

Historical Survey of Stupas and Monasteries in Kashmir with Special Reference to Harwan and Ushkur

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Abstract:

Buddhism is widely believed to have become dominant in Kashmir during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, though it was widespread long before his time, enjoying the patronage of both Buddhist and Hindu rulers. It spread from Kashmir to neighbouring Ladakh, Tibet, and China. Accounts of Kashmir's rulers patronage of Buddhism can be found in the Rajatarangini as well as in the accounts of three Chinese visitors to Kashmir between 630 and 760 AD. King Ashoka (Gonandiyā) of Kashmir is characterized as a pious Buddhist who constructed numerous Stupas and Vishnu monuments by Kalhana in his epic chronicle Rajatarangini from the 12th century. The provincial capital Srinagar which he founded was glittering with prosperity and magnificence. According to Kalhana, Ashoka built two Shiva temples at Vijayeshvara (Bijbehara) and had several others renovated. He constructed a number of viharas and stupas in Vitastatra (Vethavutur) and Shuskaletra (Hukhalitar). As witnessed by the available historical records Kashmir was full of Stupas and Buddhist Monasteries before almost two thousand years back and during the reign of Ashoka the Great. It was during his time that 4th Buddhist council was held in Kashmir Harwan area. In present time some remains of these Buddhist stupas and monasteries are still found in Kashmir. In this paper I will try to give a survey of some important stupas and monasteries found in Kashmir.

Key Words: Stupas and Monasteries, Harwan Stupa, Ushkur site, Buddhist Council,

Introduction: Buddhism in Kashmir is centered primarily in Ladakh, where the majority of Buddhist adherents live. In other terms, Ladakh, formerly part of Kashmir, is now a Buddhist-dominated UT. But how did Buddhism arrive in Kashmir? What is the Buddhist background of Kashmir? There are several ideas and beliefs surrounding

it. Let us investigate the origins of Buddhism in Kashmir and its history in the area. Along the way, take a peek at some of the Buddhist monasteries situated throughout the valley.

Buddhist influence in Jammu and Kashmir led to the establishment of several monasteries across the region. Nearly a thousand years later, Buddhism is still prevalent in Kashmir. Therefore, evidence of Buddhist impact can still be found in Kashmir today. Jalora Vihara at Zalur Zainageer (Sopore in Baramulla), Vitastatra, and Vyathavotur in the Anantnag region are a few of the viharas in Kashmir. Moreover, a stupa was erected in modern-day Budgam by King Ashoka. Rattani Pura, Parihaspora, Raithan, Harwan, Ahen, and other places are just a few examples.

The Buddhists inherited a long artistic tradition, naturally compliant with their old models, although there was a difference in the material they used and the decoration they elaborated. They used stunning gray limestone, which was simpler to carve. The old stupa's plinth, which was rectangular with a single flight of steps, was enlarged into a square with multiple offsets on each side projecting far into the courtyard and flanked on either side by side walls adorned with sculptural reliefs.

The bigger structures had plinths with a double terrace made up of five courses of finely chiseled, large stone blocks. The two lowest levels, along with the fourth, were plain. The third was shaped into a round torus molding, while the uppermost was shaped into a fileted torus or cyma recta.

The Fourth Buddhist Council was convened in Kashmir and was called by Kanishka, the most powerful Kushana ruler. Hieun Tsang, as well as the Tibetan monks Bu Ston and Tarantha, attest to this truth. They claim that 500 Arhats, 500 Bodhisattvas, and 500 pundits were present at the Council, which was convened in order to resolve the disagreements between the various sects' differing interpretations of the religion. (Kashmiri Buddhism) Eminent Buddhist monks from other regions of India and Central Asia, China, and Tibet continued to visit Kashmir long after the Council's pious work was done because of the Council's maintaining Kashmir's reputation as a center of Buddhism. Nagarjuna, a renowned Buddhist philosopher, was in Kashmir at the moment.

Harwan Monastery:

This ancient monastery was pivotal in the history of Buddhism. On the orders of Kushana emperor Kanishka I, the 4th Buddhist council of the Mahayana (Sarvastivada) school of Buddhism was held here in the 1st or 2nd century CE. Historians believe that the 4th Buddhist Council of Mahayana Buddhism was held in Harwan, which was known as 'Kundalavana' in ancient times. The 4th Buddhist council of Mahayana (Sarvastivada) tradition called by Emperor Kanishka between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE was significant because it was held to reconcile the contradictory doctrines of 18 sects of Mahayana Buddhism that existed at the time. By this time, Buddhism had split into several sects, and the council in Harwan was an attempt, albeit futile, a reconciliation between them.

It was also the home of one of the greatest Buddhist masters of his time, Nagarjuna (150-250 CE), who proposed the theory of 'Sunnyata' or 'Emptiness,' which went on to revolutionise Buddhist thought. Unfortunately, the significance of the site appears to have faded in modern times. As has Kashmir's significance in Buddhist history.

It is not known exactly when the Harwan monastery was constructed, although excavations have turned up artefacts that date from the 1st to the 6th centuries CE. During this time, Kashmir was covered with a large number of Buddhist monasteries, the two most notable of which are in Srinagar and Baramulla district at Harwan and Ushkur respectively. Even the current Pari Mahal, which is close to Srinagar, formerly housed one of these monasteries.

