

AWAKENING OF THE SLEEPING BUDDHA OF AJINA TEPA; A CASE STUDY OF DIFFUSION OF BUDDHISM IN THE VAKHSH VALLEY REGION

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ABSTRACT

Historically the religious and philosophical ideas of Buddhism spread along the trade routes across Central Asia and quickly became the dominant religion of the region. It affected the Religious and cultural landscape all along the Silk Route and gave new cultural identity to different regions.

Being a central feature of the Buddhist tradition, monastery is a vehicle of Buddhist thought. It creates a sense of place and regional identity. The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa, a unique symbol of Vakhsh Cultural Heritage, was an essential feature of the civilization of the Vakhsh Valley Region. Rightly, it is regarded as the earliest evidence of Buddhism in the region.

The history of the Ajina Tapa monastery is the history of spread of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan. It facilitated interaction between people and places and thus the diffusion of Buddhism. As a symbol of the faith, it was an expression of the spread of Buddhist cultural in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan.

Without aiming to be much comprehensive, the article reveals the traces of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley Region. The objective of this study is to identify the history and the characteristics of the cultural landscape of the Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa. It also looks into the role of the Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa in the diffusion of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan.

Apart from geographical investigation it includes micro historical investigation in given time and space.

Keywords: Ajina Tapa, Vakhsh Valley, Buddhist monastery, cultural landscape, diffusion of Buddhism, sacred space, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa is a unique symbol of ancient (pre-Islamic) Cultural Heritage of the Vakhsh Valley Region. It is regarded as the earliest evidence of Buddhism in the region. As a symbol of the faith, it was an expression of spread of Buddhism in this region. Built in the 7th century, The Ajina Tapa monastery, functioned until the 8th century. It was an essential feature of the civilization of the Vakhsh Valley Region. It created a sense of place and regional identity.

The history of the Ajina Tapa monastery is the history of spread of Buddhism. It facilitated interaction between spaces and thus diffusion of Buddhism. It helped in the expansion of Buddhist culture in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan. Later on abandoned and became ruins. Its destruction was related to the Arab invasion.

Besides the study of landscape (cultural landscape) there is a tradition of research in geography on spatial interaction. This paper addresses the question of spatial interaction and spatial diffusion of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan. It is significant within the larger context of research on cultural landscape of the region.

The spatial and temporal boundaries of the present research extend from VIIst century A.D. to VIII century A.D. along the Silk Route in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The possible objective of the study includes; analysis of the process of diffusion of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan; the exploration of the extent of Buddhist influence in Tajikistan and the examination of cultural landscape of Ajina Tapa. It is a first step towards a more adequate treatment of the subject; the spread or diffusion of Buddhism in the vakhsh valley region. An attempt has also been made to identify the characteristics of Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa and its role in the diffusion of Buddhism in the the Vakhsh Valley Region.

In this study; an attempt has also been made to consider the cultural landscape of Ajina Tapa and its influence on the identity of the Vakhsh Valley Region.

The Geographical Configuration of the Vakhsh River valley;

The Vakhsh River is one of the main rivers of Tajikistan. It is an international river of Central Asia. It is a very important source of water, not only to Tajikistan but to other countries of Central Asia too. As one of the largest tributaries of the Amu-Darya, it supplies huge amounts of water in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The Vakhsh River is also known as the Surkhob River in north-central Tajikistan and the Kyzyl-Suu in Kyrgyzstan. The river's source lies in southern Kyrgyzstan near the Kyrgyz-China border. Officially it begins at the confluence of the Obihingou and Surkhob Rivers. Like any mountain stream, it rushes through alpine mountains, for most of its route, before slowing down in the plains of southern Tajikistan. The river is fed mostly by melting glaciers. The largest tributaries of the Vakhsh are the Muksu and the Obihingou.

