



Spatial History and Cultural Geography of Taxila: A Search for the Buddhist Identity

Dr. D. K. Shahi

Associate Professor, Deptt. of Geography, D.A.V. P.G. College, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.

Abstract;

The land of the Takshashila or Takkasila or Taxila has a unique identity. Geographically, it was the frontier (the land near or beyond the boundary) of ancient India (Hindustan). Historically it was capital of cultures (great centre of learning and a great centre of religion and culture) besides a political capital. It stood at the centre of convergence and confluence; of people, culture, languages and religions. It stood at the centre of conflict and conquest. Thus, it occupies a unique position in the cultural history of India.

The identity of a place, a space or a region is formed by the entire values (meanings) and cultural characteristics of the region. Taxila has a prominent identity with its Hindu and Buddhist past. It has a rich cultural and historical heritage. It was (is) the expressions of the shared past, that is, rooted in the history of ancient Hindustan.

The present research is an attempt to identify the expression of the cultural landscape of Taxila and its cultural neighbourhoods. It explores the identity of Taxila in the Buddhist cultural milieu. In an autobiographical description of the places, it also explores the changes in spaces, identities and cultures. Thus, it produces a Buddhist cultural history through its geography.

Key Words; Buddhism, Takshashila or Taxila, Cultural Landscape, Buddhist Identity

Dr. D. K. Shahi, Associate Professor, Deptt. of Geography, D.A.V. P.G. College, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.

Introduction;

The question of identity of a place, a space or a region has always been a popular subject of research for disciplines like geography and history. The identity of place is produced by its geography. The identity of place is shaped by its history. Similarly, identity explains the place or space (geography) and reveals its past (history).

Although, the identity of place is part of its geography and history, but it is more than its chorology and chronology. Identity evolves and develops with certain values and meanings rooted in the land(scape). Likewise, identity of a place shift as places gain or lose particular values or meanings.

Places do not have a permanent meaning and its contribution to identity is never the same. (Shukran Qazimi, 2014) Buddhism shaped the identity of Taxila but the identity of Taxila changed with decline of Buddhism. It was due to the change in the 'sense of place'. This research evaluates the identity of Taxila in the Buddhist cultural realm. It is an interpretation of identity of a place (geography) in relation to its historical and cultural identity.

Objective of the Study;

The identity of Taxila is an ancient capital of culture, capital of civilization and capital of empires. The objective of this study is to;

- Evaluate the cultural geography of ancient cultural landscape of Taxila.
- Narrate the cultural history of the Buddhist landscape of Taxila.
- Explore the role of Taxila in cultural exchange in the ancient world.

The aim of this study is to reveal the lost identity of Taxila. The scope of this study or the especially the focus of this study is on the Buddhist identity of Taxila.

Authenticity and Integrity;

The geography and history of Taxila is known from references in Indian, Greek and Roman literary sources and from the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Faxian, Xuan Zang and others. Using historical accounts of Greek and Roman historians and travel accounts of Chinese pilgrim and travellers, this paper examines the Buddhist cultural landscape of Taxila.

Taxila has also been studied by the Historian and archaeologist for a long time. Historian Alexander Cunningham and archaeologist John Marshall, the first director of the Archaeological Survey of India, surveyed this region in the early 1900s. The present study will also review some of the available archaeological reports and then reinforce it on the spatial history and cultural geography of Taxila.

Methodology;

The study of spatial history and cultural geography of Taxila afford a multiplicity of approaches to define and describe its ancient identity. The present study is both analytical and descriptive.

