

Contextualizing Buddhism: Exploring the Limits of Buddhist Survivability in High Altitude Valleys in District Mansehra, Pakistan

Shakirullah, Junaid Ahmad, Haq Nawaz

Abstracts: Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, being located on the ancient Silk Route has played an instrumental role in the ancient trade, commerce and development of Buddhism as well. The region is a pivot between the China and Central Asia. Asoka recognized it in the 3rd century BC by carving 14 edicts here, and became central to the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia and China. It has been revealed that no Buddhist site existed at altitude of 2000 meter and above, equally not mentioned in Buddhist narratives. Recent archaeological explorations exposed hundreds of Buddhist sites in the region revealing the survivability and availability of Buddhist sites mainly on the trade routes. This paper systematically explores the existence of Buddhist monuments in Mansehra coping with natural and cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Buddhist monuments, Explorations, Survivability

The valleys of District Mansehra in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, have been strategically located on the ancient Silk Routes and have been instrumental in the promotion of trade, commerce and Buddhism in the past. The region derives its importance from its location between the valleys of Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, China and Central Asia. King Asoka, who erected his 14 edicts at the crossroads at the city of Mansehra (Shama 2002: 87-103), recognized the importance of this region in the 3rd century BC, and since then, this region became central to the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia and China. Recent archaeological explorations have exposed hundreds of Buddhist period sites in the region, which have not been factored in the traditional narrative of Buddhism in Gandhara and adjacent regions. In fact, these explorations show that there were no Buddhist monuments in valleys beyond 2000 meters above mean sea level. Thus, these explorations raise many interesting questions about the survivability and availability of Buddhist monuments in the adjoining high altitude valleys, such as Kashmir and Swat (Tucci 1958: 279-328; Swati 1997: 155-184; Berger 1941: 5-270; Rahman 1993: 1-

124; 1991: 152-163), and their absence in Mansehra. This paper systematically explores the existence of Buddhist monuments in District Mansehra and their relationships with natural and cultural landscapes. We tentatively argue that Buddhist monuments in District Mansehra, were present in regions which were more accessible and were on trade routes, and that the Buddhist did not explore and live in the extraordinarily beautiful and calm valleys beyond 2000 meters above mean sea level.

The area itself is located on the high altitude and having the silk route passing through it, which played an important role in passing of the different caravans, scholars, religious leaders/preachers as well as the strategic importance which connects the South Asian Sub-Continent with the rest of the world. These investigations are broadly focused on the exploration of the area for all cultural activities of the past under the archaeological domain.

The title paper under discussion confines the present study to a specific subject as the survivability of past Buddhist communities in the high-altitude valleys of the District

Mansehra. The area indicates thousands of Buddhist sites now abandoned or under earth with no much modern activities on the surface. The plain and low altitude areas of Mansehra at some places have similarity with the landscape of Kashmir and Swat valleys.

The present theme of study covers three high altitude valleys viz. Thanawal Valley, Nain Sukh Valley, and Agror Valley of Mansehra District having the Buddhist remains in the shape of architectural features as visible at various places. These high-altitude valleys have a very unique and different landscape which the Buddhist communities of the past selected for their survival and constructed shelters for their activities in the panoramic view of the natural landscape of each valley.

Tanawal Valley

This valley is comprised of upper and lower Tanawal (Samad 2016: 1-98). However, the lower Tanawal is now administered from Haripur District of Hazara Division (Sardar 1995: 81-105). Most of the Upper area is under the administration of District Mansehra. Yet this area is partly in Tehsil Oghi and partly in the Tehsil Mansehra of the District Mansehra. This area is also known as Amb and remained a state ruled by the Tanoli tribe chiefs. A number of Buddhist sites have been discovered which reveals existence of Buddhist doctrine on high altitudes of the District Mansehra in its western parts.

