



The Status Of Religion In Central Asia: A Case Study Of Buddhism

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Abstract

Ethics, morals, values, are the guiding force of our behaviour; Ethics which is plays central role stability and continuity of any society. This article deals with the philosophical background of strong ethical values of Buddhism; how it was destroyed by the arrival of Islam and the governing system in Central Asia. The transmission of Buddhism into central Asia is evolving as archaeological interpretation of the history of the central Asia. The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia by the Kushan (Kusana) dynasty through the silk trade route which was also became an channel for the transmission of art, literature, architecture, technology, culture, religion, philosophy, etc to different countries in Asia. Religion has played a major role in the history of Central Asia and religion is one of the important factors of social development. However, the conversion to Islam on revive of the Arabs and the demolition of Buddhist stupas and destruction of manuscripts, persecution of Buddhists which shown that how the Buddhism was declined by the Arabs. The Silk Route which is also known as the 'Ancient International Trade Road' that spread from China to Italy existed from second century BC to fifteenth century AD. This silk route was known for trade, many items such as silk, paper, raw materials and other goods was exported through India to China and Central Asia. This route also became a channel for the transmission of art, culture, religion, literature, architecture, philosophy, technology, etc to different countries in central Asia and beyond. Buddhism which was developed in India is one of the most important religions that transmitted through the Silk Road to central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, Religion, Buddhism, Silk Road, Islamization.

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Historical evolution of Buddhism in central Asia

Buddhism reached to Central Asia from the northwest parts of the Indian subcontinent. Its spread into Afghanistan must have begun not later than the third century when the Indian dynasty of the Mauryas, and especially their most important ruler Aśoka (c. 268–233 bce), succeeded in uniting major parts of India and advancing the north-western border of their empire up to Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan. This transmission from India to central Asia is well recorded in the Ashok's stone inscriptions which placed in various parts of the empire. Such inscriptions are preserved in northwest Pakistan and in Afghanistan (in Kandahār, in Lampāka, and at the river Laghmān). The inscriptions also suggested that Asoka supported the various religious movements in his empire, but especially Buddhism, to which he appears to have been personally inclined and have faith on it. The Buddhist scripture depicted as one of the supporters of the faith. It can be said that the development of Buddhism from an ascetic movement mainly situated in northeast part of India. India to a universal religion, accelerated during his reign and that the political stability achieved by the Mauryas favored its spread, especially along the trade routes. The extensive activities of the Central Asian such as trading, religion, are coincided with the expansion of the universalist, missionary religions and the Central Asian were instrumental in spreading those religions. Buddhism was the earliest religion which reached to Central Asia under the Greco-Bactrians later Bactria became a center of Buddhism under the Kushans dynasty. The Kushans were the most important single people responsible for the spread of Buddhism into Parthia, Central Asia, and China. In the propagation of Buddhism in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan (now Xingiang), an important role was played by the Parthian, Saka and Kushan rulers of north-western India. The principal route of Buddhist expansion lay through Bactria and the western possessions of the Kushan Empire. The empire reached its zenith under the fifth ruler, who patronized Buddhism, among other religions. The silk route as a springboard of Buddhism in Central Asia, which was analyzed after Kanishka had become the ruler of India in the first century A.D. The international foundation of Buddhism which was laid down by Asoka was further strengthened and expanded by Kanishka along with the silk route in Central Asia. Under Kanishka's Kushan dynasty, international interaction between Indians and Central Asia become very frequent, which resulted in a tremendous expansion of Buddhism. During this period, the most important Buddhist site was developed in Bamiyan valley of Afghanistan which became a turning point for the protection of silk route trade caravans. Soon Kanishka succeeded in spreading Buddhism all over the region, starting from the bank of the river Tarem in Turkestan to Chinese Turkestan. Buddhism not only infiltrated into Central Asia under the Kushan reign but also began to spread far and wide over the vast spaces of Central Asia and Far East. Buddhism came to this area (Bactria-Tokharistan) from beyond the Hindu Kush, obviously under the auspices of the Kushans. However, even under Kanishka, Buddhism was neither the only nor the dominant religion in the region rather it coexisted with other old local cults belonging to the Avesta Circle and the cult of the Kushan emperors, beliefs imported from the steppe areas as well as Manichaeism and Christianity from the West. The Kushans lands were one of the main centre's of Buddhism as source stated by the third-century

Chinese Buddhist. The Kushans who have had Buddhist texts translated it into their own language and later these texts translated into Sogdian for the benefit of Central Asian converts.

