

## **BUDDHISM IN ANCIENT AFGHANISTAN: A HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Shubham Tyagi**

*Dept. of History*

*Chaudhary Charan Singh University,*

*Meerut, India*

*Email: shubhamtyagiom@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*This paper tries to review the major catastrophe that came upon. Once a vibrant hub of Buddhist education, art, and culture, Afghanistan was known historically as Gandhara and Bactria. Supported by Indian kings and later the Kushan Empire, the area was vital in the propagation of Mahayana Buddhism. Gandharan art and monumental buildings like the Bamiyan Buddhas represent the great Buddhist impact that formerly pervaded the area. However as Islam emerged in the 7th century CE, a slow but significant change took place. In a period of religious and cultural strife, the Arab conquests were followed by opposition from nearby Hindu and Buddhist groups. Along with destruction, forced conversions, and a degradation of pre-Islamic legacy, the Turkic invasions of the 10th and 11th centuries CE resulted in the broad collapse of Buddhism and Hinduism. Along with the impact of Sufi saints, socioeconomic and political elements helped to explain the general conversion to Islam, hence forming Afghanistan's modern religious character. The political, cultural, and historical processes influencing Afghanistan's change from a Buddhist bastion to an Islamic country are investigated in this paper. This article emphasizes the complexity of religious transformation, cultural interaction, and identity changes in Afghan history by means of analysis of archeological data, historical narratives, and academic interpretations. Knowing these changes helps one to better understand more general trends of cultural adaptation and resilience in world history.*

### **Keywords:**

*Buddhism, Indus-Saraswati civilization, the evolution of Buddhism, Kushan Empire, Greco-Buddhist Art, Islamic Conquest, Cultural Heritage, Religious Transformation.*

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**Shubham Tyagi**

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## **Introduction**

Afghanistan, historically known as Gandhara and Bactria in ancient texts, was a significant cultural and religious hub in the early centuries of Buddhism. The region's geographical location made it a meeting point for diverse civilizations, contributing to the development and propagation of Buddhism. The introduction of Buddhism in Afghanistan is closely linked to the influence of Indian rulers and the subsequent patronage of local dynasties. Afghanistan is a landlocked nation that is strategically situated at the intersection of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. As such, it has long been a cosmopolitan, religious, and cultural melting pot. Because of its location, it was an important crossroads for trade, cultural interchange, and the flow of ideas between the East and the West along the Silk Road. Afghanistan's special location made it possible for it to become the birthplace of many different religious and cultural traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Indus Valley civilization. Eventually, Islam emerged. Afghanistan's history encompasses more than simply political victories and ephemeral empires; it also tells a powerful story of cultural adaptability, persistence, and change. Afghanistan was already part of a rich cultural landscape by the third millennium BCE, as archaeological discoveries from the Harappan or Indus-Saraswati civilizations show. Due to its advantageous location, the area was able to link with Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and other regions through significant trading networks. A rich cultural legacy that would develop over millennia was established by these early ties. Massive stupas, monasteries, and sculptures like the Bamiyan Buddhas represent the spiritual and creative pinnacle of Mahayana Buddhism, which flourished in Afghanistan in the early centuries of the Common Era. Buddhism and the Gandharan art style, which combined Indian and Hellenistic elements, were greatly advanced under the Kushan Empire, especially under Emperor Kanishka.

However, Afghanistan's history underwent a sea change when Islam arrived in the 7th century CE. A new religious and cultural force brought by the Arab invasions would ultimately change the identity of the area. Afghanistan's Hindu and Buddhist communities have fought against Arab invasions for ages, maintaining their customs and way of life. In particular, the Shahi kingdoms were instrumental in this struggle. However, the Turkic immigration and their eventual conversion to Islam caused a significant shift in the balance of power. Buddhism and Hinduism declined in Afghanistan as a result of the Turkic invasions in the tenth and eleventh century CE, which also caused extensive destruction and mass conversions.

