

DECLINE OF BUDDHISM IN PAKISTAN: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The decline of Buddhism in the regions now in Pakistan is usually associated with the arrival of Islam. There is no doubt that the regions that are now dominantly Muslim were once dominantly Buddhist. But whether it is a simple matter of arrival of Islam to these areas that the entire Buddhist population turned into Islamic demography? How this transformation took place and at which historical juncture? This paper reconsiders such a narrative in light of some historical evidence traced from the contemporary sources of the period. While doing so a sketch of religious situation of the subcontinent at the arrival of Islam is presented. The paper is based on historical discourse analysis; the data is derived from various contemporary sources like the local Indian narratives, accounts of the Buddhist travelers from China besides the Islamic historical sources as well as the debate of contemporary scholars on the issue is also reviewed.

Key Words: Buddhism, religious history, archeology,

INTRODUCTION

Usually when one talks about Buddhism in Pakistan what comes to one's mind are the Buddhist historical sites scattered across Pakistan. Among these are many stupas like the Dharmarajika Stupa in Takht-i-Bahi, the Votive Stupa, Shinggardar Stupa, the Amluk Dara Stupa and the iconic Buddha statue in Swat and many others. One may also think of the museums in Taxila and Peshawar that are showcasing the Buddhist remains in form of coins, sculpture and other artifacts that were discovered there. (Hassan, 2017) As the presence of Buddhists in Pakistan today is almost unnoticeable and only a few Pakistanis have recently reported themselves as Buddhist, but that has never been an area of focus in academia. What has been focused is the Buddhist past, the history of Buddhism in the regions of Pakistan and the Buddhist art. These aspects of the history of Buddhism are again dealt in a very naive manner and mostly a kind of powerful story is presented as historiography of Buddhism. This powerful story for the explanation of the decline of Buddhism in Pakistan is that Buddhism withered away in this area after the arrival of Islam. According to this powerful narrative it was the arrival of Islam that resulted in the destruction of Buddhist culture and conversion of Buddhist population to Islam. (Johan Elverskog, 2010, p. 1) No matter how popular this narrative has become it is problematic to accept and consider this as only explanation for the checkered history of Buddhism itself in the area before Islam and the thirteen hundred years expanded interactions and relations between Islam and Buddhism across Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Thus the existence and interaction of Buddhist population under the Islamic dominion in different parts also runs contrary to the idea of Muslim destruction of Buddhist heritage and coercive conversion of the Buddhist population of this region to Islam.

For retelling the tale of Buddhism in Pakistan and to seek the explanation of its decline one needs to look at the history of Buddhism in Pakistan through various sources and to consider various religious, economic and social factors. This calls for a deep analysis of the socio-religious scenario at the time of Islamic conquest of this region which itself took place in various episodes as well as the situation of Buddhism in these regions during this period is also to be gauged before making any generalizations.

If we look at the regional history of Buddhism in Pakistan, we find that Buddhism once flourished in the areas now in Pakistan. This early thriving presence of Buddhism in Pakistan has marked the region with the Buddhist sacred art and architecture. These Buddhist remains are helpful in visualizing the spread of Buddhism in these regions in the past. The Gandhara civilization¹ that flourished in the areas now in Pakistan was bearer of Mahayana Buddhism and the famed Gandhara culture, art, and learning appear as essentially Buddhist. (Brancaccio & Behrendt, 2006) Historically

Gandhara is mentioned as back as the reign of Cyrus the Great in the 6th century B.C.E but its geographical description was perhaps provided in detail for the first time by the Chinese Buddhist Monk Tsun-tsang in the seventh century C.E. He visited it at the time of its decay when the monasteries were in ruin as he describes and the picture, he paints is that of a decline of Dharama here. Tsun-tsang's testimony is very helpful in reviewing the Buddhist past here.

