

Vicissitudes of Buddhism from the Kushanas to the Pushyabhutis (c. 1st-7th Century CE)

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After the initial phase of spread of Buddhist ideology outside India under the towering personality of Ashok Maurya, the more extensive phase of Buddhist expansion outside India was accomplished during the rule of the Kushana dynasty. The Kushanas achieved the herculean task of uniting a very large mass of land and its people, by carving out an extensive Empire extending from river Oxus to the banks of the Ganges in the early Christian centuries. The restoration of political stability under one strong state not only increased commercial and cultural contacts between different parts of the Kushana Empire but also gave rise to a cosmopolitan atmosphere, conducive for the efflorescence of Buddhist art and religion over this entire territory. The development of Mathura and Gandhara School of arts as well as spreading of Buddhist ideology in Central Asia was a product of this fertile atmosphere.

We can discern a remarkable phase of Buddhist expansion in the archaeological profile of most of the excavated and explored Kushana sites all over Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and north India. Apart from rich archaeological material, epigraphic and numismatic material also bears testimony to the flourishing state of Buddhist ideology during this age. The clear separation between the Lesser Vehicle (Hinayana) and the Greater Vehicle (Mahayana), established after the fourth and the final Buddhist council during the reign of Kanishka, was indeed a landmark in the history of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism reached China via Central Asia during the Kushana age and subsequently spread to Japan and Korea in the later centuries. Besides the Sthaviravadins, another sect of Hinayana, the Sarvastivadins, attained great prominence. They received patronage from Kanishka and made their presence felt in Central Asia, Gandhara and Kashmir. A very large number of Viharas, Stupas, Chaityas and Stupa-Monastery complexes have been retrieved all over the entire territory included in the Kushana Empire, apart from beautiful specimen of Buddhist art.

More than eighteen viharas and monasteries find mention in the dated Kushana inscriptions.¹ These epigraphs perpetuate the names and deeds of devoted men and women of various vocations and social classes on the gateways, railings and statues of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Maitreya, Jinas, etc. Some inscriptions even refer to various monks and nuns by name and their teachers, who not only made costly donations themselves but also inspired lay-worshippers and professionals for various acts of merit. It seems that some monks and nuns did possess or retain some wealth, which was utilized by them for religious donations. Bhikshu Bala and his disciple Bikshuni Buddhamitra were possibly the most famous donors who erected Bodhisattva images at Kausambi, Sarnath and Sravasti. A few Inscribed Gold Bars from Dalverzin-tepe, datable to the Kushana age, bear Kharoshthi inscriptions referring to these as owned by or donated by monks of Kalana (Kalyan).² Several records refer to the donations having been made by lay-disciples at the request of venerable persons of religious orders which tempts us to suggest that some of the donations given by monks or nuns could have been made out of the amount collected from their rich patrons.³ The inscriptions show that nuns played a vital role in attracting donations from secular figures. Buddhist nun, Buddhamitra was well-versed in tripitika and was trained by monk Bala of the Sarvastivadin sect. She installed a colossal Bodhisattva image at Kausambi (Accession no. 2948, Municipal Museum, Allahabad) in the year 2 of Kanishka era and along with monk Bala also donated other Bodhisattva stone images at Sarnath (year 3 of Kanishka era) and Sravasti. Another nun Dhanavati, the daughter of Buddhamitra's sister, installed a Bodhisattva image with an inscription in honour of Buddhamitra at Mathura in the year 33 of Kanishka era.

It is known from Buddhist tradition that Kanishka was a devout Buddhist and a great patron of Buddhism, who convened the Fourth Buddhist Council, at Kundalavan Vihara, probably in Kashmir. Kanishka's age witnessed the rise of Mahayana Buddhism and he is also associated with the spread of Buddhist faith in Central Asia and China. He is the only ruler in early India, to have depicted the image of Buddha on his coins and is known to have constructed a magnificent stupa at Purushpur (Peshawar).⁴ On the coins of Kanishka, Buddha is represented either standing or seated cross-legged which is taken as one of the earliest images of the Master conceived in human form.⁵ On Kanishka's gold and copper coins the figure of the Buddha is shown standing to front, with nimbus around the

¹ S. Shrava, Dated Kushana Inscriptions, Delhi, 1993., p.193.

² B.N. Mukherjee, The Rise and Fall of the Kushana Empire, Calcutta, 1988, p.486.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.487-88.