By the end of the sixth century, Buddhism had spread to the peoples of Siberia from the Land of Seven Rivers, which is now South-East Kazakhstan and the Turkic Khanate. One of the greatest concentrations of ancient Buddhist structures from the first centuries of the Common Era has survived in the Surkhandarya Province of Uzbekistan. Originating in Gandhara, the Mahayana branch of Buddhism traveled from Swat to Tibet, via Afghanistan to Central Asia, and via the Karakoram Highway to China, Korea, and Japan. The Buddhist monasteries and stupas can be found in Uzbekistan in Merv (modern-day Turkmenistan), Tirmiz, and the area around Bukhara; in Kyrgyzstan, there are Buddhist paintings at Afrasiab (modern-day Samarkand); a monastic establishment at Ajinatepe (modern-day Tajikistan); and other locations near Issikul Lake. Along the Silk Road, some monks made their way and left their mark on society. Numerous Buddhist monasteries that have evolved into educational institutions can be found along this route. Mystic Buddhist monks, monasteries, and stupas—the latter of which is a representation of the dead—are what made Buddhism so popular in Central Asia.

Buddhism and economic prosperity

Islam was first introduced to Central Asia by the armies of the expanding Arab Empire, who crossed the Oxus River (Amu Darya) in 673 AD and had conquered most of the territory by 715. The Arabs called the territory Maveranahar that is beyond the river Amu Darya. A systematic invasion of Arab armies started in the 8th century A.D., brought to the region a new religion and culture that continue to be dominant. In 712 A.D. Bukhara was conquered, by 713 A.D. Khorezm, 716 A.D. Samarkand, Tashkent and Farghana were subdued. A new religious teaching was introduced and Islam found its fervent supporters there. The Arab occupation brought about several changes in the life of the Uzbeks in diverse fields. First the ruling elite and aristocracy, then over time the general population, converted to Islam in increasing numbers, that since the fifteenth century the native sedentary population of Central Asia has been almost completely Muslim. Islam slowly extended beyond the cities, villages and ultimately to the deserts and steppes surrounding them across the state. With the extension into the steppes was more difficult due to the nomadic and sometimes transitory nature of the people that inhabited these areas who in many cases did not fully accept Islam until as late as 18th century. Unlike sedentary populations of Central Asia, nomadic peoples who inhabited territories far from the birthplace of Islam were not only the last to adopt the new expanding religion; these people also retained considerable elements of their traditional faiths and customs. Mostly the Islamic people of nomads have always been less strict. However, the Islam of sedentary peoples was more strict and conservative. Islam emerged as a dominant and almost exclusive religion of the region displacing other forms of belief to the margins of Central Asian society. This does not mean that these religions were altogether exterminated or immediately converted as evidence of individual communities continued until well into 9th century as soon as central Asian areas as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, became the home of