Tsun-tsang described the Gandhara region quite accurately mentioning its important cities and sites. The extant of Gandhara as per these early sources and the archeological facts included the Peshawar valley, the hills of Sawat, Dir, Buner and Bajaur the areas that now correspond to northern Pakistan. The regions of Pakistan have the very ancient and much revered Buddhist Stupas of Taxila and Swat besides many other sites of great historical significance for Buddhists. The manuscripts found in Gilgit-Baltistan region are considered to be the oldest surviving Buddhist scriptures. (*The Gilgit Manuscripts, the Oldest Manuscript Collection Surviving in Pakistan and India: History of Information*, n.d.)

The archeological traces of Buddhism in Pakistan are many and well explored and studied as compared to the remains of some other traditions. The archeological data of Buddhism in Pakistan today can be found in the areas that were then part of Gandhara. The first and foremost significant site of Buddhism is the city of Taxila situated at the distance of about 35 kilometers from Islamabad. The Buddhist archaeological sites discovered in Taxila are dated to 5th BCE to 5th CE telling a story of thousand years of flourishing Buddhist civilization here. These archeological sites are scattered in and around Taxila and are considered very sacred by the Buddhist of all the schools as they regard these places are closely linked with the life stories of Buddha. This huge archeological data is suggestive that the Taxila and its vicinities remained centre for Buddhist sculpture, architecture and learning for years. Due to the religious significance of these sites and the relics attached to the life stories of Buddha the Taxila Museum attracts many Buddhist visitors every year.

Likewise, in Takht Bahi another site of archaeological and historical significance is found that comprises of the ruins of an ancient Buddhist monastery situated on a hilltop some 152 meter high. Takht Bahi was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1980 and is considered as the largest Buddhist archaeological site that dates to the Gandhara period. The site is a detailed monastery and contained many relics and remains including two Stupas. addition to two stupas, it has many other relics and remains. There are many other sites of Buddhism that were excavated and studied by the various archeological surveys and teams. Tope Mankiala in near Rawalpindi is also one such Buddhist site as the legends has it; Buddha had offered his body parts to feed the seven hungry tiger cubs. Katas Raj a temple complex near Jehlum that houses many sacred sites of the Hindus, Buddhist and Jains there is a famous Buddhist Stupa situated near this complex.ⁱⁱ Likewise around there are over 500 heritage sites and monuments in Peshawar city alone. ('Long Read', 2019)

The Swat Valley has many Buddhist carvings and stupas, and Jehanabad contained a Seated Buddha statue. Kushan era Buddhist stupas and statues in Swat valley, most unfortunately, were demolished by the Talibans and after two attempts by the Taliban, the Jehanabad Buddha's face was dynamited. Only the Bamiyan Buddhas were larger than the carved giant Buddha statue in Swat near Mangalore which the Talibans had attacked and demolished. Kashmir and Laddakh also remained centers for Buddhist learning, while Sindh is also dotted with some Buddhist sites. No doubt that all these archeological remains prove the existence of a significant Buddhist population in the areas that are now Pakistan.

Beside archeology if we look at the religious history of Buddhism, we can find that it was home to Mahayana tradition.ⁱⁱⁱ It is interesting to note that many the schools of Mahayana Buddhism^{iv} that are flourishing in various regions owe their origins, translations of their sutras and Buddhist learning to the Centers of Buddhist learning that flourished in Gandhara or through Gandhara now Pakistan. The sutras of the Buddhist schools that flourished in the region were translated into Chinese, Tibetan and other languages. The centuries of Chinese pilgrims' route to Gandhara and the travelling of the Indian Buddhist monks to China resulted in largest collection of Buddhist scriptures in Chinese language. (R. U. Samad, 2011, p. 220)

The region is full of the artifacts related to the Jataka stories of the life of Buddha. Many of the relics and sacred places are referred to this region. Likewise, Buddhist Masters who expounded and taught various schools of Mahayan Buddhism lived and worked here. Guru Rinpoche and Monk Marananta, two renowned Buddhist mystics, were born here. Guru Rinpoche, also known as

Padmasambhava, was reincarnated in the Swat valley. Buddhists in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan consider Padmasambhava the “second Buddha.” Monk Marananta is said to have originated in the present-day Swabi region of Chhota (little) Lahore. He travelled from Chhota Lahore to Korea through China, where he preached Buddhism. (*Remembering Pakistan's Buddhist Past | The Express Tribune*, 2022)