Takshashila or Taxila;

Taxila is a place, a space or a region? or everything. In Sanskrit, it is known as Takshashila, in Pali it is Takkasila or Takhashila. (John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012) Taxila is a Greek approximation of Takshashila. (Neelis Jason, 2011) Ta-Cha-Shi-Lo is the Chinese name given to the region in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims. (Thomas Watters, 1904, John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012)

Taxila has a unique identity. This identity carries unique quality (or qualities, geographically and historically and also culturally). It was the frontier (the land near or beyond the boundary) ancient India (Hindustan). Ancient Taxila was land at the pivotal junction of south Asia and Central Asia. It was situated at the terminus or the junction of Uttarapatha (the 'Royal Highway' of Megasthenes). (Neelis Jason, 2011, John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012) In the context of its geography, it was situated near Purusha Pura or Peshawar. It was an important city in Gandhara. The Jatakas, mentions it as the capital of the Gandhara. (also, according to Greek sources) (John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012)

Identity is defined not only with physical and natural elements but also with its cultural elements. Besides being a historical province (Mahajanpada), the ancient city of Taxila was a great centre of religion and culture of the ancient India (Hindustan). It was also a symbol of great centre of knowledge and learning. Its identity expresses originality.

Its identity also expresses individuality and diversity (not similarity). Situated at the crossroads of civilizations it was meeting point of cultures. All defined it as their 'favoured city'. In the historical past, it was centre (region) of confluence for the

people from different languages, religions and nationalities. Throughout its history Taxila has stood a confluence of people, culture, languages, religions, thus, it occupies a unique position in the spatial history and cultural geography of India.

Taxila has another prominent identity with its Hindu and Buddhist past. It was part and parcel of ancient Buddhist cultural region. It has a rich cultural and historical heritage.

Taxila: The Myth and the Reality;

The origins of Taxila are shrouded in legend. According to mythology Taxila is said to be the land of the Taksha (Nag Raj or the serpent king who could change the form at his will to mingle with humans). According to the Brahmanical tradition, it was the capital city of Taksha, son of Raja Bharata (the king of Ajodhya and brother of Shri Rama). He was installed here as king. Taxila was also associated with the story snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, referred in the great Indian epic Mahabharata. (Raychaudhuri, Hem Chandra,1923 John Marshall, 2013) It is believed that the Mahabharata have first been recited here.

Buddhist literature, 'jataka', is said to have linked with Taxila. (John Marshall, 2013) We hold from the narratives of the Buddhist traditions that, Taxila was related to the story of the Bodhisattva who voluntarily beheaded himself in sacrifice to a local Brahman, in the city of Bhadrasila. The (nearby) city of Sirkap also has a similar meaning. Faxian also explains the meaning of the name as 'cut off head'. (Thomas Watters, 1904, John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012)

Since its inception, Takshashila or Taxila, have been an important cultural centre. It was a great centre of learning. The ancient city was revered as having one of the first universities of the world. (John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012) It flourished during the 5th to 1st centuries BC as part of the great civilization. Although it was not an institutionalised centre of learning but rather a combination of religious and secular studies cantered around ashrams, temples and monasteries. (generally, every Buddhist monastery was also an educational Institution)

Taxila was a metropolitan centre of the past, especially during the period of Ashoka and in the Kushan era. It was an economic and commercial hub on the great trade route of Uttarapatha. Taxila was also a renowned centre of Buddhism. It was a hub of Buddhist stupas and monasteries. (even today it is a protected historical and archaeological area)

The Characteristics of the Landscape;

According to historical and archaeological evidences, the world heritage site of Takshashila or Taxila is situated across the Indus river. Taxila valley is located in the Punjab province of Pakistan (located at 35°4' N - 72°44' E. about 30 km north of the city of Islamabad and Rawalpindi). It is identified with the ruins and mounds around modern Taxila in Pakistan. (John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012) (The entire landscape of Taxila is located 30 km east of the Indus) (Neelis Jason, 2011) It was centrally located to the Indus, Swat and Kabul river valleys. The location and the geography of city was also described by Pliny, Megasthenes, Faxian, Xuan Zang. According to the accounts of Pliny, Taxila was 60 miles from Peucolaitis (Pushkalavati) or Hashtnagar (situated in the centre of Peshawar valley). (Raychaudhuri, Hem Chandra,1923)