Unfortunately, not many people go to the remains of the Harwan monastery nowadays. In order to get there you have to take the road to Harwan village, which is about 7 miles northeast of Srinagar. Just off the main road, a little board designates the location. The Dachigam National Park is bordered by the monastery's Top Tier.

There were numerous exquisite terracotta tiles that were also discovered here. However, they have since been moved to the Shri Pratap Singh Museum in Jammu. The site's excavations yielded some magnificent tiles that date to the 4th century AD. The upper deck also featured a circular structure resembling a temple and a courtyard that had previously been tiled with the same terracotta found here. What appears to be

the remnants of this higher tier are behind it. There are yet additional buildings that need to be uncovered. As it seems that the entire structure was once dispersed throughout the entire hillside.

The Harwan Monastery site is important because it played a significant part in the expansion of Buddhism, which originated in Kashmir and then spread in all directions from there.

Buddhism remained the predominant religion in Kashmir until the 8th century CE, when it was gradually replaced by a revitalised form of Hinduism. Both coexisted in a syncretic existence for a few centuries until Buddhism vanished with the arrival of Islam in Kashmir

Ushkur Stupa : Ushkur is an ancient Buddhist site in Jammu and Kashmir, India, near Baramulla. This site is located on the Jhelum River, approximately 55 kilometres from the capital city of Srinagar. During British rule, it was an important trading centre because it served as the western entrance to the Kashmir Valley. Huskapura is undoubtedly modern Uskür, located opposite Varamul (Skr. Varahamula, vulgo Baramula) on the left bank of the Vitasta, where the latter leaves the Valley of Kashmir.

The ancient site of Hushkapur (now Ushkur) on the left bank of Jehlum is said to have been founded by Huvishka, a ruler from the famous Kushana dynasty that ruled parts of Afghanistan and India during the first three centuries AD. Hieuan Tsang, a 7th century Chinese traveller entered Kashmir and stayed in Ushkur, described it as a flourishing Buddhist centre.

Ushkur in Baramullah is picturesquely located at the mouth of the gorge through which the Jhelum (Vyeth) river exits the valley of Kashmir. Baramulla was once considered the gateway to this land because it was located on the Jhelum valley route, which was once considered the life line of Kashmir. It was the first motorable road in undivided India, connecting Srinagar to Rawalpindi and other northwestern towns. This ancient route also linked Kashmir to Taxila, Hazara, and ancient Gandhara (Kabul valley).

Since ancient times, the town of Baramulla has been a popular tourist destination. Because of its excellent geographical location, it was easily accessible to all visitors

who used to visit Kashmir in the past. Ancient Chinese and Arabian travellers such as Huen Tsang, Okong, and Alburuni were among the most famous envoys to visit the town. Several European travellers arrived here via this route during the Sikh and Dogra periods. In their respective travelogues, these travellers have also provided brief descriptions of this town.

Baramulla is mentioned in historical records. However, it is mentioned by other names in ancient records, its name is thought to have originated from Hushkpur or Kanishkpor. These two locations, which are adjacent to the modern town, are thought to have been founded in the first and second centuries AD by two Kushan princes, Kanishka I and Huviska, respectively.

Excavations at Hushkpor in the early twentieth century uncovered a number of antiquities from Huvishka's time. The most notable discovery was an early plinth structure identified as the basement of a Buddhist monastery. On the upper land of Hushkpor, a massive limestone basement can still be found today.

Archaeologists believe that these are the ruins of an ancient monastery built here by Kushan king Huviska. Huen Tsang, the Chinese ambassador who arrived in 631 AD, was received at this historical monastery by King Durlabhavardana of the Karkota Dynasty. The remains of a stupa and its surrounding wall were discovered by Daya Ram Sahani, a 20th century archaeologist, in Huskapura, modern Ushkara near Baramulla. Although no circular tile pavement is known to have been discovered at this site, a few notable terra-cottà figures have been discovered.

Another 20th-century archaeologist, RC Kak, writes about the terracotta heads of this site, claiming that the structure dates back to Kushan times. This hypothesis is supported by the discovery of eleven terracotta heads outside the north-eastern corner of the surrounding wall, as well as a number of fragmentary limbs of images displaying the undeniable influence of the Gandhara School of the 3rd and 4th centuries. These are now preserved at the Srinagar Museum.

Conclusion: It is well known that Kashmir was essential in the transmission of Buddhism from India to the rest of Asia. Throughout the first millennium, translators and pilgrims traveled there, and Kashmir and the nearby Himalayan regions eventually

developed into a kind of pilgrimage area. Unfortunately, Kashmir's own Buddhist remains have not fared well over the ages. Following the completion of the Muslim conquest in the fourteenth century, Buddhism ceased to thrive there, and what few monuments were left began to deteriorate and were frequently demolished for use as construction materials.

In this paper the Buddhist sites that contain remains adequate for study are analysed. Today, all that remains of Harwan and Ushkur, are ruined foundations that hardly rise above the ground. Some inferences about the date and initial form can be made based on other objects discovered nearby and evidence from sculpture and literature. This paper highlights Buddhist stupas from Kashmir, a style of structure that became recognizable throughout the valley. This essential component of Buddhist architecture took on a specific form in the Kashmiri region, and this form may have spread as far as the westernmost point of China, contributing to the intricate development of the Asian stupa or pagoda.

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