Despite the sacred geography of Buddhism in Pakistan and the fact that these areas have been center of Buddhist tradition the view that Decline of Buddhism in these regions is because of Islamic conquest and settlement in these areas is questionable. As when Islamic expansion started in these regions of Buddhism had already witnessed some decline and even destruction of Buddhist culture at the hands of some Anti-Buddhist rulers. The well recorded destruction of the Hepthalites or the White Huns is that preceded the arrival of Islam is also to be considered as factor for decline of Buddhism in the region. (Frye, 1984, p. 351)

There is ample historical data to show that the decline and degeneration of Buddhism had already set in and the impact that arrival of Islam had on Buddhism was not only the reason for decline of Dharma; Firstly, one needs to bear in mind that Buddhism was not the major denomination of the Indian subcontinent, nor it was considered an orthodox system of beliefs from its very inception. It was a nonorthodox teaching and contrary to the prevalent practices of India. Both Buddhism and Jainism were declared to be *Nastiks* or heretical teaching. (Nicholson, 2013, pp. 166–179) Mahatma Gautama Buddha had a few followers who followed his moral system. His teachings were essentially a challenge to the Brahminical structured systems where lower caste had no right to the learning of higher truth i.e. the Veda. While Buddha taught indiscriminately, he and his followers moved from town to town to preach their path of liberation from *Dhukkha* the miseries of life. It was only after almost three the centuries of Buddha's mission that a great king Asoka converted to Buddhism. His conversion transformed Buddhism into a state sponsored missionary religion. His son Mahinda is credited with promoting the Buddhism towards the further south Asia. (Hirakawa, 1993, pp. 95–104) From the first century of Christian era onwards there were some key developments in the history of Buddhism. These include the conduct of councils to decide the issues related to the regulation of Sangha, canonization of scriptures and the most significant division of the Buddhist Sangha into Thervada and Mahasnghikis or the Mahayana. Likewise, the extensive construction of Buddhist monastic buildings and complexes started from this period. As well there emerged the *jataka* stories and literature referring to the relics of Buddha. These stories are provided sanctified the region with the itinerary of Buddha. The Master came here during one of his rebirths he walked here and had offered his limbs as offering to feed the needy and hungry.

These schisms enriched the Buddhist culture on the one hand and expanded the Buddhism geographically on the other hand. Persecuted and their teachings being rejected by the elders or the Thervada the Mahayana Buddhists masters concentrated the northern part of the subcontinent, the areas now in Kashmir and Pakistan. It was through these regions that the Buddhist teachings and scriptures were disseminated to China, Tibet and beyond. While the Thervada schools prevailed mostly in the South the areas where Master started his teachings the Mahayana teaching became popular in the north and from here to the East Asia and central Asia.

The ancient Chinese accounts and maps that are documented in *Gaoseng Zhuan* a biography of the Chinese Buddhist monks describes in very detail that the areas of Buddhist learning were confined to Gandhara regions. In these Chinese sources of the fourth and fifth century the geographical description of the areas where they came to learn and pay homage to the signs of Buddha coincides very closely with the geographical definition of Gandhara. (Brancaccio & Kurt Behrendt, 2006, p. 107) It was in this region that the monks coming as pilgrimage all the way long from China this use to see, touch and worship the alms bowl of Buddha. Thus Faxian has mentioned that "the Buddha's alms bowl is in this country," in the city of Purushapura, or modern Peshawar. Even he has gives a vivid description of the bowl that was the focus of veneration and worship 'bright and glossy luster of various colours, black predominating, with a thickness of about a fifth of an inch, large enough to hold more than two pecks, and showing the distinctively marked seams of its fourfold composition'. He further records the veneration of that bowl: "When it is near midday, they bring out the bowl, and along with the common people, make their various offerings to it, after which they take their midday meal. In the evening, at the time of incense, they bring out the bowl again." According to Faxian this bowl was kept in a monastery that had the capacity for more than seven hundred monks. (Brancaccio & Kurt Behrendt, 2006, p. 108)