Nain Sukh Valley

Balakot Tehsil of District Mansehra consists of different narrow valleys, the most important and culturally rich valleys among them are mainly the Kaghan and this small Nain Sukh Valley. This valley marking the area on both sides of the banks of River Kunhar from the present city of Balakot down to the town of Garhi Habibullah. As the River Kunhar passes through this small

eye catching valley with beautiful natural landscape, the name of the valley is associated with the famous legend that Noor Jahan, the queen of the 4th Great Mughal ruler, Nūr ud Din Jahangir, when she was on the way to Kashmir, felt pain in her eyes, which was cured by washing with the water of River Kunhar in this area. Thereafter the valley was named as *Nain Sukh* (means eye soothing). Apart from that the valley has a very rich history despite its high altitude below 2000 meters above the mean sea level. Along with other cultural material, the area has rich Buddhist remains. Banda Mound for instance shows fine diaper masonry structures in and around the modern settlement covering about two km long (North-South) and one km wide (East-West) area.

Agror Valley

This valley is partly located in both the Tehsils (Mansehra and Oghi) of District Mansehra. In the recent past, it had the status of a state under the control of Nawab of Agror. This mountainous region has a unique natural beauty and archaeological wealth in the shape of different buried mounds of multiple cultural heritage of the past. Besides other remains this area has a rich collection of the past inscribed boulders and rocks. These inscriptions have the same of Kharoshti scripts for the education of lay men. These inscriptions were installed at different points on the main ancient routes passing through the area. With these inscriptions, the Buddhist settlement and monastic sites have also been explored in this high-altitude area amidst natural landscape. So far two such inscribed boulders have been explored in the Shahdore and Bela Mound.

Discussion

This systematic exploration is extended to Buddhist monuments and sites of District Mansehra together with a study of natural and

cultural landscape of the area. The present exploration and the entitled research proves that the Buddhist lived on the main trade routes and fixed inscribed rocks or inscribed natural rocks near the routes and junctions to educate the masses and propagate the teachings. They chose places where such relics could survive and were accessible to the masses. The Upper Kaghan Valley of high altitude has no signs of any Buddhist site because in the off-season there is still no life. The Buddhists made a permanent settlement at places where they could procure their livelihood according to their will and need

References

- Berger, E. & Wright (1941). Excavations in Swat and Explorations in the Oxus Territories of Afghanistan. *Asian Arts and Archaeology*, series No. 1, PP. 5 – 270, India.
- Rahman, A. (1991). Butkara-III: A Preliminary Report, *Ancient Pakistan*, vol. VII, Research Journal of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, PP. 152 – 163, Peshawar
- Rahman, A. (1993). Shnai-Sha Gumbat: First Preliminary Excavation Report. *Ancient Pakistan*, vol. VIII, Research Journal of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, PP. 1 – 124, Peshawar
- Shama Habib (2002). Asoka Rock Edicts in Pakistan. *Ancient Sindh*, vol. 6, Research of the Department of Archaeology, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, PP. 87 – 103, Karachi.
- of the time. During the present exploration, it is observed and concluded that no Buddhist site, so far, exists in this area above 1500 meters altitude as seen in the already explored areas like Kashmir and Swat Valleys.
- ### Acknowledgment
- We duly acknowledge the financial support of the National Fund for Cultural Heritage (NFCH) Government of Pakistan as the present research is part of the same exploration project funded by NFCH.
- Sardar, B. (1995). Archaeological Panorama of Hazara Division. *Journal of South Asia*, vol.18, No. 1, PP. 81-105.
- Swati, M. F. (1997). Recent Discovery of Buddhist Sites in the Swāt Valley. *ATHARIYYAT (Archaeology)*, vol. 1, A Research Bulletin of National Heritage Foundation, Peshawar, Pakistan, PP. 151 – 84, Peshawar.
- Swati, M. F. (1997). Recent Discovery of Buddhist Sites in the Swāt Valley. In *Athāriyyāt* (pp. 151–84). Peshawar: National Heritage Foundation.
- Tucci, G. (1958). Preliminary Report on an Archaeological Survey in Swat. *East and West*, vol. 4, Rome, Italy, PP. 279 – 328, Rome.

