

DISCOVERING BUDDHISM
IN SOUTHERN PUNJAB:
A Study of Vanishing Buddhist.
Heritage at Sui Vihāra

SUI VIHĀRA: LOCATION AND NOMENCLATURE

The province of Punjab occupies the central part of Pakistan. It has a rich cultural profile starting from Pre-Historic times to the colonial period. Owing to its friendly environmental conditions and plains, urban headquarters like Harappa, Taxila and Lahore established at this particular region. Southern part of the Punjab is also equally important and offers a rich built heritage. Present research paper is about one of the sites related to one of the Buddhist settlements in Southern part of the province. To begin this investigation, we have the remains of a tall standing monument. This monument was referred to as the Tower at Sui Vihāra near Bahawalpur (Fig. 1).

The site is located on the G.T. Road between Bahawalpur and Ahmadpur Sharqia – precisely some 20 kilometre south of the city of Bahawalpur. Presently, a stupa like structure made of clay bricks occupies the main building area. It is surrounded by a graveyard and the small mausoleum of a local saint. The site would have played a significant role in the development of Buddhism. Although its structure has been quite resistant against the harsh climatic conditions of the area, human interference is unavoidable.

Neither historical nor archaeological records give us anything to determine the nomenclature of the site. We have only a few local traditions explaining why it is called Sui Vihāra. According to the information collected by

the author during a couple of visits some years ago, local villages narrated beautifully their versions about the first part of the name Sui Vihāra. The term Vihāra which means a monastic centre, was beyond their understanding and they were mostly concerned with the word Sui, which either stands for a stitching needle or delivering a baby. Obviously, these versions are baseless and simply coined to attract and fascinate listeners. During the research, it was also noted that the site is also called *thul* in the local dialect. This word is very popular in the Sindhī language as well. In both areas it describes a tall standing structure, or minaret. This may be corrupted version of the Pāli word *thupa*.

As for scholarly opinions are concerned, the site was a complete Buddhist complex from the Kaniṣka period consisting of a proper *stūpa* and a monastery¹⁾. It was built during 11 years of Kaniṣka, as proven by the dated inscription, to be discussed later. Regarding the association of the word *vihāra* with this site, it can be suggested that originally a monastery was also built near this so-called tower.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

After the first documentation of the Sui Vihāra site back in 1867–70²⁾ and the discovery of a copper plate inscription, no second attempt was made at conducting a comprehensive exploration by the concerned authorities. Similarly, limited literature has been published about the site and its genesis.

Sui Vihāra was listed in the district gazetteer of Bahawalpur in 1904³⁾. Kamil in 1975 published an essay in Urdū⁴⁾ on the site and its surroundings⁵⁾. He also mentioned that treasure hunters and local people did collect certain

¹⁾ See Bayley (1870: 63–70). Kamil (1975: 45–49). Auj (1998: 227–245). Wasti (1993: 226–236). Siddiqui (2007: 119–135).

²⁾ Bayley (1870: 63–65).

³⁾ Din (2001: 384).

⁴⁾ Urdū is national language of Pakistan.

⁵⁾ Kamil (1975: 45–49). The description reads “Sui Vihar lies sixteenth miles south-west of Bahawalpur. There is a tower there the present height of which is about forty-five feet, twenty feet above the surface of the earth and the rest buried in a mound, but it is sad that several years ago its upper portion, about eight feet in height fell down from the effect of an earthquake. The ruin represents the remains of a compartment about eight feet square. The tower is a strong one and is built of a large bricks 5 X 2 feet each. The compartment had a floor made of the same bricks as are used in the building...”.

antiquities such as sculptures and coins but these are no longer traceable. Later on, Auj, a local writer, and historian, included Sui Vihāra among his list of Buddhist *stūpas* in the Indus valley⁶. Wasti, another local writer, discussed Sui Vihāra with reference to the Buddhist period of Bahawalpur⁷. In 2007, Siddiqui revisited the site and gained access to some artefacts in a private collection. These objects include coins and seated headless figure made of terracotta. He mentioned that his family named it the headless figure of the Buddha⁸.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE SITE

The archaeological history of Sui Vihāra started with a short period of excavation during 1867–68. The work continued for two days under the supervision of Major Stubbs. A detailed report of the short excavation report was published in 1870⁹. This was the only archaeological activity that took place way back in 1867–8. We do not have any information of the other finds mentioned by Major Stubbs, except the copper plate inscription. This Pali-Bactrain inscription was written in Kharoṣṭhī characters (Fig. 2). After its discovery, it was handed over to Asiatic Society of Bengal, Library Kolkata.

