

International Seminar on Buddhism and Gandhāra Art

Keynote Address

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Holding of this Seminar in Varanasi or Kāśī is quite befitting for the fact that the core region of Gandhāra i.e. Udyāna and Kāśī both were known for textiles in ancient times. While the former produced beautiful blankets, the latter was known for weaving fine quality clothes, particularly the silk fabrics. This reputation finds place in Mahāvāṇika Jātaka of about 2nd century B.C.:

काशिकानी च वत्थानि उड्डाने च कम्बले¹

We are not aware of the present state of affairs of Udyāna but Kāśī continues to retain its ancient glory in the silk sarees although the trade is not at its peak now.

Region : The region of Gandhāra has been defined again and again by the scholars but a fully satisfactory solution is yet awaited. In a colloquy held in February 1991 in the Indian Museum, Calcutta after considering various facts, suggested that the region of Gandhāra from the cultural and artistic viewpoint has two components. One is the heartland or the core area and the other is the greater Gandhāra. The heartland is somewhat triangular piece of rocky region surrounded by the hills between the present day Afghanistan and the northern Pakistan and roughly measures 100 kilometers from east to west and about 70 kms. from north to south. Bifurcated into two distinct parts by the Indus, the land was known in the ancient times as Aparā Gandhāra (western side) with Puṣkalāvātī (modern Charsadda) on the confluence of Indus and Kabul rivers as capital and Pūrva Gandhāra (eastern side) with Takṣaśilā as the head quarter. The greater Gandhāra, however, commanded a vast land as it influenced the art productions in the periphery of several hundred kilometers.

The derivation of name is not certain. We know that the *gandharvas* were well versed in performing arts i.e. music and dance. The ladies were beautiful, looking like nymphs (*apsaras*). On the other hand, the word Kandhāra may be derived from 'Skandhāvāra,'² i.e., military regiment centre as the land was known for fighters and warriors who were employed by the ambitious rulers and invaders. When Chandragupta Maurya annexed it from Selucus, it was transformed into a military regiment, i.e., Skandhāvāra. Among the Greeks it was well known as Arackosia, a locality near Kandhar is even now known as Daṇḍa, which means army.³

Culture has much more larger dimension than history, geography, politics and even religion. Same is the case with the Gandhāra region which remained culturally associated with India for long. The Indians particularly those who are conversant with this cultural significance feel emotionally attached and affected with the incidents in the region. In ancient time, there was a large common Orient in which several countries of modern times behaved like one family members and India and Gandhāra region specially Afghanistan also shared this affinity.

Destruction : The brutal attack on the Buddhist antiquarian wealth in Afghanistan by some uncivilized persons in the recent past shook the entire world. It was really paradox that the country, which was the foremost to honour the apostrophe of peace severely assaulted his spirit. The destruction of Buddhist remains was an act of dismantling principles of peace and this really hurt the peace and co-existence or *pañcaśīla* as propagated by the

Master. While necessary precautions against such barbarity will be taken by the world community, the academicians have also to raise their voice and endeavour to restore the heritage as far as possible.

Early References : The earliest scripture of India, i.e., **R̥gveda** does mention the Gandhāra region in somewhat strange context but ofcourse appreciates its important characteristic of producing quality wool.⁴ The later Vedic literature also remembers Gandhāra and further details are to be seen in the epics specially the **Mahābhārata** and several names of the area are met with. The heated discussion between Karṇa and Śalya furnishes detailed information about Gandhāra country and its people.⁵ The ties between two countries were further cemented from the time of the Buddha. As the literary traditions inform that the two merchants Tapassu and Bhallika came to pay their respect to the Buddha in the eighth week after the Enlightenment. They are reported to have come from Ukkala in the Gandhāra region and offered *madhugolaka* (the sweet balls) to the Master who in exchange offered his eight handfuls of hair for worship.⁶ They are to be taken as the first lay devotees. The arrival of these merchants covering all the length and breadth of about two thousand kilometers is really a remarkable incident in the history of two countries. The texts further inform that they were brothers, Tapassu being elder and Bhallika younger, and were sons of a trader leader, Sārthavāha of Pokkharvatī town. Their second visit to the Master was at Rājagṛha and this time the Buddha preached them. Deeply elated by the sermon, Tapassu and Bhallika became devout Buddhists and entered the *saṅgha*.⁷

