kifl as the Prophet Ezekiel, Qadir expounds that 'Kifl' is the Arabicized form of Kapila, short for Kapilavastu. Furthermore, he also argued that the Qur'anic reference to the fig tree (*At-Tin* 1-5) implies the Buddha as well, insofar as he attained to enlightenment at the foot of fig tree.

Jalaluddin Rumi, the finest poet of all time and a great influence on intercultural writings, was a mystical thirteenth century Sufi thinker whose one of the best loved poems is *The Guest House*. The Buddha employed the same analogy 1700 years before, in two talks entitled *The Guest House*. Christopher Titmuss, a former Buddhist monk, points to Rumi's "sublime capacity to nourish the depth of our being with his perceptive insights into love, sensuality, spirituality and intimacy with the immediate world." He said that Rumi having been inspired by Buddha wrote great poems that "strike a chord in the depths of our meditative being" (Titmuss 2007). Similarly, the twentieth century poet Muhammad Iqbal, in his "Bang-e-Dara," calls the teaching of the Buddha as a message of truth and humanism that was lost in its place of birth while it thrived across the world. Iqbal writes:

The nation could not
care less about Gautama's message-
It did not know the price of its unique pearl!
Poor wretches! They never heard the voice of truth:
A tree does not know how sweet its fruit is.

Over years, Sufism in India and other countries in South, West and Southeast Asia began to face several challenges and struggles, particularly when Islamic fundamentalism/political Islam gained ground. Sufis are the power that has made Islam the world's second-largest religion, with perhaps 1.8 billion adherents. Over centuries, the areas where Sufism spread Islam have transformed from the faith's frontiers to its demographic heartlands—these areas today encompass Islam's largest and fastest-growing populations. Of the eight nations with the world's largest Muslim communities, only one (Egypt) is Arab. A fifth of the world's Muslims now associate themselves with Sufism, and for many millions more, Sufism is simply part of their life. Sufis, in short, bestowed an Islam that combined local traditions and worship styles. It is not surprising that Sufi practices began to sway over the non-Arab Muslim world: in India and Pakistan, in Indonesia and Malaysia, Nigeria and Senegal, and in the Muslim countries of South and Central Asia, such as Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Seethi 2011).

However, Sufism as a tolerant and accommodative tradition came under challenge in many of these countries, as a result of the narrower views of the fundamentalists or militant Islamists, who are known by various names (Sirriyeh 1999). For example, Salafism has emerged as one of the agencies of Sufi persecution. It claims to teach a 'return to the pure religion' espoused by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, and in that early Islamic society Salafis believed they could get all they needed to know about life and law. The most influential and best-known account of this 'back-to-basics' ideology is Wahhabism— named after Muhammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab—that emerged in the eighteenth century and which, in modern times, has established a worldwide network on the strength of petrodollar. At its most extreme, this particular tradition demurs knowledge that is not clearly entrenched in the Quran and Islamic legal system, and regards other religions and cultures as lacking any redeeming virtues (Ahamed 2003: 148-49). The adherents of both Salafism and Wahhabism have new versions and offshoots in the contemporary period even as many Islamic militant/jihadi groups make claims of their 'mission' having the intellectual lineages to these strands in one way or other. The discourses of 'Islamic terrorism' also deploy such narratives of Islamic trends in the past with uncharitable lumping of all and everything under a single brand—without knowing their nuances and niceties.

As the new claimants of Wahhabism and Salafism moved around the world with their 'purity' thesis of Islam, Sufism became its prime target in countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria etc. This frequently manifested in the form of 'ideological struggle,' but open conflicts and violence have broken out as well. In Sudan, the black Sufi population of Darfur encountered this; in Iraq, suicide bombers targeted Sufi centres. Sufis have literally everything to lose from the continued onslaught of the Islamists. In some countries, Sufis wielded influence within local regimes, and these alliances sometimes helped

them deal with radicalism. Sufis were apparently supporters of some post-Communist regimes, including in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Albania. When the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamists emerged in Uzbekistan, the government's alliance with the Sufi orders helped it to undermine the power of Islamists. Syria used to sustain tolerant-minded Sufi orders as the best means of fending off the activities of Islamists (Jenkins 2009). Fundamentalists find it difficult to gain much of a foothold in societies where Islam is synonymous with Sufism and where Sufi loyalty is deeply tied to cultural and national identity.

