**Temples and tourists**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-12-22

LATE last week, a joint team of Italian and Pakistani archaeologists, working in the Swat region, announced that they had discovered a 2,300-year-old Buddhist temple. The temple is located in the historic Bazira city, in Swat district.

Unsurprisingly, the site had already been vandalised by robbers; but somehow the temple and many of the artif acts within it survived.

According to the team, there are many more structures in the area that need to be excavated. At 2,300 years of age the temple is said to be older than the Buddhist iconography found in Taxila. In addition to the temple itself, around 2,700 other objects including coins, jewellery, pottery shards, etc., were also discovered. Work on the site is expected to continue as a joint effort between Pakistan and Italy.

The news of the temple`s discovery is a hopeful portent in the saga of neglect and corruption that is Pakistan`s relationship with its past. Growing up in Karachi, I knew nothing about Pakistan`s ancient history. The world appeared to have begun at the conquest of Debal by Mohammad Bin Qasim. A school visit to the National Museum in Karachi suggested differently. There, lying propped up against the wall and covered with dust, were statues of the Buddha. As far as I remember, there were no plaques to explain what they were and in which part of the country they had been found. As a matter of fact, there was no explanation of Buddhism at all.

The condition in which they were being stored and displayed could well be considered as a metaphor for their presence in a historically dislocated country that wanted to tell a very particular story of its past. It was almost as if the condition of the statues had to reflect the national attitude over this portion of its history.

When considered through the prism of our denials, the discovery of the temple represents all the lost chances that we have had to preserve our ancient pre-Islamic heritage. Not many in Pakistan have any idea of what Buddhism is, what the stupas and figurines and temples represent, and how deeply connected and integral these findings are to the larger story of the world we live in.In the fever of the religious obscurantism that continues to envelop and engulf, the very presence of the Buddhas presents a threat to some elements.

Those who pursue this line of infantilised thinking, fear that Muslims might start revering the inanimate figures of the Buddha and that individual Muslims may not be strong enough nor intellectually robust enough to withstand the allure of these figures.

The Muslims of Pakistan deserve more credit than this. The Islamic identity of the Republic is safe and entrenched. Conducting a dialogue that reaches into the faraway past 2,300 years of it does not pose a danger to the f aith which shouldnot be linked to a shortsighted vision of the past by elements such as the Afghan Taliban who two decades ago used dynamite to blow up the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. Historical baggage, even the Taliban may have now realised, cannot be disposed of with the detonation of bombs.

Destroying the testaments to an ancient past only serves to underscore the intellectual absurdities of the present.

Everywhere else in the world, and along with other artefacts, ancient Buddhist figurines and stupas are treated with respect. Most of the largest museums in the world feature items from Gandhara and Taxila. In those venues, the objects are displayed in rooms that are cool. The lighting of these objects is just right ambient, and complementary.

Their collective import seems to bring a sigh of relief, a successful evasion of having to perform a part in the ongoing (and seemingly never-ending) Pakistani cultural wars.There is subterfuge here as well. While the plaques affixed next to each object provide useful historical information, the time period, geography and other interesting facts, they do not tell you how the museum now in possession of these centuriesold artif acts procured them in the first place. To the extent that there is any information regarding provenance, it usually references private collections of this or that rich person. How this random white and Western museum got a hold of these objects is never, ever explained. Even though the object might realistically be the `loot`that af fluent white and Western conquerors gathered for themselves during the fall of the British Empire, it is displayed with pride.

This gloating exhibition of stolen goods from colonised lands is a problem in itself. In the case of Pakistan, it presents a unique dilemma. If looted objects from the territory that is now Pakistan are returned, what indeed will we do with them? The question has gained increased importance because some museums, facing pressure from the public, have begun to return objects to the places of their origin.

It is a Catch-22 situation. Pakistanis would not know what to do with their pre-Islamic history, and this confusion benefits rich museums in the white and Western world which can then keep the looted objects under the pretext of `protecting` them. The thousands of objects discovered in Bazira city belong in Pakistan and to the Pakistani public.

The government, which has recently touted its promotion of religious tourism, has a unique opportunity to show how things should be done. Not only must the excavation site be properly secured, the discovered objects must also be catalogued and housed in a special museum on the site. Pakistan is a Muslim country with a Buddhist past; these are two entirely compatible truths. The ground on which Pakistanis live today has been pressed by human feet for thousands of years, and that in itself is a simply glorious and hopeful thought.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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