

Contours of Buddhism in Ancient Jammu: Texts, Traditions, and Archaeology

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INTRODUCTION

Spatial characteristics are integral in comprehending the historical context of a region. Currently, the term Jammu in the context of Jammu and Kashmir does not refer exclusively to the single district named

Abstract: *This study explores the presence and development of Buddhism in the Jammu region, which forms a transitional cultural and geographical zone between the Punjab plains and the Kashmir Valley. Owing to its strategic position along ancient trade and pilgrimage routes, Jammu emerged as a convergence point for diverse cultural and religious influences. The study traces archaeological and literary evidence revealing Buddhism's penetration into the area from the early historic period, with discoveries of stupas, monasteries, and inscriptions, notably at sites such as Ambaran near Akhnoor. Drawing upon primary textual sources such as the Nilamata Purana, Kalhana's Rajatarangini, and Milindapanho, alongside archaeological findings and secondary historical analyses, this study reconstructs the contours of Buddhist activity across the region. Grounded in textual exegesis and material culture, this study provides new insights into Jammu's vital role in the broader narrative of Buddhist expansion across northern India.*

Keywords: Buddhism, Archaeology, Nilamata Purana, Ambaran, and Cultural routes.

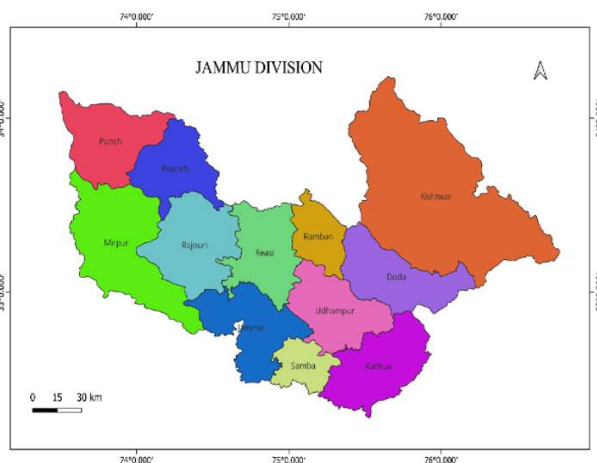


Figure No. 1

Source: Survey of India prepared using Arc GIS

Jammu. Instead, it signifies a broader region that includes several districts. Specifically, the Jammu region comprises ten distinct districts located south of the Kashmir Valley. This distinction clarifies that references to Jammu in the regional context should be understood as encompassing this larger area. The Jammu region is situated to the south of the Kashmir Valley and stretches into the Punjab plains. The plains encompass Jammu and the historical principalities of Billawar, Basohli, and Jasrota, as well as the lower regions of Reasi and Udhampur. The westernmost and easternmost areas of the region are Poonch and Kishtwar, respectively. The eastern hilly tracts include Kishtwar, Dacchan, and Bhaderwah, whereas the western hills include Rajouri and Poonch. Jammu province is situated between the outer hilly region, which borders the Kashmir Valley to the south, and the hilly area extends towards Punjab plains. The Ravi River flows east, whereas the Jhelum River flows west. The Chenab River emerges from the mountains into the plains near Akhnoor and traverses the Jammu district before entering the Punjab plains. The flat terrain at the northern edge of the Punjab plains, which converges with the low ridges of the hills and spans a vast area, is referred to as the 'region of the outer hills.' These rugged hills, ranging from 600 to 1200 m above sea level, run parallel to each other, forming small and narrow valleys in between.¹ The geographical divisions of Jammu include the submontane and semi-mountainous areas, which comprise the Kandi and the plain in front of

the hills; the Outer Hills, consisting of relatively low hills to the south of the mountain ranges; and the high Middle Mountains, which separate the Kashmir and Ladakh valleys from Jammu in the north.²