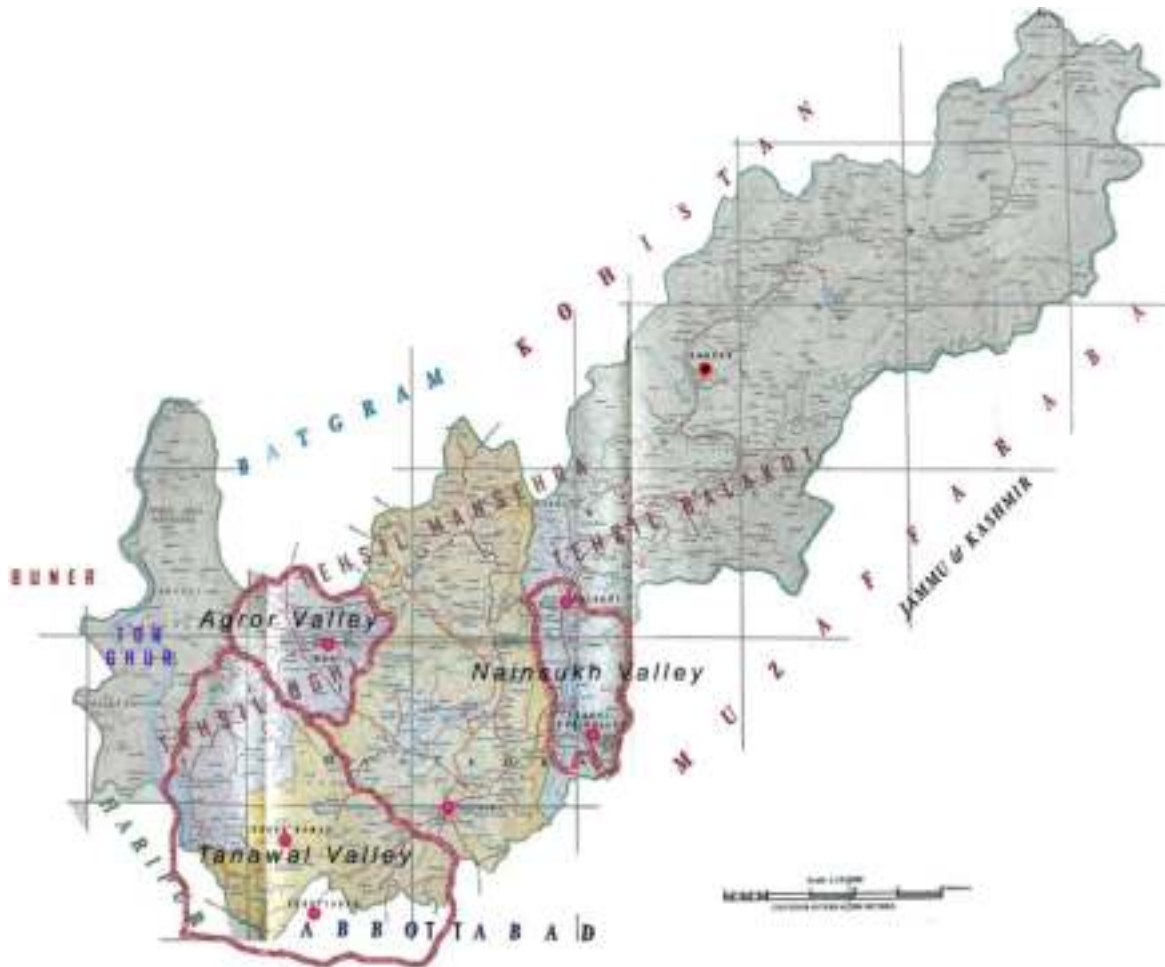


Figure 1: Mansehra District Map showing the three valleys (Tanawal, Agror and Nain Sukh)