

## **Religious and Cultural Tourism to the Ancient Gandhara Region Promotes Multiculturalism, Interfaith Harmony and Peace**

**Fazal Khaliq (Pakistan)**

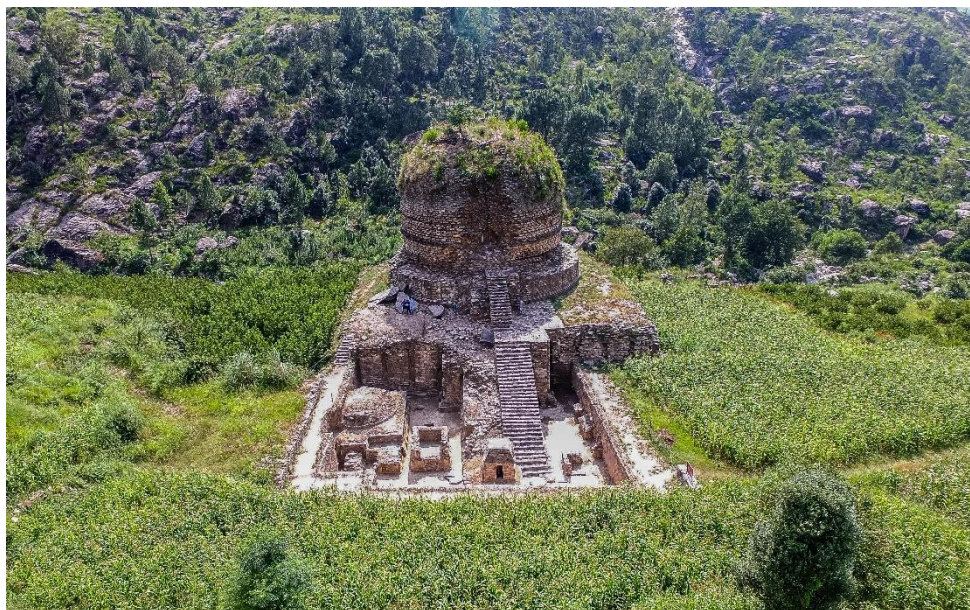
Reporter, Dawn Media Group / Cultural Activist / ALFP 2017 Fellow

The Gandhara region in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan was the center of multicultural and multi-religious activities, and people of diverse cultures lived there in harmony about 2000 years ago.

Followers of different religions and cultures like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Persian, Greek and Roman faiths lived peacefully. A place where the concept of religious harmony emerged and developed, Gandhara became the first perfect model of multicultural coexistence on the globe, according to archeologists and cultural experts.

The region was also a busy center of educational, religious, cultural and trade activities between South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe with a continuous stream of people migrating in and out of it. The infusion of ideas helped Gandharan art achieve a matchless identity with its diversity and sublime themes. In short, we can claim that Gandhara was the first region to have international influences of globalization with business and other activities.

Today, parts of the Gandhara region in Pakistan, including Taxila, Peshawar, Charsadda, Mardan, Swat, Buner, Malakand and Dir, contain thousands of sacred archaeological remains of immense importance for Buddhists, Hindus, Persians, Greeks and Romans, as well as Muslims, and people from across the world want to visit the area to view the sites.



View of a Buddhist stupa and complex at Amlook Dara, Swat (Photo by the author)

However, due to a lack of awareness and misguided religious beliefs, local Muslim communities consider the archeological remains as mere ruins or structures that provide them no benefits. Their lack of knowledge leads to the destruction of priceless artifacts and important sites. Until recently, the lack of understanding, absence of benefits and little government interest in preservation resulted in deterioration at several rich archaeological sites.

These historic sites were also targeted by militants who tried to destroy them, and the defacement of the seventh-century, rock-carved Buddha at Jahanabad was one of their ugliest attempts.

### **Steps for Protection and Preservation**

To protect and preserve the precious archeological and cultural heritage of different religions and nations both in Swat valley and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, I along with some friends established a group and undertook multiple activities.

- Initially, we started a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of archaeological sites in schools, colleges and universities. Our team delivered speeches and presentations and conducted interactive sessions about the importance of this cultural heritage.
- We raised awareness among the general public by holding interactive seminars.
- A media campaign was launched to advocate for protection and preservation of the crumbling archaeological sites. Proper video documentaries, news packages and print and web reports were made to inform and invite international communities, particularly Buddhists, Hindus, cultural heritage lovers, historians and researchers.
- A group, including civil society members and youths, was formed to urge governmental and non-governmental organizations to take solid steps for the protection and preservation of the archeological sites.
- Plans were devised to attract local and international tourists to visit their sacred archaeological sites.

### **Encouraging Consequences**

The entire campaign bore threefold benefits. Firstly, students and youths started taking interest and began respecting these rich cultural heritage sites. Secondly, local communities started realizing benefits from the sites after tourists began visiting them. Thirdly, relevant government organization started protecting the sites in order to escape public criticism.

Today, the situation is different than five years back and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Directorate of Archaeology and Museums reported a more than 50% increase in the influx of tourists to the religious and cultural heritage sites, which also earned foreign exchange for the country.

Thus the centuries-old cultural assets are, at last, producing manifold benefits. With our efforts large numbers of tourists, mainly Buddhists, from across Southeast Asia are now able to visit sacred Buddhists sites for worship, researchers for their inquiries and heritage lovers to quench their thirst.



Locals, particularly youths, now feel a sense of ownership for the sites and the general public who live near or around the sites have started protecting them as they receive financial benefits from the sites.



Buddhist monks worship at the Saidu Sharif monastery, Swat (Photo by the author)

### **A Step towards Multicultural Coexistence**

Perhaps the most important benefit from the cultural and archeological assets is that in their contribution to multicultural coexistence, which came about after pilgrims, tourists and researchers of different nationalities started visiting our country.



Buddhist monks from Thailand stand in reverence in front of the Jahanabad Buddha (Photo by the author)

The arrival of tourists from multicultural backgrounds brings various benefits to our society.

When locals meet and interact with Buddhist pilgrims from Bhutan, South Korea, Thailand, China and other countries of Southeast Asia, they both learn from each other, develop friendships and start respecting each other's culture.

The pilgrims and tourists spend money on local transportation, food, lodging and shopping and contribute to the local economy, which financially benefits local residents.

The tourists and pilgrims take part in local functions and cultural events, thus creating mutual respect for each other. This allows both the visitors and the locals to learn about each other's culture and traditions.

The locals treat the visitors according to their sense of hospitality and serve them food and offer them places to stay. In this way the visitors learn about hospitable culture and our dedication to preserving our shared archeological heritage.

Both the visitors and locals find each other in a different bond, respecting each other and thus creating opportunities for pluralism and coexistence.

The frequent intermingling, learning about each other's culture and traditions and respecting each other's norms is the best way to create harmony between different nationalities of multicultural backgrounds. Our cultural assets are now becoming the source of interfaith harmony and durable peace.

The golden era of multiculturalism in Gandhara, when ethnic and religious harmony existed, has returned through tourism and pilgrimages. It is now up to the government of Pakistan to take the necessary steps to promote religious and cultural tourism to the ancient Gandhara region.

*The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.*