From its origin it runs westwards for 262 kilometers; it then flows through Tajikistan for a length of 524 km before joining the Pyanj River to form the Amu Darya at the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Culture of the Vakhsh Valley;

The Vakhsh Valley of Tajikistan is part of the Ancient Cultural Realm. A hypothesis about the existence of great cultural region, (represented by the Vakhsh Valley) is based on its name itself. It is called Vakhsh in honor of the Goddess of Water and Fertility. Based on the archeological evidences the Vakhsh Valley Culture dates from the last centuries of the second millennium B.C. (Dani A. H. Masson V. M.1992). Long back it had the culture of the settled oases and thus it became a cradle of ancient civilizations. This is clearly evidenced by archaeological findings of the subsequent development of culture in Tajikistan. Many civilizations have appeared and disappeared on its banks.

It has a rich and varied history that connects it far beyond the area of Central Asia, to the broader Eurasian landmass. It is notable that the caravan routes, that is, referred as the 'Silk Road' crossed the territory of the Vakhsh Valley region. (Nourzhanov K. and Bleuer C. 2013) Being an important way stations on the caravan route, it was integrated into a wider Cultural Realm that bloomed along the Silk Route of Central Asia.

The Ideological Exchange through the Silk Route;

Nestled high in the mountain, the Vakhsh Valley was a major junction where routes going east and west crossed, those going north and south. The northern route went through Khujand and the Zarafshan Valley and the southern one traversed the Pamir Mountains. There was links to Balkh too. It was also linked to the route connecting it with Termez and Kashgar and the Sogdian or the northern route connecting Samarkand and Kashgar. (Nourzhanov K. and Bleuer C. 2013) therefore the territory was always on the crossroads.

The Silk Route not only served for the movement of goods but also the movement of people. It also served the exchange of cultural ideas and religions. It connected the erstwhile remote areas to an even larger geographical area, thereby connecting it with even more diverse cultural traditions. Thus, it affected the communities through which it crossed. The influence of ancient

civilizations of the region was complemented by the constant interaction between different cultures. (Nourzhanov K. and Bleuer C. 2013)

Of the three great religions, or the religious persuasions, professed in contemporary world, have existed in this region. As a result of the co-existence of the three religious systems for so many years, Vakhsh Valley has been the melting pot of Mediterranean, Indian and Chinese civilizations. People who lived here, used this opportunity to adopt the different philosophical concepts and religious traditions and to develop them further using vast local experiences. (Nourzhanov K. and Bleuer C. 2013)

Spread of Buddhism and the Process of Diffusion;

Buddhism was one of the great religions to get spread along the Silk Route, from India towards China through Bulkh and Termez. Throughout the centuries, there was an uninterrupted flow of Buddhist missionaries from India, into the Central Asian region. Buddhist monks travelled through Pakistan and Afghanistan and then on the Silk Road, firstly to Central Asia and finally to China, spreading their religion wherever they went. (Hartmann, J. U. 2004) They interred in to the most remote regions of Central Asia. The outcome of this interaction was its integration into Buddhist cultural realm. Since Kushan times (second century A.D.) Buddhism had been entrenched in this region (Tokharistan and Transoxiana). Gradually it became a truly Buddhist region.

Before the conquest of Arabs in the 8th century AD, Buddhism was spread all along the Silk Road. To spread the religion, Buddhist missionaries followed various routes, to travel between destinations. (Neelis Jason, 2011) Their roads frequently overlapped and intertwined with those of merchants and traders. Thus, the religion got diffused in different parts of Central Asia, including the Vakhsh Valley region, by monks and merchants. Here it found a fertile ground to grow.

There existed a cultural similarity between the regions of the Eurasian landmass. A basic factor determining this cultural similarity was the religious and philosophical ideas of Buddhism. It was accepted over the entire territory, as a doctrine of moral ethics, an ideology and a religion. (Litvinsky; B. A. 1996) Although Buddhism was formerly patronized by the emperors of the Central Asia, its influence was felt everywhere. Therefore, one is not surprised to find that one of the largest statues of Buddha was discovered and rediscovered in the Vakhsh Valley.

