

Impact of Kushanas on Kashmir

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Abstract: *Khushana period is regarded as glorious period in Kashmir history, the influence of Buddhism was at its peak. The prominent ruler of the Kushana was Kanishka, under his supervision the historical division between two versions of Buddhism, Mahayana and Hinayana took place through the fourth Buddhist Council that was organized by him. The impact of khushana rule was visible in every aspect but the most dominated field was art and architecture in which Gandhara School of Art was most flourished.*

Key words: Kushans, Gandhara, Mahayana, Hinayana, stupas, Kanishka, Iconographs, Harwan, barasingha, Bodhistavas

The Greeco-Buddhist art or Gandhara School of art reached its zenith during the Kushana period from 1st century A.D to 5th century A.D. One of the most important Kushana ruler was Kanishka who held fourth Buddhist council in *Kundalvana* (Modern, Harwan), in which a new line of approach was issued in the development of Buddhism called *Mahayana* against the previous school of *Hinayana*.¹ The new form of Buddhism or ‘Mahayanism’ was the main theme of the *Gandhara* art. The full size statues of Buddha and the images of Kushana rulers were produced by employing this new style of art. The statues of Buddha appear similar to the statues of Greek God, *Apollo*. Actually the Gandhara art is a live commentary on the life and deals of Lord Buddha.² From the archaeological evidences it is amply attested that Kashmir was included in the wide dominion of the Great Kushana Empire and it had its influence on the Kashmir. No other field of Kashmir was so influenced as art and architecture.

Impact on Art and Architecture

Kashmir has been known to outsiders as *Shashtra-shilpira* or architects on account of their well-known skill in building. Similarly in the realm of sculpture they, like the Greeks, personified the natural objects and imparted to them life and vividness as beheld and experienced by them in their heavenly homeland. Religious fervor of these early artists found outward expression in the building of temples and iconographs.³

¹ Luckvinder Singh Sodhi, *The History of ancient Kashmir*, Srinagar, 2006, p.65.

² Sharan Dr., *Ancient India*, Meerut, 2009, p. 179.

³ Bamzai P.N.K, *Kashmir and Central Asia*, Srinagar, 2009, p.199.

Kashmir had, however, still preserved some good specimens of sculpture and it is not difficult to reconstruct a succinct history of the development of the plastic art. Very little had, however, survived of the Kashmiri art of the centuries before the Christian era. At Harwan Buddhist ruins have been excavated, but they are not of earlier than the fourth century A.D.

The molded brick tiles unearthed at *Harwan* depict unique art trend, in that they do not deal with religious, but with secular themes. We find life and nature as the artist found around him. There are figures of men wearing Central Asian costumes and curiously enough the relief figures of Parthian horsemen, women, heads and busts appear side by side with early Gupta motifs. The moulding on Harwan terracotta tiles cannot however be the work of folk artists. The art seems to have attained the high degree of sophistication and the mould tiles depict life of the upper class, in as much as we find figures of hunting horsemen, men and women sitting on a balcony and enjoying perhaps the beautiful landscape and listening to music from female musicians and recitals of dancers. The physiognomy of the persons depicted on these tiles leaves no doubt of their central Asian origin- their prominent cheek bones, small eyes, receding forehead and head features, all point of the same conclusion. From some letters in the *Kharoshti* script which went into disuse before the fourth century A.D and also from a small passage on Buddhist creed written in the *Brahmi* character, it seems the tiles belong to 3rd-4th century A.D.⁴

The valley of Kashmir especially under the beginning rule of *Kanishka* became the celebrated centre of a tolerant and luxuriant style of art and architecture. In his period the Buddhist art turned to be the focus of Indo-Hellenistic and Gandhara cultures. Gandhara School of art flourished and reached new heights of glory and development. It was however cosmopolitan in character.