Wahhabists and Salafists, however, continued to challenge the Sufi traditions and practices, claiming that the latter invented and introduced practices contradictory to the religion. They also rejected the notion of *moulids* (annual religious festival to mark the birthday of a saint, prophet or head of a religious order), which they viewed as contradictory to the teachings of Islam. Wahhabists and Salafists maintained that Sufism promoted *shirk* – referring to the worship of someone other than God. *Shirk* is forbidden in Islam and is punishable, according to them. Wahhabists and Salafists saw Sufism as a degenerate form of Islam and urged a return to the 'fundamentals' of Islam, as opposed to the 'traditions' that had accrued over centuries. All this has resulted in a growing attack on local Muslim cultures and Sufi traditions, which the Wahhabists and Salafists regarded as 'un-Islamic.' Thus, the Wahhabi and Salafi versions of Islam appeared so widely visible today. Yet, it is important to note that the silent majority of Muslims are not aware of the nuances and niceties of Wahhabi-Salafi ideologies at all. Moreover, they are still associated with the Sufi traditions in some way or the other. As the fundamentalists and militant Islam have gained support, they pressed hard on Muslim populations who are overwhelmingly drawn from countries where the Sufi current has always dominated Islamic life, such as Pakistan, Turkey, and North Africa (Seethi 2011). Sufis are, however, not well-organised like Wahhabi and Salafi groups. They may not have massive funds at their disposal, unlike the Wahhabists and Salafists. Sufis are also not combative. They rarely insist that other Muslims accept their way of understanding Islam, which is what the other groups do. Sufis don't brand other Muslims as apostates and condemn them as wrong.

Wahhabism and Salafism have made inroads into many South Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Paradoxically, the new brands of Wahhabism (like Taliban) emerged in Pakistan with the support of the State and its machineries. It eventually destabilised its vastly native Sufi Islam in favour of an alien fundamentalist ideology for short-term geopolitical gains, and the United States played its part with financial and military largesse for the jihadi groups against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan (Seethi 2002). In less than two decades, the Pakistani state has been forced to wage an 'all-out war' over virtually the entire province of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) with the very jihadis it created with Saudi funding and ideology (Seethi 2011; Seethi 2002).

Sufism was followed for centuries in the north western Pakistan. The shrines of great mystics in the NWFP, like that of the eighteenth-century poet and mystic Rehman Baba and Pir Baba in Buner had attracted many Sufi faithful from across the country. But with the spread of Wahhabism and Salafism, Sufism has been on the decline, especially in areas of the north western Pakistan. To discourage Sufism among the masses, Wahhabists argued that many

rituals of Sufism, like *Qawali* and visit to shrines, are close to Hinduism. Over a period of time, the rift between Sufism and Wahhabism led to bloody clashes in different areas. The fighting between *Lashkar-i-Islam* (LI) and *Ansar ul Islam* in the restive Khyber agency, which killed hundreds of people, was started when the LI banned people from going to shrines in the tribal region. In the 1980s, Wahhabism, which held sway in parts of the NWFP, came to this region with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. They set up a network of *madrasas* (seminaries) across the country. These *madrasas* not only indoctrinated young minds with the spirit and passion for *jihad* but also launched a hate campaign against Sufism. They denounced the Sufi music and poetry as decadent and immoral. Pir Azmat Ali of the Barelvi school of thought in Thana who had a long chain of followers all over Pakistan left the area when Taliban took control of Swat and other areas of Malakand. Pointing towards the extra-judicial killings of Taliban in Swat, he said that "they have desecrated shrines and tortured followers of great saints." In the wake of the Afghan *jihad* against the former Soviet Union and, then, the US war against terrorism, the traditional religious fabric of the land has been torn asunder by challenging the prevalent Sufi traditions in the area. The American anthropologist and Sufi-specialist Kenneth Lizzio's *Embattled Saints* provides the long history of spiritual traditions in Afghanistan and the narratives of Sufism in the 1990s (Lizzio 2014). However, when the Taliban forces took over power in Kabul, it became a turning point in the history of Afghanistan with its policies and activities generating world-wide criticism (Rashid 2001, 2010; Matinuddin 1999; Nojumi 2002).