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on both primary and secondary sources to establish a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Primary sources include literary texts and material remains. Additionally, archaeological reports form a crucial part of the primary evidence, offering insights derived from systematic excavations and material culture analysis. Secondary sources consist of modern scholarly works authored by experts specialising in the region. By integrating both primary and secondary materials, the research is based on a balanced approach that enhances the depth and credibility of its conclusions.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The Jammu region, situated in northern India, is of considerable historical significance in Buddhism studies. Its strategic position along ancient trade and cultural routes rendered Jammu a confluence of diverse religious and cultural influences. Archaeological evidence, including stupas, monasteries, and inscriptions, attests to a vibrant Buddhist community in this region from an early period. European scholars initially conducted a significant scholarly examination of Buddhism, followed by extensive research on religion. Early Buddhist studies predominantly concentrated on doctrinal aspects, with scholars initially focusing on textual analysis. Establishment of a Pali Text Society by T. W. Rhys Davids, in 1881, and the subsequent publication of nearly all Buddhist texts exemplified this trend. Consequently, Buddhist research gradually transitioned towards a historical approach, drawing upon the extant Pali and Sanskrit literature of the time. Within a few centuries of the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, Buddhism disseminated across most of Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia as a well-established, acknowledged, and flourishing religious faith. Sir Edwin Arnold called Buddha 'The Light of Asia'. Buddha is seen as a guiding light for the whole world.

Jammu and Kashmir have remained the focal points of scholarly attention since antiquity. From Madradesha, several eminent disciples of the Buddha, such as Mahakappina, Khema, and Bhadda Kapilani, originated. It is highly probable that Buddhism had reached here, and the Jammu region was familiar with it during the Buddha's lifetime.³ The territory of Madradesha encompasses contemporary Punjab, Jammu, and eastern Pakistan, with its capital in Sagala, presently known as Sialkot. Brick remnants from the Kushan period have been discovered at sites such as Akhnoor, Babor, Krimchi, Rajouri, Poonch, and Mendhar, and it is plausible that these remnants were associated with Buddhist monasteries and Viharas. Attempts have been made to associate places such as Mendhar with the Buddhist ruler Menander based on phonetic similarities. Archaeological evidence reveals the existence of a flourishing Buddhist monastery in Akhnoor, indicating that Buddhism thrived in the area since the Mauryan period. The influence of the Kushans on the Jammu region is evident from the numerous archaeological

sites that have been discovered. Excavations have uncovered a significant number of sites and artefacts linked to the Kushan period, underscoring their presence and impact in this area. The Kushans were notable patrons of Buddhism, and numerous sites from the Kushan period remain, indicating their strong influence in this region. The Archaeological Survey of India has notified sites that yielded remains from the Kushan period.⁴

Hiuen-Tsang's "SI-YU-KI", translated by Samuel Beal in 1884 as *Buddhist Records of the Western World* references earlier travellers such as Fahien and Sung Yun, along with their works. This text details the journeys of various Chinese Buddhist monks to India in early centuries. Hiuen-Tsang commenced his travels in his twenties, journeying from China to India through Central Asia. During his sojourn in India, he visited numerous Buddhist sites and monasteries, including those in Jammu and Kashmir. He travelled extensively through Kashmir, visited royal courts, and subsequently moved south to explore areas associated with Jammu. Throughout his travels, he documented observations regarding the conditions of the monks and monasteries in the region, which he recorded in his text. Part III provides detailed information on KIA-SHI-MI-LO (Kashmir) and brief information on PUN-NU-TSO (Poonch) and HO-LO-SHE-PU-LO (Rajouri). The Gandhara region, which forms the northwestern border of the Jammu region, was well connected to the areas of Poonch and Rajouri in ancient times. This northwestern region was an important Buddhist centre at some point in the past and may have influenced the adjoining areas. Hiuen-Tsang described PUN-NU-TSO (Poonch) as a kingdom where the locals were honest and adhered to Buddhism. There are five monasteries in the kingdom, but most are abandoned. The region lacks its own ruler and is a tributary of Kashmir. To the north of the main town is a small monastery with only a few priests, featuring a famous stupa known for its miracles that attract many pilgrims. According to Hiuen-Tsang, travelling southeast for approximately 400 li⁵ leads to the kingdom of Ho-lo-she-pu-lo, also known as Rajapuri in ancient times, and modern-day Rajouri. This kingdom does not have an independent ruler and is governed by Kashmir. There are ten monasteries or sangharamas in the Kingdom, but they are largely empty, housing only a small number of priests.⁶ Hiuen Tsang's detailed accounts of monasteries in this region offer compelling evidence of Buddhism's widespread presence and vitality in ancient times. These monasteries functioned as centres where monks engaged in scriptural studies, meditation, and dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Their existence implies patronage from local rulers and the broader populace, further highlighting the significance of religion in shaping the cultural landscape of the time.