many distinguished scholars, scientists, and theologians. In fact, Islam came to Central Asia through the filter of Persian civilization, which it had already absorbed and which was its most prominent non-Arab influence. The new Abbasid Empire maintained the pre-existing Persian cultural and political realities under a new Islamic identity. Islam became increasingly Persian in character: Islamic law, philosophy, literature, art, and mysticism all developed to a large extent in the Persian cultural space. It was therefore a very Persianized form of Islam articulated through Persian language that was communicated to Central Asians. It was under the Islamic Caliphate that local identity essentially disappeared and Central Asia became an integral part of the Persian world. Islam like Christianity expanded and spread not only through conquest and forcible conversion but through missionary activity and voluntary acceptance of the dominant religion. However, much of the spread of Islam throughout Central Asia owes more to the activity of Arab traders and Muslim mystics, known as Sufis, than it was to the sword. In fact, two of the most significant Sufi brotherhoods (known as tariqa) in the whole Islamic world were founded in what is now Uzbekistan. Najmuddin al- Kubra (1145-1221) founded the Kubrawiya in Khiva while Bahauddin Naqshband (1318-1389) founded the Naqshbandiya in Bukhara.

Under Arab rule, Central Asia retained much of its Iranian character, remaining an important centre of culture and trade for centuries after the Arab conquest. During the Abbasid caliphate in the 8th and the 9th centuries, Central Asia experienced a truly golden age. The caliphate at Baghdad through their governors could not hold the area for long as in the course of the 9th and 10th century there emerged independent states that got detached from the Arabs. The most important among these was the state of Samanids (874-999 A.D). A significant turning point occurred in Central Asia when one aristocratic Persian Muslim, Ismai'l Samai, chartered a Muslim state in Bukhara. The Samanid dynasty (from the ninth to thirteenth centuries) inspired a golden age for Bukhara and made the city a rival to Baghdad for its architectural splendour, religious learning, and cultural progress. During this era, Bukhara earned the title as one of the "pillars" of early Islamic civilization. The city became a magnet for artisans, musicians, philosophers, and business leaders and was the seat of a Persian renaissance where some of the world's greatest scholars and poets resided. Along with Bukhara, Samarkand stood out as a center of Islamic-Persian culture. The Samanid state comprised whole territory of Maveranahar, Khawarizm, part of modern Turkmenistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The Samanids played a great role in the ethnic and cultural history of the region. Maktabs and Madrasas of these areas were known for their excellence and variety of disciplines taught to multinational students. Ulama of Maveranahar began to represent official Islam in the Samanid state and later in Central Asia's Turkic states and made efforts to Islamize the nomadic population. At the time of the Samanids, the highest religious official had the title of ustad. Later it was replaced by another title -Sheikh-ul- Islam. The second in command was the Khatib, an official who had the right to read the khutbah (meaning sermon in Arabic) in the mosque on Friday congregation. Arab governors read the khutbah themselves. As Central Asian rulers did not speak Arabic so they had to appoint an official to read the khutbah for them. Because it had to be read in Arabic. From the latter half of the 8th century onwards,

many mosques and madrassas were built in Central Asia. At first they were built by Arab governors and later by local rulers.

After the collapse of Samanids the spoils were divided between the Karakhanids and the Ghaznavids. Ghaznavids were the first of the Turkic states in the region established in the last years of the 10th century. In spite of the endemic wars for establishing their regional influence, this period contributed significantly to the growth of cultural and scientific temperament of the distinct peoples at large. Both dynasties were destroyed in the 11th century at the onset of new Turkic invaders, the Seljuks, whose conquests included Persia and large parts of the Middle East farther to the west. Seljuk power in Central Asia waned within a century when new Turkic invaders continued to pour into Central Asia and carve up the region into short-lived new states. But in 1141 they suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Kara khitai. The Kara khitai themselves were overthrown by the Khwarezm Shahs, whom they had originally helped to power, towards the end of the 12th century. As Khorezem grew strong in the early 13th century, the Khorzem Shah strove to build a new large state in Central Asia but his efforts were unsuccessful. Even in that period of feudal fragmentation, Islam continued to establish itself as the preeminent religion of both settled and nomadic peoples and was an important statehood consolidation power. Most of the experts are convinced that Islam was firmly established in 990 A.D, when Turk Karakhanids got converted to Islam. Although Samanids and Karakhanids were multilingual states, but Arabic became the official language, used in official documents, literature and flourishing sciences. It replaced Pahlavi. Another Arab feature super imposed on Turkestan was the land owner system (ikta) which remained in operation down to 1924 when it was abolished by the Soviets.