The **Lalitavistara** records that the two merchants came from Uttarāpatha and passed through Bodh Gaya to offer honey and pieces of sugarcane to the Buddha. The **Mahāvastu** also narrates the incident and informs that honey and *ghee* were the gift of these two devotees. Subsequently, Hiuen Tsang in the early 7th century says that these two followers on return erected *stūpas* at Asitanjana near Balkha.⁸

We come across a reference where a surgeon and physician, Jīvaka Kumārābhṛtya of Magadha is said to have received his training at Taxila and many students from Kāśī also went to Taxila to study under Jīvaka.⁹ The mention is also made of migration of some Śākya when they were massacred by Virūdhā of Kośala and they took shelter in several countries and one prince went to Udyāna in the Gandhāra region. His son Uttarsena was able to obtain the relics of Buddha after *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and erected a *stūpa*, which was seen by Hiuen-tsang. A. Stein located this in the Swat Valley. Both Fi-hyan and Hiuen-tsang wrote about the visit of the Buddha to the country of Udyāna (Gandhāra) but this seems to be the outburst of their emotions and the Master never went there. Hiuen-tsang recorded the visit of Buddha to several places but a close scrutiny of facts does not confirm such statement.¹⁰ Of course, the erection of *stūpas* remained a pious act and several spots were chosen for it. Hiuen-tsang mentions another Śākya king who was responsible for building a *stūpa* at Bamiyan.

Carvans & Monks : We also find numerous references when the monks used to travel with the Sārthavāhas (merchants). This must have been in the mutual interest of the traders and the monks. On one hand, the caravan felt safe with the fellow travellers and on the other, the monks must got necessary provisions from the caravan. The spiritual discourses and discussion were also befitting and entertaining. Fi-Hyan mentions the deposition of skull bone of the Buddha enshrining a *stūpa* near Jalalabad (Udyāna). The place probably is, therefore, known as Haḍḍā derived from *hadḍi* meaning bone.¹¹ Both the Chinese travellers testify their visit and worship to this sacred place. Hiuen-tsang informs that the eyeballs, tooth, bowl, etc. of the Buddha were also installed for worship. The *stūpa* where the tooth of

the Master was deposited became famous as Dauranta i.e. Dantārāma in Jalalabad.¹²

All these references directly or indirectly suggest that there was a good deal of interaction between India and Gandhāra region even before the invasion of Alexander in the 4th century B.C. Afghanistan may be considered as the first region to receive the message of the Budha. When the *saṅgha* was divided into different branches, there were five groups of monks of *mahāsāṅghika* settled in the Gandhāra region in the pre-Christian century. These were Ekavyavahārika, Kaukalika, Bahuśrutīya, Prajñāptivādin and Lokottaravādin.¹³

The Councils: While the interaction between India and Gandhāra in the realm of art started towards the close of first century A.D., the thought process has commenced much earlier. It is gathered from the texts that a monk Sambhūta Sāṅgakavāsi who belonged to Mathurā and attended the second Buddhist Council after 100 years of the Great Demise, went to Kipin (Kapiśā) to check the growing influence of *mahāsāṅghikas* and to propagate the real message of Master of Theravāda.¹⁴ Sambhūta was able to convince the Buddhist council that *vibhajjavāda* was the essence of Buddha's thought and the same was later upheld by the third Council also which was convened in the time of Aśoka. The learned monk, however, did not succeed much as the *Mahāsāṅghikas* were rapidly increasing their strength and he ultimately returned to Mathura and breathed his last.

As resolved in the 3rd Council in the 3rd century B.C., several missionaries were despatched for the propagation of *dhamma* to a number of countries and places.¹⁵ Of these two went to North-West, i.e., Thera Majjhantika to Kashmir and Gandhāra and Thera Maharakshita to Yona. This may be pointed out here that both these regions were the part of the Aśokan Empire. Yona was next to Gandhāra where the Bactrians had settled after the departure of Alexander.¹⁶ Selucus had ceded this territory to Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century B.C.