## **The Rich Cultural Heritage of Ancient Afghanistan**

Archaeological findings related to the Harappan or Indus-Saraswati civilization indicate that Afghanistan was integral to a flourishing cultural milieu

by the third millennium BCE. The region's strategic location along trade routes such as the Silk Road facilitated cultural and commercial exchanges. Indian historian Romila Thapar highlights the shared cultural and economic ties between the Indus Valley civilization and regions such as Afghanistan. Three The region's role as a conduit between South and Central Asia is evidenced by the discovery of Harappan artifacts at sites such as Shortugai in northern Afghanistan. Four R.S. Sharma asserts that trade networks extending to Mesopotamia facilitated the dissemination of Harappan culture into Afghanistan. Five The diverse religious and cultural traditions that ultimately developed in Afghanistan were founded during this period. 6

### **The Introduction of Buddhism in Afghanistan**

The spread of Buddhism in Afghanistan began during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (c. 268–232 BCE) of the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka, after embracing Buddhism, actively promoted the religion by sending missionaries to various regions, including present-day Afghanistan. Archaeological evidence, including rock edicts found in Kandahar, confirms the presence of Buddhist influence during this period. These inscriptions, written in Greek and Aramaic, indicate Ashoka's efforts to communicate Buddhist teachings to diverse populations.

Afghanistan was the epicenter of Mahayana Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era. With colossal stupas, temples, and sculptures like those at Bamiyan and Hadda, the area rose to prominence as a hub for Buddhist education and art.<sup>7</sup> A major factor in the development and spread of Buddhism was the Kushan Empire, which ruled over it from the first to the third century CE.<sup>8</sup> Buddhism flourished throughout Central Asia, including Afghanistan, thanks in large part to the Kushan emperors, especially Kanishka, according to Indian archaeologist B.R. Mani<sup>9</sup> The building of the Kanishka Stupa at Peshawar and the popularity of Gandharan art, which combined Indian and Hellenistic artistic traditions, are clear examples of Kanishka's support for Buddhism<sup>1</sup> The Bamiyan Buddhas, which are etched into the Bamiyan Valley's cliffs, are evidence of the area's Buddhist past<sup>11</sup> Buddhist iconography was greatly influenced by the Gandharan school of art, which thrived in Afghanistan, according to D.N. Jha.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Role of the Kushan Empire**

The most significant phase in the history of Buddhism in Afghanistan occurred under the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd century CE). The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka the Great, played a crucial role in promoting and institutionalizing Buddhism. Kanishka is known for convening the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir, which led to the formalization of Mahayana Buddhism. The

region witnessed the establishment of numerous stupas, monasteries, and sculptures that blended Greek, Persian, and Indian artistic influences.

### **Architectural and Artistic Contributions**

Ancient Afghanistan became renowned for its Buddhist art and architecture, particularly in the Gandhara and Bamiyan regions. The Gandhara school of art, which flourished under Kushan rule, produced remarkable Buddhist sculptures characterized by Greco-Roman artistic elements. The most iconic representation of Afghan Buddhism was the Bamiyan Buddhas, two colossal statues carved into cliffs, which stood as testaments to the region's Buddhist heritage until their destruction in 2001. Monasteries such as Mes Aynak and Hadda also served as major centers for Buddhist learning and cultural exchange.

### **The Arab Invasions and Resistance**

The Islamic conquest of Afghanistan began in the 7th century CE. The region came into contact with the emerging Islamic caliphates as a result of the Arab invasions.<sup>13</sup> The Afghan and Hindu communities fought against Arab invasions for about 400 years, preserving their cultural and religious identities<sup>14</sup> Upinder Singh, an Indian historian, highlights the indigenous communities' tenacity against outside invasions, pointing out that resistance was not only military but also cultural and religious.<sup>15</sup> The Shahi kingdoms, which dominated northern India and portions of Afghanistan, were crucial in halting Arab conquests.<sup>16</sup> According to R.S. Sharma, the Shahi monarchs were supporters of Hinduism and Buddhism, and their resistance to Islamic invaders stemmed from a desire to preserve their cultural and religious traditions.<sup>17</sup> However, with the Turkic migrations and their eventual conversion to Islam, the balance of power started to change.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Turkic Invasions and the Decline of Buddhism**