⁴ P.B. Desai (ed.), Some Problems Concerning the Kushans, Dharwar, 1971

⁵ S. Sharma, Gold Coins of Imperial Kushanas and their Successors, BHU, Varanasi, 1999, p. 64.

head and a *prabhavali* (aureole/halo) around the body. His right hand is raised in *abhayamudra* (blessing pose) while the left hand is at waist level holding the end piece of his *sanghati* (cloak). He is seen wearing *uttarasangha* (the robe of a monk), covering both the shoulders and his hair is tied in a prominent *ushnisha* (top-knot) with his elongated ears clearly visible⁶. On some coins the right hand of Buddha instead of being in *abhayamudra* is drawn in front near the chest with a small dot over it. On some of Kanishka's copper coins the future Buddha, *Maitreya*, is depicted sitting cross-legged on a low stool like throne with his right hand raised in *abhayamudra* and his left hand holding a water flask while resting on his lap.⁷ The head-dress looks like a *koantopa* (a cap covering the ears) which is used even by the present day Buddhist monks and his prominent ear-rings are visible as small dots over his shoulder. Mostly the legend reads *Boddo* (Buddha) on gold coins and *Sakamano Boddo* (Sakyamuni Buddha) or *Metreya Boddo* (Maitreya Buddha) on the copper coins. These Buddha type coins of Kanishka are rare specimens of art and corroborate the evidence of Kanishka's patronage to Buddhism. The Buddhist images of Kanishka's coins not only confirm the availability of sculptural images of both *Sakyamuni* and *Maitreya* as prototypes during Kanishka's reign but also give an idea of what sculptural Buddhist images during his reign looked like.⁸

Even a cursory look at the archaeological layers of sites dated to the Kushana period speak in volume about the popularity of Buddhist sects in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and north India. Political patronage as well as economic prosperity of the time must have facilitated religious building activities. The principle city of Kushanas in Bactria was **Balkh** (north Afghanistan), which apart from being a centre of Kushana polity was also a Buddhist town. According to Huien tsang, the largest monastery of Navasangharama was situated outside Balkh. **Termez** (in Uzbekistan) was another old town of Kushana Bactria where two large monasteries have been found on the mound of **Kara-Tepe** and near **Chinghiz-Tepe**.⁹ The excavations at Kara Tepe revealed a 2nd century CE Buddhist monastery hewn out of rock. Termez is usually associated with the high relief, Buddhist sculptures of Airtam which are compared to the analogous monuments of Gandhara art. These reliefs clearly show familiarity with Graeco-Roman and Indian sculptural forms.

⁶ Joe Cribb, 'Kanishka's Buddha coins-The Official Iconography of Sakyamuni and Maitreya', *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1980.

⁷ Joe Cribb, 'The Origin of the Buddha Image – The Numismatic Evidence', *South Asian Archaeology*, London 1981, pp.231-243.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.236.

⁹ B. Stavisky, 'The Study of Kushana Central Asia', in A.L. Basham (ed.), *Papers on the Date of Kanishka*, Leiden, 1968, p.204.

In Afghanistan, many Kushana sites in the vicinity of Begram (ancient Kapisa) such as **Topdarra**,¹⁰ with a stupa and two monasteries; **Khwaja Seh Yaran**,¹¹ with a stupa-monastery complex and **Paitava**, with a stupa and a monastery, have been identified. **Kuh-i-Bacha**¹² and **Kafir Qala**,¹³ with a stupa and a large rectangular platform seem to be a part of the Begram urban complex.

Hadda, in Ningrahar province, near Jalalabad is one of the richest archaeological sites of the Kushana period, in terms of Buddhist art. It has an extensive area of stupas, monasteries and caves, covering about 15 square kilometres. The Hadda complex contains famous sites such as Tepe Shotur, Tepe Kafiriha, Tepe Kalan, Tepe Zargaran, Bagh Gai, Gar Nau, etc. Explored between 1923 to 1928 and 1930-33 by the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan, more than 1000 stupas were identified along with Gandharan stucco sculptures in large quantity, limestone and schist bas-reliefs and Buddhist wall paintings.¹⁴ At and around **Tepe Kalan**¹⁵ as many as 23000 limestone and stucco heads were recovered including Buddhas, Boddhisattvas, demons, donors, monks, helmeted soldiers and men of different groups. The excavation of **Tepe Shotur**¹⁶ by the Afghan Department of Archaeology between 1965 to 1973 and afterwards, revealed a Buddhist stupa-monastery complex with chapels, decorative votive stupas, clay statuary, bas-reliefs, wall paintings, large number of coins, many gold, silver and steatite reliquaries, etc. A unique 'fish porch' (2.40 m × 2.20 metre) in stucco, dated to the 2nd or 3rd century CE. elaborately depicts the conversion of a snake-king to Buddhism along with many real and imaginary sea-creatures. Hadda was surrounded by settlements which all appear to be stupa-monastery complexes, like **Ghunda Chasma**, **Chakhil-i-Ghundi**, **Barabad**, **Kuhna Deh**, **Qala-i-Shahi**, **Deh-i-Rahman**, **Shalatak**, **Bimaran**, **Filkhana** and **Ahin Posh Tepe**. The stupa at **Ghunda Chasma** stands on two platforms, the first 1.07 metre high and c. 25 metre square, the second c. 22 metre square with 10 pilasters on each side. It has a stairway on the north side and a monastery to the south. It is a single culture site which is dated to the Kushana period on stylistic grounds.¹⁷ **Chakhil-i-Ghundi**,¹⁸ situated around 1.5 kilometres northeast of Hadda complex, is a stupa-monastery complex with an associated habitation area on a nearby small hill.

