

# **CULTURAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST CIVILIZATIONS THROUGH THE SILK ROAD AND THE ROLE OF GANDHARA AS A MELTING POT**

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This paper aims to investigate the consequences of cultural interactions among different civilizations from ancient times through dialogue and the role played by Gandhara (Pakistan) through the Silk Road. The Silk Road is also known as ancient Trade Route connecting China with the West, that carried goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and China. Originating at Xian, China this caravan tract, followed the Great Wall of China to the Northwest, bypassed the Takla Makan Desert, climbed the Pamirs, crossed Afghanistan, and went on to the Levant; from there the merchandise was shipped across the Mediterranean. This paper also finds that China received Christianity from Europe and Buddhism from Gandhara by means of the Silk Trade Route. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the route was revived under the Mongols, and at that time Marco Polo used it to travel to Cathay (China). The ancient part of the Silk Road still exists, in the form of a paved highway known as 'Karakorum Highway' linking Pakistan and the autonomous region of Xinjiang, China (since 1970's). The ancient Silk Trade Route extends to more than 7,000 kilometers, linking most territories of Asia and Europe. To trace the ancient Silk Trade Road on the map is not an easy task, because there are several offshoots which also have many further branches while connecting East and West.

The interactions, meetings and dialogues between people to people have been used for communication since immortal times. About two decades ago, the widespread acceptance of the plan to designate 2001 as the Year of "Dialogue Among Civilizations" by the United Nations General Assembly was of high importance from this viewpoint. Since then the concept of "dialogue among civilizations" has emerged as a symbolic asset

for mankind with its proper projection and widepresentation. This idea is now considered as the bases, in order to define new policies, power and to create new set of relations among nations of the world in 21st century.

**Key words:** Cultural tourism, Civilizations, dialogue, Silk Road, Gandhara, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Central Asia, Kashgar, Tashkhughan, Karakorum Highway, Kashmir, Uddiyana, Trans-Himalaya.

Today, dialogue among civilizations can determine our socio-economic and geo-political differences and issues. Besides, it can promote cultural tourism which is a composite system of supply and demand. As such it can lead to the identification of many types of tourism; such as; ecotourism (nature-based tourism) sport tourism, religious tourism, adventure tourism, cruise tourism and heritage tourism. Heritage tourism, which typically falls under the purview of cultural tourism is however, one of the most prominent and widespread types of tourism and is among the very oldest forms of travel whose linkages are well attested from the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road. The Silk Road, in history has served as a bond between world's great civilizations, as well as a source of diffusion of knowledge of different arts including those with secular and religious themes.

The Silk Road was a magnificent network of ancient caravan paths which started from Xian city, China in the East and culminated at Rome in the West. This route of about 7000 KM formed the first bridge between East & West civilizations which came into being in the 3rd Century BCE and survived for many centuries of this era. Along this long and dangerous road, the well-known Chinese silk was carried to the west, while woolen garments, perfumes, precious stones, gold vessels, silverware, coins and glass vessels etc., were imported into China<sup>1</sup>. It was not only a trade route, it was here that different civilizations met and mingled their cultural traditions, religious beliefs, scientific and technological achievements. As a result, active exchange of cultural values and creative enrichment of people took place through such dialogue.

From Kashgar which was the junction of the two principal routes of the Great Silk Road, the road bifurcated further in two routes; the Western route continues over the Roof of the World (Pamirs) towards Samarkand, Balkh, Merv, Nissa through Parthia to the shores of the Mediterranean at Antioch and then on to Rome and Alexandria by ship. The Southern route clipped to Tashkhughan to cross the Karakorum and then on to the great Buddhist University of Taxila or the Centre of the Gandhara Civilization. Both these primary destinations were located on either side of the Indus River which guided the caravans<sup>2</sup>.



