

THE FOURTH BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The World's Best Kept Secret

*Mohammad Ajmal Shah**

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of controversy about the date of the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir.

One theory is that it was introduced fifty years after the death of Buddha, while according to the others it was introduced by Ashoka after his Buddhist council (Khosla 1972: 13).

It is commonly believed that Buddhism came to Kashmir during the reign of Ashoka. But Kalhana's Rajtarangani has mentioned Surenra as propagator of Buddhism before Ashoka who built two Viharas in Kashmir (Stein 1961, I: 93-94). After Surenra, Ashoka brought 5,000 Buddhist monks and settled them in Kashmir and adjacent territories. He built several mathas and viharas and gifted the valley to the Sangha.

Ashoka's introduction of Buddhism naturally changed the entire social fabric in Kashmir. The scholars and pandits pursued the Buddhist studies and took an active part in propagation of Buddhism. It is said Ashoka built a number of Viharas, Chaitiyas and Stupas besides he is credited of building a new capital city in Kashmir called "Shrinagri". "The conclusion of the deliberations of the Buddhist council held at Patliputra under the Presidentship of Muggaliputta Tissa, Majjhantika was sent to Kashmir and Gandhara at the head of an evangelical mission. Hieun Tsang and Ou-Kong has mentioned, that an arrival of 5,000 monks who were settled in Kashmir by Ashoka and his gift of the valley

* Research Scholar, Department of Archaeology, Deccan College, Pune

to the Sangha for turning it into a centre of study and propagation of Buddhist religious texts" (Bamzai 1994:82-83).

After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, north-western India came under the subjugation of Indo-Greeks, was followed by the Kushanas, a sub-division of the Yueh-chi nomads, who hailed from Central Asia. Kashmir, which was included in their domain, witnessed a great resurgence of Buddhism during this time. The revival of Buddhism began in the reign of Kanishka, the greatest of the Kushan rulers. It was in his time The Fourth Buddhist Council was held in Kashmir.

This paper will mainly deal with the venue of The Fourth Buddhist Council selected by Kanishka and the historical background behind it.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The existence of conflicting and contradictory schools of thought among the followers of Buddhism confused the great Kushan king Kanishka. He explained his difficulty to Parasva, his religious preceptor. The venerable teacher explained to him how the different interpretations have arisen on account of a growth of number of sects after the death of the Buddha. The King therefore decided to call an assembly of the leading monks, with a view to reconciling their views and restoring Buddhism to its former glory. The primary objective of the conference was to settle various controversies and disputes that had arisen in the principles and practices of Buddhism. The entire Buddhist literature was reviewed. The council which sat for six months made strenuous efforts to bring into order the scattered sayings, theories and dictums of various doctors of the law. The texts of the Tripitika were collected and the council, "composed 100,000 stanzas of Upadesh-Sastras explanatory of the story of the Vinaya; and 100,000 stanzas of Abhidharma Vibhasa Sastra, explanatory of the Abhidharma. For this exposition of Tripitika all the learning from remote antiquity was thoroughly examined; the general sense and the terse language was again and again made clear and distinct and learning was widely diffused for the safe guiding of the disciples" (Bamzai 1994: 95).

Kanishka, thereupon, got the text of the treatises engraved on sheets made of red copper, which after having been sealed in stone boxes were stored in a Stupa to be guarded by the Yakshas (Beal 1906, I: 156).

Various scholars have advanced contradictory views about the exact site of the Stupa housing the stone boxes. Some have identified it with

kanzalwan or Kuentilun, the hilly slopes from Harwan to Gupkar in Srinagar and some are of the opinion that the village Kond in Kulgam is the actual site. It has also been claimed that kanelwan near Bijbihara is the possible site. Some are of the opinion that the site may be at Ushkar. The area around Yechegam, Yechhkot and Raithan has also been claimed to be the exact site. Parihaspura and Buddhabal has also been mentioned in this connection as the possible site. Excavations done at Harwan, Ushkar and Ahan have revealed existence of Buddhist relics but no traces of these copper plates have been found and this problem still engages attention of scholars throughout the world (Hassnain 1973: 22).