The Mongol invasion of Central Asia is one of the turning points in the history of the region, having left imprints that are still discernible in the early 20th century. The Mongols had such a lasting impact because they established the tradition that the legitimate ruler of any Central Asian state could only be a blood descendent of Chengiz Khan. Chengiz Khan captured the region in the 13th century and completely destroyed the state of Khorezem Shah. When Mongols erupted on to the scene in 1219 then, the Mongols brought great devastation and destruction causing the economic and cultural backwardness from which Central Asia for a long time could not recover. Within months they had taken Bukhara, Samarkand and Khwarezmia, not to mention vast new territories to the north, south, east and west. Previous invasions had done little to alter the tenor of life in Central Asia but the Mongol conquest disrupted the old patterns of trade and agriculture and threw the cultural life of the region into turmoil. The Mongol conquest causing an unprecedented destruction of Central Asia's greatest cultural centres, laid in ruins many Muslim cultural monument. In Bukhara, most mosques madrassas and market were destroyed, What be fell the Bukharans and Samarkand is a bloody chapter of Mongol and Central Asian history. The Mongol Campaigns over Khurasian landmass, the loss of life, the destruction of magnificent cultural centres and the utter disregard to human civilization were appalling. Consequently a temporary halt came to the Islamic traditions since Mongols were averse to Islam. In the 14th century, from among the Mongol tribe of Barlas, who had been

exposed to Turk influence, there arose the great conqueror Amir Timur. He after thirty eight years of campaigns established a powerful state, center of which was in Maverannahr. His vast empire included the South-Western parts of Central Asia, Damascus, Iran, South-Eastern Russia and the Lower Volga. Timur, (1336-1405) had been a fanatical Muslim and, as such, Islam once again dominated the socio-political fabric of Central Asian societies and most of the vestiges of other religions such as Nestorian Christianity that had lingered on till date was wiped out. The influence of Sufis in Central Asia reached its peak under Timur in 14th century. Perhaps the best known of the orders encouraged by him is Naqshbandiya order. This order was founded in Timur's reign by a famous religious saint, Bahudin Naqashband. With the growth of the order, Timur's court at Samarkand became a world center of this branch of Islam. The Sufi orders in 14th, 15th 16th centuries were close to the center of imperial power in Central Asia. Timur also brought scholars to Samarkand, and they made the city a cultural and intellectual centre. All of this was done to realize the conqueror's vision of making Samarkand the urban centre of the entire world. Timur's cultural legacy was more impressive than his political one. A regional flowering of Islamic civilization initiated in central Asia done by him, when he brought scholars and gave support to them.

In Central Asia, Islam is by no means a recent development. But as the people in authority have changed, so too has the extent of Islam's influence in the area. Following decades of scientific atheism promoted by the ruling communists, many Central Asian populations have started to recover more traditional forms of the religion since the fall of the Soviet Union. The growing radicalism of Islam has coincided with this acceptance of a more traditional form of the faith. This new kind of Islam, which is a result of the increasing economic marginalization and political repression in Central Asian nations, is not likely to slow down. The Inequality in education throughout Central Asian nations is another factor contributing to the dissatisfaction that has fueled the resurgence of Islam in general and its politicized form in particular. Islam is also being embraced by women as one of the only alternatives to the current system of power that has led to oppression and poverty.

Present state of religious affair in central Asia

Most people agree that religion has had a noticeable impact on human society throughout its history. Regarding the origins of religion, it reflects the rudimentary human conceptions of both their inner selves and the outside world. Religion was founded on the idea of regulating society, and its primary goal was to bring about some form of order in it.

The history of Central Asia has been significantly influenced by religion, which is also one of the key determinants of social development. This is particularly true in traditional societies such as Central Asian states, where political systems are based on religious beliefs, customs, and ethnic norms. During the Arab conquest, Buddhism was represented and all of these religions had sizable followings. Central Asia's way of life changed in a number of ways during the Arab conquest. Islam became the predominant and nearly exclusive religion in the area, pushing other religions to the periphery of Central Asian culture.

