

Retracing the Permanence of Buddhism during the Kushan Empire and its Influence on the Silk Road

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Abstract—The Kushan Empire (1st– mid 3rd century CE) had played a significant role in the development and consolidation of Buddhism, facilitating its spread over Central Asia and the Silk Road. The Empire had supported Buddhist institutions and encouraged the syncretic development of Buddhist literature, Art and Theology under emperors like Kanishka. This paper examines the resilience of Buddhism throughout the Kushan era and its extensive impact on the Silk Road. It explores the evolution of Mahayana Buddhism, the impact of Greco-Buddhist Art on religious iconography and the role of Buddhist monasteries as hubs for education and inter-cultural exchanges. By analyzing historical and archaeological evidences, this research emphasizes the enduring impact of Buddhism in shaping Asia's spiritual and cultural landscape.

Keywords: Kushan Empire, Buddhism, Silk Road, Mahayana, Kanishka, Greco-Buddhism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Yuezhi nomads, who migrated from Xinjiang, China had established the Kushan Empire in Bactria (Northern Afghanistan) around 135 B.C. and 375 A.D. They spread into India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran after driving out the Greco-Bactrian dynasty. The empire had played a significant role in the Silk Road trade that had connected the Roman, Persian, Chinese and Indian empires. In the first century B.C., the Kushans had adopted Buddhism and integrated into the Greco-Roman culture. They promoted Sanskrit literature and Gandhara Art, which blended Greek and Indian elements. The Shaka Era was established around 78 A.D., and it still continues to be recognized in India today. Kanishka, the most influential emperor had expanded its territory to include regions such as China, the Indus River and Kashmir. He promoted literature and the arts; convened a Buddhist council in Kashmir and had advocated for Mahayana Buddhism.

The Gansu region in the Northwestern China was the birthplace of the ancient nomadic Yuezhi people. They were forced to relocate westwards after being routed by the formidable nomadic Xiongnu in the second century B.C. The Yuezhi were compelled to move into Sogdiana and Bactria due to this displacement, where they ultimately defeated Greek dominance and established the Kushan Empire. The Scythians (Sakas), who moved into the Indus Valley and parts of northern India, were similarly driven out by the Yuezhi movement. The Kushans, who were a faction of the Yuezhi, rose to prominence and built a powerful empire that extended across northern India, Afghanistan and Iran. Under the reign of Kanishka in the second century A.D., the Kushan Empire had thrived as a key center for Buddhism, Art and Commerce, especially along the Silk Road. Although the Yuezhi remained neutral in the conflicts against the Xiongnu, they continued to have interactions with China, receiving visits from Chinese envoys like Zhang Qian in their region. Their reign had facilitated the fusion of Central Asian, Indian and Greco-Bactrian cultures, along with the expansion of Mahayana Buddhism. The Yuezhi have left a lasting mark in the histories of Central Asia, India and Persia by greatly impacting the political, cultural, and religious landscape of these regions.

An important factor in the emergence and expansion of Buddhism was the Kushan Empire, a political entity located in Central and South Asia. During this period, Buddhist theology and art underwent substantial transformations, which facilitated the growth of Mahayana Buddhism along the Silk Road. The religion flourished during the reign of the Kushan kings, particularly under Kanishka. They had provided financial support for the building of stupas, monasteries and temples that served as hubs for communal life, education and meditation. Under Kanishka's patronage, the Fourth Buddhist Council helped to establish Mahayana Buddhism and resulted in the Codification and Translation of Buddhist Texts (Divakara, 2016).

During this period, there were remarkable developments in both art and architecture, particularly evident in the Gandhara Art style, which fused elements from Persian, Indian and Hellenistic traditions. The Buddhist monastic groups had facilitated cultural exchange and fostered community integration through land ownership and management, engagement in trade and commerce and the provision of welfare, healthcare as well as educational services. Buddhism's institutional underpinnings were strengthened by the Kushan emperors' sponsorship, which also helped the religion grow throughout Asia and influenced succeeding the Buddhist traditions (Divakara, 2016).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Lam, R. (2013) his essay reevaluates the spread of Buddhism across Eurasia during the Kuṣaṇa period (ca. 30 CE–375 CE), incorporating recent research that challenges traditional views. Scholars have reassessed the role of Kuṣaṇa rulers in Buddhist expansion and revived debates on Gandharan art. By highlighting key findings and scholarly advancements, the essay provides a fresh perspective on the political, economic and cultural dynamics that shaped the complex relationship between the Kuṣaṇas and India's Buddhist communities.

