Gandhara, Mathura, Taxila from the perspective of travelers and historians - Artistic ideas, economic policies, social organization and architecture and sculpture through Buddhist thought: A study

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Abstract -*The artistic tradition of ancient India did not decline with the fall of the Mauryan Empire. Indian art continued to flourish even during the rule of the Shakas and Kushans. Perhaps it was not as widespread as that of the earlier rulers. There was a concentration of art in certain regions. Such as Gandhara, Mathura, and Amaravati. There are many opinions among historians about the origin of Gandhara art. (Chattopadhyay 1985) Percy Brown has called it "Greco-Buddhist" art. According to him, the style was Greek, but the subject matter was Indian. Although Marshall specifically looked at the Greek character, Kumar Swamy also believes that there is an Indianness in Greek customs. Again, according to Roland, he also considers it to be a manifestation of the art of the Roman Empire. Different art critics have expressed different opinions from the perspective of non-historians. The Hellenistic, Parataviyan and Central Asian influences cannot be denied in the art of Gandhara. (Chattopadhyay 1985) Since the roots of Gandhara art are in ancient Greek art, Western art lovers have easily been able to appreciate the beauty of this art. Although Gandhara art had a touch of Greek art, Mathura art maintained its complete Indianness, and Mathura art was not influenced by Gandhara art in any way. Gandhara art certainly touched the exterior of Mathura art, but could not penetrate into its interior. The number of sculptures found in Mathura is about 140 and its construction period is in the Kushan period. (Chattopadhyay 1985) On the other hand, Taxila has created a chapter in ancient Indian architecture and sculpture. This chapter begins from about the sixth to the fifth century. Particularly noteworthy are Sirkap, the second city of the Greek or Indo-Greek period, Sirsuk, the last urban area of the Kushan period, and Vir DP, the ancient city of Taxila. On the other hand, the costumes of the sculptures of Amaravati are seen to have many similarities with the reliefs of Sanchi. (Chattopadhyay 1985). Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy focuses on Indian sculpture, namely the heavy yet lifelike sculptures of Badami, Ellora, and Elephanta of the 2nd, 6th and 7th centuries BC. A connection of almost a thousand years has been established. He says with pleasure that he listened to the soft and gentle music of Sarnath with deep attention, but the art of Eastern India cannot be called an echo of Sarnath (Chattopadhyay 1985). The philosophy of Indian sculptors and sculptors has touched the hearts and minds of the common man.*

Keywords: *Mauryan Empire, Indo-Greek period, Greco-Buddhist, Gandhara, Mathura,* Taxila

Introduction:-The artistic tradition of ancient India did not decline with the fall of the Mauryan Empire. Indian art continued to flourish even during the rule of the Shakas and Kushans. Perhaps it was not as widespread as that of the earlier rulers. There was a concentration of art in certain regions. Such as Gandhara, Mathura, and Amaravati. There are many opinions among historians about the origin of Gandhara art. (Chattopadhyay 1985) Percy Brown has called it "Greco-Buddhist" art. According to him, the style was Greek, but the subject matter was Indian. Although Marshall specifically looked at the Greek character, Kumar Swamy also believes that there is an Indianness in Greek customs. Again, according to Roland, he also considers it to be a manifestation of the art of the Roman Empire. Different art critics have expressed different opinions from the perspective of non-historians. The Hellenistic, Parataviyan and Central Asian influences cannot be denied in the art of Gandhara. (Chattopadhyay 1985) Since the roots of Gandhara art are in ancient Greek art, Western art lovers have easily been able to appreciate the beauty of this art. Although Gandhara art had a touch of Greek art, Mathura art maintained its complete Indianness, and Mathura art was not influenced by Gandhara art in any way. Gandhara art certainly touched the exterior of Mathura art, but could not penetrate into its interior. The number of sculptures found in Mathura is about 140 and its construction period is in the Kushan period. (Chattopadhyay 1985) On the other hand, Taxila has created a chapter in ancient Indian architecture and sculpture. This chapter begins from about the sixth to the fifth century. Particularly noteworthy are Sirkap, the second city of the Greek or Indo-Greek period, Sirsuk, the last urban area of the Kushan period, and Vir DP, the ancient city of Taxila. On the other hand, the costumes of the sculptures of Amaravati are seen to have many similarities with the reliefs of Sanchi. (Chattopadhyay 1985). Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy focuses on Indian sculpture, namely the heavy yet lifelike sculptures of Badami, Ellora, and Elephanta of the 2nd, 6th and 7th centuries BC. A connection of almost a thousand years has been established. He says with pleasure that he listened to the soft and gentle music of Sarnath with deep attention, but the art of Eastern India cannot be called an echo of Sarnath (Chattopadhyay 1985). The philosophy of Indian sculptors and sculptors has touched the hearts and minds of the common man.