People in the area sought to show that they were unique, therefore it was a cultural, social, and religious phenomena. In actuality, Islam is by no means a recent development. It has been the area's traditional religion for centuries. However, Islamic activities quickly expanded as a result of the resurgence of Islamic philosophy. The endeavor to revive old institutions, prevalent habits, work methods, and native culture in order to create dynamic national identities is one of the main tendencies in Islamic revivalism. The Universalist and missionary religions expanded in tandem with the Central Asians' considerable economic activity, and the Central Asians played a key role in the development of these faiths. Buddhism was the first to spread over Central Asia under the Greco-Bactrians, and under the Kushans, Bactria developed into a Buddhist center. The Kushans were the ones who brought Buddhism to China, Central Asia, and Parthia. The Parthian, Saka, and Kushan kings of northwest India were crucial to the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang).

The Buddhism's spread throughout Central Asia can be divided into two main categories. In addition to Mahayana, Hinayana also extended into eastern and coastal Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan from that period to the present. We began to get precise evidence regarding the spread of Buddhism during the Ashoka period, which began in the early third century B.C. After 236 years after the Buddha's death (Mahaparinirvana), Asoka called a third council (Mahasangeeti) in Pataliputra to ensure that it was preserved in its original form. Approximately one thousand learned Buddhist monks participated in this nine-month-long council.

A knowledgeable Buddhist monk by the name of Maha Asthvir Majjhantika was sent to Gandhar, Afghanistan, as part of the third council's resolution to send Buddhist missionaries to various locations across the world to speak and teach Buddhism. Islam spread throughout these central Asian countries in various ways over time. The different cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the local communities in central Asia had an impact on how they reacted to Islam. Shortly after its inception in the seventh century in Arabia, Islam made its way to Central Asia. The Arab conquest occurred approximately between 600 and 800 CE, and it continued to spread through commerce until 1200.

In the 680s, the Umayyads launched the first Arab invasion, conquering the right bank of the Amu Darya, which the Arabs called "mawara-i-nahr." The armies arrived from Khurasan, Iran, where the town of Merv served as the center of an Arab administration. The first autonomous Muslim state in Central Asia, the Samanids, emerged in the ninth and tenth centuries after the Arabs. It was created in 875 by an Iranian dynasty from Khurasan, who had a base of power in Bukhara.

The principal route of Buddhist expansion laid patronized Buddhism, among other religions. The 'silk - route' as a springboard of Buddhism in Central Asia may be analyzed particularly after Kanishka had become the ruler of India in the first century A.D. The international foundation of Buddhism which was laid down by Asoka was further strengthened and expanded by Kanishka along with the silk- route in Central Asia. Under Kanishka's Kushan dynasty, international interaction between Indians and Central Asia

become very frequent, which resulted in a tremendous expansion of Buddhism. During this period, the most important Buddhist site was developed in Bamiyan valley of Afghanistan which became a turning point for the protection of silk route trade caravans Through Bactria and the western possessions of the Kushan Empire. Buddhism came to this area from beyond the Hindu Kush, obviously under the auspices of the Kushans.

The Silk Road facilitated blending of Greek and Asian cultural influences. Afghanistan merchants and monks carried Buddhism north to places like Samarkand, then east over the Tien Shan Mountains into China. Buddhism seems to have been carried further east along the Silk Road then brought to Eastern Turkistan in the 1st century to Korea in the 4th century and to Japan in the mid-sixth century. In the 4th century Buddhism was also brought to China, where it established in the form of Mahayana. By the 5th century most of the former Kushan lands were being raided and plundered by nomadic armies from the steppes to the north, known as Hephthalites or White Huns. The Hephthalites looted Buddhist monasteries dealing a severe blow to the Buddhist culture of Western Central Asia by taking away the financial base that had enabled it to thrive. The largest number of ancient Buddhist monuments has survived in Surkhandarya Province of Uzbekistan which dating to the first centuries of the Common Era. It is the Mahayana form of Buddhism that emerged from Gandhara and spread along the Silk Road through Afghanistan to Central Asia, from Swat to Tibet and along the Karakoram highway to China, Korea and Japan.