The strategic location, trade networks and cultural influence of the Kushan Empire are highlighted in this study's analysis of its economic dynamics. The Kushan Empire, which flourished from the first to the third century CE, linked East and West via the Silk Road, enabling trade with powerful nations such as the Roman, Parthian, and Han empires. Through commerce and an advanced infrastructure, it bolstered its economy and served as a crucial intermediary for significant goods. With the introduction of a standardized coinage system, cities such as Bactria and Peshawar evolved into prominent centers for trade and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the empire encouraged a blend of cultures and religions, particularly Buddhism along the Silk Road. In the end, ancient Eurasian history was significantly influenced by the Kushan Empire's cultural and economic contributions (Khaji, 2021).

A thorough compilation of literary and epigraphical sources for the Kushan Empire can be found in Harry Falk, an Indologists' book 'Kushan Histories: Literary Sources and Selected Papers' from a Symposium at Berlin in December 2013. The book is organized into two sections: Thematic Texts on Kushans, which include subjects like the Yuezhi Pre-history and Primary Sources, which comprise references from other languages. Both professionals and non-specialists can easily access the original materials because they are organized alphabetically and contain descriptions, editions and translations. By gathering important sources and academic debates, the book closes a vacuum in Kushan historiography, promoting scholarly conversations and advancing knowledge of Kushan political history (Falk, 2001).

An important addition to the study of the Kushan dynasty's cultural history, especially in Indian and Central Asian contexts, is John M. Rosenfield, an American Art Historian's book 'The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans' of 1967. The book explores how, particularly during the reign of Kanishka I, the Kushans integrated cultural influences from China, Iran, Central Asia and Rome. The intersections of religion, royalty, and social customs were shaped by a blend of Indian, Parthian, Iranian, and Roman traditions that coalesced during the Kushan era. Rosenfield's research primarily focuses on coinage, royal images, inscriptions, and sculptures, particularly those depicting Kushan patrons and worshippers.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing historical texts, archaeological evidence and numismatic analysis. Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books and excavation reports. Comparative analysis is conducted to examine the influence of Kushan-era Buddhism on the religious landscape of Central and East Asia.

IV. ANALYSIS OF KUSHAN BUDDHISM

Archaeologists unearthed an ancient Buddhist temple in Barikot, situated in the Swat Valley of what is now Pakistan. The temple, which dates back to the 2nd century B.C., rises more than three meters in height and includes a platform, a cylindrical structure, a small stupa, and several small rooms. This site has a history that spans over 3,000 years and was once under siege by Alexander the Great in 327 B.C. The finding of this temple underscores the region's historical and spiritual importance, which was vital in the growth and dissemination of Buddhism. Gandhara, covering present-day Swat, Puner, and Bajaur districts in Pakistan, was a key center for Buddhism in the ancient period. Located approximately 700 miles north of today's Karachi, it served as the Easternmost area of the Persian Empire and the Westernmost part of the Indian subcontinent. The region was part of an ancient Mahajanapada and extended into portions of Punjab, Kashmir and eastern Afghanistan. Its prominent cities included Peshawar and Taxila, which gained fame for their contributions to Buddhist scholarship and artistry.