According to the account of the Chinese traveler Hiuen

Tsang (Xuanzang), the area of this Gandhara kingdom was about 1,000 li ('li' is an ancient Chinese unit of length, commonly called the "Chinese mile". In the current metric system, 1 li is equal to 800 meters or 0.8 kilometers) and the circumference of the capital was 20 li.

There are about 20 Sangharama's (monasteries), 2,000 monks (who follow both the Hinayana and Mahayana faiths), 5 temples, and 3 stupas built by Emperor Ashoka. Monks worship and offer offerings at several stupas dedicated to the Buddha's chief disciples, such as Sariputra, Mudgalyayana, Ananda, and Rahula, during special holy months and fasting days. Monks initiated into a particular teaching pay homage to their own gurus or bodhisattvas. About 5–6 li east of the city is a high Sangharama, built by the renowned Upagupta. Here is a stupa enshrining a severed fingernail of the Buddha. In a cave to the north of the Sangharama is a large stone chamber filled with small pieces of wood. Whenever Upagupta elevated someone to the rank of 'arhat', he would place a piece of wood in this chamber. (sarma1975)

Historical records by Hiuen Tsang reveal geographic discrepancies regarding Mathura, omitting the Yamuna River to its east and falsely mentioning eastern mountains. Scholars like Alexander Cunningham and Samuel Beale suggest Chinese texts misprinted "mountain" or mistook elevated monastery mounds for natural peaks; thus, terms like "high mountain" and "tunnel" offer clearer context.

Mathura's fourth prominent spiritual figure, Upagupta, was born of Shudra descent. Ordained at age 17, he attained Arhat status after three years of rigorous practice by defeating King Mara—a struggle detailed by Acharya Ashwaghosha. When Mara disrupted his meditation with a flower garland, Upagupta retaliated by binding a decaying corpse around Mara's neck. To be freed, Mara apologized and fulfilled Upagupta's demand to manifest in the bodily form of Lord Buddha. Revered as the "featureless Buddha," Upagupta was prominent in Northern Buddhist traditions as a contemporary of Emperor Ashoka, about a century post-Mahaparinirvana, and welcomed all disciples regardless of caste.

Nearby, a dry lake's bank features a stupa, adjacent to a forested area honoring the four previous Buddhas and stupas commemorating 1,250 Arhats. Northeast lies 'Sat Ani Shefalo', bordering a river leading toward Taxila, where treacherous currents reportedly capsize any vessel carrying sacred relics or treasures. (sarma1975)

Historical accounts from various ancient travelers offer differing perspectives on travel times and distances to Taxila. Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang and traveler Sunga Yana both recorded that crossing the Indus River to reach Taxila took three days, whereas Fa-Hien noted a seven-day journey from the Gandhara region. From an archaeological perspective, General Alexander Cunningham identified the historical site of Taxila near Shahderi, located one mile northeast of Kalka Sarai. Archaeological excavations across this ancient city have unveiled the remnants of multiple forts, approximately 55 stupas—two of which equal the grand scale of the renowned Manikyala Stupa—along with 28 mud dwellings and 9 Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, accounts by Philostratus document that during the visit of Apollonius and Damis around 45 AD, a monastery near Taxila displayed wall paintings illustrating Alexander the Great's war against Persia.