¹⁰ W. Ball, *Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, Paris, 1982, No. 1197.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, No. 606.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 620.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 491.

¹⁴ V.C. Srivastava, *Historical Probings in Afghanistan*, Varanasi, 1997, pp.65-66, 76.

¹⁵ *Afghanistan*, XXI (1-2), 1968; XXII (2, 3, 4), 1969.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, XXIV (2-3), 1971; XXVI, (4), 1974.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.76.

¹⁸ W. Ball, 1982, *op. cit.*, site no. 165.

Stucco statuary and reliefs and elaborate facades on the votive stupas have been reported from this site. **Barabad**¹⁹ is also a stupa-monastery complex of 1st-2nd century CE., with a frieze of pilasters, blind arches, a steatite reliquary and series of caves nearby. **Kuhna Deh**²⁰ contains a small, perfect stupa, monastery, aqueducts and number of artificial caves that are dated to the Kushana period. **Filkhana**²¹ has an artificial cave complex of 32 caves, two stupas and a gold and silver reliquary which are architecturally and stylistically dated to the Kushana period. **Sultanpur**²² is another Kushana site with a stupa having a pyramid shaped reliquary. **Bimaran**²³ in Laghman province, is a rich Kushana site, with four major stupas, Kharoshthi inscriptions, coins, gold jewellery, gold reliquary inset with rubies and a complex of six artificial caves. The representations on the reliquary include two sets of three figures – a standing Buddha flanked by the gods Indra and Brahma. This is believed to be one of the earliest examples of the Buddha image.²⁴ **Qala-i-Shahi**²⁵ in Kunar province, with a stupa-monastery complex also appear to be a part of the Hadda complex.

The most striking Buddhist remains of Afghanistan were the two colossal images of Buddha from **Bamiyan**,²⁶ 55 metre and 38 metre high, carved in deep niches. The site, lying on the silk route, about 250 kilometres northwest of Kabul offered a natural camping place to the merchandise-laden caravans and encouraged Buddhist devotees to carve out shrines and images. With two towering images of Buddha and thousands of rock-cut shrines in vicinity, Bamiyan seems to have developed into a vast monastic establishment during the later Kushana period.

Several rock-cut caves carved in the three walls of a gorge, have been noticed at the site of **Homay Qala**.²⁷ These are irregularly situated caves at different levels, with a corridor running along all the three walls. The complex has been identified as a Buddhist cave monastery consisting of monastic cells with parabolic "vault" and rectangular or arched entrance and small chapels connected by corridors and stairways. The caves of **Fil-Khana** also have a similar plan where several cells, at the same level, connected by a corridor were carved out in rock. K. Nishikawa and S. Mizuno who studied the Fil-Khana caves have dated this complex to the period of the 'Great Kushans' on the basis

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 106.

²⁰ W. Ball, 1982, *op. cit.*, no. 627.

²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 326.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 1116.

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 127.

²⁴ Upinder Singh, *A History Ancient and Early Medieval India*, Delhi, 2008, p.462.

²⁵ V.C. Srivastava, 1997, *op. cit.*, p.77.

²⁶ R. Sengupta, *The Buddha in Afghanistan*, ASI, New Delhi, pp.3-5.