Changing Dynamics of Fundamentalist/Militant Islam and Buddhism

A few months before the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, I had a conversation with noted Islamic scholar Asghar Ali Engineer in Mumbai. Among the issues that had emerged in our discussion was the destruction of the 6th century Buddha sculptures in the Bamiyan Valley of central Afghanistan by the Taliban forces. The two sculptures (55m and 37m high) were carved out of sandstone cliffs, and they remained unique among the world's great ancient Buddha monuments (for details of the sculptures see Morgan 2012). The process of destruction was directed by Mullah Obaidullah, the Taliban defence minister in the wake of the special orders of 26 February 2001, proclaimed by the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar for the destruction of all non-Islamic statues. For the demolition of the statues, explosive materials were used. The earlier attempts to destruct them with artillery shells failed. Later, more explosives were brough in and they were drilled into different parts of the statue for destruction. It took almost 25 days for the complete destruction. The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and many other leaders appealed to the Kabul government to protect the Buddhist cultural heritage. But the Taliban regime turned down all such pleas and even destroyed other moveable statues as well, including more than a dozen smaller Buddha statues in the Kabul Museum. Asghar Ali Engineer was aghast at the vandalism of the worst kind unleashed in the name of Islam. He said the Talibans, the offshoot of the madrasas in the North West of Pakistan, advanced a very narrow sectarian ideology, which never represented any spiritual tradition of Islam.

Engineer reminded that there is hardly any verse in the Qur'an which calls upon Muslims to destroy idols that others worship. Yet, the Taliban forces destroyed the Buddha statues which were not even idols worshipped by anyone. He also said the Talibans could not even distinguish between a statue and an idol. A great Islamic scholar of Egypt Muhammad Abduh had proclaimed that installing statues even by Muslims was not un-Islamic. A well-known fatwa of Abduh underlines that in Islam deeds have merit or demerit according to intention (i.e. *niyyah*). If the intention is not worshipping, then statues of great people can be erected. Abduh's fatwa came at a time when many ulama of al-Azhar, the leading Islamic institution in Cairo, were not approving of the installation of statues of political leaders. Earlier in an article in *The Times of India*, Engineer wrote that an eighteenth-century Sufi saint Mazhar Jan-i-Janan who was buried in Delhi even maintained that Hindu worship of idols was "qualitatively different from idol worshipping of pre-Islamic Arabs. A Sufi reaches Allah through a Master called Sheikh, not by himself. Similarly, a Hindu reaches God through the agency of an idol in which he sees God's reflection. And thus, he maintains that such idol worship does not lead to kufr i.e. denial of the oneness of God or shirk i.e. associating partners with God" (Engineer 2001). Engineer always maintained that some of the basic concepts of Islam come very close to Buddha's teachings and both Islam and Buddhism laid great stress of compassion (Engineer 2008).