In 2011–12, the Department of Archaeology, University of the Punjab, started a project to explore the site. UNESCO funded the project. As part of the project, the site at Sui Vihāra was also partially excavated. In a press release, the team leader of the project shared some results of the investigation that also include the survey and documentation of several proto-historic mounds in the Cholistan desert. The excavation at Sui Vihāra revealed a circular platform made of sun-dried bricks. Moreover, a number of supporting walls was also unearthed, built to hold the circular platform and cylindrical structure of the *stūpa*. According to his interpretation, the site was originally built to impart the philosophy of Sāṅkhya or Sāṃkhya to the devotees. Later on during the period of Kaniṣka I period, it was converted to Buddhism. No information about the antiquities recovered from the site was given. A Comprehensive excavation of the site is still pending.

⁶ Auj (1993: 239–245).

⁷ Wasti (1993: 226–236).

⁸ Siddiqui (2007: 122, Pl. IV a-b).

⁹ See Bayley (1870: 63–65).

SUI VIHĀRA INSCRIPTION

Sui Vihāra became significant by the time of first expedition and even till today because of the dated inscription. The inscription was found by Rev. G. Yeats inside a large square chamber, about 8 feet, whose remains were visible when the only excavation took place in 1869¹⁰⁾. According to the district gazetteer “In the centre of the tower there was a narrow masonry shaft leading to a small recess in which were found a copper plate, a few coins and fragments of oxidised iron (Fig. 3)¹¹⁾”.

After its discovery, many scholars like Bayley,¹²⁾ Hoernle,¹³⁾ Indrajī¹⁴⁾, Konow¹⁵⁾, to name a few, published Sui Vihāra inscriptions. These readings of the inscription represent different interpretations and editions of the textual version. A newer and more comprehensive reading of Sui Vihāra inscription has been made by Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass in their dic-

¹⁰⁾ Bayley (1970: 65–66), in his article, published accompanying note of Major Stubbs which says “The name of the place, where the tower stands, is Sue Vehāra. Its present height is about 45 feet but report says that 6 or 8 feet have recently fallen. Upon approaching the site from North, it is seen that but half of it is standing, having been cut, as it were, right down the diameter, passing from N.E to S.W. Half of the exterior height is made up of a mound and about 20 feet above the place where the tower rises from the mound, there are the remains of a large square chamber, about 8 feet square with sides facing cardinal points. Above the floor of this square chamber, the walls rise at present about 11 feet. In the centre of this floor of this chamber, there is a square hole of 16 inches, opening into a shaft of the same size down to the top of the mound. This shaft is quite exposed from above 3 feet of the floor down to the top of the mound, by the falling away of half of the tower, whenever that occurred. The tower is built of large sun-dried bricks measuring 17 x 13 x 3.5 inches. In this chamber was formerly a flooring of burnt bricks of the same size as the sun dried bricks, laid in lime cement with a copper plate bedded in the middle, while round the place on the four sides, walls of the same kind of bricks and mortar were raised, about 2 feet high, forming a sort of chamber with the copper plate at the bottom. In this, coins mixed with some pieces of iron, a few beads, fragments of ornaments, all mixed with ashes and earth, were found (...)”.

¹¹⁾ Din (2001: 348).

¹²⁾ Bayley (1870: 67–70).

¹³⁾ Hoernle (1881: 324–331).

¹⁴⁾ Indrajī (1882: 128–129).