Kalhana's "Rajatarangini" constitutes a pivotal historical source for the history of Kashmir and the regions of Jammu that fell under Kashmir's influence. Throughout his chronicle, Kalhana demonstrates a profound admiration for Buddhism. He commends a succession of kings, from Ashoka to his own time, for establishing monasteries (Vihara) and stupas in support of the Buddhist faith. In his account of Harsha's sacrilegious confiscations, Kalhana meticulously identifies the spared Buddha statues alongside images of Hindu deities that received similar protection.

Centuries before Kalhana's time, Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted peacefully in Kashmir, with many individuals adopting practices from both religions. Jammu and Kashmir were part of the expansive empire of the Kushana dynasty, a fact well supported by Buddhist records and the discovery of coins, particularly copper pieces from Kanishka and Huvishka, which were found in abundance at several sites. Buddhism experienced significant advancement during the Kushan period, as evidenced by the convening of the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir, north of Jammu. The presence of numerous Kushan sites in Jammu, as reported by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), corroborates the notion that this region benefited from the patronage and support of the Kushans. This is further substantiated by the discovery of the Ambaran monastic complex in Akhnoor, which exhibits a cultural sequence associated with the Kushan period.

P.K. Kaul's work, "NAG SEN OF MILIND PANHO" (1996), examines the text Milind Panho from the Sacred Books of the East series, translated under Max Muller's direction. Buddhism thrived in these mountainous valleys, as evidenced by the place names. The Nagseni region of Padar Kishtwar resembles monk Nag Sen from the 2nd century B.C., who defeated King Menander in a metaphysical debate, suggesting that Nagseni is derived from Nagsen. Buddhist influence preceded the Brahmanic tradition in the Jammu region. Charles Fabri examined the site at Ambaran, near Akhnoor, 32 kilometres from Jammu, finding evidence of a monastery and stupa. The discoveries included Buddha heads, torso fragments, drapery pieces, and figures of monks and civilians. Fabri regarded the terracotta from Akhnoor as exceptional works of art, noting their close relationship with those found at Uskhur in Kashmir. The Milind Panho is a religio-philosophical dialogue between Nagsen and King Menander that provides valuable insights into the Indo-Scythian ruler of Sakala. Menander, an Indo-Greek king, is thought to have ruled near the end of the 2nd century B.C. E.. He was a distinguished scholar and truth seeker. He devoted much of his leisure time to engaging in philosophical debates with the renowned scholars and thinkers of his era, often emerging victorious. Well-versed in the Puranas and philosophy, he was highly respected in religious discussions, with many learned individuals apprehensive about him. His benevolent treatment of Buddhist communities led to the recognition of Buddhist literature. Milind Panho, or The Questions of Menander, is a Buddhist canonical text that presents a congenial philosophical and religious dialogue between Nag Sen and King Menander. Menander came under the influence of the great Buddhist philosopher Nagsen, ultimately leading to his conversion to Buddhism. It appears that Indo-Greek rulers accepted Buddhist teachings, as evidenced by their construction of stupas and vihara complexes and the installation of images of the Sakya Muni at the Ambaran monastic complex. The text offers a detailed account of how Nag Sen systematically addresses and resolves Menander's doubts, ultimately leading him to seek refuge in the Buddhist faith and become a disciple of the esteemed teacher, who was a committed rationalist. The conversation is said to have occurred at a location approximately 12 yojanas from Kashmir, which, according to the P. K. Kaul, is located in the Sakhi Medhan area of

Mendhar in Poonch. The Milind Panho is regarded as one of the most significant sources of information on the history of Buddhism in the region. It also documents that Menander constructed the Milind Vihara, joined the Sangha as a monk, and ultimately attained arhatship. Currently, there exists a mound-like structure in the Sakhi Medhan area of Mendhar Tehsil in the Poonch District, which may be associated with the historical discourse between Menander and Nagsen.

