

Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent: Reflections in History and Archaeology

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The sixth century BCE was a remarkable period in Indian history when the field of philosophical inquiries was bubbling with intense activity. Apart from significant developments in the political, social and economic spheres, it marked the beginning of early historical period in north India and witnessed the process of state formation and urbanisation in the Ganga valley. According to Buddhist sources as many as 62 new religious sects and according to Jain texts 363 sects emerged in north India in the sixth century BCE. Of all the searching souls and religious preachers of this time, Gautam Buddha was exceptionally influential, with the most popular social base.

Gautam Buddha was born in 586 BCE in a grove at Lumbani, as Siddhartha, son of Suddhodhana, the chief of the Sakya clan of Kapilavastu. According to the Pali canon he bore the 32 marks of a mahapurush. Shattered by the sight of the sorrows of life, he left his home at the age of 29 and wandered around for six years searching for truth. He finally attained enlightenment under a pipal tree at Bodha Gaya and hence came to known as Buddha, the enlightened one. It was at a deer park in Isipattana, identified with Sarnath near Varanasi, Buddha preached his first sermon on deliverance from suffering, to his five

former companions. This event is celebrated as dhammacakka-pavattana i.e. Turning of the Wheel of Law, marking the beginning of propagation of Dhamma and this sermon formed the nucleus of the Buddhist doctrine. Buddha is said to have spent the next rainy in Sarnath where the number of holy men gathering grew to sixty. He addressed his teachings to the laity as well as the monastic order established by him, known as Sangha. He wandered on foot for forty- five years teaching his doctrine while visiting centres like Kaushambi, Rajgir, Gaya, Pava and Dakhinagiri near Mirzapur¹. Before Buddha's death at Kushinara, identified with modern Kasia, at the age of eighty, his doctrine had won over a wide social base among various sections of the society.

During about three centuries between the age of Buddha and the accession of Ashoka, the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, Buddhism had emerged as an impressive force with considerable social appeal. According to the Mahaparinibbana Sutta eight stupas were constructed over the cremated remains of the Buddha and two were built over the cremation vessel and embers of the funeral pyre. The mud stupas at Piprahwa and Vaishali could represent these early stupas.² Over a period of time stupas emerged as places of veneration and an emblem of Buddha's dhamma. After witnessing the horrors of his victorious Kalinga war in 260 BCE, Ashoka was attracted to the Buddha's teachings. He became an enthusiastic supporter of Buddhism after two and a half years of the war and gave up conquest by war in favour

¹ D.N. Jha, *Ancient India*, Delhi, 2015 pp.71-72

² U. Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, Delhi, 2008, p.362

of conquest by piety or dhammaghosha. According to the Buddhist tradition he constructed 84,000 stupas and viharas, although the figure seems inflated. The Avadana texts inform us that Ashoka redistributed portions of the Buddha's relics and ordered the construction of stupas over them in all important towns of his empire. Old mud stupas were enlarged or rebuilt using bricks during his reign. The excavations of brick stupas at Piprahwa and Vaishali as well as the Nigali Sagar pillar inscription recording the enlargement of the Kanakamuni stupa to double its size in the 14th year of Ashoka's reign, sufficiently testify to these activities. The presence of the Ashokan pillar with the lion capital at Sarnath hint at the construction of the Dharmarajika and Dhamekh stupas during his time. The brick stupa at Rajgir, the Dharmarajika stupa at Taxila and the stupa-monastery complex at Amaravati seem to have been constructed during the Mauryan period.³ The brick core of the largest stupa at Sanchi viz. Stupa no. 1 was built in Ashoka's time. It was a low dome mounted over a low cylindrical drum, about 60 feet in diameter at the base. A lion capital pillar bearing Ashoka's schism edict, warning the members of the sangha against causing any division in its ranks, was erected near this stupa.

Ashoka clearly professed his faith in Buddha's teachings and calls himself an upasaka or a lay devotee in minor rock edict 1. In the minor rock edict 3, found at Bhabru, he greets the sangha, proclaims his deep faith in the Buddha, dhamma and sangha and prescribed six canonical texts for monks, nuns, and lay followers. As part

of his dharmayatra, he visited Sambodhi (modern Bodhgaya) in the tenth year of his reign; Lumbini which is mentioned in the Rummindei inscription; the stupa of Buddha Kanakamuni in the 14th year and then again in the 20th year of his reign, according to Nigalisagar pillar inscription and Upanitha-vihara in madhyadesha which is mentioned in the minor rock edict at Pangurariya. The Buddhist chronicles assert that the third Buddhist Council, presided over by Moggaliputta Tissa, was convened during Ashoka's reign at Pataliputra. The first Buddhist council at Rajgir was held immediately after the death of Buddha, while the second council was held at Vaishali hundred years thereafter. In the schism edicts found at Sarnath, Kosam and Sanchi, Ashoka strongly warned the monks and nuns who fomented division in the sangha and ordered their excommunication.