The Turkic invasions of the tenth and eleventh century CE proved to be watershed moments in Afghanistan's history.<sup>19</sup> Following their conversion to Islam, the Turks launched ruthless operations against the native populations.<sup>20</sup> After centuries of prosperity, the Buddhist and Hindu communities could not survive the assault.<sup>21</sup> Religious sites like the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed, signifying the erasing of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past.<sup>22</sup> According to Romila Thapar, the Turkic invasions changed the identity of the area by causing cultural and theological changes in addition to military conquests.<sup>23</sup> B.R. Mani claims that the devastation of Buddhist stupas and monasteries was a component of a larger effort to impose Islamic rule over the area.<sup>24</sup> Another factor contributing to the decline of Buddhism in Afghanistan was the collapse of the Silk Road, a significant hub for both cultural and economic interchange.<sup>25</sup>

### **Mass conversion to Islam**

The massive conversion of the Afghan population to Islam was a complicated and multidimensional process. Pressures from the political and socioeconomic spheres led to some consensual conversions, while others were coerced. Over the ages, the once-thriving Buddhist and Hindu communities declined as Islam took over as the predominant religion.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the bloody conversions that took place during Turkic control, Indian historian D.N. Jha emphasizes the contribution of Sufi saints and traders to the nonviolent expansion of Islam in various areas.<sup>27</sup>

The fall of Buddhism and Hinduism in Afghanistan, according to Upinder Singh, was a cultural shift as well as a religious one, since Islamic literature, art, and architecture started to take center stage.<sup>28</sup> A period in Afghanistan's history came to an end and a new one began with the widespread conversion of Buddhist Hindus to Islam.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Afghanistan's history demonstrates the continuing complexity of human civilization as well as the dynamic interaction of empires, cultures, and religions. The history of Afghanistan mirrors the larger factors that have impacted the history of Central and South Asia, from its early ties to the Indus Valley civilization to its peak as a Centre of Mahayana Buddhism and, ultimately, its transition into an Islamic nation. Afghanistan's Buddhist rise and collapse is not just a local story; rather, it is a microcosm of the dynamics of cultural trade, conquest, and adaptation that occur around the world.

Early in the Common Era, Buddhism flourished in Afghanistan, marking a significant period in the history of the area. The Kushan Empire had a lasting impression on the cultural environment by supporting Buddhist art and architecture. The Gandharan art style, the Bamiyan Buddhas, and the many stupas and monasteries are all timeless reminders of this era. On the other hand, a significant change began when Islam arrived in the 7th century CE. The Arab conquests, followed by Turkish migrations, resulted in a seismic shift in Afghanistan's religious and cultural identity. The Hindu and Buddhist populations' resistance, especially throughout the Shahi dynasties, demonstrates how resilient these groups are to outside influences. However, Islam became the predominant religion and Buddhism and Hinduism declined as a result of the Turkic invasions in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Political, economic, and social considerations all had an impact on the complicated and multidimensional process of the Afghan population's wholesale conversion to Islam. Some conversions were forced by military conquest and destruction, while others were voluntary and motivated by the allure of Sufi saints and traders. The pre-Islamic legacy of Afghanistan was further eroded by the collapse of the Silk Road, which had been an essential conduit for

commercial and cultural interchange. The Taliban's 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is a clear illustration of the continuous conflicts between upholding religious identity and conserving cultural heritage.

Afghanistan's complicated past has been clarified thanks in large part to the work of historians and archaeologists like Romila Thapar, Upinder Singh, B.R. Mani, D.N. Jha, and R.S. Sharma. Their writings highlight the value of interdisciplinary approaches in comprehending the region's cultural and religious changes. We can better appreciate the rich legacy of the area and acquire important insights into the processes of cultural adaptation and change that still impact modern communities by reexamining the history of Buddhism in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the narrative of Afghanistan's transition from a Buddhist bastion to an Islamic community serves as a potent reminder of the adaptability and tenacity of human societies. It pushes us to embrace the complex interactions of factors that make history rather than relying solely on oversimplified accounts of conquest and conversion. We respect Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage and learn more about the eternal intricacy of human civilization by researching its past.

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