Traces and References;

Notwithstanding our improved acquaintance with the region, however, it is discouraging to find that our actual knowledge of the existence of Buddhism in this region is very limited. We must

briefly allude to the character of the materials from which our knowledge of the existence of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley is derived.

Some historians hold the opinion that the history of Buddhism in Central Asia, should begin with the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, but there is no documentary evidence of this fact. Although, there are information about the teaching of Buddha and some individual followers of Buddhism that may have arrived here much earlier, in the Achaemenid era. The Spread of Buddhism into Central Asia and the existence of Buddhist monasteries here has been verified by both Chinese and Arabic written sources. Almost 1,000 years ago Al-Beruni has written, 'in ancient time people of Khorasan, were following the Buddhist religion. It was especially significant in the Vakhsh Valley.

In the present study we consider the archeological traces and references made in literatures. It includes the archeological traces of Ajina Tepa; a statue of a recumbent Buddha in Nirvana (Litvinsky; B. A. 1996). The site of Ajina Tepa is a sophisticated blend of earthen architectural forms, sculptural detail and wall painting, all of which are unique in the area. (Fodde E., Watanabe K. & Fujii Y., 2007) The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tepa, Tajikistan (Heritage of the Ancient Silk Roads) is one of the most significant evidence of existence of Buddhism in Central Asia. The culture of the Silk Road was not rediscovered until the late twentieth century. Around 60 years ago a 1600-year-old statue of a reclining Buddha was uncovered by archeologists of the former Soviet Union. The site was excavated by Soviet archaeologist Boris Anatolevich Litvinski. (Fodde, E. 2008) It was excavated using up-to-date archaeological methods and was extensively documented. It reproduced the colorful relics of the world culture. (Babadjanova M. Munzifakhon, 2017)

An Experience of the Lost Civilization;

The statue of the 'Reclining Buddha' or the 'Buddha in Nirvana', dates back to the 7th century AD. The statue of measures 41.7 feet (12.8 m) long and 9 feet (2.7 m) high. It was excavated from the Buddhist monastery complex in Ajina Tepa. (Litvinsky; B. A. 1996)

After the destruction of Buddhist monuments in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, the sculpture of 'Buddha in Nirvana' from the remains of Ajina Tepa, is recognized as the largest statue of Buddha in Central Asia. It was never seen by the outside world till very recently. Instead of making it popular, the Soviet archeologists excavated the Buddha only to conceal it. The Giant Buddha was rediscovered in September 2001. Now it is on display in State Museum of Antiquities of the Republic of Tajikistan in Dushanbe. Now the Sleeping Buddha of Ajina Tepa represents a symbolic icon in its cultural landscape. It helps in creating a regional identity for the Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan. The 'Reclining Buddha' or the 'Buddha in Nirvana', remain the foundation of our knowledge of Buddhism in the Vakhsh Valley of Tajikistan. It was an

experience of lost civilizations. The new discoveries continue to widen and deepen our knowledge of Buddhism in the region.

The monastery of Ajina Tepa (VII - VIII century A.D.) is located north of Hindu Kush and Karakorum and west of the Pamir. It is located in southern Tajikistan along the Vakhsh Valley, at about 100 km south from the capital city of Dushanbe. (To be precise at 37.8644 Lat and 68.9419 Long) It is about 13 kilometers from the modern city of Kurgan Tybe or Qurghonteppa. (Fodde, E. Watanabe, K. and Fujii, Y. 2008) (Qurghonteppa is the largest cultural center of the Vakhsh Valley). The site of Ajina Tepa is of great importance especially in terms of spread of Buddhism in central Asia. (Litvinskij & Zejmal 2004). The deductions drawn from this discovery was that; the inhabitants of ancient Bactria or ancient Tokharistan (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) were the adherent of Buddhism. (Nourzhanov K. and Bleuer C. 2013)

In 1961 an archaeological excavation began here. When the excavations were completed in 1971, it was determined that the Ajina Tepa ruins were the remains of a residential Buddhist monastery. It is unique in the whole of Central Asia. It is combination of *vihara* (monastery) and *caitya* (temple). (Litvinskij and Zejmal, 2004, Fujii, Y tera 2008). The monastery has a Ground Temple. (Nakamura and Okazaki, 2016)

More than 1,500 art artefacts were excavated from this place. It included sculptures and their fragments and wall paintings. Some of the findings are completely intact and others are in fragments.