According to Mahavamsa, Ashoka despatched a number of Buddhist missions to various parts of the Indian subcontinent, after the third council. Majjhima, Kassapagota, Dhundibissara, Sahadeva and Mulakadeva were sent as missionaries to the Himalayan region; Maharakkhita was sent to Yona in the north-west; Majjhantika to Kashmir and Gandhara; Mahadeva to Mahishamandala in central India; Yona Dhammarikhita to Aparantaka in western Malwa; Rakkhita to Vanavasi; Mahadharmarakkhita to Maharrattha in the western Deccan; Sona and Uttara to Suvarnabhumi, perhaps in Myanmar or southeast Asia; and Mahinda to Sri Lanka.⁴ These literary, epigraphic and archaeological records testify to the

³ Ibid. p.363

⁴ Ibid. p. 351

exemplary role of Ashoka in propagation of Buddhist ideology within India subcontinent and in perhaps Southeast Asia.

After this initial phase of spread of Buddhism outside India, another more extensive phase of Buddhist expansion in the region west of India was accomplished during the rule of the Kushana dynasty. The restoration of political stability under one strong state increased commercial and cultural contacts between different parts of the vast Kushana Empire which extending from Oxus to Ganges. It also gave rise to a cosmopolitan atmosphere, conducive for the efflorescence of Buddhist art and religion over this entire territory. The development of Mathura and Gandhara School of arts as well as spreading of Buddhist ideology in Central Asia was a product of this fertile atmosphere.

Apart from rich archaeological material, the epigraphic and numismatic records also testify to the flourishing state of Buddhist ideology during the rule of the Kushanas. The major schism between the Lesser Vehicle (Hinayana) and the Greater Vehicle (Mahayana) was formalised after the fourth Buddhist council during the reign of Kanishka. Mahayana Buddhism, which can be traced to the older Mahasanghika school, reached China via Central Asia during the Kushana age and subsequently spread to Japan and Korea in the later centuries. Several Mahayana sutras were translated into Chinese during the late second century CE. Two major schools of Mahayana philosophy emerged during this period viz. the Madhyamaka, emphasising

the idea of shunyata (emptiness) propounded by Nagarjuna and the Yogachara which emphasised the importance of meditation and was founded by Maitreyanath. Besides the Sthaviravadins, another sect of Hinayana, the Sarvastivadins, attained great prominence. They received patronage from Kanishka and made their presence felt in Central Asia, Gandhara and Kashmir. Archaeology has revealed beautiful specimens of art and architecture in the form of the remains of a large number of Buddha and bodhisattva images, viharas, stupas, chaityas and stupa-monastery complexes from all over the vast territory included in the Kushana Empire.

As many as eighteen viharas and monasteries are mentioned in the dated Kushana inscriptions.⁵ Some of these inscriptions even refer to various monks and nuns by name and their teachers, who not only made costly donations themselves but also inspired lay-worshippers and professionals for various acts of merit. Bhikshu Bala and his disciple Bikshuni Buddhmitra were possibly the most famous donors of this age who erected Bodhisattva images at three sites viz. Kausambi, Sarnath and Sravasti. Several records refer to the donations having been made by lay-disciples at the request of venerable persons of religious orders which tempts us to suggest that some of the donations given by monks or nuns could have been made out of the amount collected from their rich patrons.⁶ These inscriptions show that nuns played a vital role in attracting donations from secular figures.

⁵ S. Shrava, Dated Kushana Inscriptions, Delhi, 1993, p.193.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.487-88.

Buddhist nun, Buddhmitra was well-versed in tripitika and was trained by monk Bala of the Sarvastivadin sect. She installed a colossal Bodhisattva image at Kausambi (Accession no. 2948, Municipal Museum, Allahabad) in the year 2 of Kanishka era and along with monk Bala also donated other Bodhisattva stone images at Sarnath (year 3 of Kanishka era) and Sravasti. Another nun Dhanavati, the daughter of Buddhmitra's sister, installed a Bodhisattva image with an inscription in honour of Buddhmitra at Mathura in the year 33 of Kanishka era.