²⁷ G. Verardi, 'The Buddhist Cave Complex of Homay Qala', *South Asian Archaeology*, 1975, pp.119-126.

of a Kharoshthi inscription discovered in cave no. 28.²⁸ They concluded that Fil-Khana caves were one of the earliest Buddhist caves in Afghanistan. Several other rock-cut monasteries have been reported from Afghanistan of which the caves of **Haibak & Hazar Sum** are very imposing.²⁹

On the basis of Chinese sources, it is generally believed that **Purushapura** (modern Peshawar) was the capital of the Kushanas. According to *Fa-hsien*, Purushapur was famous for the splendid stupa built by Kanishka and Buddha's alm bowl which was brought by Kanishka from Pataliputra.³⁰ *Hiuen Tsang* also refers to the construction of a grand stupa, containing the relics of Buddha and the tower of the *Patra* of Buddha at Purushapur.³¹ Two large mounds, known as **Shah-ji-ki-dheri** near the Peshawar city have been identified with Kanishka's stupa and a monastery. The core or the dome of this gigantic stupa rested on a 180 square feet plinth which had on each side a 43 feet deep central projection, itself endowed with a 7 feet deep central projection. The plinth also had four circular towers at four corners. The façade of the plinth was covered both with bricks and roughly dressed stone blocks and had stucco figures of the Buddha between corinthian pilasters. The core of the stupa was made of walls which radiated from the centre.³² The centre of the stupa below ground level yielded an inscribed cylindrical casket and its lid of copper alloy (7.75 inch high and 5 inch in diameter). It has the figure of a seated Buddha on the centre of the lid and two figures of Brahma and Indra with folded hands standing on the left and the right side respectively.³³ The casket also displays the standing figure of a king in Central Asian dress, most probably Kanishka, flanked by divine figures of sun god and moon god. The Kharoshthi inscription on the reliquary records the religious gift "in Kanishka's Vihara in Mahasena's Samgharama, in the reign of the great king Kanishka"³⁴

The site of **Mekhasanda** on the slope of the mountain, east of Chanaka-Dheri near Peshawar, was first excavated by A. Foucher.³⁵ The Kyoto University Archaeological Mission excavated many buildings of stone on several ridges including a main stupa in the centre of a court, standing on the main ridge and many votive stupas around it. The two storeyed square base of the main stupa has been preserved and some stucco figurines of Buddha along the edge of this stupa-court

²⁸ S. Mizuno (ed.), *Hazar Sum and Fil-Khana*, Kyoto, 1967, p.77.

²⁹ G. Verardi, 1975, *op. cit.*

³⁰ James Legge, *The travels of Fa-hsien*, Delhi (reprint), 1971, Ch. X, pp.33-35.

³¹ S. Beal, *The Life of Hsuang-Tsang* by Shaman Hwui Li, Delhi, 1973, p.63.

³² D.K. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology: The Archaeological Foundation of Ancient India*, OUP, Delhi, 2006, p.397.

³³ *Pakistan Archaeology(PA)*, No. 1, 1964, pp.69-73.

³⁴ *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. II, pt. i. p. 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

in low enclosure walls and pilasters on the side walls can be observed.³⁶ This site yielded a great number of Buddhist sculptures, stucco figurines, pottery, iron objects and Kushana coins.³⁷ On the other ridges several rooms of viharas were also unearthed.

The **Threli** Buddhist temple in a mountain valley situated 14 kilometre north of Mardan , revealed more than one hundred stone building remains, of which three groups were excavated by the Kyoto University Archaeological Mission. One group, located on the top of one of the ridges has a stupa-court, viharas and a square hall with three big stupas adjacent to one another in the centre.³⁸ The second group, near the bottom of this valley consists of three terraces adding to an eastern wing, with a stupa court on the uppermost terrace. The rear part of this stupa court is large and has a main stupa in the centre and several votive stupas around it. The front part of it is narrow with small stupas and shrines. On the middle terrace, there stood a pillared veranda while the lowest terrace was a flat plane with no buildings.³⁹ The third groups of buildings were mostly viharas. About three thousand pieces of stone Buddhist sculptures and building fragments, one thousand stucco figurines, pottery, iron objects and coins including copper coins of Huvishka (from the stupa-court) were recovered from this site.⁴⁰

In the Potwar Plateau, 20 miles to the south east of Rawalpindi, there is a huge Buddhist complex of not less than fifteen isolated stupas and fourteen attached monasteries, mostly on the sandstone ridges of Manikyala. The **Manikyala tope** was first excavated in 1830 by General Ventura, an army officer in the service of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, followed by General Court in 1834 and then investigated by Alexander Cunningham in 1863-64. These extensive remains cover an area of about six square miles. The Manikyala tope No. 1 is a 92 feet high gigantic stupa that yielded a reliquary containing gold and copper coins of Kanishka and Huvishka, mixed with one coin of Yashovarman of Kanauj.⁴¹ With these coins were found two Kharoshthi inscriptions, one on the lid of the cylindrical bronze casket and other on a plain silver disc. The main body of the stupa is a solid hemisphere of 127 feet, 9 inches in diameter. The upper and lower plinths are decorated with corinthian pilasters.