Some monks moved along the Silk Road and left their influence among the people. It is along this road that we find many Buddhist monasteries which became centers of education. It is Buddhist monks of mystic type, the monastery and the stupa, the last as symbol of the dead that became very popular throughout Central Asia. Buddhism in Central Asia already weakened and decline after the emergence of Islam in the 7th century. The persecution of Buddhists and the demolition of monasteries became the norm with the expansion of Islam in Central Asia, particularly during the next 500 years and proved fatal for the existence of Buddhism all over the world.

The decline of Buddhism in Central Asia taken place by two events 1st the collapse of t'ang dynasty in China and invasion of Arabs from the west after the death of Mohammed in 631 CE. In 631 CE the Arabs army captured the city of Merv (in present day Turkmenistan), beginning the slow process of islamization in Central Asia. By the 19th century, Islam has displaced Buddhism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. As a result of series of invasion by Arabs (Muslim armies), many Buddhist living in Samarqand, Tashkent, Ferghana, Herat either converted to Islam or fled. Urban life in Central Asia was destroyed. Calligraphy, arts etc suffered as Islam replaced Buddhism.

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Another important factor of spread of Islam into Central Asia was the Muslim domination of trade activity. By the middle of the 8th century CE, Muslims controlled the silk trade route. Islamization came to urban and rural areas of the silk route. Gradually, Islam took hold and Buddhism eventually vanished from the Central Asia.

In Central Asia, the conversion to Islam began in the eighth century. The history of Buddhism came to an end when the majority of Buddhist sculptures and wall paintings were destroyed or damaged because Islam forbade iconography, idolatry, and the belief in a single god. The temples and stupas of Buddhism were destroyed and buried under the sand. Islam had spread throughout Central Asia by the fifteenth century. Following the introduction of Islam at the end of the eighth century, Buddhism lost its prominence in the area; yet, it is obvious that Buddhist religious establishments continued to operate in the northern part of Central Asia into the tenth century. As late as the ninth and tenth century, Buddhist idols are said to have been sold in Samarkand and Bukhara. Bamiyan would remain the center of Buddhism until the middle of the sixth century because the road via Gandhara was the primary route taken by Buddhist pilgrims and commercial traders. Today, there are only traces of Buddhism's previous prominence in the region, including the abandoned recesses in the cliff at Bamiyan.

Conclusion

India is the birthplace of Buddhism. Buddha's teachings and enlightenment made it one of the most significant "World Religions" in history. The first religion to be conveyed across the Silk Road from India to China was Buddhism, which was practiced in Gandhara, which is now known as northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Central Asia was home to Buddhism, which was historically particularly common along the Silk Road. The Silk Road's role in spreading Buddhism throughout the first millennium of the

common era is intimately tied to the history of Buddhism in Central Asia. Buddhist monasteries and stupas can be found in Uzbekistan in Merv (modern-day Turkmenistan), Tirmiz, and the area around Bukhara; in Kyrgyzstan, there are Buddhist paintings at Afrasiab (modern-day Samarkand); a monastic establishment at Ajinatepe (modern-day Tajikistan); and other locations near Issikul Lake. Along the Silk Road, some monks made their way and left their mark on society. Numerous Buddhist temples that have evolved into educational institutions can be located along highways. Mystic Buddhist monks, monasteries, and stupas—the latter of which is a representation of the dead—are what made Buddhism so popular in Central Asia. In Central Asia nowadays, the only traces of Buddhist art and culture may be seen everywhere. Temples have been destroyed, almost to the point of stupas.

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