Uneasy Bedfellows: Islamic Art and the Politics of Indian Nationalism

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In the Indian subcontinent art and politics have been bedfellows – sometimes uneasy ones – for thousands of years. It was only with the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March, 2001 that this relationship came to the notice of the larger world. Let us commence this discussion with the Bamiyan Buddhas – in this case not the actual images themselves – but with the reactions to their destruction. Their threatened demolition and then the actual event prompted outrage from many quarters. For example, a banner depicting one of the Buddhas was displayed outside Paris’ Pompidou Center in response to the destruction; at the same time the RSS, a right wing Indian political group, declared that they would rebuild Bamiyan in India.1 The focus was on recapturing those material objects that had been lost, rather than understanding factors that had led to their destruction. The assumed evil nature of Islam as a culture bent on destruction – the word often used is iconoclasm – was confirmed in the minds of many. This common belief was further reaffirmed on September 11, 2001. I would like to evaluate these assumptions both in the larger Islamic world as well as in the South Asian context, pointing out that even the earliest Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads, produced figural imagery. This is apparent from those images surviving in eighth century palaces in Syria and Jordan; the same was true in the Indian subcontinent when Muslims assumed political power and, for example, made 12th century coins bearing an image of the Muslim ruler, Iltutmish.2

Before we turn to a specific Muslim context, let us look at the larger picture. Dario Gamboni, in his 1997 book, The Destruction of Art, discusses the role that tensions between Christian and Muslim identities in Bosnia-Hertegovina played in the demolition of churches, mosques and even bridges (47-50). What is less well known is the fact that the Taliban’s demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas was politically motivated rather than just an act of religious iconoclasm. Professor Janice Leoshko at the University of Texas, Austin has shown that the Bamiyan valley was one of the greatest areas of resistance to the Taliban.3 This resistance figured...
prominently in their decision to destroy the statues. Other motivating factors in the Buddhas’ destruction included issues of identity – in this case, the Taliban showing their affiliation with the highly conservative Wahhabi-based Islam. To put this in an historic Islamic context, most image destruction is politically, not religiously, motivated. In the case of the Bamiyan images, it is important to recall that Islam as a political force had been in modern Afghanistan since about the 8th century; yet no one destroyed these monumental Buddha images until now.

How typical is the kind of destruction we have seen by the Taliban in the history of Islam? We need to recognize that throughout history, visual messages, that is, art which represents ways of thinking, have been destroyed in order to eradicate their messages. Certainly Byzantine destruction of Early Christian art is a case in point, as was Calvinist destruction of Catholic imagery. There is an awesome fear – to use the words of David Freedberg, a scholar based at Columbia University – of the “power of images.”

In the Indian subcontinent such destruction by Muslims can be grouped into two general categories, both politically motivated. The first follows the model proposed by one of the leading scholars of Islamic art, Oleg Grabar. When mosques initially were built in areas newly introduced to Islam they were constructed from older yet readily available architectural members. In India the first mosques were constructed from reused temple materials. An example of this is the late 12th century Jami mosque of Delhi (known popularly today as the Quwwat al-Islam mosque) built immediately after Islam as a political force was introduced into north India in the area of Delhi, still the capital of modern India (fig. 1). Here you see the pillars of this mosque are reused ones, not ones carved especially for this particular structure. Notice there is a lack of uniformity among these pillars; in fact to gain a sense of height, unmatched pillars are stacked on top of each other. Moreover, the motifs on these pillars, images of Hindu gods and goddesses, are completely antithetical to the Islamic tradition which is staunchly monotheistic and has no anthropomorphically concept of God. Rather, God is all knowing but not knowable by men and women.

The reasons for reuse can be both expediency and the desire to send a political message. On one hand, by reusing locally available material the mosque could be constructed in a hurry. This was of considerable concern, for in the Islamic tradition, kings declared themselves as legitimate rulers of a new region by two acts. One was minting coins in their own name; the other was to have their name read in the sermon on the Friday congregational prayer. To do this, a mosque was required. Reusing material built by earlier rulers can also be seen as a symbolic