Apart from the three ancient cities of Taxila viz. Bhir mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh, a large number of Buddhist stupas and monasteries have also been discovered in and around Taxila. They are

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.177-178.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *PA*, No.1, 1964, p.178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *PA*, No. 7, 1970-71, p.9.

the **Dharma-rajika stupa**, the Samgharama at **Kalawan**, the stupa-cum-monasteries complex of **Giri**, the stupas of **Kunala and Ghai**, the Samgharamas of **Bhamala**, the stupas and monasteries at **Lalchak, Pippala, Mohra, Moradu, Jaulian, Badalpur** and **Bhallar** and the Ionic temple at **Jandial**. Most of these religious buildings were established after the founding of the Kushana city of **Sirsukh**.⁴² The best example of stucco ornamentation in this region is provided by the stupa and monastery at *Jaulian*.

Buddhism rose to great height in Kashmir under the Kushana rule when Kashmir became a leading centre of the Sarvastivada school. According to Hiuen tsang, the fourth Buddhist council was held at Kundalavan Vihara in Kashmir under the patronage of Kanishka. Remains of Buddhist art and architecture were noticed in the form of a stupa and a monastery at **Harwan**, two miles from the Shalimar gardens in the valley of Kashmir.⁴³ The site comprises of three terraces, with lower terrace representing an important Buddhist site of the Kushana period while an apsidal stupa or temple stands on the highest terrace. The overall plan of Harwan closely takes after the fire temple at Surkh Kotal (Afghanistan) where the temple is a terraced structure with a courtyard surrounding the main temple located upon the highest level. Both originally had a stairway leading through the centre of each terrace. The masonry style at Harwan underwent a systematic evolution. The earliest construction was in the 'pebble style', but the 'diaper pebble style' – dated to around 300 A.D. replaced it and subsequently gave way to 'diaper rubble style' as seen in the triple base of a medium sized stupa built in a rectangular courtyard and a set of rooms or chapels.⁴⁴ Decorated tiles were found associated with the 'diaper pebble style' on the pavements of the courtyard of the apsidal stupa which was square in front and circular at back. The temple accommodation consisted of a spacious rectangular ante-chamber with a circular sanctum behind.

The site of **Ambaran**, in Akhnur region of Jammu district, excavated under the direction of B.R. Mani during 1999-2001, yielded a Buddhist monastic establishment of Kushana period.⁴⁵ During the excavation of Period II identified with the Kushana phase, a main stupa (6 × 6 metre base), another large stupa (10 × 10 metre square base), several votive stupas, walls of a monastery and another long structure probably a platform attached with the stupa were exposed. All the burnt brick

⁴² J. Marshall, *Taxila*, I, rept. 1975, p.5.

⁴³ R.C. Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir*, New Delhi, 1971 (reprint), pp.105 ff.

⁴⁴ B.R. Mani, 'Concentric Circles : Kushan Structural Riddle in Kashmir', *Puratattva*, No. 38, 2007-08, p.218.

⁴⁵ *Indian Archaeology, A Review (IAR)*, 1999-2000, pp.52-63; 2000-2001, pp.47-68.

masonry was constructed with brick of 36 to 38 × 24 × 6 to 7 centimetre.⁴⁶ A rectangular brick-paved platform was found associated with the stupa on its eastern side over which some lamps were discovered. According to B.R. Mani, the construction plan of this Buddhist establishment is similar to the Taxila stupas of Dharmarajika, Kalwan and Jandial.⁴⁷ The main stupa yielded a heavily encrusted copper casket with thirty circular thin sheets of gold, two circular rimmed thin sheets of silver, hundred and fifty micro beads of pearl, twelve cylindrical coral beads, two metallic micro-beads, an oval shaped silver casket, a circular gold casket, four full and six broken circular thin sheets of gold, three encrusted copper coins, two of which are possibly Kushana issues and one bead of amethyst.⁴⁸ The site also yielded Buddhist terracotta heads with close resemblance with terracotta heads of Gandhara art.