The archaeological research in recent years at some of the ancient sites of Western Iran (ancient Parthia), and Hyrcania (North-Eastern Iran) and Gandhara have confirmed the Hellenistic penetration during the Greek rule but its continuity in a dignified style achieved a great significance during the Kushana period. Gandhara in the Peshawar valley of Pakistan was the meeting ground of Indian, Persian, Greek, Central Asian, Chinese and Roman cultures. Both Gandhara and Kashmir were considered as one geographical unit.⁵

⁴ Bamzai P.N.K, *Cultural and Political History of Kashmir*, Srinagar, 2007, p.321.

⁵ Shali S.L, *Settlement Pattern in Kashmir*, New Delhi, 2001, pp.160-161.

The archaeological research done in recent past have shown numerous Kushana settlements in Kashmir some are Harwan, Huvishkapur (modern Ushkar) in Baramulla, Hathmura in Pahalgam, district Anantnag, Kralchak in Pulwama, Takya Balla in Pulwama, and Semthan in Anantnag. The most important Kushana settlement from art and architectural point of view has remained Semthan and Harwan.

In Kashmir, terracotta art represents a religious as well as secular affiliation of a very high order. Instead of stone masonry, large sized terracotta plaques were utilized freely. These were moulded and modeled and are unique of their kind so far as the development of the architecture in Kashmir is concerned. They betray decorative motifs and scenes of life and are of a legendary character.⁶

The most valuable and striking findings or the terracotta tiles from the Buddhist sites especially from the Kushana settlement of Harwan, district Srinagar. These present an effective and a colourful picture of human beings, mythical and real representation of animals, flora and other abstract motifs or figures of diverse nationalities.

The human figures shown on the tiles are men and women in pairs or more on the balcony, water carriers, horse riders, dancing women, musicians with instruments like flute, cymbal, pairs of drums etc., men fighting with the dragon for the wheel of law, archer wearing a conical cap, female figures attired in close-fitting garments holding their skirt with the left hand and a vase of flower in upraised right hand, emaciated monks etc. The rich attire of men and women, their exquisitely curved ornaments of ear rings and beaded necklaces, pointed Turkman caps, style of combing the hairs, sunken eyes, low receding foreheads, heavy jaws, dresses, weapons or arms show resemblance with the ethnic features of the people residing in various countries of Central Asia.⁷ The couple on the balcony is generally wife or husband or lovers. Both are seated facing each other. They have their individual personality. The woman has a distinct style of hair dress and wears a beaded necklace while the man is having a well-built body and carries bonded strands of hairs at the back of his head. The man holds in the left hand a lotus bud and sometimes he holds a cup of wine and thus enjoys while conversing with his counterpart. Even the lotuses were also substituted for cups in the hands of figures of bacchanalian scenes.⁸

⁶ Gupta P.L, *Gangetic Valley Terracotta Art*, Varanasi, 1998, p.64.

⁷ Bandey Aijaz A., *Prehistoric Kashmir*, New Delhi, 2009, p.82.

⁸ Kak R.C, *Ancient Monuments in Kashmir*, Srinagar, 2006, p.196.

The occupation of the society in Kushana settlements varied from person to person. In order to maintain the high standard and comforts by the well-to-do people manual labour was employed. Some of the labour class had to work more as compared to professional actors like dancers, musicians or women attendants directly attached to the masters. For instance, the water carriers shown in the process of bringing water in pitchers had to undergo much physical hardships. The water had to be fetched from the running streams down below and he had to carry it in pitchers after walking the breath-taking slope of the settlement at Harwan. His physical posture and the facial expression is a proof of the magnitude of manual labour he had to undergo. He holds one pitcher by his right hand stretched downwards and the other is held by his left hand stretched over his head while the pitcher rests on his right shoulder. Against this, the woman in a relaxed mode, wearing a thin robe and a stole is shown holding only one vase on her upraised left hand while with the right hand she supports her skirt.⁹ The vase most probably is the incense burner. A similar fascinating and impressive example is characterized by the professional dancer who wears long ear rings, loose robes, trousers of full length but tight near the anklets. The scarf hanging from her head on either side is held by her two hands presenting an emotional gesture of her performance. In due recognition of skill, the figure is portrayed within an ornamental panel. On the whole it signifies the higher status for a woman in general. The musicians are also shown full vigour and movement while playing on their instruments like flute, cymbals, drums etc. flanked by flora motifs in another panel is shown a well dressed female musician playing on a drum slinging from her left side of the shoulder by means of a strap. Martial spirit is depicted by a scene of combat between a man and a fabulous monster. The man holds a heavy headed mace in his right hand. The creature is standing on its hind legs. In between the two is shown the wheel over which both appear to be fighting. The offensive arms were bow and arrow. A soldier in armor is seen in a panel riding on a galloping horse holding the curved bow with his left hand and with his drawn-out right hand he is shown in the act of sending an arrow. In another panel an archer is shown riding on a horse back chasing the deer and shooting arrow at it. In this way, these terracotta tiles provide information on the nature of the social life and the range of activities practiced by different sections of the people. There was a planned system of division of labour ensuring the safety and security of the settlements. This represents a

