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# HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN GANDHĀRA: A RELOOK AT MATERIAL REMAINS.

**Sarita Khettry**

Gandhāra was the ancient name of a region which included Pushakalāvātī (Charsada in the Peshawar district) and sometimes also Takshaśīla (Shah-dheri = Taxila in the Rawalpindi district). The country was thus situated on both sides on the Sindhu or the Indus and included parts of the Peshawar and Rawalpindi districts.<sup>1</sup> The term in its broader sense, comprised besides, Gandhāra proper, several neighbouring regions, particularly the Swat and other river valleys to the north, the region around the city of Taxila to the east, and Eastern Afghanistan (culturally it was a part of the Indian Subcontinent). Gandhāra was an important centre of Buddhism since its introduction during the reign of Mauryan king Aśoka till about the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This is attested by epigraphic and literary sources.<sup>2</sup> Apart from inscriptions, material remains often provide important insights into the history of development of Buddhist sects and lay practice regarding which the texts are silent. The recent discoveries of inscribed water pots and birch bark manuscripts from Eastern Afghanistan, which are now in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British library, London, Senior Collection and the Private Collections have added significantly to our knowledge of Buddhism of the region concerned.<sup>3</sup>

During the time of Aśoka various sects of Hīnayāna or Nikāya Buddhism came into existence with their tenets and literatures. In this connection, we can refer to five Schools, viz., Mahāsaṃghika, Sarvāstivāda, Bahuśrutīya, Kāśyapīya and Dharmaguptaka in the north-western part of the Indian Subcontinent. Of these sects, the Mahāsaṃghika and the Sarvāstivāda were the most important sects till the Kushāna period. The epigraphical as well as the accounts left by foreign travellers like Fa-hsien, XuanZang and I-tsing testified to the above fact. The Dharmaguptakas figure prominently in the history of sectarian development of 'Hīnayāna' or 'Nikāya' Buddhism. The importance of this school lies in the fact that they were the first Buddhist school to establish themselves in Central Asia and China and it was by their effort that Buddhism was introduced in these countries. The history of the Dharmaguptaka School in India<sup>4</sup> in general and Gandhāra in particular has been obscure. At the same time several scholars believed

that the Dharmaguptakas played an unobtrusive role in the Indian Subcontinent. Buddhist inscriptions in Kharoshṭī and Brāhmī make no mention of them.<sup>5</sup> However, this paper aims at revising the history of above mentioned sect in the light of the new discoveries.

The formation of this School is variously presented in the accounts of Buddhist sects. According to one tradition, the Dharmaguptaka is one of the sub sects derived from the Sarvāstivādins, while in Pāli Theravāda tradition it is identified as an out growth of the Mahīśāsaka sect.<sup>6</sup> The founder of this School was one Dharmaguptaka who declares himself the successor of Maudgalyāyana.<sup>7</sup> This School originated in the Aparanta country. During the time of Fa-hsien (beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.), the Hīnayānist had 500 *Sanḅhārāmas* in Uḅḅiyāna (Swat Valley). They were supplanted by the Mahāyānist in this region during the next two centuries. In approximately 630, XuanZang in his *His-yū-chi*<sup>8</sup> notes their disappearance: 'on both banks of the subhavastu river, there were formerly 1,400 *Sanḅhārāmas*, most of which are already deserted. In the past, the monks in that land numbered 18,000; now they had gradually diminished. They all studied the Māhāyāna and are engaged in the practice of meditation on quietude. They are skillful at reciting the texts, but do not seek to understand their profound meaning. Their disciplinary conduct is pure, and they are especially versed in magical formulae. The Vinaya tradition of the five Schools, namely, the Sarvāstivādins, the Mahīśāsakas, the Kāśyapīyas and the Mahāsamḅhikas were known to them. This is the only allusion to that School in the *Hsi-yū-chi*. Half a century later, when I-tsing arrived in about 671, he found few adherents of Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka and Kāśyapīya School in Udyāna. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D. they effectively established themselves in Central Asia and China. This is proved by the fact that, according to Bernard,<sup>9</sup> one of the Central Asian Kharoshṭī documents from Niya (no.510) contains six verses which correspond to the concluding verses of the Prātimoksha-sūtra in the Dharmaguptaka version, implying that its writer belonged to this sect. This led Richard Salomon<sup>10</sup> to believe that Dharmaguptaka monks were present in the Buddhist communities of the Shanshan Kingdom in and around the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D., and since there is no direct evidence there for the presence of any other particular sect at this relatively early period, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the Dharmaguptakas were the dominant School there. We cannot also deny the role played by this School in the diffusion of the Vinaya in China. This is well attested by E.H. Lamotte who comments:

In the list of the five Schools drawn up in China, it was the Dharmaguptakas who most frequently occupied the place of honour.