The region's geography features several notable religious sites. Approximately 70 *li* northwest of the capital lies the Nagaraja Ilpatra pond (or serpent pond), measuring under 100 paces in circumference. Moving 30 *li* southeast from this pond, positioned along a narrow pass between two hills, stands a 100-foot-high stupa constructed by Emperor Ashoka. According to tradition, Buddha Shakyamuni prophesied that this sacred ground would emerge as one of the four great jewels of the earth upon the advent of the future Buddha, Maitreya. Local belief holds that even during intense earthquakes that shake adjacent mountains, a 100-step perimeter surrounding this holy site remains completely immobile, while any ignorant attempts to excavate it provoke seismic tremors. Adjacent to this stupa lies an ancient *Sangharama* (monastery) that has long been abandoned and left deserted. Additionally, another stupa built by Emperor Ashoka is located roughly 12 to 13 *li* north of the city. (sarma1975).

Historical, Geographic, and Scriptural Context

The legend of the serpent king Ilpatra is widely documented across Chinese Buddhist literature. Archaeologist Alexander Cunningham identified the 'Babawali' spring in Hasan Abdal as the historic Ilpatra Pond. Local folklore claims the Naga king's body stretched from Taxila to Varanasi, supporting the view that Hasan Abdal—associated with Kashyapa's city and the *Kadur Sutta*—was historically part of Taxila.

Bodhisattva Chandraprabha & Acharya Kumarlabdha

During his practice as a Bodhisattva, Lord Buddha ruled this region as King Chandraprabha, a legacy marked by a historic stupa. Adjacent to it stands a dilapidated *Sangharama* (monastery) with crumbling, overgrown structures where a few monks still reside. Notably, this monastery served as the working place for the famed Sautrantika scholar Acharya Kumarlabdha, who authored several treatises here.

The Tragedy of Prince Kunal-Southeast of the city, at the foot of a hill, sits a 100-foot-high stupa constructed by Emperor Ashoka in memory of his son, Prince Kunal. Known for his beauty, humility, and noble character, Kunal was the son of Ashoka's chief queen. Following her death, his stepmother, Tissarakshita, became enamored with him. When Kunal tearfully rejected her improper advances, the vengeful queen conspired to have him appointed ruler of Taxila. She ultimately engineered a plot to have him unjustly blinded. Today, tradition holds that visually impaired devotees who pray devoutly at his burial stupa can regain their sight.

Literary References & Buddhist SectsAccounts of Prince Kunal's narrative appear in the travelogues of Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hien and Sungayana, as well as in Rajendra Lal Mitra's work, *Nepalese Buddhist Literature*. Furthermore, according to Vasilef's *Buddhism*, Dharma Uttar (or Uttara Dharma) founded the Sautrantika

sect—which, along with Vaibhasika, forms one of the two primary branches of Hinayana Buddhism. (sarma1975). Part Three (Emperor Ashoka's Order and the Taxila Journey): King Ashoka called his eldest son, Prince Kunal, and ordered him, "I want to hand over the responsibility of this empire of my ancestors to a loyal and worthy son, who will not do any wrong and will keep the family honor intact. I have full confidence in you, so I am appointing you as the ruler of Taxila. However, governing the kingdom is a very complex and responsible task; therefore, do not take any immoderate decision that will tarnish your image. In the future, to verify any kingdom I send, look at the seal of my teeth imprint given in the letter - because the impression of my teeth can never be wrong." Following his father's instructions, Prince Kunal went to Taxila and started governing with great efficiency. Part Four (Tissarakshita Conspiracy and Kunal's Ultimate Sacrifice): Even after time passed in Taxila, the jealousy and anger of Kunal's stepmother, Queen Tissarakshita, did not diminish at all. After a few days, the queen prepared a conspiratorial royal decree and applied red wax to it. Then, when the king was asleep, she secretly pressed the letter to the king's mouth, affixed the king's tooth impression or seal to it, and sent it to Taxila through an envoy. (sarma1975).