A very interesting fact is that the implementation of the resolution of the 3rd Buddhist Council for selecting a monk from the Yona country to preach in Aparānta (Konkaṇa) in the western part of India.¹⁷ This suggests that the Buddhist scholar Yonaka Dhammarakṣita who participated in the Council was a great scholar and devout Buddhist. Before coming to India he must have gone under vigorous scriptural and religious training in his own country and on the basis of his background, he was asked to preach *dhamma* in India itself. We can, therefore, presume that the teachings of the Buddha had started attracting the foreigners even before the Mauryan period. Yonaka Dhammarakṣita was fully conversant with Pāli texts and he preached Aggi Khandopama Sutta from Aṅguttara Nikāya.¹⁸ This part lays stress on leading a disciplined and pure life by the monks. Thus, a foreign monk was held in high esteem not only in learning but also in his conduct. As the result of this 37,000 persons received *pabbajjā* (monkhood). We are informed by the **Mahāvamsā** that same Sutra was delivered by Mahendra who went to Śrīlanka on the same mission.¹⁹

Kuṣāṇas: We now come down to the dawn of the Christian era and find a gold plate from a *stūpa* Ekakūṭa from the Udyāna region which records in the Kharoṣṭī inscription the name of the King as Senaverma and also the two early Kuṣāṇa kings i.e. Kuzul Kadphises and Devaputra Sadakṣaṇa (Wema Kadphises).²⁰ This was the time when the Indian rulers although exercise their sway in the Gandhāra region yet were being uprooted by the powerful Kuṣāṇa invaders who were advancing with speed and reached the heartland of India like Mathurā and even beyond. An inscription from Mathurā informs about the monk Jivaka from Udyāna or Oddiyāna donating a pillar to the Mahārājā Rājātirājā Devaputra Huviṣka Vihāra in the year 59 corresponding to A.D. 137.²¹

Later : It appears that in the 5th century A.D. the territory of Udyāna was bifurcated into Nagarhāra and Udyāna. The kings of the Indian origin or Hindus sometimes appear on scene and in the 8th century A.D., the Hindu Śāhīs shifted their capital to Udbhāṇḍapur²² (Unda near Attok in Pakistan) due to pressure of Chinese and Turks. An inscription on the image of Gaṇeśa mention Khingil Shahi as Otyata Shahi i.e. Śāhī of Udyāna.²³

Despite a turbulent situation, Jalalabad or the region or Udyāna retained its cultural glory and was known as Nagarhāra i.e. the ornament of Uttarāpatha. There was an exchange of scholars also and we find Bhikṣu Vira Deva who graduated from Kaniṣka Mahāvihar at Peshawar under Ācārya Sarvajñāna Śānti became the Head of Nālandā Mahāvihāra.²⁴

There are numerous places in the Gandhāra region, which find adequate place in the Indian texts but due to paucity of time, it is not possible to discuss all. Kabul finds place in the Vedas and river Kubha is mentioned.²⁵ An inscription unearthed about 30 miles west of Kabul (Wardak) belong to 2nd century A.D. mentions *Mahāsāṅghikas*. The language is Prakṛt Sanskrit and the script is Kharoṣṭī.²⁶ It is recorded on the reliquary of the Buddha. This archaeological evidence from the vicinity of Kabul is probably the earliest evidence mentioning *Mahāsāṅghika*.

Similarly, Śālatura on the confluence of river Kabul and Indus (modern Lahore) is known as the birth place of Pāṇini,²⁷ the great Grammarian who belongs to 5th-6th century B.C. Another remarkable incident, which took place here, was the discussion between Thera Nāgasena, a well-known Buddhist monk with the Greek King Menander in the 2nd century B.C. The king was much impressed with the arguments of the monk and as a result of this he embraced Buddhism and erected several *stūpas*.²⁸