According to the Buddhist tradition Kanishka was a great patron of Buddhism, who convened the Fourth Buddhist Council, at Kundalavan Vihara, probably in Kashmir. Kanishka's age witnessed the rise of Mahayana Buddhism and he is also associated with the spread of Buddhist faith in Central Asia and China. He is the only ruler in early India, to have depicted the image of Buddha on his coins and is known to have constructed a magnificent stupa at Purushpur (Peshawar).⁷ On the coins of Kanishka, Buddha is represented either standing or seated cross-legged which is taken as one of the earliest images of the Master conceived in human form.⁸ On Kanishka's gold and copper coins the figure of the Buddha is shown standing to front, with nimbus around the head and a *prabhavali* (aureole/halo) around the body.

His right hand is raised in *abhayamudra* (blessing pose) while the left hand is at waist level holding the end piece of his *sanghati* (cloak). On some of Kanishka's copper coins the future Buddha, *Maitreya*, is depicted sitting cross-legged on a low stool like throne with his right hand raised in *abhayamudra* and his left hand holding a water flask while resting on his lap.⁹ The legend mostly reads *Boddo* (Buddha) on gold coins and *Sakamano Boddo* (Sakyamuni Buddha) or *Metreya Boddo* (Maitreya Buddha) on the copper coins. These Buddha type coins of Kanishka are rare specimens of art and they confirm the availability of sculptural images of both *Sakyamuni* and *Maitreya* as prototypes during Kanishka's reign.¹⁰

The cosmopolitan atmosphere and affluence of the Kushana age found an expression in the production of art objects and sculptures of great beauty. The earliest representation of Buddha in anthropomorphic form, is believed to have begun during the Kushana period, when the Afghanistan-Gandhara region and Mathura, emerged as two major centres of artistic activity. While the issue, as to which region first produced the image of Buddha, is far from settled, most authors now tend to believe that both centres created the Buddha image independently as both have characteristic representation of the

⁷ P.B. Desai (ed.), *Some Problems Concerning the Kushans*, Dharwar, 1971

⁸ S. Sharma, *Gold Coins of Imperial Kushanas and their Successors*, BHU, Varanasi, 1999, p. 64.

⁹ Joe Cribb, 'The Origin of the Buddha Image – The Numismatic Evidence', *South Asian Archaeology*, London 1981, pp.231-243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.236.

Master.¹¹ The Mathura Buddha is usually called the *Kapardin* type on account of the *Kapardin* or bun of entwined hair on top of the head,¹² which looks like a seashell. It is practically always made of red sandstone speckled with buff, characteristic of the locality. The most striking characteristic of Mathura Buddha is the fact that the transparent material covering the Master's body is draped over the left shoulder only, leaving the right shoulder bare.¹³ The Buddha usually sits cross-legged on a simple pedestal, which is mostly but not always supported by lions, with his right hand raised in the *abhayamudra*. The lower part of his crossed legs and his feet are not covered and therefore are visible. The eyes are wide open and look straight at the observer.¹⁴ Over his head the artist has often depicted the *Bodhi* (pipal) tree. Sometimes flying figures are shown on either side near the top of the sculpture. In many examples two more figures, which in early sculptures clearly represent Indra and Brahma, are standing to his left and right.¹⁵ The Mathura artists also carved a large number of Bodhisattva images, Jaina images and some reliefs of scenes from the Buddha's life.

The characteristics of the classical Gandhara Buddha are completely different.

The material used was mostly grey schist of the region in the beginning, which was gradually replaced by stucco by the 3rd century A.D. The Graeco-Roman influence is clear in the facial features, wavy hair, muscular body¹⁶ and the drapery with deep rhythmic folds. Both shoulders of the Buddha are normally covered. The legs and feet are also usually covered and therefore invisible. The eyes are often half closed as if the Master is meditating.¹⁷ The figure can assume various mudras the *dharmachakra mudra* (teaching pose), the *dhyanamudra* (meditative pose) and *abhayamudra*. Some of the Buddha figures have a moustache. The *Bodhi tree*, floating divinities are missing and Indra and Brahma too are not so common.¹⁸ Gandhara also produced heavily ornamented Bodhisattva images, narrative sculptures of the Buddha's life and of the Jataka tales on stone friezes to decorate stupas of different sizes. It seems that while the Buddhist scholars and missionaries conducted the intellectual conquest, the artists of the Mathura and Gandhara school created an atmosphere of Buddha consciousness among the masses

¹¹ J.E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 'New evidence with regard to the origin of the Buddha image', SAA, 1979, pp.377-400.

¹² J.E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 'New evidence with regard to the origin of the Buddha image', SAA, 1979, pp.377-400.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.382.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ U. Singh, 2008, *op. cit.*, pp.462-63.