The fate of Buddhism in India again became a topic of discussion among a few scholars on the sidelines of the *Mahatma Gandhi–Daisaku Ikeda Peace Research Conference* in August 2008 in Singapore. This conference was organized by the East Asian Institute (EAI) of the National University of Singapore on the theme "The Rise of China and India: Towards a Harmonious Region?" (Seethi 2009). The context of our informal conversation was the proposal to re-establish Nalanda in India, endorsed by the leaders of sixteen member states of the East Asia Summit (EAS) when they met in the Philippines in January 2007. Some of them raised the question how Buddhism declined in India but flourished in China, pointing to the observations made by Amartya Sen a few years ago. Yes indeed, Sen had written about it in his *The Argumentative Indian* (Sen 2005) as well as in several articles. He said that "religion has been a major source of contact between China and India, and Buddhism was central to the movement of people and ideas between the two countries. But the wider influence of Buddhism was not confined to religion. Its secular impact stretched into science, mathematics, literature, linguistics, architecture, medicine, and music" (Sen 2004). Sen later reminded that there are about 250 million Buddhist followers in China (which come approximately 18 per cent of the population)—they constitute nearly half of the world's Buddhist followers. By allowing Buddhism to function as a religion along with others, China has been trying to project itself as a 'tolerant' system—a 'soft power' component in its global strategy of containing criticism.

Our discussion went beyond Buddhism, and we broached on an array of issues that emerged in India-China relations, over the years, including the border conflict and the continuing dilemma of resolving it—notwithstanding the *Panchsheel Agreement* (1954) which, paradoxically, had a Buddhists implication of 'peaceful co-existence' and 'non-violence.' The platform of such informal exchanges was provided by 'Mahatma Gandhi–Daisaku Ikeda' Peace

Research Conference, and both Gandhi and Ikeda remained the symbol of the great Buddha tradition (Daisaku Ikeda was the third President of the Soka Gakkai lay Buddhist organization in Japan, founding president of the Soka Gakkai International).

However, I personally witnessed the inner dynamics of how religions functioned within China when I became a part of the international symposium on "Buddhism and World Culture" held on 27-28 October 2011 at Jinan National University, Guangzhou, Guangdong organised by the Institute for Chindian Studies, Jinan University jointly with the Liuzu (Huineng) temple at Zhenshan, Sihui city, China. The topic of my presentation was "Sufism and the Contemporary Challenges of Islam in South Asia." The main attempt in the paper was to place Sufism within the traditions of folk Islam and bring out how the rich Sufi traditions have been undermined by Salafists and Wahhabists of the new generation in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Indonesia etc (Seethi 2011). After listening to my presentation, a Buddhist scholar from the United States asked a question—how does the 'mainstream' Islam of the contemporary period engage and encounter the Sufi Islam, which has been influenced historically by Buddhist-Hindu traditions? This was actually the focus of my enquiry in my paper. I tried to catalogue the kind of challenges and atrocities perpetrated against the Sufi followers in the name of 'purifying' the 'un-Islamic' practices in several Muslim countries. The Salafists and Wahhabists were in the forefront of the 'purification' project, but the political manifestation of radicalism and violence began spreading across regions under different ideological labels. The Buddhist scholar also raised a point if all these were only interpretations. The answer is a big YES, insofar as the texts of Islam can exist only with interpretations and explanations. This has been a widely contested area in Islamic theology. Here, what is critical is the philosophical basis of interpretations. Islam has developed its own hermeneutical traditions *(Tafsir*), and *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) is a part of this intellectual process. *Qiyas* (analogical deduction) and *Ijma* (consensus of opinion) are some of the factors in the 'making of meanings.' There are several strategies of interpretation of Islamic texts embedded in different value premises and principles. It is, of course, quite relevant to ask from which value premises scholarly interpretations emerge. The demands and imperatives of modernity led many scholars (like Muhammad Abduh) to read and interpret Quran and Sunnah from an egalitarian-humanistic perspective (Hourani 1962; Sedgwick 2009). The ideas of justice, compassion, tolerance, gender equality etc thus become an indispensable part of modern Islamic hermeneutics. This is what fundamentalists generally abhor. For them, the scriptural version of Quran is final and beyond any interpretation.