There are contradictory opinions about the Fourth Buddhist Council. Some scholars believe that it was held in Kashmir and others believe that it was held in Jalandhar in Punjab (Taranath 1970: 93). There is also dispute on the number of people (monks) who attended the council. Some scholars believe that there were only 500 monks who were selected on the basis of merit and their understanding of the doctrines of Buddhism. Some are of the opinion that Council consisted of 500 Arhats, 500 Bodhisattvas and 500 panditas. Whatever be the case and number, there is a general consensus among most of the scholars that the Council was held in Kashmir. The location of the site is still a debatable issue. While Hiuen Tsang has stated that the Council was held in Kashmir, he has not given the exact location, but on the other hand Taranath has mentioned 'Kundalavana-Vihara' as the place where this great Council was held (Taranath 1970: 92). Many archaeologists of the world have been searching the place but of no avail.

SELECTION OF THE SITE

Many scholars agree with the view that the council met at the Kundalvan Monastery near the capital of Kashmir (Khosla 1972, fn. 26: 44). Kanishka wanted to conduct the council somewhere in Gandhara but the place was objected on account of its 'heat and dampness'. Then he suggested Rajgriha where a similar council has been held previously. But this was also rejected. Finally it was decided to hold the Council in Kashmir where it was pointed out, "the land is guarded on every side by mountains, the yakshas defend its frontiers, the soil is rich and productive, and it is well provided with food" (Beal 1906, I: 153). Paramarth says, Kashmir had mountains on all sides and was like a fortified town. It had one well guarded gate and was an ideal site for a religious assembly.

The pleasant climate and beautiful scenery of Kashmir are said to have been praised by Gautam Buddha himself. In the *Samy-uktavastu*, the Buddha is represented as saying that Kashmir is the best land for meditation and leading a religious life.

In his introduction to the *Rajtarangani*, Kalhana says of the valley that, the things which are rare in heaven are common here; Kailasa is the best place in the Three Worlds, Himalaya the best part of Kailasa and Kashmir the best place in Himalaya (Stein 1961, I: 42-43). About the scholars of Kashmir, who took part in the council, Hieun Tsang remarks; "this country from remote times was distinguished for learning, and these priests were all of high religious merit and conspicuous virtue, as well as of marked talent and power of clear exposition of doctrine; and though the other priests (i.e. of other nations) were in their own way distinguished, yet they could not be compared with these-so different were they from the ordinary class" (Beal 1973: 71).

These statements are much valuable and testify the fact, that Kashmir and its people were held in reverence from ancient times.