Ajina Tepa monastery was 50 x 100 m in area and consisted of two parts (a temple and a monastery) surrounded by strong walls. In the center of each part was a courtyard which led to temples. In one courtyard there was a large terrace for keeping relics. In another corridor, there was a giant clay figure (13.5m long) of 'Buddha in Nirvana', laying on his right side. The figure of Buddha took central place in the sculpture of Ajina Tepa. The monastery was richly decorated with paintings. There were several statues of the Buddha, including one seated and one of the Buddha in Nirvana. (Litvinsky; B. A. 1996) In Buddhist philosophy, 'Nirvana' is the highest state of mind, an absolute and undisturbed peace.

It is interesting to note that no images of a standing Buddha were found in Ajina Tepa. Among sculptures found in the monastery, there are also images of bodhisattvas (Sanskrit: 'Enlightening existence'). Compared to other figures of Buddha, it is of small size. It tells us that the main object of worship was Buddha and the bodhisattvas was held a subordinate position, acting as accompanying characters.

The Characteristics of the Monastery of Ajina Tepa;

Being a central feature of the Buddhist tradition, monastery is a vehicle of Buddhist thought. In fact, it is a place where Buddhist monks and believers engage in religious activities. A complete Buddhist monastery includes a fixed space dedicated to worship, a place where rituals are regularly performed and also a place for resident monks. The monastery of Ajina Tewa had temple as well as a place for community living. It also has place for relics. The monastery may have been used as a center of learning and the temple as places of worship (for meditation). It may have also been used for community living.

The Functional Significance of the Monastery of Ajina Tewa;

The 'Preservation of the Buddhist Monastery of Ajina Tewa, Tajikistan' started in 2005 and was completed in 2008 under the UNESCO/Japan Trust Fund project. The functional significance of the Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tewa is far greater than a sacred space or simple religious center. These statues were also not only part of ritual and worship, but also served as an image to transmit religious ideas.

The spatial relation of different places on the Silk Route clearly indicate that there was a close and consistent cultural relationship between people and places (it gave an opportunity to 'spread the religion,' by linking people and places). It facilitated interaction between spaces and thus diffusion of Buddhism and expansion of cultural area.

The Buddhist Monastery of Ajina Tewa;

Its Distinctive Cultural Characteristics

Monastery of Ajina Tewa	Distinctive Cultural Characteristics,
General description;	monastery of Ajina Tewa; an incomparable Buddhist center, one of the most significant Buddhist archaeological sites of Tajikistan,
History;	Called variously, Ajina Tepe or Adzina Tepe or Adzhinatepe it was at the height of its glory and identity in VII-VIII century AD., declined in VIII century AD. (abandoned and became ruins), played central role in the development and geographical spread of the religion.
Relative Location;	Ajina-Tewa monastery; close to the Buddhist heartland of Central Asia, on the caravan routes connecting East and west,
Geographical Location;	Geographically the area includes, the Vakhsh Valley Region, southern Tajikistan. Located in the city of Kurgan-Tyube or

