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RESEARCH ARTICLE
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Spatial History and Cultural Geography of Gandhara

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ABSTRACT

Every geography has a history and every history has a geography but some places or spaces have greater geography and even greater history. The present paper is an attempt to identify both the history and geography of Gandhara which is generally referred as an ancient culture region of Bharat (India). It was a holy land of Buddhism. Buddhism existed and survived as a major cultural tradition of this region from 3rd century BC to approximately 1200 AD. The place or space of Gandhara had (and even has) its own special qualities across time and space. It was a geographical 'frontiers' and a cultural 'heartland'. In the language of location (space or place) it represented a grand space or spatial crossroads of empires and economies. It has witnessed confluence and influence of cultures. In an attempt to understand the frontier culture, this research examines the cultural history and historical geography of Gandhara. Besides an engaging history, Gandhara has many geographies; it is experienced and represented. The geography of Gandhara had many manifestations; it is cultural and also religious. The interpretation of this geography and history requires an interdisciplinary perspective. This research investigates the effects of 'frontier exposure' on the cultural geography of Gandhara. It also investigates the role of Gandhara in cultural transmission. It also provides a deeper insight to the spread or diffusion of Buddhism. Thus, this paper contributes to a growing literature on the cultural history and historical geography of Gandhara.

Key Words : Buddhism, Gandhara, Geographical Frontier, Cultural 'Heartland', Diffusion of Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

Gandhara was the name given to the historical and cultural land that existed in the Uttarapatha (Uttara Kshetra) of ancient India. (Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, 1923) This historical region (Gandhara) is generally referred as an ancient culture region of Bharat (India). It was a holy land of Buddhism. Buddhism existed and survived as a major cultural tradition of this region from 3rd century BC to approximately 1200 AD.

The Geographical Boundary of Gandhara:

Gandhara was spread over the western bank of the Indus River. Geographically Gandhara was situated in the Peshawar valley (around the confluence of the Kabul and Swat rivers). It included the Peshawar valley and the Swat valley. It even included Dir, Buner and Bajaur. The Gandhara also included the region around the great city of Taxila.

Geographically or spatially Gandhara was bounded on the north by the Hindukush Mountains. The Safed Koh range from the southern boundary. The Indus River makes the eastern boundary of Gandhara. The Suleiman Mountains along the border of Afghanistan forms its western boundary.

The land of Gandhara had a greater geography and even greater history. The region of ancient Gandhara (Gandhara Mahajanpada) existed even during the pre-historic period. It included the north-western part of the Panjab and the adjoining areas across the Sindhu. At the time of Mahabharata, it formed a part of Uttarapatha. According to Jataka the kingdom of Gandhara included Kashmir as well as the Takshashila region. (Raychaudhuri Hemchandra, 1923) At the time of Buddha,

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the extent of this state was over one hundred yojanas. Its boundaries included parts of eastern Afghanistan, the whole of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Kashmir Valley. It was frequently described by the Chinese pilgrims. In the story of their journey they have recorded it as Kien-to-lo. It is identified with the Valley of Peshawar (Warraich, 2015). Xuan Zang has also described the existence and extent of Gandhara.

The Historical and Political Boundary of Gandhara:

The political boundaries of Gandhara were never fixed. It wavered with the strength and weakness of its rulers. Sometimes the Peshawar Valley and Taxila were collectively referred to as Gandhara; sometimes the Swat Valley (Sanskrit: Suvastu) was also included in its boundary. However, the heart of Gandhara, was always the Peshawar Valley. In the historical past Gandhara contained two great cities, Takshasila and Pushkaravati (Raychaudhuri, 1923). The Kingdom of Gandhara is considered to have lasted from the first century B.C., till the eleventh century AD. It attained its height position under the Kusana kings in the first to the fifth century A.D. (Jens Braarvig and Fredrik Liland, 2010). The kingdom was ruled from different capitals in different periods in the history. The ancient capital of Gandhara was at Taxila, Purus Pura (Peshawar), Pushkalavati (Charsadda), Kapisa (Bagram) and in its final days from Udabhandapura (Hund) on the River Indus.

The Cultural Realm and Cultural Boundary of Gandhara:

The influence of Gandhara Buddhism has been found in a much area wider than the Peshawar Valley. It may be called the Greater Gandhara (The term Greater Gandhara has recently been coined by Richard Salomon). This area had a far-reaching influence in ancient times (Jens Braarvig and Fredrik Liland, 2010). The boundaries of this vast area can only be loosely determined. On the northwest it is marked by the Panjshir valleys in Afghanistan with a northward extension in the Kunduz valley along the traditional trade route. Although the Kabul valley is generally looked upon as the southern limit of this region, Gandharan sculptures have also been found in Ghazni (Gandharan manuscripts were found in Bamiyan region of Afghanistan). Numerous other Buddhist cultural sites have also been found in Swat, Dir and Bajaur. On the east Taxila marks the cultural realm of Gandhara with numerous monasteries and several stupas. The territories of Kohat may also be included in the cultural boundary of greater Gandhara. These areas (territories) may conveniently be referred to as Gandhara Cultural region (Warraich, 2015).