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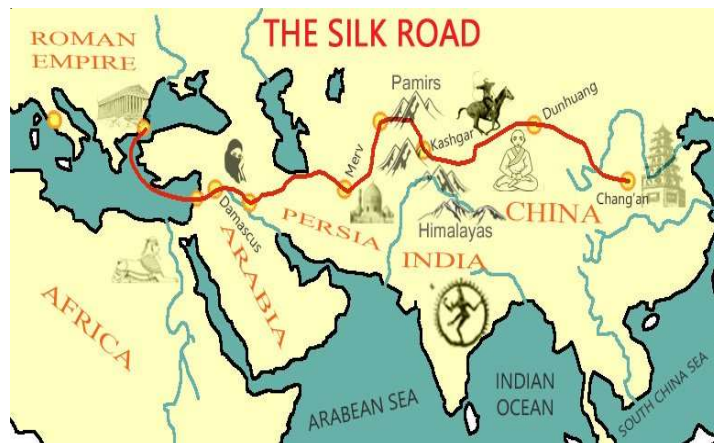
Major settlements of this region were connected by a network of trade routes. The so-called silk routes were the most important of these ancient trade roads, connected China to India and the Mediterranean world. The northern and southern branches of the silk route interacted in Chinese Central Asia (East Turkestan) where they joined the three main trade routes from northwest India. These latter routes traversed the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs, and the Karakoram. The political and religious intuitions that grew up along these trade routes facilitated contact among the diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the area. The Buddhist monasteries that lined the routes commissioned a vast amount of religious art and encouraged the development of distinctive artistic traditions. This monastic art reflects at different times the artistic traditions of the three great civilizations of the area: China, India, and Tibet.

These caravans laden with silk from China, spices and precious stones from India, silver goods from Iran, Byzantine cloths and many other goods moved through the deserts passed over the ridges, mighty mountains and rivers to reach their final destinations.<sup>3</sup> From Hellenistic times until Marco Polo it carried silk and other goods between China and the West across Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan or Central Asia, the Tarim basin and the Gansu strip. The route described in the Han Shu, an ancient Chinese work, parted from the southern route near Yarkand in

the Trim Basin, crossed over the Hindu Kush, passed Hunza, Gilgit and the upper part of the Indus River until it finally reached Gandhara. This route approximates to today's Karakorum Highway<sup>4</sup>.

Buddhism was first spread from India to Gandhara, the gateway to the Silk Road, where it became internationalized as it amalgamated with various cultures from Greece, Rome, Saka Parthia and Sasan. In the early Christian era, Buddhism became firmly established in the Tarim basin and from there entered the region of China<sup>5</sup>. Today the Trans-Himalaya may appear to be an unfriendly, inaccessible corner of the world, but in the first millennium Christian era, when trade between the great civilizations of Asia flourished and the Silk Routes were important avenues of commerce, this region gave birth to distinctive artistic and intellectual pursuits. In this mixed environment Buddhism developed syncretic and esoteric features known as 'Esoteric Buddhist Art'.

The areas of China, Central Asia, and West Asia and to a lesser extent Europe were connected with each other by the use of the Silk Road. Linking great civilizations, the Silk Road contributed chiefly to cultural achievements. A branch of the Silk Road passed through the Karakorum Highway linking Kashgar with Kashmir and Gandhara regions. The Karakorum Highway (KKH) connects the Chinese Province of Xinkiang with Pakistan and pursues the ancient Silk Roadroute which linked heart lands of Asia with the Western rim land and further away from the entire continent of Europe. More than 50,000 Petroglyphs and over 5000 inscriptions in 39 different scripts and languages have been recorded by the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums in close collaboration with German Archaeological Mission along the Karakorum Highway in the Northern Areas of Pakistan<sup>6</sup>.



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The ancient trade routes of Silk Road also carried scholars, teachers, missionaries and monks, who met, mingled and exchange their ideas with each other. This mixing of human thought has been found in the shape of expressions in cave paintings, stone reliefs, monasteries and educational institutions, which was the first organized attempt to disseminate knowledge. The Buddhists, Zoroastrian and other missionaries all followed the Silk Road leaving behind indelible footprints of their passage. The Chinese travelers; the monk Fa-hsien travelled through the Tarim Basin, crossed over the Pamir from Tashkurgan reached Darel, arrived at Uddiyana Swat to finally enter Gandhara, this route was called the Ki-pin Wu-i-shan-li route in Han China. Ki-pin means Gandhara Wu-i-shan-li was name of Kandahar and today it is the Karakorum highway<sup>7</sup>.