There is nothing surprising in this considering the role played by that school in the diffusion of Vinaya in China. The first formularies (karmavācanā)... pertained to that school. According to I-tsing, China followed mainly the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya and..... the Pātimoksha of that school was considered to be the paramount code of Hīnayānists Buddhism until the final years of the Empire.<sup>11</sup>

The activity of this School in the Indian Subcontinent since its origin in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. till its advent in the Central Asia and China is not much known. However, the early dissemination of Dharmaguptakas in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. in Central Asia definitely indicates its affiliation with Gandhāra region. A large number of pots and fragments of pots made of clay, or occasionally of ceramic and metal have been found at Buddhist monasteries of Gandhāra and adjoining regions of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and ancient Bactria. These pots were used for the carrying and storage of water and for domestic storage of a wide range of commodities. These water-pots (*pāniya-ghadha* or *kundika*) were embedded in the floor near the sacred monuments.<sup>12</sup> From I-tsing's account we come to know that pottery, along with porcelain, was one of the two materials used for keeping clean water, whereas 'touched water' (i.e. dirty water) was kept in copper or iron vessels. According to G.Verardi<sup>13</sup> water was certainly involved in lustration rituals carried out in the sacred area, but the specific presence of these water-pots near the sacred monuments could be connected with the offerings made by devotees. This is clear from a good number of pots (both complete and fragmentary) which are inscribed with Kharoṣṭī and Brāhmī scripts. They are donative in nature and found at the Buddhist monasteries at Takht-i-Bahi, Pālāṭu-ḍheri, Sahri-Bahlol, Tor-Ḍherai (mentioned by S.Konow), Peshawar, Qunduz, Kara Tepe and Faiz Tepe near Termez, Uzbekistan, Bāswal, Būtkara, Tepe Zargarān, GulDara, Saidu Sharif Mekhāsaṇḍa, Rānighāt, Shaikhan Ḍherī and at Haḍḍa (new finds).<sup>14</sup> The dedicatory inscriptions on the pots, like other types of Buddhist donative records contain the description of the record, name of the donor and specification of the recipient of the gift, the geographical location of the recipients, the purpose for which the donation is made and the religious merit acquired from it. Unlike the other Buddhist donative records dates are not mentioned. The discovery of large number of such records from Gandhāra and its adjoining regions suggests that it was a common and widespread form of donation on the part of laymen, pilgrims and worshippers to Buddhist monasteries. The interesting point is that sometimes the inscribed water-pots and their fragmentary parts contain the name of the Buddhist sect to which the monastery belonged. This would help in unravelling the many facts of history of religious sects.

So these are not mere minor gifts or casual finds but an important archaeological source of history.