The excavations at **Sanghol** in Ludhiana district of Indian Punjab have yielded remains of two Buddhist stupas, monastery complexes, a palatial complex, an assembly hall and other official buildings from Period IV dated to 100 B.C. – 300 A.D. Sanghol has been identified with She-to-tu-lu of Hiuen-Tsang who refers to the existence of ten monasteries in it. Two Buddhist stupas, a monastery complex, votive stupas and other big stone structures have been exposed in the peripheral zone away from the main habitation. The architectural plan of the interior of both stupas is like the *Dharmachakra* or sacred wheel with spokes.⁴⁹ The larger stupa is a cylindrical monument built over a raised square platform having three concentric rings of brick masonry in the interior, with intervening spaces divided by radiating brick spokes at regular intervals, i.e. 12, 24 and 32 spokes as we proceed from the first inner circle to the third outermost circle. From the bottom of the stupa a stone casket filled with ash and charred bones was found with a Kharoshthi legend reading *Upasaka Ayabhadrasas*.⁵⁰ In the east of the stupa a paved path is noticed over which a number of votive stupas are seen. To the north of the stupa are two rectangular platforms measuring 1.35 × 1.05 metre and several other structures which constituted the monastic complex with a gateway attached to the shrine. Towards the northeast of the larger stupa, another stupa of smaller dimension, based on the similar *Dharmachakra* pattern, was unearthed. Apart from these, several Kushana sculptures of great beauty, sculptured railings, pillars, cross-bars, coping stones, etc., of fine textured red sandstone belonging to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *IAR*, 1999-2000, p.59.

⁴⁸ *IAR*, 1999-2000, p.60.

⁴⁹ S.K. Vashisth, 'Buddhist Remains at Sanghol', *Punjab History Conference*, 37th Session, 2005, pp.116-118.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.116-118.

the Mathura school of Art, form a part of the architectural project surrounding the stupa.⁵¹ They prominently depict Buddha heads, Buddha images, Bodhisattvas, Buddhist monks, dharmachakra etc. As many as 117 pieces of railing pillars were discovered from the site.

Sugh, in Yamunanagar district of Haryana, was first surveyed and identified with the ancient city of Srughna by Alexander Cunningham.⁵² Remains of a burnt brick structure, identified with a monastery of Kushana period, have been dug out at a distance of 1.6 kilometres in the south-west of Sugh. It is a rectangular enclosure measuring approximately 130 × 70 metre with massive walls of 75 centimetre width and 6 metre height.⁵³ A stupa-cum-monastery complex was discovered at **Adi Badri** in Yamunanagar district showing two phases of structural activity. In phase I of Period I a burnt brick stupa was constructed at the site during the later Kushana period with typical Kushana burnt bricks (35 × 20 × 6 centimetre, 33 × 20 × 5 centimetre, 30 × 22 × 6 centimetre and 23 × 25 × 6 centimetre) arranged in tapering circular fashion.

Remains of a brick stupa have been noticed from **Asandh** in Karnal district. The gigantic structure rises to a height of more than 25 metre and has a circular drum with an elongated dome. As many as 44 courses of the circular wall have been noticed.⁵⁴ Buddhist stupas of the Kushana period might have existed at Hathin, Bhuna and Bhadas also.⁵⁵

It is very likely that Mathura was the headquarter of the Kushana empire in the east. Alexander Cunningham identified several Buddhist sites in and around Mathura, such as the Upagupta Vihara, Huvishka Vihara and Kunda-Sukha Vihara at **Katra** and **Jail mound** respectively.⁵⁶ The inscriptions also suggest the existence of many viharas at Mathura like the Buddharakshita Vihara, Chutaka Vihara, Srivihara, Suvarnakara Vihara, Dharmahastika Vihara, Kastikiya Vihara and the Vihara situated at Anyor. Two Buddhist monasteries were also excavated from Kankali mound and Jamalpur mound respectively. These finds prove that apart from being a centre of the Mathura School of Art, Mathura was also an important religious centre during Kushana times. Many other sites in Uttar Pradesh have yielded remains of Buddhist establishments. The excavation of **Sankisa** in Farrukhabad district revealed evidence of a monastery from Maurya to

⁵¹ *IAR*, 1968-69, p.25.

⁵² *Archaeological Survey Reports(ASR)*, Vol. II, 1871, pp.226-27.

⁵³ A. Kesarwani and S.K. Vashist, 'Buddhist Suptas in Haryana : New Evidence', *Puratattva*, Vol. 33, 2002-03, pp.87-93.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.90.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.87-93.

⁵⁶ *ASR*, Vol. I, pp.232-41.