	Qurghon teppa, <i>Tajikistan</i> . Absolute Location; 37.8644 Lat and 68.9419 Long
Morphology of the Landscape;	the archaeological zone cover an area of 5000 sq m (100 x 50 m.), the architectural elements; within the archaeological zone there are monuments in the forms of Temples and sun dried brick monastery, (single structure), (house to keep statue of Buddha and space for Bodhisattvas), (prayer and ordination hall) (hall to be used for festivals and ritual gatherings) and ruins of brick mounds.
Cultural Landscape;	perceived as sacred space, the contents includes (statues, relics and paintings including the most monumental expression of Buddha)
Functional Dimensions of the Buddhist Monastery	Important for religious, socio-cultural and artistic values; generation of knowledge, preservation of culture and cultural transmission; role in conveying, expressing and sustaining the faiths, significant for dissemination and expansion of religion (philosophy and ideas), played a significant role in connecting ‘people and places’
Symbolic Meaning;	an important historic site of the country, central to the Buddhist self-definition, a symbol of cultural self-identification
Cultural Sustainability	one of the most visible aspects of the Buddhist tradition, give a new cultural identity to the region; inclusion in the heritage site helped in conservation, preservation and restoration of monument, (preserved under the UNESCO/Japan Trust Fund project) reveals the pre Islamic multicultural past to solve the identity crisis,

<http://monastic-asia.wikidot.com/ajina-tepa>

The Richness of the Influence;

According to Le Manh ‘Buddhist philosophy has been considered as a ‘way’.’ It has the tendency to ‘live in harmony’ with other religions. (Dang Van Bai, 2013) In Central Asia it

blended with other beliefs and religions. The interference of Buddhism religion and other beliefs and religions represents a greater process of exchange and acculturation.

Buddhism has laid profound legacies in the 'material and spiritual cultures' of the Tajikistan. It deserves recognition as exemplary works of art and architecture. The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tepa is one of the most remarkable monuments of early Central Asian art. It is a testament to the merging of cultural traditions. (Babadjanova M. Munzifakhon, 2017) The Gandhara Buddha was the first representation of a human Buddha. (Hartmann, J. U. 2004) A large variety of Buddha's hair styles, characteristic of Ajina Tepa sculpture was influence of Greco-Roman culture. It developed in a new art form, known as Tokharistan-Buddhist school of art. Both paintings and sculptures found here, gives a comprehensive picture of the Buddhist art of Tokharistan. It is an example of the synthesis of Indo-Buddhist and Central Asian cultures and their mutual influence and complementarity. Origins of the Tokharistan-Buddhist school of art can be found in both India and Bactria.

The restoration work of the 'Sleeping Buddha' was successfully completed by September 2001. It was several months before the sad moments, when the Taliban blew up the giant statues of Buddha in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Currently the 'Buddha in Nirvana' sculpture found in Ajina Tepa is the largest sculpture of Buddha found in Central Asia.

Discovery of a Civilizational History;

The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tepa represent not only the last remnant of the pre-Islamic cultures of the Vakhsh Valley Region, but also the last observable example of a Buddhist religion. As far as the historical and political topography of Ajina Tepa is concerned, it gave the Vakhsh Valley Region a cultural identification. It is a cultural element to construct cultural identity. This Cultural Self-Identification offers them a chance to formulate an alternative identity.

Although the political creation of 'Tajikistan' is relatively recent. But the existence of a Buddhist monastery at Ajina Tepa helps them in Discovery of a Civilizational History, far beyond the pre-Islamic past.

CONCLUSION

The cultural landscape Ajina Tepa is an expression of spread of Buddhism in this Vakhsh Valley Region of Tajikistan. Here the existence and survival of Buddhist tradition is well documented and acknowledged. It is identified as a unique expression of Buddhism within the Vakhsh Valley Region. The cultural heritage of Ajina Tepa creates a sense of place and regional identity. It led to the next major step in the expansion of Buddhism in the region and apparently left a strong impression in the Vakhsh Valley Region.

The Buddhist monastery of Ajina Tapa had an identity defined by Buddhism. It favors a strong presence of Buddhism in the region. This research pushes the boundaries of Buddhist Cultural Region across Hindu Kush - Karakorum - Pamir Region.

Ajina Tapa has outstanding values and may be recognized as a 'living museums of Buddhist arts and sculpture. Although the evidence is limited, it facilitated the spread of Buddhism in Tajikistan. It is particularly important in view of its distinctive contribution to Tajik Heritage. Still it is crucial in creating a culturally defined regional identity.

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