The Tragic Loyalty of Prince Kunal

Upon receiving Emperor Ashoka's royal decree, the ministers of Taxila were horrified to learn it ordered Prince Kunal's eyes to be gouged out and banished him and his wife to the mountains. Hesitant to execute such severe instructions, the ministers proposed waiting to verify the letter's authenticity with the king. However, out of absolute filial devotion, Prince Kunal insisted on immediate compliance, recognizing the authentic imprint of his father's teeth on the seal. Refusing to delay, he summoned an executioner (*Chandal*) to remove his eyes and subsequently embraced a beggar's life, wandering beyond the realm.

Political Rebellions and Governance in Taxila

Historically, around fifty years after Alexander the Great's Indian invasion, Taxila revolted against the Magadhan ruler Bindusara. After Bindusara's eldest son, Susima, failed to quell the uprising, his younger son Ashoka successfully restored order and was appointed Viceroy of Punjab. Later, when Taxila rebelled a second time, Ashoka dispatched his own son, Prince Kunal, as governor—setting the stage for his tragic narrative.

Artistic Evolution & Philosophical Ideology in Gandhara

Dr. Nehru analysed the complex artistic style of Gandharan sculptors, noting that early art critics lacked comparative frameworks to evaluate Gandhara against other regional traditions. Situated at a geographical and cultural crossroads, Gandhara harmonized diverse artistic influences. Unlike the strict spiritual abstraction of Sanchi and Bharhut sculpture—which transcended the physical world to establish a pure moral order where Buddha's physical features symbolized abstract philosophical concepts—Gandhara focused on material representation. Its primary objective was to instruct and train new artists by emphasizing external forms and narrative depictions through the Jataka tales. (Mitra 1956). Gandhara art originated under Greek influence, adapting classic Western techniques before transforming through its deep connection with Buddhism. Moving beyond earlier symbolic depictions, Gandhara artists began sculpting human portraits of the Buddha. Under the Kushan Empire—centered at Taxila—Emperor Kanishka became a pivotal patron who, like Ashoka, aggressively promoted Indian art and Buddhism abroad. The Kushans' cultural policies successfully laid the groundwork for Buddhist scriptures and artistic traditions to thrive across China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. During this era, Kushan artistic expression split into two distinct styles: Gandhara art and Mathura art. Though completely different in technique, both forms were united by a profound sense of humanity. (Mitra 1956). The wheel was one of the Vedic period's most vital contributions to Indian civilization, driving technological and social progress through the ox cart, chariot, and potter's wheel. Its continuous rotation and circular form inspired profound philosophical concepts regarding cyclical change, eventually influencing religious imagery such as Emperor Ashoka's *Dharmachakra* and the *Vishnu Chakra* in Brahmanical art.

Later, the lives and ethical teachings of Gautama Buddha and Mahavira introduced a new humanistic vision that transformed the Indian artistic landscape. Building upon the thematic diversity established during the Mauryan period, artists at key Eastern Indian sites—including Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati—gained confidence in their creative capabilities, sparking unprecedented development in early Indian art. (Ghosh 1976). Early Indian sculptors rapidly mastered stone carving within a century, seamlessly progressing from shallow relief work to full-figure sculptures depicting both religious and worldly subjects. Sites featured detailed Jataka tales alongside high-relief figures of Bodhisattvas, Yakshas, and Nagas, while Brahmanical icons of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Mahishasuramardini also emerged. This rich artistic evolution and technical mastery in the pre-Kushan era laid the groundwork for the flourishing talent of Kushan-period artists. (Ghosh 1976). The idea of a meditative old man came from the ancient yoga tradition, an example of