⁹ Stein M.A, *trans.*, *Rajatarangini*. Motilal Bansaridas , Delhi, 1969, P.325

sound administrative capability and economic stability. Still fundamental differences remained between rich and poor or between feudal nobility and priestly class. Evidences of suffering spells are illustrated through repeated motifs of self tortured scenes of emaciated monks who are lean, nude and reduced to skeleton and are seated in a crouched position with their bent backs and legs tucked up.¹⁰ Their chins are placed on the hands which in turn are resting on their knees.¹¹ This is the realistic picture of starvation or the agitation path resorted to by these monks to give vent to their feelings against the luxurious way of living of the upper class of the society and the non-Buddhist practices like the lavish life style of amorous couples, wine drinking, dancing, wrestling, acrobatic etc. Such scenes of pleasurable life of amorous couples are distinct in Gandhara reliefs and popular themes in Mathura school of art. Similarly exposures like old and sick women and people tortured bodies, anguished expressions, protruding ears and warty skins have occurred at the beginning in the Hellenistic art.¹²

The production of countless terracotta motifs at Harwan are both mythical and real. Among these are the scenes representing man and a griffin fighting with each other. Galloping horse, long horned deer sometimes shown with its head turned backwards at the moon or the archer on horseback chasing it and even shooting arrows at them, domestic cocks with foiled tails in roundrels are in the centre of floral patterns, running or flying Geese holding lotus stalks in their beaks, cocks and rams fighting, makra types of animals, lions, fish, elephants and cows suckling their young etc. The decorative elements consist of frets, wavy lines, fish borne patterns, conventional flowers, flower or lotus petals, aquatic plants and full blown lotuses shown both in separate panels and in vases. The tiles were invariably stamped with Kharoshti numerals to avoid confusion in their settings.

The meticulous display of highly ornate human figures and their movements, griffin like fantastic creatures, Kashmiri *barasingha*, indigenous flora and fauna with the natural environmental set up betray excellent artistic skill of which Kashmir can justly be proud of. The Harwan tiles show comparatively evolved technique reflecting the socio-religious

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Bandey Aijaz , p.88.

¹¹ P. Fergusson, *Kashmir*, JK Publishers Srinagar, 1999, p. 45

¹² Shali S.L, *Kashmir History and Archaeology through the Ages*, New Delhi, 1993, p.255.

and opulent life of the inhabitants. These characterize syncretism of cultural traits of many diverse nationalities and civilization besides the indigenous creations.¹³

The grand achievement of architectural style of settlement patterns and the exuberant artistic productions at Harwan under the supremacy of Kushanas were widely distributed and illustrate various phases of evolution. This indicates that the spirit of progressiveness was a living force. Despite regional or local manifestations, the standardization of forms, principles and procedure has been maintained which indicate that all these examples from various sites in the valley fundamentally belong to same wide-spread movement.

The Kushanas were great patrons of art and other than terracotta tiles; many wondrous products of terracotta objects were created which became popular with the common man. Terracotta was used for manufacturing of favorite images which have also occupied a distinct position in the art history of the valley and were in fact a source of inspiration for the stone cutters to produce sculptures in stone during the succeeding periods. These consisted of human figures and figurines, Buddha's, Bodhisattvas, stupas, clay objects etc. These served as the most convenient and less expensive medium of artistic expression among the rich and the poor. The source of expression for development of terracotta figures of other associated cultural material had come with the Indo-Greeks and it were the Kushanas who gave it a practical shape.