The region came under strong Buddhist influence during the rule of the Indo-Greek King Menander (155-130 B.C.), who is believed to have converted to Buddhism. Between the 2nd century B.C. and the 7th century A.D., Gandhara remained a major centre of Buddhist teachings, philosophy, and monastic life. At its zenith, Lower Swat was home to over 1,400 monasteries. The area also emerged as a prominent center for Buddhist art, creating remarkable Gandhara reliefs and sculptures from the 1st to the 4th centuries A.D. Throughout history, Gandhara was controlled by various dominant empires, such as the Persian Achaemenid Empire, the Mauryan Empire in India, and the Kushan Empire. The first Kushan ruler, Kujula Kadphises, introduced

gold coinage, probably minted from Roman gold that reached India via trade. His successors continued to enhance the empire's power. The Kushan Empire started to decline in the 3rd century A.D. because of internal conflicts and external invasions. The region eventually fell to Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century, leading to the disappearance of Gandhara as a distinct cultural and religious entity. Today, the remnants of Gandhara's rich history, including its Buddhist temples, sculptures and monasteries, serve as a testament to its role as a major centre of Buddhist thought and art. Besides of being a religious movement, the Kushan Empire's backing of Buddhism was a strategic and cultural phenomenon that had a significant effect on the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist art and Cross-Continental religious interactions.

The Kushan ruler Kanishka I, who had reigned from 127 to 147 CE, was renowned for his military triumphs and his patronage of Buddhism. He had broadened the Kushan Empire from Bactria and Central Asia all the way to Bihar and central India. Kanishka had not only annexed Kashmir but also extended his influence over regions such as the Ganges basin, Mathura, and Ujjain. He in turn engaged in conflicts against the Chinese under General Pan-Chao, initially facing defeat but ultimately overcoming Pan-yang. Kanishka had significantly contributed to the proliferation of Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana tradition. He constructed a massive stupa in Peshawar and provided assistance to the Buddhist monks. The Kushan Empire (1st-3rd century CE) was a significant player in connecting South Asia and Central Asia through trade and cultural exchange. Its strategic location had facilitated commerce along the Silk Road, fostering interactions between India, China, and Rome. The Kushans upheld Iranian religious customs while also significantly supporting Buddhism, facilitating its dissemination via the Silk Road into China. Their impact had reached Khotan and Kashgar within the Tarim Basin, where Kushan leaders took part in local governmental affairs. A collection of bronze coins from the Kushan era, dating back 2,000 years and fused due to corrosion, validated the economic expanse of the empire.

The decline of the Kushan Empire began during the reign of Vasudeva I, which resulted in the division into smaller princely territories. The incursion of the Persian Sasanians into Northern India during the 3rd century CE accelerated this decline. Meanwhile, the Nagas and other Indian dynasties rose to power, paving the way for the emergence of the Gupta Empire. The Kidara Kushans maintained control over parts of the Kabul Valley until the middle of the 9th century. Following the fall of the Kushans, India's political scene remained unstable until the Gupta period, when the Naga rulers of Mathura and other areas were instrumental in reinstating Hindu governance. Their dominance persisted until Samudragupta triumphed over them in the 4th century CE, signifying the shift to a new era in Indian history..

V. POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS STRATEGY

Buddhism had received considerable support from the rulers of the Kushan Empire, particularly from King Kanishka. The time of Kanishka's rule is often seen as the pinnacle of Buddhism, as there were significant contributions to the fields of Buddhist scholarship, art, and architecture. His patronage played a vital role in the expansion of Buddhist monastic centers, which encompassed the construction of stupas, monasteries, and vivid places of worship. Through the development of several monastic establishments that served as centres of Buddhist study and practice, this sponsorship solidified Buddhism as a significant religious force in the area (Divakara, 2016).

Through the organization of Buddhist councils, promotion of Buddhist literature translations, and support for Buddhist scholars, the Kushan rulers significantly advanced the spread of Buddhism. Their active involvement facilitated the consolidation and distribution of Buddhist teachings throughout the empire and beyond. Key achievements during the Kushan era included the establishment and expansion of monastic institutions, which served as centers for education, meditation, and community life. The support provided by the Kushan rulers directly contributed to the construction of monasteries and viharas, or monastic complexes. These institutions, which highlighted the artistic and architectural achievements of the Kushan period, were noted for their impressive design and cultural importance. The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka, used Buddhism as a unifying force to consolidate their vast and diverse empire (Divakara, 2016). By supporting Buddhist institutions, they strengthened their political legitimacy, much like Ashoka of the Maurya Empire did earlier. Since the empire covered territories with Hindu, Zoroastrian and Hellenistic influences, Buddhism—especially Mahayana—served as a 'diplomatic bridge' between these cultures.