We can refer here to five water-pots which are in the collection of the British Library, London. A detailed survey of these water-pots is made by R. Salomon in his book entitled *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhāra*.<sup>15</sup> F.R. Allchin's analysis of the pots reveals the following details: Four water-pots were complete and one had lost its neck and rim. They were wheel thrown and were made out of finely sorted clay. They had a smoothened or lightly burnished surface and a light cream/buff wash or slip. The pots were gobular or near-globular in shape, basically the kind of vessels used for storing water or other household commodities. Three of them were decorated with stamped impressions of rosettes. The writing in black ink was added onto the shoulder of the pot after firing. It is derived from a single probably local source. Of these five water-pots, pot D (as mentioned by R. Salomon) is dedicated to the Buddhist sect of the Dharmaguptakas (*Saghami caūdisami dhamaūteana parigrahami*. 'Given to the Universal Community, in the possession of the Dharmaguptakas'). Several other fragmentary parts of the water-pots (no.8,11,17) refer to the Dharmaguptakas. Significantly, the pot D which is donated to the Dharmaguptaka sect contains Buddhist manuscripts which are written on birch-bark in Gāndhārī language and Kharoshṭī script. This shows that the manuscripts must have come from or at least have been associated in some way with a monastery of Dharmaguptaka sect. According to R. Salomon the probable provenance of British library pots was the ancient Nagarāhāra (the modern Jalalabad plain) in Eastern Afghanistan. His contention is based on the fact that abundant Buddhist stūpa sites in the Jalalabad plain (the ancient Nagarāhāra) and particularly those in the neighbourhood of the village of Haḍḍa yielded many specimens of inscribed pots that have a close similarity with the British Library pots. A close resemblance with Shaikhan Dheri pots suggests early centuries of the Christian era for the date of British Library pots. On the basis of paleographic and linguistic ground the birch-bark Buddhist manuscripts can be dated to period ranging from early first century A.D. to the middle of the second century A.D. However, the reference to two important Indo-Scythian rulers namely Jihonika and Aśpavarman (who ruled in the north-western part of the Indian Subcontinent in the early first century A.D.) in the Buddhist fragments prove that the cultural tradition of the texts stems from the Indo-Scythian period of the early first century A.D. Thus, if we believe in the argument of R. Salomon regarding the provenance and date of both inscribed pots and Buddhist manuscripts then we can say that by about early first century A.D. or

during Indo-Scythian period Nagarahāra in Eastern Afghanistan was a principal centre of Dharmaguptakas. In this connection mention should be made to another newly discovered ceramic pot now in a private collection. The pot belongs to variety of globular or nearly globular jars used for storage of water or domestic commodities. It is nearly 40 cm high with its neck broken. The pot is reported to have found in the region around Jalalabad in Eastern Afghanistan. Below the neck of the pot one line Kharoshti inscription is found which gives the following reading:<sup>16</sup>

*Saghe cadodi<śa>mi radaṇa acarya dharmaudaka p(ra)digha[he]  
[eva ca] [dha]rma///*

.....'For the Buddhist order of the four directions, in the possession (of) the Dharmaguptaka teachers (at) Radaṇa and so.....of the Dharma(?)///'

It appears from the above inscription that the ceramic pot is a gift to the Dharmaguptaka teachers at Radaṇa. The name Radaṇa is definitely a place name where Dharmaguptaka teachers used to reside. The term Radana also occurs on an inscribed jar from Schoyen collection<sup>17</sup> which is said to be given to dharmamuya(na) teachers of that place : *Saghe catur[ti] śami [ra]danami acaryana dharmamuyana pratigrahe*

'[Gift] to the Universal community, in the possession of the dharmamuyana (Dharmaguptaka) teachers at Radaṇa(?).'

Ingo Strauch pointed out that 'not only there is similarity between both the texts but the shapes of both the pots and their decoration suggests that both objects originated from same place Radaṇa.' However, the exact identification of this place is not known. With regard to its general location Radaṇa has to be looked for somewhere in the area near modern Jalalabad on the basis of close resemblance with inscribed Haḍḍa pot published by G.Fussman.<sup>18</sup> Other than these a number of pots and potsherds have been found from Eastern Afghanistan which are now in the private collection and dedicated to the Dharmaguptaka teachers at Sreṭharaṇa (*Saghe cadudiśe S(re)ṭharaṇe acarayana dharmauṭakana para[sic] grahami*).<sup>19</sup> Sadakata has also mentioned a pair of sherds which has an inscription *cadudiśami Sreṭhara[ṇami]maṭṭaka*.<sup>20</sup> It appears that both the potsherds derived from a single source.

The presence of Dharmaguptakas in the north-western part of the Indian Subcontinent in the first century A.D. is attested by Jamalgarhi stone inscription. According to Lüders this School had their other important centre in the Mathurā region in northern India during the Kushaṇa period. He refers to a Brāhmī inscription<sup>21</sup> on the pedestal of a Boddhisattva image which probably comes from Mathurā or its environs. The inscription records the donation of the image to the