The Cultural Landscape of Gandhara:

In Gandhara, several places have been identified as having association with the Bodhisattva. Later on, stupas were erected and monasteries were built on those places. With the passage of time Gandhara became a holy land for the followers of Buddhism (Harmatta, 1994). The early Buddhism was introduced here by Ahsoka (in third century B.C.). These monasteries and stupas have (re)created the cultural landscape of Gandhara.

Buddhist Monasteries and Stupas of Gandhara:

Purushapura Monastery, Peshawar:

The city of Purushapura (Peshawar) was once a renowned Buddhist site. It was associated with Kanishka. He is credited for the foundation of the great stupa and viharas in this city. It is located outside the old walled city of Peshawar. In the past it was known as Shah-ji-ki-Ḍheri. It has an imposing stupa.

The Great Stupa was built during the Kushan era in the 2nd century AD. (Litvinskii *et al*., 1996). It had bone relics of Buddha.

The Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian visited Peshawar or Fu-lou-sha (as called by him). In his travelogue he has also described about the Kanishka stupa. At that time, the great monastery had 700 monks (Litvinskii *et al*., 1996). Xuan Zang also visited this site. According to him it was the 'tallest stupa' in this part of Asia.

Tahkt-iBahi, Mardan, Peshawar:

Takht-i-Bahi is one of the most important Buddhist sites of Gandhara. In Urdu 'Takht' means 'throne' and Bahi means 'water' or 'spring'. The monastic site was called Takht-i-Bahi because it was built at the top of a hill and was watered by a spring. It was one of the most beautiful Buddhist monasteries of Gandhara. It was located north of the Mardan city. The monastic site was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980 (Rajput, 2018). The Monastery had many stupas. It also had an unfinished statue of Buddha (Kumar, 2015).

Takht-i-Bahi had Buddhist monasteries and stupas dating to the 1st century BC. It was occupied from

the 1st to 7th century AD (the Gandhara period). Unlike many other early Buddhist monastic sites, it escaped successive invasions and is still exceptionally well preserved. The hilltop location of Takht-i-Bahi seems to have protected it from destruction.

An inscription recovered from this place dates the site to the first half of the first century AD, but the earliest portion were likely a century earlier. Xuan Zang (7th century) describes the main stupa as the biggest and most spectacular he had ever seen.

Sahr-i-Bahlol, Mardan; Peshawar:

Nearby the Tahkt-iBahi are the ruins of Sahr-i-Bahlol. It is a small fortified city in Mardan. It dates from the early 1st century. Other monasteries and stupas of this region were constructed in the 6th or 7th centuries.

The excavations at the ancient ruins in Mardan have revealed the hidden treasures of the Buddhist civilisation. It has yielded many sculptures of the stupas and monasteries. The Buddha statues recovered from this site as well as from the nearby site of Tahkt-iBahi and Sahr-i-Bahlol, are seen today in various European museums.

Jamalgarhi Monastery, Mardan; Peshawar:

This monastic site is also located close to the great monastery of Takh-i-Bahi. This Buddhist monastery is dated back 2nd to 5th century A.D. Similar to Takh-i-Bahi it also contains a large stupa. Close to the monastery there are several viharas also. These viharas also have small stupas. The excavation of this site has yielded many sculptures and many donative inscriptions. The excavation has also yielded a bust or head of Buddha.

During excavation a khroshti inscription was also discovered from this place. It bears samavat 359 (275 A.D). The site is believed to have witnessed successively the rise and fall of different dynasties of Parthians and Kushans. It was finally destroyed during the Huns invasion.

Sacred Monastic Sites of the Swat Valley:

Swat Valley was an important Buddhist region in the historical past. More than 400 Buddhist sites have been discovered in this region.

Uddiyana was an ancient kingdom, situated to the north of Gandhara in ancient India. It was situated on the left bank of the Swat river (a trans Indus region). Mongali or Mangala was ancient capital of Udyana (also known as Uddiyana). Mahavana monastery was situated near Manglaur in present Manglavor. It was known as the great forest monastery.

Close to the city of Mongali (Manglaur) there was another monastery known as Masura Sangharama. It was an ancient vihara.

Monastic Site of Butkara; Swat Valley:

Butkara is an important Buddhist site of Gandhara. It is one of the most important Buddhist sites in Swat valley. The Butkara Stupa is said to have been built by king Asoka. Although it is dated slightly later to the 2nd century BC. It is believed that the Stupa was enlarged on five occasions during the following centuries. Every time it was (re)erected by encapsulating and building over the previous structure (Rajput, 2018).

Buddhist stupa of Butkara had great religious significance in the Buddhist world. The sacred monastic site of Butkara is identified as the monastery of Ta-Lo. It was containing original relics of the Buddha. It was mentioned by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Sung Yun. He visited this place in 520 AD. It has been referred as Meng-Chich-Li by the other Chinese pilgrims of the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries AD. The monastery of Butkara was situated in the ancient capital of Udyana (Mingawara).