VI. IMPACT ON MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

The Fourth Buddhist Council, convened under Kanishka's patronage in 72 AD Kundalvana, Kashmir has played a defining role in formalizing Mahayana doctrines, emphasizing the Bodhisattva ideal and the concept of universal salvation. This period saw:

- The emergence of new Buddhist texts, many of which were later translated into Chinese.

- The rise of Buddhist scholasticism, with thinkers like Vasubandhu and Asanga, influencing later Buddhist philosophy.
- The involvement of laypeople in Buddhism allows accessibility for individuals outside the monastic community.

VII. THE ROLE OF ART IN BUDDHIST EXPANSION

The Kushans made important contributions to Buddhist imagery, especially through Gandhara Art, which has fused Greek realism with Indian spiritual concepts. This artistic movement:

- Introduced Anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, making Buddhist teachings more relatable to followers.
- Created narrative reliefs that visually depicted stories from the Jataka tales and Buddha's life, making them more accessible to the common people.
- Influenced later Buddhist art in China, Tibet and Japan, marking the global spread of Buddhist aesthetics.

VIII. KUSHAN ECONOMY: TRADE ROUTES AND SILK ROAD CONNECTIONS

The Kushan Empire, a significant power in Central and South Asia from the first to the third century CE, was strategically located along key trade routes like the Silk Road. Its dominance over vital mountain paths and diverse landscapes enabled extensive trade and economic growth. The Kushans played a crucial role in the Silk Road trade acting as intermediaries for goods moving between China, India, and the Roman Empire. In addition to promoting trade, the empire promoted technological and cultural interactions, especially in the fields of art and religion, which had an impact on events in China and Central Asia (Khaji, 2021).

Owing to its strategic position on the Silk Road, which facilitated extensive trade in luxury goods, the Kushan Empire had enjoyed a prosperous economy. Silk, imported from China and disseminated westward was a highly valuable commodity that generated significant tax revenue. Premium textiles and Indian spices such as Pepper and Cinnamon were key exports. In addition to trading in Gold, Silver and Lapis lazuli, the empire also took advantage of its rich natural resources and its currency showcased a variety of cultural influences. The Kushan Empire's economic and cultural significance was further increased by the trading or diplomatic usage of luxury goods like ivory and exotic animals (Khaji, 2021).

IX. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

The Kushan-controlled Silk Road facilitated the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia and China, as Buddhist monks and traders travelled these routes. Buddhist monasteries:

- Became economic hubs, managing land, receiving donations, and engaging in trade.
- Operated as community organizations, offering education, medical care, and housing.
- Played a role in cultural integration, blending Buddhist philosophy with local traditions.

X. DECLINE AND LEGACY

Even though Buddhism thrived during the Kushan era, its prevalence in the area waned because of:

- The fall of the Kushan Empire and shifts in political dynamics.
- The rise of Hindu and Shaivite movements, which reasserted Brahmanical traditions.
- The later spread of Islam, which reshaped the religious landscape of Central Asia.

Despite this, the influence of the Kushan dynasty persisted through Mahayana Buddhism, which established itself in China, Korea, and Japan, shaping Buddhist philosophy for hundreds of years.

XI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

XI.I. BUDDHIST PATRONAGE UNDER THE KUSHANS

One of the most defining features of the Kushan rule was their strong patronage of Buddhism. Emperor Kanishka, in particular, is known for his contributions to Buddhist expansion. Buddhists during the Kushana period embraced the Mahayana concept of 'extreme emptiness' as taught by philosophers like Nagarjuna; however, their religious practices developed within the diverse cultural influences of Bactria and Gandhara, shaped by the Silk Road trade routes. Consequently, Buddhism under the Kushanas

was distinct from the Buddhist traditions found in Eastern India and the Mahayana schools that later expanded to China and Japan.