In the excavated site of Semthan from the Kushana levels, important antiquities were obtained which included terracotta figures, terracotta balls, and clay sealings with Brahmi and kharoshti scripts, semi precious stone, bone and shell objects, copper coins of Kushana rulers. Some of the terracotta figures were prepared out of the single mould¹⁴.

A number of terracotta figurines and animals besides coins and pottery of different periods and styles are coming forth in groups from the Semthan mound particularly after the rain fall. These include monks, Buddha, Bodhisattvas, female and male figures with distinctive draperies, poses and facial expressions. Among the animal figures various types of rams, monkeys, cows, elephants etc. with beautiful mouldings are found. Coins of Indo-Greeks, Kushanas and of Hindu and Muslim periods are found in large numbers from the slopes of

¹³ Ibid, pp.163.

¹⁴ Ojha N.N, *The Indian History*, New Delhi, 2009, p.85.

the mound. All such superb collection of antiquarian value from Semthan distinguishes it now as a site of rich cultural material bearing a stamp of rational chronology.¹⁵

A collection of terracotta figurines from the Semthan site was obtained in excavations from the Kushana layers. A noteworthy standing figure was of a Bodhisattva wearing a sleeved tunic reaching to the knees and having intermittent delineated folds usually running parallel to one another. Being headless, facial expression is missing. The right hand of the figure is raised as a gesture of Abhayamudra (protection from fear) and the left hand probably is straight. Another male head has typical moustaches. Some figures are shown with necklets around their necks and necklaces of ovoidal beads or pearls of uniform sizes. In early Indian art, depiction of necklets, necklaces or chinnavira (meaning protect warrior) type of ornament and wristlets are very common.¹⁶ A head less standing figure of a female deity, probably of Hariti, was found. She wears necklets, channavira, wristlets, three strands of beaded Mekhala (belt) and her left hand is placed by the side of the thigh. Again from the Kushana level is a seated Buddha figure in a separated panel wearing uttariva (attire) covering both the shoulders. He is seated in the Padmasana (lotus seat) posture with legs crossed and soles turned upwards. This again shows the striking resemblance with Buddhist art of Gandhara. At the bottom are two animals in a combat. These are frequently represented on terracotta tiles from the Kushana settlements of Harwan.¹⁷

The pattern of drapery ornaments and symbolic gestures and get up of the figures indicate close similarity with Gandhara prototypes. In the latter levels of this period at Semthan terracotta finds included both human and animal figures. The earlier treatment of drapery, ornamentation and tangibility is missing. However, such finds recovered from the stratified dig and large number of these from the surface portray a systematic flow of cultural cross-currents into the valley during Kushana and late Kushana periods.

At Harwan itself a number of terracotta finds were also found. These included bodily limbs of Buddha or Bodhisattvas, their snail-shell hair curls and plaques bearing replicas of miniature stupas. A terracotta coin more or less a prototype of the coinage (in metal) in vogue reported from Buddhist settlement of Harwan appears to be of a later period. There was no need for going in for such a cheap method of coinage when the Kushanas had set

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp.171-173.

¹⁶ Krishna Murthy S, *The Gandhara Sculptures A-Cultural Survey*, Delhi, 1977, pp.40-45.

