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Iconographic interaction between Ladakh and Kashmir in the remote antiquity

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Abstract

The present work looks at the remnants of Buddhism in a relatively unorthodox terrain of Kashmir. Buddhism is generally believed to have come to Kashmir in the time of emperor Aśoka, but the present work shows that it was prevalent in the Kashmir valley long before his time. Buddhism was prevalent in Kashmir in the time of the native king Suredra who ruled some time after the Buddha's mahaparinirvana but before Aśoka. As opposed to the perceived isolation of the valley in popular perception it shows the vibrant cultural interaction of the Kashmir valley with rest of India. The archaeological remains scattered throughout Kashmir attest the vibrant presence of Buddhism in the valley. In this regard the present work closely examines the cultural and artistic links between ancient Kashmir and Ladakh. The connection of Kashmir with Ladakh was not just confined to politics or ruling circles, but it also enjoyed an important position for the fact that one important trade route which connects India with her neighbors in the north and the north-west actually passed through Ladakh. Dissemination of Buddhism from Kashmir valley towards the east or Ladakh region has been encountered at many places in the form of petroglyphs, inscription, sculptural and architectural finds which have been discussed in detail in the present work. Nevertheless, certain things need to be delineated at the very outset in the context of the present work. First is regarding the usages of the term iconography or remnants. This term has been used exclusively in the context of 'archaeological or structural remnants/remains' in the course of the present work while fully acknowledging the availability of several other markers of presence of Buddhism in Kashmir from ancient times. Secondly, the present work deals more with the historicity of Buddhism in Kashmir than its presence forms and cultural nuances.

Keywords: Buddhism, Vihāra, Stūpa, Rajatarangini, Kharoshti, Remnants

Introduction

Kashmir, popularly known for its picturesque landscape remained unseen historically. Very less people aware with that Kashmir had been one of the most important centers for Buddhism ages ago and it was from here that Buddhism propagated to even outside the Indian subcontinent. Although, Buddhism had footing its steps on the land of Kashmir much before than general speculation, yet the fruition of Buddhist institutions and their unique material manifestations saw only in the early Kushana period. From this period the paradigm of Buddhism had changed methodically and institutionally in upward trend. Up to this period people used to worship only Buddha's foot print and stūpa, but during this period *vihāras* or monasteries assume a prominent position among the other institutions of the state and monks hold a unique class distinction.

Buddhism is generally believed to have come to Kashmir in the time of Emperor Aśoka (c.3rd BCE), however literary sources indicates that Buddhist doctrine was prevalent in the region even before the reign of Aśoka. In fact it was from Kashmir that Buddhist principles either as a culture (way of life) or faith had further travelled to the neighboring regions Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and china, however what happened in the eastward Kashmir where Ladakh region lies remain obscure. The aim of this article is to put insights on how Ladakh region was politically and culturally connected with mainland Kashmir.

According to Kalhana's Rajatarangini the first known ruler of Kashmir, Gonanda, who was related to Jarasaṅdha (Magadha) was succeeded by his able son, Damodra ^[1].

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¹. M.A. Stein, (ed.), Op. cit., 59, 60.

But Surenra was perhaps the first Buddhist ruler of Kashmir, if not the first Buddhist ruler, most possibly he would be the first patron of Buddha's teaching in the region. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* recorded that Surenra belonged to a dynasty whose members are known for their religious endowments. Khagendra, the father of Surenra had created two such endowments, one of them having left its name to the existing village of Khonamuh, in Pampor. Kalhana also mentions that Surenra himself, as a person, humble in nature and kept himself away from sinfulness ^[2]. The first Buddhist-*vihāra(s)* in the region have already been existed before Aśoka's missionary and Aśoka believed to have invited Buddhist monks from Kashmir to Third-Buddhist-council at Pataliputra. Hence, the great Buddhist patron (might be Surenra) constructed the first Buddhist *vihāras* in the region even before the Aśoka's missionaries arrived. Interestingly it has been brought to our knowledge that Narendrabhavana, one of these *vihāras*, was located in the Soraka or Suru, the then *Dard region*, which apparently Kargil district of Ladakh, beyond the Zoji-La pass ^[3]. The other *vihāra* was Saurasa, corresponding to the village Sowur (Saura) on the bank of Anchar Lake, to the north of Srinagar city ^[4].

Despite having limited sources with reference to arts, culture, religious and political state of Ladakh in the period of early history, few, but very important archaeological and epigraphic findings in and around the periphery of Ladakh brought it into light that Buddhism remained the main domain in Ladakh from the early phase of history. The first Buddhist *vihāra* which was said to be found in Suru (Soraka) valley in Kargil district of Ladakh, was dated back to pre-Aśokan era indicating that Buddhist influence was very strong hold in the regions.