However, with the emergence of modern nation-state and the diffusion of democratic ethos, many Muslim ruling regimes resorted to policies and programmes amounting to legitimise their rule by invoking their particular version of Islam to escape from popular assertations. Wahhabism and Khomeinism are the two opposite versions of the Islamic ideological spectrum. Several jihadi/Islamist movements and organisations emerged against this backdrop of the use and abuse of Islam for regime legitimacy. Alongside this, some ruling regimes also promoted militant Islam of their choice against their rivals at home and abroad (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iran, Tukey etc are some glaring examples).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks, however, made a change in the conditions of jihadi Islam across the world. On the one hand, these attacks generated a false illusion that even the world's mighty states like the United States could be smashed down with a religious weapon. On the other hand, the states have become more aggressive in their security and surveillance (for example, the US 'Patriot Act' and the Indian version of POTA and UAPA) and even more virulent military interventions (such as the 'war on terrorism' in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria etc). Alongside this, massive anti-terrorism mechanisms and infrastructure have been put in place across countries and regions. Meanwhile, religions and ethnic moorings tended to serve as nifty ideological apparatuses for spearheading right-wing campaigns and movements in many countries. Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism etc have become convenient political instruments for many such right-wing regimes.

It is no strange that even China used and treated religions differently, as part of keeping its 'civil society' alive to ensure both regime legitimacy and hegemony. A few years back, I had personally seen how the provincial leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled and managed university conferences and how they 'supervised' Buddhist festivals in the Sihui city. Even as the CCP has been sensitive about the Tibetan question and its cultural and political implications, the party seemed to have been reconciled to the idea of letting Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and other religions function—of course, under the 'new normal' of surveillance. It is in this background that the presence of the Dalai Lama and his followers in India continued to be a factor to be reckoned with in Beijing's security calculous. A few years back, it was announced that it would be the Chinese state's privilege to declare the successor of the Dalai Lama—knowing well that the Tibetan Government-in Exile won't accept this. *The Global Times* (13 March 2015) warned that "the Dalai Lama must know that any attempt to mess with the reincarnation will only make him a 'double betrayer' of both his motherland and his religion."

Meanwhile several reports appeared in the international media that in the Chinese province of Xinjiang, Uighur Muslims are persecuted by the government. Reports said that during the last few years, there was an alarming increase in repressive measures and systematic discrimination targeting Uighurs, as well as other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, the largest of China's administrative regions having borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc (BBC News, 26 September 2014). The Chinese seemed to have long feared that Uighurs would attempt to establish their own national homeland in Xinjiang. Some estimates said that as many as one million Uighur Muslims were being held right in internment camps. It was against this background that the Uighur exiles urged the International Criminal Court to investigate Beijing for genocide and crimes against humanity, the first-ever attempt to use international law to hold China's ruling Communist Party accountable for its crackdown on the Muslim minority (*The New York Times*, 6 July 2020). A major allegation of the Chinese government and the press was that the Uighur extremists were responsible for importing Salafism and elements of Taliban into the province which would pose a threat to Buddhism and the native culture of Xinjiang (*The Global Times,* 26 May 2014). It may sound paradoxical that the Chinese Government has a different position on Tibet and its version of Buddhism

even as its strategic partnerships with Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc are so crucial for its maritime strategy.

It is even more bewildering that in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka etc., the Muslim minorities (such as Rohingyas in Myanmar and Moors in Sri Lanka) are under constant threat from the Buddhist organisations, clergy and the state. However, in countries like Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan the situation is just the reverse. In Bangladesh, the Buddhists who constitute less than one per cent of the country's population continued to face religious discrimination. In Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), one of Bangladesh's poorest regions having a boundary with India and Myanmar, indigenous Buddhists (like Chakmas) have become the victims of religious discrimination—they were subject to land grabbing and mass Muslim migration. The settler Muslims and the state police were together in launching attacks on them and several thousands of Chakmas had to escape to India, leaving their motherland (Seethi 1999). There was a smouldering resentment among a section of the Muslims in the bordering areas, who felt that the Muslims on the other side, in Myanmar, were being persecuted in the hands of the ruling regime as well as the Buddhist sections. In 2012 enraged Muslims launched attacks on the Buddhist shrines and homes after a photo of a partially burned Quran was posted on a social media platform. The protesters chanted anti-Buddhist slogans accusing a Buddhist boy of burning the Quran. The violence, started in Ramu in Cox's Bazar, soon spread to other adjacent areas (CBS News 2 October 2012).