¹⁷ J.E. Van Lohuizen-de-Leeuw, 1979, *op. cit.*, p.383.

¹⁸ J.E. Van Lohuizen-de-Leeuw, 1979, *op. cit.*, p.383.

by endearing them to the Buddha in human form.¹⁹

The archaeological layers of sites dated to the Kushana period speak in volume about the popularity of Buddhist sects in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and north India. Political patronage as well as economic prosperity of the time must have facilitated religious building activities. The principle city of Kushanas in Bactria was **Balkh** (north Afghanistan), which apart from being a centre of Kushana polity was also a Buddhist town. According to Huien tsang, the largest monastery of Navasangharama was situated outside Balkh. **Termez** (in Uzbekistan) was another old town of Kushana Bactria where two large monasteries have been found on the mound of **Kara-Tepe** and near **Chinghiz-Tepe**.²⁰

Hadda, in Ningrahar province, near Jalalabad is one of the richest archaeological sites of the Kushana period, in terms of Buddhist art. It has an extensive area of stupas, monasteries and caves, covering about 15 square kilometres. The Hadda complex contains famous sites such as Tepe Shotur, Tepe Kafriha, Tepe Kalan, Tepe Zargarana, Bagh Gai, Gar Nau, etc. During the explorations between 1923 to 1928 and 1930-33 by the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan,

more than 1000 stupas were identified along with Gandharan stucco sculptures in large quantity, limestone and schist bas-reliefs and Buddhist wall paintings.²¹ At and around **Tepe Kalan**²² as many as 23000 limestone and stucco heads were recovered including Buddhas, Boddhisattvas, demons, donors, monks, helmeted soldiers and men of different groups. The excavation of **Tepe Shotur**²³ by the Afghan Department of Archaeology between 1965 to 1973 and afterwards, revealed a Buddhist stupa-monastery complex with chapels, decorative votive stupas, clay statuary, bas-reliefs, wall paintings, large number of coins, many gold, silver and steatite reliquaries, and a unique 'fish porch.' Hadda was surrounded by settlements which all appear to be stupa-monastery complexes, like **Ghunda Chasma, Chakhil-i-Ghundi, Barabad, Kuhna Deh, Qala-i-Shahi, Deh-i-Rahman, Shalatak, Bimaran, Filkhana and Ahin Posh Tepe. Bimaran**²⁴ in Laghman province, is a rich Kushana site, with four major stupas, Kharoshthi inscriptions, coins, gold jewellery, gold reliquary inset with rubies and a complex of six artificial caves. The representations on the reliquary include two sets of three figures – a standing Buddha flanked by the gods Indra and Brahma. This

¹⁹ S.N. Chopra, Presidential Address, *Punjab History Congress*, 18th Session, 1983, pp.19-20.

²⁰ B. Stavisky, 'The Study of Kushana Central Asia', in A.L. Basham (ed.), *Papers on the Date of Kanishka*, Leiden, 1968, p.204.

²¹ V.C. Srivastava, *Historical Probings in Afghanistan*, Varanasi, 1997, pp.65-66, 76.

²² *Afghanistan*, XXI (1-2), 1968; XXII (2, 3, 4), 1969.

²³ *Ibid.*, XXIV (2-3), 1971; XXVI, (4), 1974.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 127.

is believed to be one of the earliest examples of the Buddha image.²⁵

The most striking Buddhist remains of Afghanistan were the two colossal images of Buddha from **Bamiyan**,²⁶ 55 metre and 38 metre high, carved in deep niches. The site, lying on the western end of the central Asian silk route, about 250 kilometres northwest of Kabul offered a natural camping place to the merchandize-laden caravans and encouraged Buddhist devotees to carve out shrines and images. With two towering images of Buddha and thousands of rock-cut shrines in vicinity, Bamiyan seems to have developed into a vast monastic establishment during the later Kushana period.