As we know after Mauryan rule in Kashmir region, a series of foreign invasion began in about 200 BCE in north-western India. The first to cross the Hindu Kush range were Greeks, who initially ruled Bactria or Bahlika (around northern Afghanistan). The invasion took place one after another and some of them ruled concurrently in different regions ^[5]. In the beginning of the second century BCE, i.e., post Aśokan period, the Indo-Greeks occupied a large part of north-western India, a much larger area than that conquered by Alexander ^[6]. They have entered and pushed forward as far as Ayodhya and Pataliputra in central India, however they could not consolidate and failed to establish united rule in India. One of the most well-known Indo-Greek rulers was Menander (165-415 BCE) who embraced Buddhism in entire region of north-western India. Menander got converted into Buddhism following his debate with Buddhist scholar Nagasena ^[7]. Menander put number of questions before Nagasena on the subject of Buddhist philosophy, which he was puzzled about, and being satisfied on the answers of Nagasena he embraced and patronized Buddhism. Since then he is also known as Milinda and the debate between Milinda and Nagasena became so popular which recorded in the form of text known as *Milinda-Panho* or the Questions of *Milinda*. However, we do not have any

indication of his association with Ladakh. Nonetheless the Greek influence on Indian art and architecture is immense, hence this fascinating Indo-Greek 'art and architecture' of Gandhara and Kashmir draws attention from every nooks and corner of the Indian sub-continent. Ladakh which most probably was politically part and parcel of Kashmir-Gandhara province has also had significantly influenced by it.

Chronologically the last Indo-Greek ruler who was ruling in Taxila (in present Pakistan) was swept away by the invading forces from the west known as Scythians (or Sakas), who had long been settled in the Parthian provinces of Seistan (present day eastern-Iran and southern Afghanistan) and had mingled and intermarried freely with the Parthians. According to R.C. Agarawal during the reign of Azes-I, the powerful ruler of the Sakas (around 58 BCE) who extending and consolidating the Saka power in north-west India was at its peak. So far no specific evidence was discovered about the extension or dominions of Sakas in eastern Kashmir of Ladakh regions. Eventually the Greek and Sakas were followed by mighty Kushana dynasty in north-western India, Kujula Kadaphises perhaps the founder and first Kushana ruler originally belonged to a Yueh-Chi tribe, emanated from the north-west of China. One of the following rulers of Kushana dynasty, Vima kadaphises (around 50-60 CE), is said to have once captured Kabul valley and Taxila from the Parthians, who had regained power following the death of Gondophernes. Around second century (c. 127-151 CE) one of the most zealous king in Indian history, Kanishka the great and powerful Kushana king, came into power ^[8]. After Aśoka, it was Kanishka - the zealous king of Kushana dynasty under whom a great resurgence and revival of Buddhism took place. His kingly renown reached the highest and he brought the most remote too within his jurisdiction. Kashmir eventually became the hub of Buddhist learning.

Kushana dynasty conquered huge territories including the provinces of Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan (present Xinjiang province). Interestingly, Ladakh region was also a part of Kushana Empire, is attested by epigraphic evidence discovered by A.H. Francke in the recent past. Francke discovered a Kharoshthi inscription at the side of Khaltse-bridge over Indus river, at Khaltse village, in Ladakh, 94-km from Leh city towards west, lies on the Srinagar-Leh highway (NH-1), reflecting the importance of ancient central-Asian trade route. The inscription comprises two lines: 1, "Sam. 1 100 202020 4[III]", 2, "Maharajas Uvima Kavthisasa" and it has been translated as 'Era 184 or 187' during reign, and 'Uvima Kavthisasa of the inscription has been identified with the Kushana ruler Vima Kadaphises, the son and successor of Kujula Kadaphises or father of Kanishka, which long back professor Rapson pointed out that the name with title Maharaja in Kharoshthi is there ^[9]. This inscription reflects that Ladakh region was politically part of the Kushana kingdom. As already described that the introduction of Buddhism to Ladakh from Kashmir is testified to the fact that emperor of Kashmir named Surenra established first Buddhist *Vihāra* called Narendrabhavana beyond Zojila pass at Saurasa or present day Suru in Kargil district even prior to Aśoka's reign ^[10].