Archaeology: The archaeological evidence generally corroborates the scriptural references but these start from the Mauryan period. From about the middle of the 6th century B. C., the region was the part of Achaemenian Empire in the time of Cyrus, the Great.²⁹ Later, in an inscription of Darius, the people of Gandhāra are mentioned as subject of his Empire and the soldiers of this place fought on the side of Xerxes against Greeks in 480-479 B.C.³⁰ The land remained under the Persian domination until it was conquered by Alexander in 326-27 B.C. As pointed out earlier, Chandragupta Maurya annexed Gandhāra from Selucus in 305 B.C. and in the time of his grandson Aśoka, the process of spread of Buddhism began. Towards the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., the Mauryan Empire was disintegrated as a result of which several groups of foreign rulers exercised their sway and these included Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians or Śakas, Ausakas, Pārthians and then Kuṣāṇas. We have to depend mainly on the numismatic sources for the reconstruction of the history of the region.

Art Style : It was at this point that Gandhāra became the melting pot of several cultural currents and the result of which a mixed school of sculptural style emerged which is known as Gandhāra School of Sculpture. At the same time it did maintained the distinct features which bespeak an independent language of artistic evolution.³¹ The geographical and historical factors are of course important to assess the nature and features of this School. It, of course, had the origin in the pre-Kuṣāṇa era but as a well-established and dominating school, it functioned under the patronage of Kuṣāṇas. Unfortunately, the history and chronology of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty is complicated issue. Although the scholars have been emerged from the mid-19th century yet the issues have not been fully sorted out so far.

An art historian often endeavours to study and suggest the chronology of a style of art. In several cases the efforts have met the desired success and it has been possible to project a reasonable time frame for some important art schools. The case is rather different for the

Gandhāra sculptures. This complex nature is suggested by various names given to it like Gandhāra, Indo-Greek, Indo-Hellenistic, Graeco-Buddhist, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Roman, etc. One can infer that not one but several ateliers were functioning in different places simultaneously, and these represented some distinct features of their own.

The problem becomes more critical when we are confronted with the paucity of inscribed material and that too mostly undated. Even in case of date, the era for reckoning is not certain. So far only eight dated sculptures of Gandhāra School have been recovered but the date given does not lead to a definite conclusion for the fact that these represent different eras.

The workshops of Gandhāra School were spread in a large zone and the regional characteristics were bound to creep in. Only one binding factor is prominent and that is the Buddhist theme. Almost 90% of the sculptures illustrate the Buddha, the Buddhist pantheon, the Buddhist devotees, etc. The remaining 10% represent Brāhmanical and alien subjects. Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa are seen on the coin of Agathocles from Ai-khanum in the 2nd century B.C.³² It was the meeting place of Hellenism and Orientation. Śiva, Skanda, Mātṛkas and later Gaṇeśa were installed at different places. Coins also illustrate some deities.³³ It appears that the Gandhāra products were at the service of Buddhist monks for the dissemination of Buddhism. The narration of life scenes and allied events was a favourite subject matter and proliferation of the postures gained momentum. Under the impact of the worldly detached Buddhist monks, the Gandhāra art although handled mostly by the foreign artists, remained unsensual.

At the beginning of the School, Jātaka and symbols dominated but by the passage of time, the figure excelled. It appears that due to canonical prohibition, the artists of Gandhāra were depending on the canonical theme and when the restrictions were relaxed the anthropomorphic figure of Buddha was introduced. Soon it attracted the society and his forms were carved in multiple ways. The origin of the Buddha image is a matter of big controversy and the champions of Gandhāra and Mathurā Schools have expressed their divergent views on the subject both have strong arguments in their favour.³⁴