Several rock-cut caves comprising a monastery carved in the three walls of a gorge, have been noticed at the site of **Homay Qala**.²⁷ These are irregularly situated Buddhist monastic cells at different levels, with a corridor running along all the three walls. The caves of **Fil-Khana** also have a similar plan where several cells, at the same level, connected by a corridor were carved out in rock. K. Nishikawa and S. Mizuno who studied the Fil-Khana caves have dated this complex to the period of the

'Great Kushans' on the basis of a Kharoshthi inscription discovered in cave no. 28.²⁸ They concluded that Fil-Khana caves were one of the earliest Buddhist caves in Afghanistan. Several other rock-cut monasteries have been reported from Afghanistan of which the caves of **Haibak & Hazar Sum** are worth mentioning.²⁹

The Chinese sources inform us that **Purushapura** (modern Peshawar) was one of the capitals of the Kushanas. According to *Fa-hsien*, Purushapur was famous for the splendid stupa built by Kanishka and Buddha's alm bowl which was brought by Kanishka from Pataliputra.³⁰ *Hiuen Tsang* also refers to the construction of a grand stupa, containing the relics of Buddha and the tower of the *Patra* of Buddha at Purushapur.³¹ Two large mounds, known as **Shah-ji-ki-dheri** near the Peshawar city have been identified with Kanishka's stupa and a monastery. The core of the stupa was made of walls which radiated from the centre.³² The centre of the stupa below ground level yielded an inscribed cylindrical casket and its lid of copper alloy (7.75 inch high and 5 inch in diameter). It has the figure of a seated Buddha on the centre of the lid and two figures of Brahma

²⁵ Upinder Singh, *A History Ancient and Early Medieval India*, Delhi, 2008, p.462.

²⁶ R. Sengupta, *The Buddha in Afghanistan*, ASI, New Delhi, pp.3-5.

²⁷ G. Verardi, 'The Buddhist Cave Complex of Homay Qala', *South Asian Archaeology*, 1975, pp.119-126.

²⁸ S. Mizuno (ed.), *Hazar Sum and Fil-Khana*, Kyoto, 1967, p.77.

²⁹ G. Verardi, 1975, *op. cit.*

³⁰ James Legge, *The travels of Fa-hsien*, Delhi (reprint), 1971, Ch. X, pp.33-35.

³¹ S. Beal, *The Life of Hsuang-Tsang by Shaman Hwui Li*, Delhi, 1973, p.63.

³² D.K. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology: The Archaeological Foundation of Ancient India*, OUP, Delhi, 2006, p.397.

and Indra with folded hands standing on the left and the right side respectively.

The site of **Mekhasanda** on the slope of the mountain, east of Chanaka-Dheri near Peshawar, was first excavated by A. Foucher.³³ The Kyoto University Archaeological Mission excavated many buildings of stone on several ridges including a main stupa in the centre of a court, standing on the main ridge and many votive stupas around it.

In the Potwar Plateau, the **Manikyala tope** was first excavated in 1830 by General Ventura, an army officer in the service of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, followed by General Court in 1834 and then investigated by Alexander Cunningham in 1863-64. Its extensive remains cover an area of about six square miles. The Manikyala tope No. 1 is a 92 feet high gigantic stupa that yielded a reliquary containing gold and copper coins of Kanishka and Huvishka, mixed with one coin of Yashovarman of Kanauj.³⁴ With these coins were found two Kharoshthi inscriptions, one on the lid of the cylindrical bronze casket and other on a plain silver disc. The main body of the stupa is a solid hemisphere of 127 feet, 9 inches in diameter. The upper and lower plinths are decorated with corinthian pilasters.

A large number of Buddhist stupas and monasteries have also been discovered in the vicinity of Taxila. These include the **Dharma-rajika stupa**, the Samgharama at **Kalawan**, the stupa-cum-monasteries

complex of **Giri**, the stupas of **Kunala and Ghai**, the Samgharamas of **Bhamala**, the stupas and monasteries at **Lalchak, Pippala, Mohra, Moradu, Jaulian, Badalpur** and **Bhallar** and the Ionic temple at **Jandial**. Most of these religious buildings were established after the founding of the Kushana city of Taxila viz. **Sirsukh**.³⁵ The best example of stucco ornamentation in this region is provided by the stupa and monastery at *Jaulian*.

Buddhism rose to great height in Kashmir under the Kushana rule when Kashmir became a leading centre of the Sarvastivada school. According to Hiuen tsang, the fourth Buddhist council was held at Kundalavan Vihara in Kashmir under the patronage of Kanishka. Remains of Buddhist art and architecture were noticed in the form of a stupa and a monastery at **Harwan**, two miles from the Shalimar gardens in the valley of Kashmir.³⁶ The site comprises of three terraces, with lower terrace representing an important Buddhist site of the Kushana period while an apsidal stupa or temple stands on the highest terrace. The overall plan of Harwan closely takes after the fire temple at Surkh Kotal (Afghanistan) where the temple is a terraced structure with a courtyard surrounding the main temple located upon the highest level. Both originally had a stairway leading through the centre of each terrace. The masonry style at Harwan

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *PA*, No. 7, 1970-71, p.9.