¹⁷ Shali S.L, *Settlement Pattern in Kashmir*, New Delhi, 2001, p.172.

their standard of minting gold, copper and to some extent silver coins to meet the needs of their subjects and to facilitate international trade. The large sized terracotta pendant and now reported gold flower petal could be the ornamental objects of the Bodhisattva.¹⁸ The Gandhara sculptures are invariably adorned with necklaces which consisted of spacers of different shapes suspended from the plaited gold. However, the use of jewellery or gold indicate the flourishing period of social life under the Kushanas.¹⁹

At the ancient city of Huvishkapura, modern Ushkur in Baramulla town built by Kushana king Huvishka, an earlier architectural evidence of a stupa plinth was exposed in recent years as a result of scientific clearance. This was afterwards super imposed by another one built by Karkota king, Lalitaditya in 8th century AD. The earlier one is built of slate stones which is quite distinct from the heavy stone blocks used at a later stage. However, both the patterns are similar to the corresponding structure of Gandhara School of architecture. Outside the surrounding wall of the stupa in the north-eastern corner and also outside the complex, a considerable number of terracotta heads and fragmentary limbs of the images were found. These again display influence of Gandhara School of art 3rd-4th century AD and betray typical smooth conventional forms with appropriate gestures. In a plaque with beaded border, Buddha is shown seated cross-legged in the gesture of meditation (dhyananmudra) with hands placed on the lap and turned upwards. The figure is dressed in three garments (trichivara) worn one over the other. Another figure is shown with head covered by a beautiful net of curls, elongated eye-brows and protruded eye-balls and a smiling, calm, charming and attractive face. The figure illustrates the exemplary precision on the part of the artist. Again in a more set-form is a head of a Shakyamuni Buddha, still a Bodhisattva. The head is decorated in a stylistic fashion by bands of curls or pearls. It has half closed eyes more beautified by the arched eye-brows and, above all reveals a more spiritualized expression. In a characteristic Gandhara style is another terracotta head of Bodhisattvas with its hair combed in twisted locks at the forehead and parts hanging on either sides with the top highly ornated strings of pearls. With a smiling face and staring eyes, the figure presents a highly dignified religious atmosphere.²⁰

¹⁸ Bandey Aijaz A., *Prehistoric Kashmir*, New Delhi, 2009, p.88.

¹⁹ Krishna Murthy S, *The Gandhara Sculptures A-Cultural Survey*, Delhi, p.38.

²⁰ Kak R.C, *Ancient Monuments in Kashmir, Srinagar*, 2006, pp.217-219.

The human figure heads which form the main group are the excellent specimens of the artistic skill and audacity of Kashmiris with deep rooted influence from Greeko-Roman, Hellenistic, Indian and Central Asian regions. They are fashioned by modelling and are of great antiquarian value. As such these have been recognised as earliest example of sculptural art in Kashmir.

Near Srinagar at Soura such terracotta images of Buddha and Bodhistavas were found. One Buddha head wearing usual type of head-dress (Ushnisha) with a hallow behind the head had also been reported. The latest discoveries in Central Asian republics and in Afghanistan have brought to light many sites where terracotta figures have been located which are inseparably linked with Hellenistic and Indian traditions. Infact, these very small but artistic Indo-Hellenistic Buddha images are Buddhist symbols wrought in Gandhara or Kashmir were taken by traders and merchants to Mid-Asia. These aroused the curiosity of the people there. Such regular contacts led to exchanges in all fields of life. Buddhism thus made the most marked advance during early years of Christian era.

The art of Gandhara is that of the period of Kanishka. The style developed because of the peace and prosperity of the Kushana Empire.²¹ The wide-spread settlements of Kushanas, therefore, gave a rich and brilliant exposure of architectural and artistic expressions in the valley. The Kushanas era was an important landmark in the development of historical and cultural contacts among the nations and Kashmir was a promising meeting place for promotion of such ties. This left a rich legacy for the people who followed next²².

By studying all the phases revealed from the Semthan excavation. We come to know that from 700 BC to 5th century AD Kashmir came into contact with the Iranian's, Mauryas, Indo-Greeks, Kushanas and Kidar Kushanas. All these civilizations influenced the Kashmiri culture to a great extent which led to the growth of its culture. Many features of these civilizations are still prevalent in the valley. As all these civilizations influenced the Kashmiri culture then, it is better to say that, amalgamation or mixture of many cultures has made our culture that is Kashmiri culture.

²¹ Op.Cit Shali S.L, p.175.

²² Gupta P.L, *Gangetic Valley Terracotta Art*, Varanasi, 1998, p.64.