In less than a few years, the same Cox Bazar became the world's largest refugee settlement when extreme violence erupted in Myanmar's Rakhine State, forcing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims to flee their home—as a result of the atrocities perpetrated by the Myanmar security forces and the Buddhist outfits. By 2018, in less than one year, around 7,25,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar sought asylum in Bangladesh (see Bari 20018). A few of the Rohingyas who had escaped to Sri Lanka faced similar atrocities from Buddhists. Reports said that several Buddhist monks stormed a shelter for Rohingya Muslims in Sri Lanka run by the United Nations, demanding that the refugees be sent back to Myanmar where they had fled from violence in their native Rakhine state (*Independent,* 28 September 2017*; Reuters,* 27 September 2017). In the wake of the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka in 2019, mobs from the Buddhist community attacked Muslims in several places enflaming fears of a new phase of violence in Sri Lanka. The attacks on Muslims were reported in Sri Lanka's northwest where the minority community owned shops and other businesses. The mobs ransacked homes, burned vehicles and vandalized some mosques (BBC News, 15 May 2019). Already the Muslims have been targeted in Sri Lanka for more than a decade. According to Chas Morrison, Sri Lanka "witnessed multiple examples of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence since the civil war termination, most infamously in 2014 when ethnic riots affected large numbers of people. Buddhist monks appeared to play a prominent role. The lengthy war and ethnonationalist ideologies have produced politico-religious shifts associated with 'Buddhist extremism,' implicated in these riots and other aggressions" (Morrison 2020).

The small island state of Maldives in South Asia also witnessed a series of attacks on Buddhist monuments in 2012. For example, the Islamists' attack on the National Museum caused

widespread damage and as many as 30 remnants of the Buddhist statues were destroyed — some dating to the sixth century. The attack began when a half-dozen men stormed into the museum and vandalised a collection of coral and lime figures, including a six-faced coral statue of the Buddha. Reports said the Islamists destroyed them because they believed they were idols and therefore 'un-Islamic.' The destruction was similar to Taliban's demolition of the massive statue of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in early 2001 (*The New York Times*, 13 February 2012).

In the third week of July 2020, Pakistan again witnessed the destruction of another Buddha statue in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Police arrested four men under the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Antiquities Act 2016 for destroying the ancient Buddha statue which was found during construction work in the province's Takhtbhai area of Mardan. According to archaeological sources, the statue belonged to the Gandhara civilisation and it was approximately 1,700 years old (*The Dawn* 18 July 2020). The destruction was reported to have been carried out at the provocation of a local cleric who had warned the workers that even their nikah would be rendered invalid and they would no longer be considered believers if they did not immediately destroy it.