³⁵ J. Marshall, *Taxila*, I, rept. 1975, p.5.

³⁶ R.C. Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir*, New Delhi, 1971 (reprint), pp.105 ff.

underwent a systematic evolution.³⁷ Decorated tiles were found associated with the 'diaper pebble style' on the pavements of the courtyard of the apsidal stupa which was square in front and circular at back. The temple accommodation consisted of a spacious rectangular ante-chamber with a circular sanctum behind.

The site of **Ambaran**, in Akhnur region of Jammu district, excavated under the direction of B.R. Mani during 1999-2001, yielded a Buddhist monastic establishment of Kushana period.³⁸ During the excavation of Period II identified with the Kushana phase, a main stupa (6 × 6 metre base), another large stupa (10 × 10 metre square base), several votive stupas, walls of a monastery and another long structure probably a platform attached with the stupa were exposed.³⁹ A rectangular brick-paved platform was found associated with the stupa on its eastern side over which some lamps were discovered. According to B.R. Mani, the construction plan of this Buddhist establishment is similar to the Taxila stupas of Dharmarajika, Kalwan and Jandial.⁴⁰ The main stupa yielded a heavily encrusted copper casket with thirty circular thin sheets of gold, two circular rimmed thin sheets of silver, hundred and fifty micro beads of pearl, twelve cylindrical coral beads, two metallic micro-beads, an oval shaped silver casket, a circular gold casket,

four full and six broken circular thin sheets of gold, three encrusted copper coins, two of which are possibly Kushana issues and one bead of amethyst.⁴¹ The site also yielded Buddhist terracotta heads with close resemblance with terracotta heads of Gandhara art.

The excavations at **Sanghol** in Ludhiana district of Indian Punjab have yielded remains of two Buddhist stupas, monastery complexes, a palatial complex, an assembly hall and other official buildings from Period IV dated to 100 B.C. – 300 A.D. Sanghol has been identified with She-to-tu-lu of Hiuen-Tsang who refers to the existence of ten monasteries in it. Two Buddhist stupas, a monastery complex, votive stupas and other big stone structures have been exposed in the peripheral zone away from the main habitation. The architectural plan of the interior of both stupas is like the *Dharmachakra* or sacred wheel with spokes.⁴² The larger stupa is a cylindrical monument built over a raised square platform having three concentric rings of brick masonry in the interior, with intervening spaces divided by radiating brick spokes at regular intervals, i.e. 12, 24 and 32 spokes as we proceed from the first inner circle to the third outermost circle. From the bottom of the stupa a stone casket filled with ash and charred bones was found with a Kharoshthi legend reading *Upasaka Ayabhadrasas*.⁴³ In the east of the stupa a

³⁷ B.R. Mani, 'Concentric Circles : Kushan Structural Riddle in Kashmir', *Puratattva*, No. 38, 2007-08, p.218.

³⁸ Indian Archaeology, A Review (*IAR*), 1999-2000, pp.52-63; 2000-2001, pp.47-68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *IAR*, 1999-2000, p.59.

⁴¹ *IAR*, 1999-2000, p.60.

⁴² S.K. Vashisth, 'Buddhist Remains at Sanghol', *Punjab History Conference*, 37th Session, 2005, pp.116-118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.116-118.

paved path is noticed over which a number of votive stupas are seen. To the north of the stupa are two rectangular platforms measuring 1.35×1.05 metre and several other structures which constituted the monastic complex with a gateway attached to the shrine. Towards the northeast of the larger stupa, another stupa of smaller dimension, based on the similar *Dharmachakra* pattern, was unearthed. Apart from these, several Kushana sculptures of great beauty, sculptured railings, pillars, cross-bars, coping stones, etc., of fine textured red sandstone belonging to the Mathura school of art, form a part of the architectural project surrounding the stupa.⁴⁴ They prominently depict Buddha heads, Buddha images, Bodhisattvas, Buddhist monks, dharmachakra etc. As many as 117 pieces of railing pillars were discovered from the site.