which is the yogi statue of Mohenjo-daro. The Gandharan art style could not last long in India. Although the ideas of yogis or ascetics, lotus postures, etc. were conceived in the pre-Kushan period, they were only successfully realized in this period. (sarma1975). India's earliest Buddha sculptures originated in Gandhara art, borrowing heavily
from the Greek god Apollo. Characterized by realistic yet unnatural features, these depictions ranged from youthful figures meditating in the lotus position to emaciated, austere forms. Depictions of Bodhisattvas and Maitreya resembled Greek or Scythian aristocrats, leading scholars to classify this style as "Greco-Indus." Ananda Coomaraswamy noted that while Gandhara introduced half-closed eyes focused on the nose, its statues lacked vital creative energy and possessed a softer, "feminine charm." In contrast, Mathura art derived its Buddha images from indigenous Yaksha figures. Prospering between 50 and 300 AD, Mathura emerged as a major cultural hub during the Kushan period. It produced a wide array of Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical sculptures, including representations of Nagas, Yakshas, Indra, Brahma, and Vishnu. Additionally, evidence of early Brahmanical worship includes a 1st-century BC Shiva temple discovered at Ramnagar in Bareilly. (Ghosh1976).

The artists of Mathura enriched Indian folk tradition by producing religious icons for Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism alongside secular sculptures tailored for wealthy patrons, skilfully capturing aspects of civil society and sensuality. During the Kushan, Gandhara, and Mathura eras, art evolved from secluded cave creations by ascetic monks into a thriving social and economic profession, though much of Mathura's artistic heritage was repeatedly looted and destroyed by later invaders. According to the ancient treatise *Manasara*, the creator Brahma originated four divine artists whose descendants defined architectural planning, design, painting, and metalwork—traditions further codified in classical texts like *Mayama* and studied by modern scholars such as Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch. Historically, Indian temple architecture developed across four distinct classical styles: the northern *NAGAR* style (exemplified by Khajuraho's Kandarya Mahadev Temple), the southern *Dravidian* style (such as Kanchipuram's Kailashnath Temple), the *Vesara* style developed under the Chalukyas, and the *Kalinga* style of Odisha seen in Puri's Jagannath Temple. Beyond these structural styles, cave architecture independently flourished through rock-cut mountain sanctuaries (Ghosh1976).

India boasts a rich legacy of cave architecture, ranging from rock-cut *Chaityagraha* like Karle and Ajanta to gallery-like caves at Udayagiri and Nasik, culminating in monolithic marvels like Ellora's Kailasa Temple. Reflecting John Ruskin's classification of architecture into religious, commemorative, civil, military, and domestic types, Indian heritage includes world-renowned monuments spanning all five categories—from the Bodh Gaya temple and Sanchi Stupa to the Red Fort and Udaipur palaces. India's earliest architectural structures include the Ashokan pillars and ancient cave sanctuaries at Barabar,
Nagarjuni, and Khandagiri-Udayagiri. During the Mauryan, Shunga, and Andhra periods, Buddhist stupas and rock-cut monasteries flourished across central and western India. Later, the Kushan-Gandhara style introduced unique brick stupas and rock-hewn hermitages across Taxila and Afghanistan, while the construction of structural (*Harmya*) temples gained prominence by the early 5th century, illustrating the continuous evolution of Indian architectural artistry. (Ghosh1976).