It was only three years back that one of the world's oldest 'sleeping Buddha' was found in Bhamala in Haripur. Archaeologists also found more than 500 Buddha-related artefacts during excavations in addition to the 48-feet long 'sleeping Buddha,' and they were so confident to restore the ancient Taxila Valley Civilisation. Everyone thought that it would be a new beginning of heritage protection in Pakistan with the unveiling of the Buddha statue. The 48-feet long 'sleeping Buddha' statue dates back to the third century. The history of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—with their obsession for the destruction of ancient relics—was too reprehensible. With a new regime in place under Imran Khan in Islamabad, everyone believed that Pakistan would no longer be known for the destruction of historical monuments and the religious artefacts of other faiths. People remember the statement of Imran Khan, when he was in opposition, that the heritage sites would be an important asset for Pakistan. As per the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Antiquities Act, it was mandatory for anyone who found ancient artefacts to immediately inform the government. The Act also made it a crime to "destroy, break, damage, alter, injure, deface or mutilate or scribble, write or engage any inscription or sign on, any antiquity or take manure from any protected antiquity or important antiquity." The Act further specified that any person committing these crimes would be imprisoned for five years or fined Rs. 2 million, or both (Pakistan 2016). People recall that almost ten years back, armed Islamist militants attacked one of the oldest and most important sculptures of Buddhist art in the Northwest Swat Valley in Pakistan. Tracing its history at the beginning of the Christian era and carved into a 40-meter-high rock, the seated image of the Buddha was second in importance in South Asia, only to the Bamiyan Buddhas (*The Daily Star,* 6 November 2007). The latest incident in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa raised many eyebrows if Pakistan would be under pressure to get back to the Taliban days. Such anxieties are snowballing in the context of the US engagement of Taliban and Pakistan's role as a go-between. It may be recalled that on 29 February 2020, the US and Taliban entered into an agreement which was hailed as a "significant moment for Afghanistan." Most importantly, Al

Qaeda welcomed the U.S.-Taliban agreement, "celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy." It is true that after 2018, the Trump Administration used Pakistan's help in the U.S. talks with the Taliban (United States, Congressional Research Service 2020:11). This is yet another instance of how the most powerful nations recalibrate the politics of 'expediency' in the changing geopolitical circumstances in international relations.

Afterthoughts

Admittedly, there are contrasting positions and stereotypes about Islam and Buddhism. They are sequel to the unwholesome discourses generated throughout history which, plausibly, stained popular imaginations in different ways. Buddhism thus became identical with peace, and Islam with violence! But these stereotypes are nothing more than overblown imageries. However, centuries of Buddhist-Muslim cultural exchanges demand a relook of these stereotypes. Yet, the problems of prejudice and suspicion still characterize the relations between Muslims and Buddhists. The share of Islam—in sustaining such stereotypes—is thus worth pondering.

Islamic ideology, symbols and slogans continued to be important factors of cultural reproduction in Muslim countries. Paradoxically, both the ruling regimes and opposition/resistance forces made use of Islamic slogans and symbols for political mobilisation and cultural legitimacy. Islamic political coalitions in many countries engaged themselves in toppling governments, mobilising resistance/opposition forces, and triggering militant/terrorist activities. Meanwhile, there was a general feeling that Muslims as a community could not bring forth an authentic pluralist social matrix that would meet the requirements of modern multicultural world as well as of the indigenous social history of each country. Naturally, as John L. Esposito (1998: 161-62) noted, behind their pretentious modern political formations and institutional practices, problems of legitimacy, authoritarianism and political participation continued to affect most of these Muslim countries. Alongside this, the promises and programmes of the governments in these countries generated immense hopes and aspirations that, most often than not, remained unfulfilled. Meanwhile, poverty and its attendant implications plagued these societies even as the benefits of 'development' and 'modernisation' went to a disproportionate few. But the new Muslim middle class and the poor, in both cities and rural side, continued to be disillusioned. In this complex social milieu of crises, western models of institutions, values and socio-political development were criticised for their inability to deliver justice. Consequently, new fundamentalist/militant/revivalist movements and organisations emerged—as both 'resistive' and 'alternative'—with an appeal to self-identity, faith, self-reliance etc. Petrodollar and migration only accelerated the pace of the long-drawn out crises of the Muslim world. Plausibly, the expansion of the new social forces among the Muslims generated more anxieties and tensions than possibilities of 'universal brotherhood' and a global matrix of inter-cultural exchanges. The 'clash of civilisation' thesis in the post-Soviet era and the project of 'Islamophobia' after 9/11 only reinforced the stereotypes of the past with ultra-right forces gaining an upperhand across the world.

No wonder, a sculpture, or a statue or any remnant of another faith becomes an 'artefact-for-othering.' This can easily be in the popular imagination, today, with a circuit of cultural transmission, both horizontally and vertically, with a diffused technology grid of communication and information.

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