According to the Greek historian Arrian; it was a great and flourishing city. It was indeed, the greatest of all the cities which were situated at the head of the Sind Sagar Doab between the Indus and Jhelum. (John Marshall, 2013) As Cunningham places its site, the ruins of the ancient city still exist in the vicinity of Shah dheri (Rawalpindi). (Thomas Watters, 1904, John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012)

The physical Landscape; Geography is considered as one of the important factors, shaping the cultural landscapes of the region. It was situated on the slopes of the of the Himalayas. The geography of Taxila is a large mountain valley. Low hills and high mountains enclosed the Valley of Taxila from all sides. In the north and east, it is surrounded by the Hazara and Murree ridges (part of outer Himalayas). It is bounded on the south and west by the spurs of Margala Hills, (part of outer Himalayas) (John Marshall, 2013) Being a mountainous area, it had unique strength of natural defence. The region was rich with sufficient vital resources. It was endowed with good fertility of soil and constant supply of good water. (John Marshall, 2013) Taxila valley is drained by the Haro river (identified with the Rigvedic Arjikiya) and its tributaries, which rises in the hills. (Raychaudhuri, Hem Chandra,1923)

Taxila is one of the oldest living cities in the sub-continent. It was known to exist as early as 1000 BC. The Greek historians Herodotus (5th century BC) and Strabo (1st century BC) as well as the Greek geographer Ptolemy (2nd century AD) have described about the region. (Heirman Ann and Bumbacher Stephan P. 2007)

Taxila was a large city. As described by Strabo, the kingdom of Taxila formed the eastern part of the old kingdom of Gandhara. It was situated between the Indus and the Jhelum (Hydaspes). The neighbouring areas of the city were very fertile and densely populated. (Raychaudhuri, Hem Chandra,1923)

Although, it had limited accessibility, location of Taxila on the great trade route, connected it with Central and Western Asia and the rest of India. (John Marshall, 2013) The high mountain passes connected it with the world outside the hills and mountains.

The Cultural Landscapes; The beginnings of human occupation in the area can be traced back to the antiquity. In the ancient period Taxila was the centre of political power and therewith economic power. The city of Taxila, known in antiquity as Takshashila, was the capital city of the ancient Gandhara. (John R. McRae, 2012)

Takshashila was one of the oldest cities of historic India. It was located in the north eastern reaches of the Mauryan Empire. Being situated on 'The Royal Highway' Uttarapath it was connected to Pataliputra (ancient capital of Magadh). (Neelis Jason, 2011, John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012, John Marshall, 2013)

The ancient highway across the Hindukush connected the city to the outside world. Across the Indus River (through Bactria), it was connected to western Asia. It was also connected and Central Asia through Kashmir. Hence, the Greek, Persian, Scythian and other cultural influences reached Taxila. The location of Taxila at the 'gate way to India' was largely responsible for its development into a political, economic and cultural hub of the Uttarapatha. The city owed its initial existence as well as its subsequent prosperity and greatness to these trade routes. And, it was due to their diversion or decline, when trade contacts with foreign countries were interrupted, that Taxila sank eventually into insignificance. (John Marshall, 2013)

The cultural Landscape of Takshashila has a vast serial site. The ruins have four fortified sites; Hathial, Bhirh Mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh. The earliest settlement at Hathial goes back to at least 1000 BC, although there are traces of an even earlier settlement dating back to perhaps 2000 BC. During the ancient past it had three distinct cities. They all were located in the Taxila Valley. The city of Sirsukh at Taxila and Rajar at Charsadda in Gandhara, together with the large number of urban settlements, speak of the prosperity of the region. (Litvinsky, 1996)

Urban Settlements of Taxila in Different Historical Period

Urban Settlements	Charactristics
Hathial Ridge;	It was the early settlements of Taxila. it existed from about 2500 - 500 BC.
Bhir Mound;	It is the oldest townlike settlement of Taxila. It exited during Achaemenid, Mauryan and early Indo-Greek periods, from 425 BC. to mid-second century BC.
Sirkap;	It is situated between Hathial and Kaccha Kot. it was a fortified urban centre. It was in existence from the last decades of the first century BC. and declined during the second century AD. Sirkap lasted longer until Kanishka.
Sirsukh;	It was situated north of Sirkap. the city was established during the Kushana period.

