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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

DEFEAT TALIBANIZATION OF POLITICS

Taliban's destruction of ancient Buddha statues in Afghanistan have been rightly condemned all over the world. In Sri Lanka too, people felt outraged about this senseless act by a government. When a state engages in cultural cannibalism of this nature, even the world opinion can do very little except expressing horror and righteous anger. In this senseless action of destruction both the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the politics it represents stand condemned.

Events in Afghanistan drew very little attention in Sri Lanka, although during the past twenty five years the political change in that country had been locked into US-Soviet super power rivalry. In the mid seventies, an almost a feudal regime was overthrown in a coup led by Left-wing forces in that country. A progressive regime led by the Communist Party of Afghanistan introduced many soio-economic reforms, that included land reform, right of women to education and work, universal education, provision of housing and health facilities to the poor. Internal conflicts within the regime led to political de-stabilization, resulting in direct Soviet involvement in Afghan politics during the Breshnev era. Immediately came the US response in the form of American support to Afghan nationalist resistance. In the Reagan-Breshnev era of US-Soviet Cold War politics, Afghanistan was the main site for a proxy war between the two super powers. after nearly ten years of military involvement in Afghanistan, the Soviets were forced to leave, a political fate similar to what happened to the Americans in Vietnam. To recall an old cliché, Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

The US involvement in Afghanistan had the most destructive consequences for Afghanistan. In order to defeat the Soviet-backed forces, the Reagan administration provided economic, military and diplomatic support to the most backward Islamic political forces that stood to turn back whatever little which Afghan society had achieved in terms of egalitarian social and economic progress. For Ronald Reagan and his anti-communist warriors, the Afghan fundamentalists were 'freedom fighters' in the same league of America's founding fathers. Money and weapons were supplied to them through overt as well as covert means. Egypt's President Sadat and Pakistan's Martial Law Administrator Zia Ul-Huq were the intermediaries between the Reagan administration and fundamentalist resistance in Afghanistan.

In more than a decade of an utterly destructive internal war, the history of which so far remains largely undocumented, Afghan society and politics went through a process of total destruction. Hundreds of thousands of its citizens were killed, maimed or forced to migrate. Cities were razed to the ground in the warfare between rival warlords, who had access to modern weapons that were available with relative ease. This internal war had indeed destroyed beyond recognition the great civilization that was Afghanistan. What remains in that society today are a poverty stricken and famine-ridden populace, administered by a brigade of warlords whose legitimation of totalitarian power is derived from a narrowly political interpretation of religion. Their destruction of ancient Buddha statues is a

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desperately perverted act to gain world attention to the humanitarian tragedy of the people in Afghanistan for which the Western world is as responsible as is the Taliban regime.

Are there lessons, however belated, to be learnt from Afghanistan? Is Talibanization of politics confined only to Afghanistan? We need to raise these questions, because South Asia has already produced political forces that are in essence similar to Taliban. We may only recall the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva forces of India, only a few years ago. The rising forces of extreme Hindu nationalism destroyed this Muslim shrine as a part of a deliberate strategy of anti-minority mobilization in order to secure electoral gains. The way in which they mobilized India's Hindu society on an utterly sectarian politics of ethnic hatred managed to bring to the center Hindu fundamentalist forces that had remained in the fringe for many years. They found, in

anti-minority hysteria, a portent force of electoral mobilization. The mass and celebrative frenzy with which the Babri Masjid was destroyed on December 06, 1992, was not a manifestation of spontaneous violence unleashed by Delhi's urban lumpen proletariat. To quote from Stanley Tambiah's authoritative account of the events, on that particular day, "as mahants, pandits and sadhus were getting ready to start the puja on the newly built platforms for the temple to Ram, the Babri Masjid was demolished by karsevaks, who broke the security cordon, scrambled on top of the domes, and smashed them, some of them plunging down the debris. There were evidence of preparations for the demolition among the rank and file, and it was preceded by an immense massing at Ayodhya leaders, activists, and workers of the Sangh Parivar, the family of organizations of the Hindutva movement. All the leaders of the movement – Advani and Vajpayee of the BJP, Joshi of the VHP, and leaders of the RSS, the Bajrang Dal, and the Shiv Sena – were present." (*Leveling Crowds*, p. 249). Present, indeed, at the moment of the Masjid's destruction were India's future Prime minister and two of his senior cabinet colleagues. Therein lies the fact that Talibanization of South Asia had begun long before Taliban came into power in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Taliban movement, as much as the Hindutva movement in India and Sihala Urumayas in Sri Lanka, represent a type of politics that is built on religio-cultural and ethnic exclusivism that is distinctly anti-minority in their own societies. They politically thrive on provoking fears and anxieties of extinction among their ethnic communities. Middle and upper class members of ethno-religious majorities are often the easy converts to their ideologies of aggressive self-preservation, based on the most irrational, yet emotionally powerful appeals to protect the majority in their own land. In their political campaigns, they use militant violence as a strategy for both mass mobilization and neutralizing of opponents. Their politics is militantly aggressive, intolerant, anti-democratic and potentially fascistic.

In this age of economic and cultural globalization, the space is certainly

emerging for the spread of Talibanization of politics throughout South Asia. The onslaught of economic reforms has already created a state of instability and uncertainty, a kind of socio-political anomie that had not been felt in the past. Rapid economic and social change, marketization of economic relations, retreat of the state from its functions of social welfare and employment generation, the unchecked rule of capital and the rapid spread of economic disparities are the grounds on which quick waves of social despair are built. The globalization-induced anomie is also taking place in a South Asia which has already been shattered by variety of crises. Politics of intolerance and militant hysteria can easily be built on the waves of mass despair. And the politics of despair respects no democracy. It is inherently anti-democratic and potentially totalitarian, as already demonstrated by South Asia's own experience of religio-ethnic fundamentalist movements.

The possibility of Talibanization of South Asian politics brings to the center of South Asia's democratic agenda the question of resisting and defeating the politics of ethno-religious exclusivism and intolerance. Respect of differences and the inclusion of the other are indeed human virtues that have immensely democratic relevance to the task of re-building political communities in our societies. One of the key challenges in the democratic politics in South Asia today is the question of intellectually and politically dealing with the regressive dynamics of identity politics of communitarian parochialism. Identity politics, particularly its culturalist version, has been attractive in a context of the decline of working class and progressive politics associated with the socialist Left. If Afghanistan is an example, it provides the extremist of the destructive possibilities of what identity politics can do to a society with a fabulously pluralistic cultural heritage. Once again, the synthesis of democratic and socialist programs have become exceedingly relevant for South Asia's future, because the agenda of transformation is a project of secular democracy in which cultural and other differences are not a disabling evil, but an enabling virtue.

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