Pre-Mauryan architecture is evidenced in Basra, Taxila, and early Deccan tomb stupas, while Sir John Marshall's reflections on Indus basin influences underscore that Indus civilization matched contemporary Sumer and Babylonia. Early urban planning featured city entrances (*Sardaru Mayathamba*) along public roads. During the Mauryan era, Emperor Ashoka revolutionized pillar architecture by creating monolithic shafts featuring a unique, enduring polish. Unlike Persian pillars assembled from multiple stone blocks, Ashokan pillars were crafted from single stones and structured into four main components: a tapering smooth shaft, an inverted lotus capital, a decorated abacus depicting figures like the Dharma Chakra or animals, and a crowning sculptural animal. Outside Mauryan imperial art, single free-standing pillars rooted in ancient tree-veneration (*fetishism*) traditions continued to evolve. A prime example is the 2nd-century BC Heliodorus Pillar at Vidisha, erected by a Greek envoy converted to Vaishnavism. This thirty-foot monolithic Garuda column uniquely blended Barhut and Hellenistic styles through its sixteen- and thirty-two-sided shaft geometry. Its design successfully balanced a top heavy in volume over a narrower base, introducing sophisticated structural balancing techniques that later influenced monument designs across India, including the monumental gateways at Sanchi. . (Ghosh1976).

The tree motif holds a foundational place in Indian art, with the pillar serving as an indigenous symbol of a tree trunk that Emperor Ashoka adopted to convey the Buddha's pure teachings, even while leveraging foreign stone-carving technology. Unlike Greek traditions that placed lions atop temples to symbolize authority, Ashoka placed

the *Dharmachakra* above lion motifs to proclaim that moral righteousness (*Dharma*)—rather than raw power, deities, or mortals—represents humanity's highest aspiration. Although most of Ashoka's architectural works and pillars have been destroyed, surviving monuments highlight his remarkable religious tolerance. Despite his personal devotion to Buddhism, Ashokan inscriptions reveal that he commissioned the Sudama Cave specifically for the Ajivika monks, contrasting with figures like the Kalinga Emperor Kharavela, who carved the Khandagiri-Udayagiri caves strictly for Jain ascetics.

During Ashoka's reign, monumental Buddhist construction also flourished. While the Bharhut Stupa was financed by wealthy merchants, imperial decrees directed the construction of the stupa enclosure at Sarnath and the original *Bodhi Manda* (shrine) at Bodh Gaya, which inspired similar open-sided, four-pillar pavilions across regions like Bharhut. Among the historic hill sites between Gaya and Rajgir—Pratapgarh, Nagarjuni, and Sitamarhi—a total of eight rock-cut caves were excavated. The Sudama Cave on Pratapgarh Hill represents the earliest of these sites, featuring a inner design with a rectangular outer chamber measuring nearly thirty-three feet long by twenty feet wide. Situated nearby on the same hill is the Lomas Rishi (Hairy Sage) Cave, considered the finest architectural specimen of the group. Later, during the reign of Ashoka's grandson Dasharatha, excavations continued with the creation of the Gopi Cave on Nagarjuni Hill, cementing this region's legacy in early Indian rock-cut architecture. (Ghosh1976)

Conclusions:

In the early days, Theravada artists did not create Buddha images, but they depicted Buddha in the form of a Bodhidrum, Dharma Chakra, footprints or lotus flower; Gandhara artists, influenced by Greco-Roman influences, imagined Buddha as a well-off young man. All of this was the plan of Gandhara artists. There is also some opinion that the first Buddha images were planned by the artists of Mathura. The Kushan king Kanishka was the patron of Gandhara art. But the artists of Mathura had a continuous practice, Mathura city was continuously attacked by external forces for 600 to 700 years, and despite the attacks of the Greeks, Sakas, Pallavas, Kushans and Huns, the artists continued to develop their art. The Buddhist art of Mathura was mostly dominated by artisans. It shows various forms of Buddha, Bodhisattva, Mahajana Devadasis, Hariti, Jambal, Mananjusri, Prajna Paramita, some Hindu deities, Vishnu, Surya, Ganesha, Haraparvati, Lakshmi, Narayana. (Sannal 1976) Gandhar did not stop at various arts, there are traces of coins from Gandhar. The coins of India, Bactria and Sak Pallava, excavated from Taksha rocks, were also in circulation at that time. (Gupta 1987)

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