Gupta period.⁵⁷The site of **Sravasti** with twin name of Sahet-Mahet denotes two groups of remain with Sahet representing the famous Buddhist monastery – the Jetavana Vihara and Mahet – the ruins of the ancient city of Sravasti.⁵⁸The excavation at **Piprahwa** and **Ganwaria** in Siddharthnagar district by K.M. Srivastava, revealed some structures dated to the Kushana period (Period IV – 2nd-3rd century A.D.). A monastic complex of well burnt bricks was exposed with as many as 17 rooms and an extensive floor of baked bricks, which might have served the purpose of a public hall.⁵⁹ The site was identified with Kapilavastu by K.M. Srivastava. The Buddhist religious centre of **Sarnath**, in the vicinity of Varanasi has brought to light an inscription of Kanishka's reign,⁶⁰ monastic remains of the Kushana period⁶¹ and a copper coin of Huvishka. The inscription, dated in the year 3 of Kanishka, records the dedication of an inscribed Bodhisattva statue and an umbrella with a post, by Friar Bala along with *Mahakshatrapa Kharapallana* and *Kshatrapa Vanaspara* of Varanasi. This inscriptional evidence sufficiently proves that Sarnath flourished as a religious town during the Kushana period.

These rich archaeological finds sufficiently demonstrate that right from the Termez/Airtam complex in Uzbekistan to Bamiyan and Hadda complex in Afghanistan; Purushapur (modern Peshawar) and Manikyala in Pakistan; Kanispur, Ambaran and Harwan in Kashmir; Sanghol in Punjab; Sugh in Haryana; Mathura, Sankisa, Sarnath, Piprahwa and Ganwaria in Uttar Pradesh and Taradih (Bodhgaya) and Juafardih (Nalanda district) in Bihar, this entire landscape is dotted with rich Buddhist structures and antiquities. Thousands of short epigraphs and graffiti discovered in the area of Alam Bridge, Hunza and Chillas, where a Buddhist century was founded, reflect close Buddhist connection. The archaeological remains point to a close connection between the Kushana rule and flowering of Buddhist art and Mahayana form of Buddhism, suggesting that political hegemony, trade and Buddhist ideology went hand in hand under the Kushana Empire.

After the eclipse of the Kushana power, during the Gupta and post-Gupta times, there is a common notion that the popularity of Buddhism was fading away, giving way to theistic Brahmanical cults. But in the light of archaeological sources and the testimony provided by Faxian (399-414 CE), who visited major Buddhist centres in India during the reign of Chandragupta II, such a notion stands falsified. Faxian noted the prevalence of Hinayana sect in Gandhara, Bannu, Kanauj and Kausambi as

⁵⁷ IAR, 1996-97, pp.139-142.

⁵⁸ K.K. Sinha, *Excavation at Sravasti (1959)*, Varanasi, 1967.

⁵⁹ IAR, 1970-71, p.72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Reports (ASIAR), 1919-20, p.26.

well as the currency of both Mahayana Buddhism and Hinayana school in Afghanistan, Punjab, Mathura and Patliputra. In Khotan however, he noted the presence of only Mahayana monks.⁶² Several prominent Yogacharins like Asang & Vasubandhu(late 4th/early 5th century) and Madhyamaka thinkers like Buddhapalita(6th century), Bhavaviveka(6th century) and Chandrakirti(7th century) preached their doctrines. According to Chinese sources Buddhist scholar Kumarajiva(343-413), is said to have studied the doctrine of the Sarvastivadi sect of Hinayana school in Kashmir but subsequently became a Mahayanist scholar and travelled to China. We can discern a remarkable growth in the size, scale and ornamentation of some monastic structures at prominent Buddhist centres of Mathura, Sarnath, Kaushambi, Bodhgaya, Nalanda and Kasia. Other important Buddhist centres flourishing during this time include Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Ajanta, Ellora, Amravati, Bagh, Sanchi, Vallabhi, Devnimori etc.⁶³ Nalanda received patronage from the Gupta rulers and Ajanta and Ellora flourished under the Vakatakas. Buddhism made its presence felt in South India also, as is evident from the Tamil epic text Manimekalai where in the protagonist is convinced of the superiority of Buddhist teachings over other philosophies and joins the Sangha. The existence of flourishing Buddhist monasteries at Nagarjunakonda and Kanchipuram is well recorded in archaeology. The reference to the Avaivarttikas, a Mahayana sect, in an inscription from the Comilla region in present Bangladesh(507-08 CE), testifies to the presence of Buddhism in the easternmost part of the Ganga delta. Faxian also mentions many stupas dedicated to Bodhisattvas and also various monks such as Sariputra, Mahamoggalana, Ananda, and others. Some of these stupas were located in Mathura like the relic stupas of Sariputra, Mudgalaputra, Purna Maitrayaniputra, Upali, Ananda and Rahul. But the Chinese pilgrim also reports some monasteries that were deserted like the ones at Gaya and Kapilavastu.