The interaction between the two schools of art, i.e., Mathurā and Gandhāra is also a fascinating subject.³⁵ The establishment of two *devakulas* one at Māt near Mathurā and the other at Surkhkotal in Afghanistan where live or heroic size portraits of Kuṣāṇa kings were installed, hints to the process of assimilation of two societies. The study of these portraits is a very interesting subject in itself. The findspot is locally known as Ṭokrī or Iṭokrī ṭilā and the word seems to have derived from Tukhāra meaning a foreigner.³⁶ The epithet is justified for the Kuṣāṇas. These are to be compared with the portraits on the coins. There are several trends, which travelled from Mathurā to Gandhāra and vice-versa.³⁷ The interaction was not only in trade and art but is also seen at the religious, ritual and mystic level. The copy of an epigraph from a well in Shakardarra in the Gandhāra region was prepared and was set up in a well at Rawal near Mathurā. This was probably done with the hope to transform the brackish water into sweet water.³⁸ There was a time when Mathurā school was dominated with the Gandhāra impact but after some time, probably towards the end of the reign of Vāsudeva the situation changed and the earlier convention revived. This intermixing of artistic traits bespeaks of the fusion of two cultural currents and subsequently a feeling of repulsion began and this resulted in the disintegration of the Kuṣāṇa Empire.

The region of Gandhāra continues to be the mine of archaeological wealth and we notice some important or rather startling discoveries now and then. The inscription

discovered at Rabatak near Surkhkotal recording the first regnal year of Kanishka is an excellent citation.³⁹ This not only records the name of some important Kuṣāṇa rulers but also indirectly suggests that Kanishka was a co-ruler for some time with Wema Kadphises before being coronated as a full-fledged king.

The products of Gandhāra art which are mostly in the bluish schist stone, some in stucco, a few in metallic terracotta are scattered and deposited in a good number of museums and art galleries in the globe. The ivories from Begra, ancient Kapiśā are world famous. These betray the early central Indian and Mathura sculptural rendering. We are well aware of the ivory guild of Vidiśā through the southern gate of the Sānchi Mahācetiya.⁴⁰ Due to uncongenial climatic conditions the Vidiśā products became extinct in the place of their origin but found a good market in Gandhāra and stood well. It is difficult to give an exact figure of specimens of this prolific art style, which was at its zenith in the second or third century A.D. Despite being somewhat mundane in characteristic and representing somewhat decadent phase of late Greek and Roman features, the Gandhāra art did serve as a forceful vehicle of Buddhist thought which spread in several neighbouring countries.⁴¹ It also influenced the contemporary and later schools of art. The credit of shaping the largest statues of the Buddha also goes to Gandhāra and at Bamian the gigantic image one measuring 175' and other 120' were known in the world.⁴² After their demolition the lovers of Buddhist art and admirers of Buddhism are considering their recreation and installation somewhere.

The Gandhāra region and its art products including the monuments suffered terrible blows at the hands of invaders repeatedly. The fierce attack in the garb of Islam this year has been the most shocking. The reports are that the Minister of Culture in the Taliban Government went to the Kabul Museum with hammer and himself broke many Buddhist antiquities and also asked the museum staff to destroy.⁴³ It is astonishing that the people of a country resolved to blast their own heritage. This attack on the world civilization was more serious and of far reaching consequences than the destruction of the World Trade Towers of New York on September 11, and on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001.

It is hoped that most of the issues as raised in this address will be discussed in detail in the week-long seminar by the subject experts and I just briefly surveyed them. Such academic gatherings are of great value for the fact that the gist of the archaeological campaigns on the sites of Gandhāra by various countries will be discussed. This is all the more necessary as the reports of the excavations are published generally in the languages of the respective countries and remain somewhat rather unnoticed to many scholars working on the subject.

Unfortunately, much of the material is reported to be lost or deliberately demolished in Afghanistan which formed the core region of Gandhāra but whatever remains, has to be taken care of and documented well for the benefit of the next generation. With the advanced techniques of documentation, preservation and restoration this target may be achieved without much difficulty. The largest number of Gandhāran remains outside the Gandhāra region are in India with wonderful specimens in the Indian Museum, Calcutta and the Chandigarh Museum. We are naturally concerned for good care of these art treasures supported by perfect record. This august gathering may also perhaps recommend some guidelines so that the destruction of the world heritage as deliberately executed in Afghanistan is not repeated anywhere in the globe. I bow to those pioneers who spent their life-time in excavating, interpreting, preserving and highlighting the treasures of the great Gandhāra Art. Let us hope after the fall of the Taliban regime the new government in Afghanistan will seriously take up the restoration of the rich Gandhāran heritage.

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