Dharmaguptaka teachers (*acāryana dharmaguptakāna pratigrahe*). Another Brāhmī pedestal inscription hails from Girdharpur in Mathurā region, recording a dedication to the Dharmaguptakas in the year 29 of Mahārāja Huvishka. Bactria which was situated in Northern Afghanistan and was one of the main seats of activity of the Kushanas is considered to be one of the strong holds of the Dharmaguptaka sects. The so-called Qunduz Vase inscription which is reported to have come from somewhere in northern Afghanistan, i.e. in Ancient Bactria, records that it was presented to the Dharmaguptaka teachers (*acariyanam dhammaguptakana parigrahe*).<sup>22</sup>

Gāndhārī (North-Western Prakrit) was the major language of Gandhāra. It has been in use even before the introduction of Buddhism in the region concerned. It is said that the Buddha advised his disciples to impart his teachings in the local language of the region. Following this principle, the Buddhists who settled in Gandhāra adopted Gāndhārī as the medium of propagation of their religion. The Dharmaguptakas who were affiliated to Gandhāra used Gāndhārī as their medium of instruction and writing their texts. It has been suggested that the Chinese translation of Dīrghāgama which is evidently a Dharmaguptaka text was translated from Gāndhārī prototype rather than from an original in some other Prakrit dialect or in Sanskrit.<sup>23</sup> The Central Asian Kharoshti document from Niya is also written in Gāndhārī language. The British library manuscript which belonged to Dharmaguptaka School is written in Gāndhārī language and Kharoshṭī script. As we know, Arapacana syllabary which had its origin in Gandhāra region appears in the Chinese translation of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. It was perhaps the Dharmaguptakas who first made use of Arapacana in North-West to teach the *dhāraṇī* or 'protective hymns' in order to facilitate the good law.<sup>24</sup>

From remote antiquity Gandhara had connections with the outside world through several overland and sea routes. References to these routes are found in Indian and foreign sources of the pre-Christian century and early centuries of the Christian era. Overland routes played an important part in establishing cultural relations with Central Asia and China. The main route proceeded along the valley of the Kabul river and reached the Hindu-Kush mountains through Purushapura (Peshawar), Nagarahāra (Jalalabad) and other cities. To the north-west of the Hindu-Kush was Bactriana with its capital at Bactra (Balkh). The route on the other side of the Oxus ran through different localities in Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Kirghizia and ultimately reached Kashgarh. At the latter site reached the routes running from the Dun-Huang area in China along the north and southern limits of the Takla



Makan desert (in Xinjiang). From here one could go to So-Chu (Yarkand) and then the Ts'ung-ling (the Pamirs).<sup>25</sup> The Chinese treatise *Hou-Han-Shu* refers to a route running from Shan-Shan (to the south of Lop-nor in Xinjiang) to the Ta-Yüeh-Chi country (the Kushana empire which incorporated the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent including Kāśmīra situated not far from the Pamir area). It appears from the Wei-lüeh that following this route one could reach Ki-pin (an administrative division of North-Western India including Kāśmīra) and Ta-hsia (Eastern Bactria) and Tien-chu (the lower Indus country).<sup>26</sup> A very important, but difficult, route from Central Asia to Ki-pin in North-Western India (including Kāśmīra) ran through Kashgarh, Yarkand, and the Pamirs.<sup>27</sup> The last noted route continues to through the areas of Hunza to Gilgit. From here the route passed through Chilas, Dasu, Mansehra and Abbottabad and ultimately reached Taxila (in the Rawalpindi district).<sup>28</sup> There was another route from Gilgit to the Kashmir Valley. Thus there were channels of communication connecting Gandhara and its adjoining regions with Central Asia and China on one hand and West Asia on the other. Through these routes travelled emigrants, including missionaries and traders. Buddhism, which was the prime force of the cultural life of the majority of North-Western India, disseminated to Central Asia and from there to China through one of the overland routes by the efforts of Dharmaguptakas.

Thus, material remains bring to light a forgotten but crucial phase in the history of development of sectarian Buddhism in Gandhāra where Dharmaguptakas played an important role under the patronage of Indo-Scythian kingdoms in the early Christian centuries. The gift of water pots and their fragments therefore provide the missing link, or at least one of the missing links, between Gandhāran Buddhism and its early manifestations in Central Asia and China. The decline of Dharmaguptakas in Gandhāra and its adjoining regions could be explained to be the result of shifting patronage as their Indo-Scythian supporters were replaced by Kushanas who were followers of Sarvāstivādin sect.

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