Sugh, in Yamunanagar district of Haryana, was first surveyed and identified with the ancient city of Srughna by Alexander Cunningham.⁴⁵ Remains of a burnt brick structure, identified with a monastery of Kushana period, have been dug out at a distance of 1.6 kilometres in the south-west of Sugh. It is a rectangular enclosure measuring approximately 130×70 metre with massive walls of 75centimetre width and 6 metre height.⁴⁶ A

stupa-cum-monastery complex was discovered at **Adi Badri** in Yamunanagar district showing two phases of structural activity. Remains of a brick stupa have been noticed from **Asandh** in Karnal district. The gigantic structure rises to a height of more than 25 metre and has a circular drum with an elongated dome. As many as 44 courses of the circular wall have been noticed.⁴⁷ Buddhist stupas of the Kushana period might have existed at Hathin, Bhuna and Bhadas also.⁴⁸

It is very likely that Mathura was the headquarter of the Kushana empire in the east. Alexander Cunningham identified several Buddhist sites in and around Mathura, such as the Upagupta Vihara, Huvishka Vihara and Kunda-Sukha Vihara at **Katra** and **Jail mound** respectively.⁴⁹ The inscriptions also suggest the existence of many viharas at Mathura like the **Buddharakshita Vihara, Chutaka Vihara, Srivihara, Suvarnakara Vihara, Dharmahastika Vihara, Kastikiya Vihara** and the Vihara situated at Anyor. Two Buddhist monasteries were also excavated from Kankali mound and Jamalpur mound respectively. These finds prove that apart from being a centre of the Mathura School of Art, Mathura was also an important religious centre during Kushana times.

Many other sites in Uttar Pradesh have yielded remains of Buddhist

⁴⁴ IAR, 1968-69, p.25.

⁴⁵ *Archaeological Survey Reports(ASR)*, Vol. II, 1871, pp.226-27.

⁴⁶ A. Kesarwani and S.K. Vashist, 'Buddhist Suptas in Haryana : New Evidence', *Puratattva*, Vol. 33, 2002-03, pp.87-93.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.87-93.

⁴⁹ ASR, Vol. I, pp.232-41.

establishments. The excavation of **Sankisa** in Farrukhabad district revealed evidence of a monastery from Maurya to Gupta period.⁵⁰ The site of **Sravasti** with twin name of Sahet-Mahet denotes two groups of remain with Sahet representing the famous Buddhist monastery – the Jetavana Vihara and Mahet – the ruins of the ancient city of Sravasti.⁵¹ The excavation at **Piprahwa** and **Ganwaria** in Siddharthnagar district by K.M. Srivastava, revealed some structures dated to the Kushana period (Period IV – 2nd-3rd century A.D.). A monastic complex of well burnt bricks was exposed with as many as 17 rooms and an extensive floor of baked bricks, which might have served the purpose of a public hall.⁵² The site was identified with Kapilavastu by K.M. Srivastava. The Buddhist religious centre of **Sarnath**, in the vicinity of Varanasi has brought to light an inscription of Kanishka's reign,⁵³ monastic remains of the Kushana period⁵⁴ and a copper coin of Huvishka. The inscription, dated in the year 3 of Kanishka, records the dedication of an inscribed Bodhisattva statue and an umbrella with a post, by Friar Bala along with *Mahakshatrapa Kharapallana* and *Kshatrapa Vanaspara* of Varanasi. This inscriptional evidence sufficiently proves that Sarnath flourished as a religious town during the Kushana period.

These rich archaeological remains point to a close connection between the Kushana rule and flowering of Buddhist art and

Mahayana form of Buddhism, suggesting that political hegemony, trade and Buddhist ideology went hand in hand under the Kushana Empire.

During the Gupta and post-Gupta period, there is a common notion that the popularity of Buddhism was declining in India due to emergence of theistic Brahmanical cults. But in the light of the testimony provided by Fa-hsian (399-414 CE), who visited major Buddhist centres in India during the reign of Chandragupta II, we need to reassess this view. Fa-hsian noted the prevalence of Hinayana sect in Gandhara, Bannu, Kanauj and Kausambi. He also noticed that both Mahayana Buddhism and Hinayana school were popular in Afghanistan, Punjab, Mathura and Patliputra however only Mahayana monks were present in Khotan. Several prominent Yogacharin scholars like Asang & Vasubandhu (late 4th/early 5th century) and Madhyamaka thinkers like Buddhapalita (6th century), Bhavaviveka (6th century) and Chandrakirti (7th century) preached their doctrines. According to Chinese sources Buddhist scholar Kumarajiva (343-413), is said to have studied the doctrine of the Sarvastivadi sect of Hinayana school in Kashmir but subsequently became a Mahayanist scholar and travelled to China.

During the Gupta and post-Gupta period a remarkable growth in the size, scale and ornamentation of some monastic structures can be noticed at prominent Buddhist centres of Mathura, Sarnath, Kaushambi,

⁵⁰ IAR, 1996-97, pp.139-142.

⁵¹ K.K. Sinha, *Excavation at Sravasti (1959)*, Varanasi, 1967.