It is significant to note the influence of the ideas of Bhakti on Buddhist practices, especially on the rites of worship. Faxian mentions a ceremony involving procession of images on chariots at Khotan, lasting two weeks and Pataliputra where it lasted only two days. The worship of the heavenly Buddha Amitabha (infinite radiance), heavenly bodhisattvas Maitreya(the kind one), Avalokiteshvara(embodiment of compassion) and Manjushri (associated with wisdom) gained ground among monks and laity. The Goddess Tara was the feminine personification of compassion.⁶⁴ Numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas, with their distinct iconography found representation in the

⁶² U. Singh, op.cit, p.519

⁶³ Ibid.pp518-20

⁶⁴ Ibid.,p519

sculptures and paintings of Buddhist centres like Ajanta, Bagh, Kanheri, Sanchi, etc. Mathura continued to be a major centre of Buddhist art while the Sarnath Buddhas are considered as among the greatest works of art of ancient India, owing to their beauty and finesse.

A number of stupas and rock-cut chaityas and viharas were constructed during this period including those of Jaulian, Charsada, and Taxila in Gandhara. One of the premier examples of stupa architecture is the imposing Dhamek stupa of Sarnath, with a diameter of 28.3 m and a height of 34 m. This drum like stupa with four niches at cardinal points for Buddha images, is constructed on a very large and heightened base. The lower portion of the stupa is adorned with exquisitely carved stones with geometric floral designs, human figures and birds, while the upper portions reveal brick work. Rock cut architecture in the form of chaityas and viharas reached a high watermark at Ajanta where 23 out of total 28 caves were carved out during the rule of Vakatakas. Cave number 19 and 26 dated to 5th and 6th centuries CE are highly adorned chaityas with rich sculptural decoration, while the rest of the caves are viharas.

Certain Buddhist monasteries like Nalanda achieved fame as educational centres during Gupta and post-Gupta times. The literary reference to Nalanda goes back to 6th-5th century BCE, but the excavation at Bargaon (site of the Nalanda monastery) revealed remains beginning with the pre-Gupta period. Gupta kings Kumargupta and Budhagupta may have built monasteries at Nalanda which continued to receive patronage in post-Gupta times during the reigns of Harshavardhan and Palas. The excavation at **Juafardih** in Nalanda district yielded a mud stupa constructed at the site sometimes in the fifth century B.C. (Period II) which was later enlarged.⁶⁵ In Period III (Sunga, Kushana, Gupta and Post-Gupta) the height of the central portion of the stupa was raised to 4.65 metre and large sized bricks (37 × 28 × 7, 36 × 27 × 2/8, 35 × 26 × 6 centimetre) were used for encasing the wall of the stupa and *pradakshinapath*.

While Faxian does not mention Nalanda, this centre of learning figures prominently in the writings of Xuanzang (c. 629 -645CE) as the later spent over five years studying the Yogachara doctrine at Nalanda. Harshavardhan of the Pushyabhuti dynasty is credited to have convened a great assembly at Kanauj, where Xuanzang, along with other scholars gave discourse on Mahayana doctrine. Xuanzang also mentions other flourishing monasteries in the Magadha area such as those of Bodhgaya and Tilodaka as well as some erstwhile centres which were in a ruined state. The

⁶⁵ S.C. Saran and others, 'Excavation at Juafardih and its identification with Kulika', *Puratattva*, No.38,2008, p.72.

Raktamrittika mahavihara close to Karnasuvarna(Chiruti, near Murshidabad), the capital of Shashank Gauda ; Vasavavihara in the Pundravardhana area of northern Bengal and some monasteries in the Samatata area in the Bengal delta, have also been mentioned by him. Yijing, another 7th century Chinese scholar lived in the monastery of Nalanda for ten years and visited Bodhgaya and the monastery of Tilodaka, which he describes as housing 1,000 monks. While the remains of many of these Buddhist sites have been identified we can clearly notice a shift in the archaeological horizon of Buddhist structures from north-western India to eastern India and a gradual fading out of Buddhism from some regions of the subcontinent.