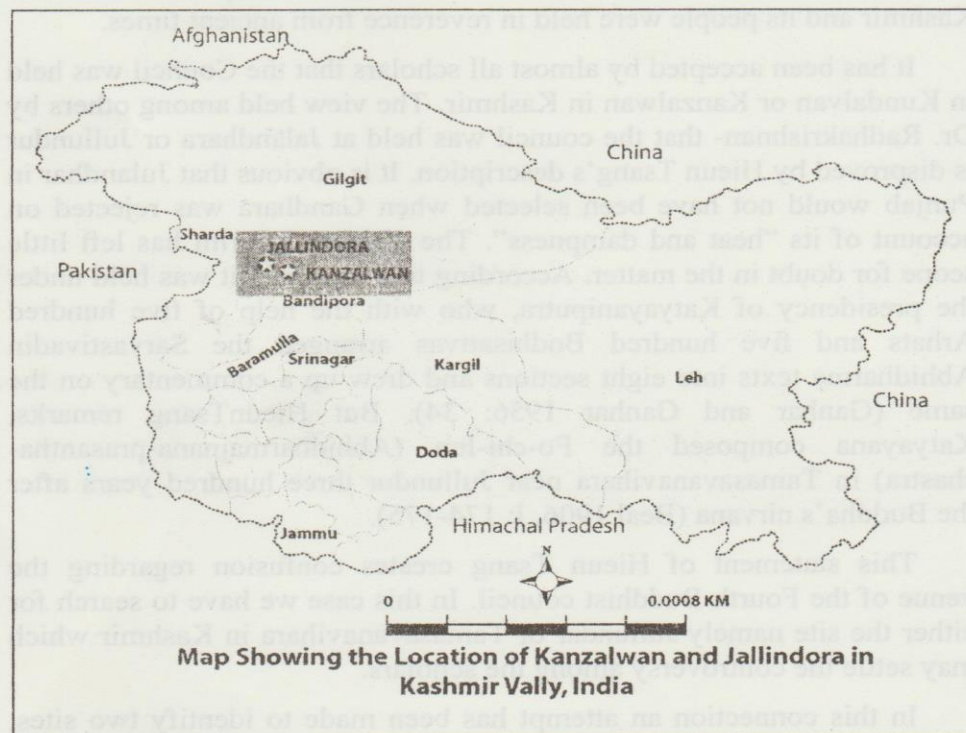
It has been accepted by almost all scholars that the Council was held in Kundalvan or Kanzalwan in Kashmir. The view held among others by Dr. Radhakrishnan- that the council was held at Jalandhara or Jullundur is disproved by Hieun Tsang's description. It is obvious that Jalandhar in Punjab would not have been selected when Gandhara was rejected on account of its "heat and dampness". The Chinese pilgrim has left little scope for doubt in the matter. According to Paramarth, it was held under the presidency of Katyayaniputra, who with the help of five hundred Arhats and five hundred Bodhisattvas arranged the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma texts into eight sections and drew up a commentary on the same (Ganhar and Ganhar 1956: 34). But HieunTsang remarks, Katyayana composed the *Fo-chi-lun* (Abhidharmajñāna-prasanthasāstra) in Tamasavanavihara near Jullundur three hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana (Beal 1906, I: 174-175).

This statement of Hieun Tsang creates confusion regarding the venue of the Fourth Buddhist council. In this case we have to search for either the site namely Jullundar or Tamasavanavihara in Kashmir which may settle the controversy among the scholars.

In this connection an attempt has been made to identify two sites, one adjacent to another, which can furnish a mine of information, if explored and excavated systematically. One is Kanzalwan and another is

Jallindora both in the Gurez valley in Bandipora district. It would be appropriate to draw an outline of the Gurez valley in historical perspective, which makes it possible site for the Fourth Buddhist Council.

Gurez is historically important as it falls along a section of the ancient Silk Route that connected the Kashmir valley with China and Central Asia. The ruins of the ancient shardi or Sharda University are preserved along the Kishanganga River that flows through Gurez (now in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir). Inhabitants of Gurez are of Dard descent—an Indo-Aryan race believed to have originally migrated to Ladakh from Central Asia. They speak Shina, an Indo-Aryan language. The Shina language has been one of the main languages of a sizeable section of the people along the old silk route touching Gilgit, Hunza and Nagari across the line of control and parts of Central Asia Before embracing Islam; they were the followers of Buddhism and Hinduism.



This is the region called Dardadesa, where Buddhism has reached before Ashoka, when King Surenra built a Vihara known as Narendrabhavana in the town of Soraka, in the Darada country (Stein 1961, I: 93). The early years of Kushana rule has obtained a strong hold in Darda country. Fa-hien entered India in 399 A.D. from the north-western routes of Dardadessa. Che-mong, the Chinese pilgrim also came to Kashmir via Dardistan (Hassnain 1973: 32). Gilgit was the chief centre of Buddhist learning during the period. Buddhist Manuscripts were discovered at Gilgit. This was perhaps the first find of original works on Buddhism in India and some of the works were known only by their Tibetan or Chinese translations.