⁵² IAR, 1970-71, p.72.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Reports (ASIAR), 1919-20, p.26.

Bodhgaya, Nalanda and Kasia. Some other Buddhist centres which flourished during this time include Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Ajanta, Ellora, Amravati, Bagh, Sanchi, Vallabhi, Devnimori, etc. Nalanda received patronage from the Gupta rulers and Ajanta and Ellora flourished under the Vakatakas. The existence of flourishing Buddhist monasteries at Nagarjunakonda and Kanchipuram is well recorded in archaeology. The reference to the Avaivarttikas, a Mahayana sect, in an inscription from the Comilla region in present Bangladesh (507-08 CE), testifies to the presence of Buddhism in the easternmost part of the Ganga delta. Fa-hsien also mentions the number of stupas dedicated to Bodhisattvas and also various monks such as Sariputra, Mahamoggalana, Ananda, and others. Some of these stupas were located in Mathura like the relic stupas of Sariputra, Mudgalaputra, Purna Maitrayaniputra, Upali, Ananda and Rahul. But the Chinese pilgrim also reports some monasteries that were deserted like the ones at Gaya and Kapilavastu.

It is significant to note the influence of the ideas of Bhakti on Buddhist practices, especially on the rites of worship. Fa-hsien mentions a ceremony involving procession of images on chariots at Khotan, lasting two weeks and Pataliputra where it lasted only two days. The worship of the heavenly Buddha Amitabha (infinite radiance), heavenly bodhisattvas Maitreya (the kind one), Avalokiteshvara (embodiment of compassion) and Manjushri (associated with wisdom) gained ground among monks and laity. The Goddess Tara was the feminine personification of compassion. Numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas, with their distinct iconography found

representation in the sculptures and paintings of Buddhist centres like Ajanta, Bagh, Kanheri, Sanchi, etc. Mathura continued to be a major centre of Buddhist art while the Sarnath Buddhas are considered as among the greatest works of art of ancient India, owing to their beauty and finess.

A number of stupas and rock-cut chaityas and viharas were constructed during this period including those of Jaulian, Charsada, and Taxila in Gandhara. One of the premier examples of stupa architecture is the imposing Dhamek stupa of Sarnath, with a diameter of 28.3 m and a height of 34 m. This drum like stupa with four niches at cardinal points for Buddha images, is constructed on a very large and heightened base. The lower portion of the stupa is adorned with exquisitely carved stones with geometric floral designs, human figures and birds, while the upper portions reveal brick work. Rock cut architecture in the form of chaityas and viharas reached a high watermark at Ajanta where 23 out of total 28 caves were carved out during the rule of Vakatakas. Cave number 19 and 26 dated to 5th and 6th centuries CE are highly adorned chaityas with rich sculptural decoration, while the rest of the caves are viharas.

Certain Buddhist monasteries like Nalanda achieved fame as educational centres during Gupta and post-Gupta times. The literary reference to Nalanda goes back to 6th-5th century BCE, but the excavation at Bargaon (site of the Nalanda monastery) revealed remains beginning with the pre-Gupta period. Gupta kings Kumargupta and Budhagupta may have built monasteries at Nalanda which continued to receive patronage in post-Gupta times during the

reigns of Harshavardhan and Palas. While Fa-hsien does not mention Nalanda, Hiuen-Tsang (c. 629 -645CE) spent over five years studying the Yogachara doctrine at this centre of learning. Harshavardhan of the Pushyabhuti dynasty is credited to have convened a great assembly at Kanauj, where Hiuen-Tsang, along with other scholars gave discourse on Mahayana doctrine. Hiuen-Tsang also mentions other flourishing monasteries in the Magadha area such as those of Bodhgaya and Tilodaka as well as some erstwhile centres which were in a ruined state. The Raktamrittika mahavihara close to Karnasuvarna(Chiruti, near Murshidabad), the capital of Shashank Gauda ; Vasavavihara in the Pundravardhana area of northern Bengal and some monasteries in the Samatata area in the Bengal delta, have also been mentioned by him. Yijing, another 7th century Chinese scholar lived in the monastery of Nalanda for ten years and visited Bodhgaya and the monastery of Tilodaka, which he describes as housing 1,000 monks.

The literary and epigraphical sources as well as the archaeological remains of numerous Buddhist sites clearly demonstrate that Buddhist teaching and learning continued to flourish throughout the early history of the Indian subcontinent. Although we can discern a shift in the archaeological horizon of Buddhist structures from north-western India to eastern India, Buddhism remained as one of the most prominent religions of the Indian subcontinent.

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