After Neelis Jason, 2011

Search for Buddhist Identity of Taxila;

Identities are shaped by the landscape, geographical, historical and cultural. Originally a stronghold of Buddhism, Taxila Valley is one of the highly important Buddhist centres across the Indus on the east of Gandhara. The Buddhist landscape presents the development of Buddhism in the frontier region of ancient Indian. It consists of a number of archaeological sites such as Dharmarajika, Jaulian, Mohra Morado, Bhamala, Badalpur, Giri etc. All these sites have produced a good number of cultural objects which are presently lying in the Taxila museum.

Buddhist Monuments

Dharmarajika;
The Dharmarajika Buddhist centre was situated in the valley of Taxila. It is the largest Buddhist stupa in the Taxila region. It a relic shrine. It is believed that the remains of the Buddha were buried in Dharmarajika stupa. The precise meaning of the word Dharmarajika is open to question, it is believed that this stupa was related to Ashoka. (John Marshall, 2013) The relic shrines were known to have been erected by Ashoka. In some Buddhist sources, the great Mauryan emperor was also known as Dharmaraj.
Accordingly, there is good reason to infer that Taxila was one of the many cities in the Mauryan empire. Ashoka had a close affinity with Taxila. It is believed that Ashoka chose this place as one of the locations to reinstate the remains of the Buddha. (John Marshall, 2013)
The original stupa was presumably small and humble. It underwent several restorations. During the Kushan era (1st century AD) it was rebuilt in a huge size. The stupas came to represent the zenith of Buddhism. By far it is not only the biggest but also the oldest stupa at Taxila. (John Marshall, 2013)
Several other stupas and chapels were clustered around the main stupa.
Kunala Stupa;
Kunala Stupa is situated at the Sarda hill. The legends associate this stupa with the Kunala. It is probably the memorial of misfortune of Kunala. Kunala, the eldest son Ashoka, was viceroy at Taxila. (John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012, John Marshall, 2013) The Kunala Stupa occupies a hardly

inferior position than the stupa of Hathial. (John Marshall, 2013)
The existing remains cover an older stupa which has not been dated yet. The latest remains are dated to the 3rd-4th century AD.
At Hasan Abdal there was a sacred tank. It is now known as the Panja Sahib. Another stupa was located above the ridge of Baoti Pind. (John Marshall, 2013)

Jaulian Stupa;

In the local language, the name Jaulian means ‘Seat of Saints’ a name which has probably existed since antiquity. It has remains of the Buddhist history.
It has numerous chapels and stupas. The Jaulian stupa was very lavish. There were depictions of the Buddha in the form of image. Once it had a massive sculpture of Buddha. Many monasteries and stupas were agglomerated to one place around this stupa.
The foundation of these monuments is ascribed to the Kushan period, in the second century AD. and their destruction to the latter part of the fifth century AD. (John Marshall, 2013) It is situated in the neighbourhood of the city of Sirsukh. During this period the capital of Taxila was in Sirsukh (the earlier cities of Sirkap and the Bhir Mound had then been abandoned). (John Marshall, 2013)

Bhallar Stupa;

Bhallar Stupa is located on the spur of the Sarada hill north of the Haro valley. (Kunala Stupa is located on the opposite side of the valley) According to Xuan Zang, it was originally built by the Ashoka to commemorate the spot where the Buddha in a previous existence had made an offering of his head. (John Marshall, 2013)