According to Taranath, Kanishka went to Kashmir to listen to the teachings of its former ruler Simha, who had renounced the throne and become a monk (Taranath 1970: 91). It was after that on the advice of Parasva he decided to hold the Council. But Kalhana's *Rajtarangani* mentions no ruler of the name of Simha or Sudarshana as he is stated to have styled himself after ordination. But here Gilgit Buddhist Manuscripts throws light on a hitherto unknown line of rulers in Dardistan, some times before the sixth century A.D. The rulers mentioned are Deva, Lalleya and Bhima of the Sahi dynasty (Hassnain 1973: 31). Bhima could be the version of simha- the possible connotation of Kashmiri Sarda.

Buddhist Stupas have been located in Gilgit, Yasin and areas around it. This fact has been ascertained by Sir Aurel Stein also, whose labors in this field are remarkable and comprehensive.

Another reason for suggesting this region as the venue of the Fourth Buddhist Council is that of Yakshas as the guardians of the records of the Fourth Buddhist Council. This tribe has its home in Dardistan, later on they migrated to other parts of Kashmir. Yakshas are described as the earliest settlers in Kashmir. There were three tribes the Nagas, the Pisachas and the Yakshas. They came from Nagar, Hunza and other areas of Dardistan.

Another reason which may be mentioned is the extension of the Kanishka's empire. It extended from Bihar in the east to the borders of Iran in the West. It also included the provinces of Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan. Kanishka's extensive empire was rich and prosperous, Kashmir which was at the heart of it naturally shared in the prosperity; more particularly because the valley was a favorite resort of the Kushan rulers,

who detested the heat of Indian plains. Kanzalwan in Gurez valley geographically was the best site for the Council, as from there Buddhism came into contact with other parts of the world like China, Yarkand, Khasgar and Khotan.

Another thing which should be kept in mind is the beginning of urbanization in the Gangetic plains- generally assigned to the Buddhist era in the sixth century B.C, which reached its climax around the Christian era under the Kushana rule. Kashmir also witnessed the great developments in building activities under Kushana Kings especially Hushka, Jushka and Kanishka. The continued existence of the three places, Kanishkapura, Hushkapura and Jushkapura, which are described as foundations of these kings and which still survive to the present day, is likely to have assisted in preserving a recollection of their founders (Stein 1961, I: 74). No doubt archaeologists have identified many cities but many have been left unidentified like Jayasvamipura mentioned in Rajtarangani by Kalhana which Aurel Stein was himself unable to trace.

These gaps if filled will surely lead the archaeologists towards the right direction. The need is to search for the new archaeological treasures especially in Dardistan (Gurez valley) along the Kishanganga River.

CONCLUSION

Kashmir archaeological research from last 100 years has lead to the discovery of many sites of great importance. No doubt archaeologists have been able to excavate number of Buddhist sites also but engraved copper plates of the Fourth Buddhist Council remains still a mystery. Hardly any attention has been paid towards Gurez valley which is the extreme northern part of Kashmir valley and is having great archaeological potential.

The recent archaeological survey in the neighboring valleys of Gurez, across the LoC, have uncovered hundreds of inscriptions in Kharoshti, Brahmi, and Tibetan that provides insights into the origins of Kashmiri people and the early history of Buddhism which took a definite shape in Kashmir and gave the world the whole new interpretation of the religion called Buddhism. Dardistan has contributed a lot in spreading the religion outside India. There are many important archaeological sites in Gurez valley. The ancient capital of Dards, Dawar is located in the Gurez valley and was functioning as a watch tower of which mention has been made by Sir Aurel Stein himself. Other archaeological sites of importance in the Gurez valley include Kanzalwan, where the last

council of Buddhism is believed to have been held and further downstream the ruins of ancient Shardi or Sharda University (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), which has been a great pilgrimage centre of the Hindus in ancient times.

Sir Walter Lawrence in his book, points out that, "Hardly a year passes without rumors of fabulous treasure being discovered in Kashmir" (Lawrence 1895: 162). But there is no debate over the vast archaeological treasure hidden in the valley. The need is to take extensive systematic explorations and excavations which will definitely reveal the hidden treasures of the Fourth Buddhist Council. Whenever these treasures will be unearthed, Kashmir will be recognized once again as the great seat of learning and will become a great pilgrimage centre for Buddhists throughout the World.

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