2. Ibid. 91

3. Ibid. 93

4. Ibid. 94

5. See R.S. Sharma, India's Ancient past. Oxford University Press, 2005. p.190

6. R.S. Sharma, Ibid., p.191

7. Bhikkhu Nagasena, Milindapanha. (available in bilingual Pali and English)

8. King of Kings, Kanishka the Kushan (Gold coin of Kanishka)

9. A.H. Francke, Antiquities of Indian Tibet, Calcutta, India, 1926. Vol.ii. p.274

10. M.A. Stein, The chronicles of the Kings of Kashmir, Vol. I, Delhi 1961. p.17

Kalhana also specified in his *Rajatarangini* that this site is in the neighborhood of the Dard country, a town called Soraka, which is now identifies with present village called Tangole Gon, in Kargil district. The *Vihāra* is located in the village Tangole -Yokma which is one of the largest villages in Kargil district of Ladakh, on the left bank of Suru river. This area is apparently known as Gohn or Gonpa (monastery) even today and also mentioned in the *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh* about the same half between Sankoo and Kargil (Gazetteer 1992; 336) ^[11]. Francke also reports that there are several rocks near Khaltse's bridge bearing ancient Kharoshti inscriptions and one with an ancient Brahmi inscription also. He also reports that he saw five or six *sarada* inscriptions in the old monastery of Chigtan village in Kargil district. Hence it gives the impression that introduction of Buddhism in Ladakh region was almost corresponds to the Kashmir, which was before Aśoka.

Besides, an important reliquary or stūpa in Sani village of Zanskar region, popularly known as Kanika chorten (stūpa of Kanishka), is being associated with the Kushan dynasty. The stūpa is almost 20-feet high having an unusual shape. It is thought to be the oldest existing religious site in the whole region of Zanskar in particular and entire Ladakh in general ^[12]. The monastery is now built to accommodate this ancient stūpa (*chorten* in native language) known as the Kanika-chorten, which is presumed to date back to the time of the famous Kushana emperor, Kanishka ^[13]. The name "Kanika" for this stūpa is commonly used form of emperor Kanishka's name. He is famous especially in Buddhist literature as a propagator and is said to have patronized an important Buddhist conference in Kashmir. This seem to be only existing Buddhist site in the entire region other than Gandhola monastery in Lahaul (H.P.) which has a history purportedly goes back to Kushana times.

The dissemination of Buddhism along with Art and Culture from Kashmir towards the east or Ladakh region has also been encountered at many places in the form of petroglyphs, sculptural and architectural finds. Alchi monastery is apparently one of the best examples for its architectural styles and paintings. Apart from Kharoshti Inscription of Kushana period, the depiction of early stūpa in petroglyphs and inscription of Kharoshti, Brahmi and Sarada also helps understand the affinity with the Kashmir style art and culture. Engraving the early stūpa on petroglyphs at Hunder Dok, Disket, Murgi, (Nubra) and Alchi are few examples. General Cunningham discovered from Drass an inscription of *sarada* characters, and read the word Maitreya among others. Sculpture of a horseman at Drass which has an inscription on the backside found by Cunningham's transliteration is said to have the only source available. Francke said the language of the inscription is Sanskrit. Dieter claims inscription in Sanskrit found from Purig also. The recent exploration in Suru valley unearthed some Buddhist sculptures included of three feet high Padma-Pani from Namsuru ^[14]. Further, few kilometers away from village-Tsangra two more beautiful sculptures of Buddha and depiction of stūpa on rock are found from the lower storey of the old house of Barsha ^[15]. Earliest Buddhist

archaeological remains and subsequent findings substantiate that Kargil area of Ladakh region, is archaeologically rich and has been an important centre of Buddhism from where we are getting numerous evidences. However, till date no archaeological remains of Aśoka have been encountered in the region of Ladakh, except the scanty remains of Tiri, popularly known as *Tiri-chhod-rten* in Changthang region of Leh district ^[16]. Traditionally it is believed that the stūpa in Tiri-village has been ascribed to have been built by Aśoka, the date is coeval with the reign of Aśoka. The subsequently alteration and addition in this stūpa made it difficult to delineate the external contour without preserving the Aśoka feature thereof.

Hence, Kalhana's finding of the vihāra or monastery named Narendrabhavana of Surrendra, near the country of Dards, obviously indicates that Buddhism must either have been prevalent in the territory or was introduced into it in the time of Surrendra to make him found a monastery there. Later, in Aśoka's time, when Buddhism spread widely in Kashmir and other territories it appears to be only reasonable to assume that monks in greater numbers crossed into Ladakh and Gilgit from Kashmir and Gandhara to spread the faith more extensively. Thus, Buddhism has been prevalent in Ladakh from before the beginning of the Christian era.

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¹³. Rizvi. Ibid

¹⁴. Sonam Spalzin, gSter-rNying – The Archaeological Remains of Ladakh, Bangkok Publishers, Leh, 2015. p.57

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