P.K. Kaul in his work '*Antiquities of the Chenab Valley in Jammu*' mentions numerous inscriptions which provide some kind of evidence towards the existence of faith in this region. The Balastal cave inscription in Kishtwar, located approximately a mile from Dacchan, was discovered by R. C. Kak. Buhler's examination of the Kushana Brahmi alphabet, along with its resemblance to the Brahmi characters found in the Balastal cave, indicates the influence of Kushana in the Jammu region. The presence of these Brahmi inscriptions suggests that the Kushanas likely settled in the inner valleys of Chandrabhaga at various historical junctures. Historically, this region was a centre of Vedic traditions, the birthplace of Nagsen of Milindapanho, and a significant area within the Buddhist world. An inscription from the same period (3rd-5th century A.D.) is the Gupta Ganga cave inscription at Bhaderwah, which also provides evidence of past Buddhist influence. The⁷ Bhandarkoot Bridge Cave Inscription located in Kishtwar consists of a brief text containing 10 or 11 characters originating from the 7th or 8th century A.D. Many folk myths are associated with this inscription. Due to its damaged state, the inscription is not fully legible or decipherable. According to Kashmiri, it contains a Buddhist message. The content might also be linked to Buddhist traditions, given its proximity to the birthplace of the eminent Buddhist scholar Nagsen and the famous Buddhist saint Assaguth, who led the Buddhist order in the 2nd century B.C..⁸

The Jammu region, characterized by its diverse topography ranging from plains to high hills, may have historically attracted Buddhist monks for residence, meditation, and propagation. The discovery of a Buddhist complex at Ambaran, Akhnoor, positioned on the banks of the Chenab River, lends support to this. The Jammu region has gained prominence because of its strategic role as an entrepot, as at Akhnoor, where the Chenab meets the plains and becomes navigable for commercial traffic. The Buddhist monastery at Akhnoor rose to prominence during the reigns of Menander and the Kushans. From this site, Fabri discovered Buddhist terracotta heads that exhibited the artistic features of the Gandhara School, along with elements of Gupta art. The growth of Jammu was facilitated by its connection with Sialkot, which served as the capital of the Indo-Bactrian Greeks and, under their protection, evolved into a trade centre in addition to being a centre of Buddhism. The region's importance is underscored by its continued prosperity despite devastation due to its trade potential, as traders could not overlook the significance of locations such as Akhnoor for both internal and external exchanges. The⁹ Ambaran Buddhist complex is strategically situated along a trade route and was likely supported by the merchant class of the time. This patronage can be attributed to the emerging concept at the time that religious or spiritual merit could be obtained through such donations.

Consequently, the merchant class supported Buddhist monasteries, facilitating their growth as monastic complexes and centres of trade and cultural exchanges. In return, the merchants acquired spiritual merit, which they comparatively lacked in Brahmanical religion.

CONCLUSION

Textual references, archaeological discoveries, and regional traditions collectively demonstrate that Buddhism has played a prominent role in the Jammu region since the early historical period. Several monks from the time of the Buddha are believed to have originated from this area, indicating an early acquaintance with the faith. The Kushan rulers were distinguished patrons of Buddhism, further corroborated by the numerous Buddhist sites identified and documented by the ASI. These findings highlight the profound and enduring presence of Buddhism in this region. Building on this foundation, the Buddhist heritage of the Jammu region is reflected not only in its historical narratives but also in the tangible remnants left behind. Archaeological excavations have uncovered stupas, monasteries, and sculptures that attest to the flourishing Buddhist culture and religious practices under Kushan patronage. These sites provide crucial evidence of the region's integration into broader Buddhist networks that extended across northern India and Central Asia. Literary sources such as the Nilamata Purana illustrate the gradual integration of Buddhism into the Brahmanical pantheon, where the Buddha came to be perceived as an incarnation of Vishnu. The association of the monk Nagasena with the village of Nagaseni in Kishtwar, and the potential identification of Mendhar in Poonch as the location of his dialogue with the Indo-Greek king Menander, as noted by P. K. Kaul, further underscore the region's Buddhist heritage. The presence of monastic complexes along major trade routes, most notably at Ambaran in Akhnoor on the banks of the Chenab, demonstrates that Buddhism in Jammu was spiritually dynamic and economically interconnected. Collectively, these strands of evidence suggest that the Jammu region not only assimilated Buddhist influences from the heartland, but also functioned as a crucial corridor through which Buddhism disseminated northward into Kashmir and further into Ladakh.

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