Both the monks Faxian and Zhimeng have almost shared the identical itineraries while the later travelers Song Yun in 520 and Xuanzang in 630 saw a drastic change in pilgrimages and the route crossing the Hindukush. Both indicate that Chinese pilgrims disappeared from the scene, and the number of Indian monks who arrived in China suddenly decreased only fifteen are recorded for this period in the Tang Gaosellg zhuall (Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks) besides there is a change in the route as well. The new road was reorded by Jinagupta, who left Gandhara around 554 and reached the China in 557 and then comes Dharmagupta who took the same road in the 570.(Brancaccio & Kurt Behrendt, 2006)

Jinagupta was a monk born in Gandhara in 528, the youngest son of Vajrapala in Purushapura. He entered the priesthood in the Mahavali Vihara under the guidance of JiiannyaSas. the kingdom of the Hephthalites. The land was barren, with little population, and nobody prepared the necessary drink and food. Jinagupta points to current political difficulties and records how he luckily escaped from this difficult situation with the help of supernatural powers. His records show that in the entire region where Buddhism was flourishing earlier now was in decline.(Brancaccio & Kurt Behrendt, 2006)

Two or three generations after the Hephthalites invaded Gandhara, Song Yun visited Gandhara during the reign of Hephthalites in 520, at the apex of their political power according to him, this brutal King conducted massacres, did not believe in the Buddhist religion rather had devoted himself to demons, and fought against the Kasmira over the territory for three years. However, Song Yun was an eyewitness also to the magnificent Buddhist activities around Shahbaz Garhi in the centre of the Gandhara area, and he does not make any mention of devastation or actual destruction of Buddhist temples by the Hephthalite king here. A century later, Xuanzang visited the same region. According to him, the royal family of Gandhara was extinct and the Kapisian deputies governed few people in deserted towns and villages, where most followed the heretical schools and few believed in the True Law. He records that one thousand monasteries were deserted ruins filled with wild shrubs, and that most of the stupas were decayed and about one hundred heretical temples were occupied by heretics.

When the Northwest had been invaded by the Hephthalites, Barniyan and Kapsi had not fallen under their political influence. The subsequent disappearance of the Hephthalites stimulated the rise of local powers. This political environment at the turn of the seventh century brought a radical change in the trade routes running through the Hindukush as well as the center of Buddhist activities and trade shifted from Gandhara.(Brancaccio & Kurt Behrendt, 2006)

The accounts of these Chinese travelers bear an ample testimony to the fact that Buddhism was already in decline before Muslims entered the subcontinent. Buddhism had lost its political authority in these regions much earlier. Moreover, it is also a historical fact that Buddhism has not been the religion of the entire region; rather there existed various Hindu systems, Jainism and other tribal or local traditions as well. The Mauryan kings some of them had adopted Buddhism as their official religion but no consolidated long lasting Buddhist empire ever existed or controlled the entire region after these Buddhist rulers. Buddhism existed side by side variety of cults and denominations each with different set of deities, beliefs and customs. The Chinese accounts also preserve a valuable record of the beliefs and practices of the Indian subcontinent during the 7th 8th century. Huien tsiang records disputes of different sects whom he calls as heretics ^vand mentions that there were 18 Buddhist sects among the Indian Buddhists. He also pointed to the fact that during the seventh century when he visited the country, there existed a kind of jealousy and rivalry between the Brahmans and Sramanas the term which he uses for Buddhist monks. Likewise, I-tsang also mentions the differences between the Buddhists which existed when he visited the subcontinent soon after Huin Tsiang and points clearly towards the degeneration of Sangha, decay and decline of Dharma. Likewsie we find that the early Muslim sources indicate the presence of Buddhists in both sides of the Indus in Lower Sind at the time of the arrival of the Muslims in Sindh. we learn from the muslim sources as well that the budhist population of Sindh collaborated with the Muslim armies against their Brahman rulers. Here also Buddhist though influential but they were not the rulers. Collaboration of Buddhist in case of Sindh might also indicate the state of affairs between them and their Hindu rulers. As the former collaborated and supported the Arab forces in process of consolidating their political authority. Both al Baladhuri and Chachnama are indicating towards such collaboration(Maclean, n.d.)