Apart from these numerous isolated Buddhist monuments were spread all over the valley. Kalawan is the largest Buddhist settlement at Taxila. It is famous for its caves. There were three small Buddhist caves located in the hillside. Buddhist monasteries and stupas have also been discovered in Giri. There were four Buddhist monuments in the neighbourhood of Sirsukh city. These monuments were also described by Xuan Zang. There was another stupa known as the stupa of the ‘sacrificed head’. It is said to have been built by Ashoka. Another stupa at Mohra Moradu is located close to the city of Sirsukh. Another monastery was located at the Bhamala. Bhamala monastery was situated at an ideal location in the Murree hills. It is located at the head of the Haro valley (John Marshall, 2013) All monasteries are inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Decline of Taxila and Change in the Cultural Landscape;

Originally a stronghold of Buddhism, the entire character of this region was based around the unifying element of Buddhism and monastic life. The opulent monasteries had large number of students and monks. During this period Buddhism travelled from Taxila to the far north into China.

The religious and cultural nature of Taxila declined after 6th century. The monasteries of Taxila along with the cultural life, fell into disrepair and decay, as mentioned by Xuan Zang in his chronicles dating from the 7th century AD. The history of the region (during that period) was characterized by frequent invasions under various empires.

Decline of Taxila was largely due to the change in political landscape (political character) of the region. The general view is that the Huns were the cause of destruction in Taxila and Gandhara. But it not supported by the historical evidences.

Moving beyond the biases, an almost sudden decrease in royal patronage led to the decline of Buddhism. Its decline can also be linked to changes in the trade routes (Surajit Sarkar, 2016) and a subsequent decline in the urban functions of the city.

Spatial and Cultural Autobiographies of the Cultural Landscape;

Jaulian (Seat of Saints) is even today known as Bhir-Dargahi (Bhir is degradation of the word ‘Pir’ or the saint; Bhir-Dargahi means 'Sacred home of the Saint'). It shows

that the religious nature of the landscape continued even the entire cultural landscape changed. Even today there are shrines of Muslim saints in close proximity to or in some cases (like Mohra Moradu) right within the older monastic centres. This shows that while the outward signs of Taxila as a centre of Buddhist cultural realm did vanish, the soul of Taxila as a spiritual centre lived on, adapting itself to a new paradigm.

Conclusion;

Taxila derived its identity from the Buddhist cultural landscape. It has a significant place in the Buddhist cultural realm. The relationship between place and identity are inextricably linked (bound to each other). It gets mutually constituted. And, it is inseparable. Consequently, it was the source of identity of Taxila.

Identity of Taxila is attached to values and meanings rooted in the Buddhist past. It is defined by those values and meanings. It is also explained by those values and meanings.

Even after the decline of the Buddhist cultural centres, the place, space or the region continue to grow but with different identity. But the old identity of place is so tightly bound that it is hard to separate them. The old identity or identities are still perpetuated by narratives of its Buddhist identity.

References;

- Heirman, Ann and Bumbacher, Stephan Peter, 2007, *The Spread of Buddhism*, Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, ISSN 0169-8524
- John Marshall, 2013, *A Guide to Taxila*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781316529904
- John R. McRae and Jan Nattier, 2012, (ed), *Buddhism Across Boundaries*, Sino-Platonic Papers, 222, ISSN 2157-9679
- Litvinsky B. A. 1996, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Volume III*, UNESCO Publishing, ISBN 978-92-3-103211-0
- Neelis Jason, 2011, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, Brill, Leiden, Netherlands ISBN 978-90-04-18159-5
- Raychaudhuri, Hem Chandra, 1923, *Political History of Ancient India*, Published by The University of Calcutta, 1923
- Shukran Qazimi, 2014, *Sense of place and place identity*, *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, Volume 1, Issue 1, ISSN 2411-9563
- Surajit Sarkar, 2016, *Taxila – An Alternative Urbanisation Between the Silk Road and the Uttarapatha (the Northern Road)*, *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 51. 4, DOI: 10.16943/ijhs/2016/v51/i4/41240
- Thomas Watters, 1904, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Royal Asiatic Society, London