XI.II. BUDDHISM AND THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road acted as a channel not only for commerce but also for the exchange of culture and religion. Buddhist monks and scholars journeyed widely along this route, setting up monastic centers that functioned as key sites for sharing knowledge. The Gandhara and Mathura School of Arts, which thrived during the Kushan dynasty, significantly influenced Buddhist iconography that spread to China, Korea, and Japan. The combination of Greco-Roman artistic influences with local traditions led to unique portrayals of the Buddha, which became a defining feature of Buddhist visual culture along the Silk Road.

The Silk Road played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism, facilitating its spread from India to China and beyond through the movement of monks, exchange of religious texts, and artistic influences. The Kushan Empire, ruling over present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern India was a key player in this process, facilitating the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. Their patronage helped translate Buddhist texts into Chinese and other languages, allowing for a broader dissemination of Buddhist philosophy. The Gandhara School of Art had emerged from this period, combining Greek and Indian artistic elements, leaving a lasting legacy on Buddhist iconography. Cities like Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan became centres of Buddhist scholarship, where important texts were translated and preserved. However, Buddhism's dominance declined with the spread of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries, leading to the destruction of monasteries and the conversion of Buddhist communities. Despite this decline, Buddhism continued to influence the cultures of China, Korea and Japan shaping new traditions such as Chan (Zen) Buddhism (FasterCapital, 2024).

XI.III. THE SPREAD OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Mahayana Buddhism became prominent during the period of the Kushans, representing a transition from the earlier Theravada tradition. The idea of Bodhisattvas and the focus on universal salvation received substantial footing from the Kushan rulers, leading to the widespread creation of Buddhist texts and teachings. The translation of Buddhist scriptures into languages of Central Asia and their later introduction to China had a significant impact on religious practices in East Asia. Monastic communities that developed along the Silk Road played a crucial role in safeguarding and sharing these teachings.

XII. CONCLUSION

The Kushan Empire, which was an important cultural, economic, and political entity from the 1st to the 3rd centuries CE, profoundly influenced Northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It was a hub for cultural exchange, supported trade through the Silk Road, and promoted religious and artistic developments. The empire's capital, Purushapura (modern Peshawar), became a hub for cultural exchange. The Kushans were strong patrons of Buddhism, with their rulers, particularly Kanishka, being strong patrons of the Gandhara art style. Hinduism had also flourished under their rule, leading to religious coexistence. The empire's capital, Purushapura, became a hub for cultural exchange. The Kushans built stupas and monasteries, such as the famous Kanishka Stupa, showcasing their dedication to Buddhism. Their coins depicted symbols from multiple religions, highlighting their inclusive nature. In literature, the Kushans promoted Sanskrit and Bactrian languages, supporting scholars like Asvaghosa, whose writings enriched Buddhist philosophy. The rise of Mahayana Buddhism during this period marked a significant religious transformation.

The Kushan administration was characterized by a centralized structure under a monarchic rule that exerted control over vast territories. They implemented a governance framework that depended on provincial governors to ensure efficient regional management. Their diplomatic approaches included cultivating relationships with far-off empires, participating in cultural exchanges, and reinforcing economic connections. The empire encountered numerous challenges, such as internal power conflicts, disputes over succession, economic downturns, resource scarcity, foreign invasions, and pressures for cultural uniformity. To protect the Kushan legacy, historians and scholars recommend incorporating its study into educational programs, fostering collaborative research, and promoting heritage tourism. Cultural exchange initiatives can showcase the empire's artistic and religious achievements. Revitalizing trade practices that are inspired by the Kushan models could strengthen contemporary economic systems, while assisting artisans in recreating Kushan-era art could encourage the preservation of culture..

In summary, the contributions of the Kushan Empire to culture, economy, and politics remain influential in today's world. The empire's support for Buddhism created a lasting impact on the religious and cultural narrative of Asia. By endorsing monastic establishments, promoting artistic advancements, and fostering doctrinal evolution, the Kushans played a crucial role in the

dissemination of Buddhism along the Silk Road. The lasting effects of this era are reflected in the ongoing practice of Mahayana Buddhism throughout China, Korea, and Japan. By retracing the permanence of Buddhism under the Kushans, this study underscores the profound impact of the empire on the broader historical trajectory of Buddhism.

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