As far as the recent demography of Buddhism in Pakistan is concerned no doubt there numbers are too little to be mentioned. According to the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), there were 1,884 holders who identify themselves as Buddhists. These Buddhists are mostly

residing in Sindh and Punjab regions. These Buddhist are known as Boari Buddhist a self styled community living throughout rural Sindh, including Ghotki, Sanghar, Khairpur, Nawabshah, and Nowshahro Firoz as per one of their members who reported to dawn during their visit to taxila last year. According to him they are almost 650 families followed Buddhism however, they were unable to practice their religious rites because there were no temples or stupas in their region. (*Number of Practicing Buddhists in Pakistan Dwindling - Newspaper - DAWN.COM*, n.d.)

According to a report, most of the Baori Buddhists do not have CNIC cards, and the actual Buddhist population could exceed 16,000. In Punjab, Buddhists live primarily in the outskirts of the Mandi Yazman and Rahimyar Khan of Rohi region. Today, they have around 15 colonies in various villages of Mandi Yazman. Tridev Roy, the Chakma chief, who himself was from the Chittagong region and settled in Pakistan was perhaps the first prominent Buddhist of Pakistan who claimed Pakistani Buddhism by founding and chairing the "Pakistan Buddhist Society" from 1996 until his death in 2012. Another prominent figure is Lala Rajoo Raam who is the representative of the Baori Buddhists community. He is also a councillor for Chak number 75 DB, Union Council number 88. He also twice contested elections for the Punjab assembly.^{vi}

CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded from above glance into the historical materials that decline of Buddhism had begun in the 6th and 7th centuries CE as a religious practice as well as a political power. While Buddhism had never been an Empire except for a brief period in history during the rule of Buddha king Asoka and his son Mahinda. It has the Brahmanical, devotional and cultic form of Hinduism as its religious competitors before arrival of Islam. Likewise the White huns or Hephthalite who had invaded and sacked the Buddhist monasteries need to be accounted for some Buddhist ruins and not every sack and destruction took place at the hands of Muslims rather in few episodes of muslim consolidation of power the Buddhist collaborated with them. in the north. However as late as the 13th century during the second or the third phase of Muslim invasions by the Turks destruction of some Buddhist sites took place needless to say that the existence of many archeological sites, remains and relics also indicate that perhaps the decline took place due to deserting and migration and not only due to the destruction and coercive conversion as it is usually considered. Buddhism had disappeared here slowly and by this time, however, Buddhism was flourishing in many other parts of Asia. A fact that is also attested by the records of the Chinese Pilgrims that the Buddhist Monks from India themselves travelled to China, Tibet and planted the drying plants of Indian Buddhist schools in new soils where they still flourish. Sometimes these migrations were due to hostile situations while some other times the trade and mercantile activities also supported such travels.

ENDNOTES

ⁱFor an in depth survey of the archeological discussion on Gandhara please see; (Brancaccio & Behrendt, 2006; Ray, 2019; R. Samad, 2011)

ⁱⁱ Author has visited all these areas during past five years time and again, leading many study tours to these Buddhist sites of Gandhara region.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Buddhism in Pakistan. By a Pakistani Buddhist. 4th Impression* (Pakistan Publications, 1963).

^{iv} Mahayan Buddhism is one of the two main branches of Buddhism. Now a days the adherents of Mahayan Buddhism are mainly found in Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, Tibet, Thailand, Malaysia and Mongolia

^v For example he mentions among heretics he disputed and refuted a Brahman of the Shun-si sect or the Lokayata School see: Samuel Beal. *The life of Hiuen-Tsiang* (London: Kegan Paul, 1911) p.75

^{vi} (*Number of Practicing Buddhists in Pakistan Dwindling - Newspaper - DAWN.COM*, n.d.)

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