The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang traversed the Swat Valley around 630 AD. He observed that there were 1400 Buddhist monasteries in the valley. Previously these monasteries had 18000 monks. Most of the monasteries were in ruins during the time of his visit and only few monks remained in them. The largest monastery active till the time of his visit was at Mingora. Today, Mingora is the largest city in Swat valley.

Chakdara, Swat Valley:

Chakdara is another important Buddhist site in the Swat valley. Chakdara was connected to the interiors of Afghanistan through the ancient route. These routes were traversed through Nawa Pass and Katgala Pass (Rajput, 2018).

It has extensive remains of the Gandhara culture including important Buddhist sites. Buddhist sculpture of the 1st to 7th centuries have been discovered

(excavated) from nearby Buddhist sites. The most important site in Chakdara is Damkot Hill. The Buddhist community living in this area came to a catastrophic end in the late 5th century.

Damkot Hill, (Dir), Swat Valley:

Damkot Hill had an important Buddhist monastery. It is an ancient site. It was resettled in the beginning of the 1st century AD. The excavated remains have a stupa and monastery. It was situated just below the top of the hill. There are also some Buddhist carvings at the foot of the hill (Rajput, 2018).

Andan Dheri Chakdara, Swat Valley:

Andan Dheri an important site is in Chakdara. AndanDheri had a monastery and a stupa near the monastery. According to the Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang it was related to a famous legend of Buddha. large number of Gandhara sculpture were recovered from this site.

Chat Pat, Swat Valley:

Chat Pat is an important Buddhist monastery. It is located near Dir. It existed from the 1st to the 4th century AD. The location of Chat Pat monastery makes it special. It was nestled into the hills, beside a small stream, where the monks could retreat and mediate. A large quantity of Buddhist sculptures has been discovered from the nearby stupas.

Ghalegay, Swat Valley:

A religious monument (stupa) of the Buddhist era is located near Ghalegay, Swat Valley. It is also known as the Shringdar stupa. It is the biggest stupa of the subcontinent. The relics of Buddha is enshrined in this stupa. This stupa was constructed by Uttarasena, an ancient king of Swat valley in the seventh century AD. It is believed that Chinese traveller Xuan Zang visited this stupa in 630 AD.

Aziz Dheri Swabi:

Aziz Dheri of Swabi is considered as central place in Buddhist era. It is located in Swabi district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. History of the ruins goes back to 3rd and 4th century BC. Aziz Dheri was an important site of Buddhist culture and civilization. It continued up to 9th and 10th AD. It contains relics of Buddhist era.

Puskaravati monastery, Charsadda:

Once Puskaravati (Charsadda) was the Capital of ancient Gandhara Kingdom (before the 6th century BC). It remained an important city until the 2nd century AD. According to a popular tradition, Emperor Asoka had built one Stupas at this place (Richard Salomon, 2000) This Stupa was mentioned by the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang who visited the area in 630 AD. According to him Buddha preached law at this Stupa (Rajput, 2018). Its ruins are located on the banks of Swat River, on the outskirts of the modern city of Charsadda.

Buddhism was introduced in to Gandhara at this time of Ashoka. It is said that Ashoka established 84000 stupas to honour the Buddha. One such stupa was located in Gandhara also (Andrew Glass, 2004). Following the decline of the Mauryan empire, the Gandhara region was controlled by a succession of foreign rulers, first by the Persian, Bactrian Greeks, later on by Sakas, Parthians and then by the Kushans. Some of these rulers have supported Buddhism (Andrew Glass, 2004). The golden age of Buddhism in Gandhara began during the first century A.D. During that period, there was phenomenal increase in the number of Buddhist monasteries and stupas in the region. It has also witnessed the evolution of a distinctive school of art known as Gandhara art (Andrew Glass, 2004).

The city of Purushapura (Peshawar) was the ancient land of Buddhism. Archaeological evidence suggests that Buddhist monasteries and stupas slowly spread in to the Swat Valley. (at some point in the 1st century A.D.) It then expanded more rapidly to all parts of the Gandhara and even beyond (Andrew Glass, 2004).

Geographically, historically and even culturally Gandhara was 'a frontier land' where all the neighbouring cultures with its regional and universal values and meanings found a melting pot. It offered a bridge to the regions 'elsewhere and anywhere' and finally, created the 'Gandhara Culture' 'not strictly Indian but cosmopolitan' (Falser, 2015). The spatial imprints of the cultural geography of Gandhara are on greater neighbourhood (cultural neighbourhood) and its temporal imprints are on greater geography. The culture of Gandhara stretched in the north up to Bactria (Central Asia) and over a larger cultural realm of Khotan (China).

Conclusion:

Gandhara had a unique geography. It was not an 'empty' space or 'isolated' place. There was convergence of cultural realms and conflict or conquest of political regimes. The 'spatial history' of Gandhara is not simply to a specific place and location (or space). It is privileged to be the history of a particular or lived space.

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