¹⁵⁾ Konow (1929: 138–141).

tionary of Gāndhārī¹⁶⁾. This reading divides the inscription into four lines as follows:

- ‘1. maharajasya rajatirajasya devaputrasya Kan[i]ṣkasya saṃva[t]sare ekadaśe saṃ 10 1 Daīsikasya masas[y]a divase aṭhaviśe di 201 4 4
2. [aya]tra divase bhikṣusya Nagadatasya dha[rma]kathisyā acarya Damatrataśiṣyasya acaryaBhavapariśiṣyasya yaṭhiṃ aropayata iha Da[ma]ne
3. viharasvamiṇi upasika [Ba]lanamdi [ku]ṭiṃbini Balajaya mata ca imaṃ yaṭhipratiṭhanam ṭhapa[ī]cam anu parivaram dadariṃ sarvasatvanam
4. hitasukhaya bhavatu’

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT READS:

‘[During the reign] of the Mahārāja Rājātirāja Devaputra Kaniṣka, in the eleventh year, anno 11, on the eighteenth day, d. 18., of the month Daisios, on this day when the friar Nagadatta, the preacher of the law, the disciple of the teacher Damatrata, the disciple’s disciple of the teacher Bhava, raised the staff here in Damana, the mistress of the Vihāra, the lay votary Balandi, and her mother, the matron, the wife of Bala [or, Balajaya], in addition to this foundation of the staff, subsequently give the enclosure. May it be conducive to the welfare and happiness for all beings.’¹⁷⁾

The inscription provides an authentic and accurate source of information about the existence of a Buddhist settlement in this particular place. The inscription also confirms the rule of Kaniṣka which ultimately leads us to conclude that the king made all possible arrangements to spread Buddhism in the Southern part of present-day Pakistan and for this purpose several major monastic centres like Sui Vihāra were established in the Indus valley. This argument is further strengthened by the information mentioned in the gazetteer of Bahawalpur according to which ‘the vihara appears to have been one of a line of viharas along the Indus’¹⁸⁾.

¹⁶⁾ For an online version of the reading, please visit http://gandhari.org/a_inscription.php?catid=CKI0147. The catalogue card incorporates a comprehensive bibliographic account of the literature that has so far been published.

¹⁷⁾ Konow (1929: 141).

¹⁸⁾ Din (2001: 25).

IMPORTANCE OF THE SITE

Sui Vihāra has historical as well as archaeological significance. Its historical significance is associated with its geographical location. This Buddhist settlement was built on an ancient route that links Mathura with Sindh or Sindhu. ‘Mathura had direct links to Sindhu-Sauvira in the lower Indus region and Saurashtra. Roruka, the capital of the former and Patala/Patalene could be reached by way of either Indraprastha-Rohitaka-Rangmahal-Sui Vihāra route...’¹⁹⁾ Pilgrims, missionaries and preachers would have used it frequently in order to propagate their faith. Moreover, it would have been equally popular as an important trade route from the Post-Mauryan period to the Kuṣāna period, as Bajpai pointed out²⁰⁾ further extensions of the route that can be seen on the following map (Fig. 4).

Secondly, the remains at Sui Vihāra provide physical evidence of the existence of Buddhism in this part of the country that is well known for the Indus Valley Civilisation and some fabulous tomb architecture. Only Buddhist remains were as yet unknown. The Sui Vihāra relics must be taken as a benchmark to explore and discover the remnants of Buddhist civilisation in Southern Punjab. These remains have extended our scope of studying Buddhism in Pakistan beyond Gandhara. There is a strong possibility of finding some more examples of this kind.

Finally, Sui Vihāra is significant with regard to its different form of Buddhist art and architecture from the Kuṣāna period that developed in Southern Punjab and the lower Indus valley. The use of local sun-dried bricks evolved a different style of *stūpa* architecture in the form of a tower, and so in earlier studies scholars referred to Sui Vihāra as a tower rather than a *stūpa*. Similarly, the use of terracotta for sculpturing also represents different manufacturing techniques and requires a comprehensive study, which can only be carried out after making a complete survey of the area in search of Buddhist remains.

¹⁹⁾ Bajpai (1989: 47).

²⁰⁾ For more information about trade routes from the Post-Mauryan period to Kuṣāna period see Bajpai (1989: 46–58).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, we can suggest that bearing in mind the historical, archaeological and geographical significance of the site, serious efforts should be taken by relevant authorities to preserve the site from further destruction and vandalism. The author is looking forward to devising a plan in order to explore the site and its surroundings with regard to discover more Buddhist settlements.

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Fig. 1. Sui Vihāra



Fig. 2. Original Sui Vihāra Copper Plate Inscription. After Bayley (1870. Pl. 1: 65)