A notable Chinese monk Xuanzang, and Ying were among hundreds of Chinese monks who made pilgrimages to India during the first millennium C.E. The detailed accounts of their journeys make them better known than others. Their travel records are important historical sources for several reasons, for instance they provide meticulous accounts of the nature of Buddhist doctrines, rituals and monastic institutons in South, Central and Southeast Asia, as well as valuable information about the social and political conditions in South Asian regions and kingdoms situated on the routes between China and India. The work of Xuanzang "*The Records of the Western Regions Visited During the great Tang Dynasty*" dedicated to his royal patrons is very significant both as an account of religious pilgrimage as well as a historical record of foreign states and societies neighboring Tang China. Further, there were also Hebrew merchants, Roman artists as well as travelers of different kinds.<sup>8</sup> The rich diversity of the people and culture linked by the Silk Road, has been the place of encounters and communication between many cultures and peoples. The interactions generated by the intense and lasting contacts between these human groups, through war, trade, religion, nomadic life, resulted in a human needlepoint made of ethnic and cultural threads expressing the unity and the diversity of the peoples from China to the Caspian Sea.<sup>9</sup>

The region of Gandharawhich now comprises mainly of northern parts of Pakistan (present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), in ancient times played a very significant role as a melting pot for cultural integration between different civilizations. It was situated in the north west of India with the high mountain ranges of the Karakorum, Pamirs and Hindu Kush adjoining it and the dry areas of Central Asia. The region of Gandhara is the area in which the Buddhist Religious art was practiced widely extending to

Swat in the north, Kohat in south, Taxila in the east and Jalalabad (Afghanistan) in the west. A number of races from Central Asia migrated to Gandhara because of its mild climate and plentiful farm products and fruits. This area was the entry point of western culture into India, and at the same time, the exits point of Eastern Culture, including Buddhism to the West<sup>10</sup>.



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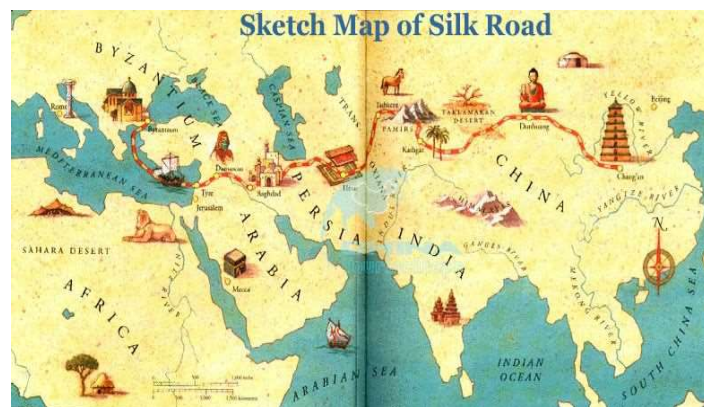
In Gandhara, due to diffusion of different cultures, there developed an art between 1st century BCE and 7<sup>th</sup> Century C.E which is commonly known by its geographic name as 'Gandhara Art'. The region of Gandhara is in fact a remote area surrounded by mountains, which served as a gateway to the Silk Road, giving access to Central Asia and hence to the countries of the East and West. It is evident that Buddhism became an international faith when it intermingled with various cultures from Greece, Rome, Saka, Parthia and Sasan. The Gandhara region located at the center of the active trade route between India, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean World and traditionally situated on the frontier of India therefore played a significant role in dissemination of Buddhist art of Gandhara<sup>11</sup>. The teachings of Buddhism spread into regions later known as Soviet Central Asia (modern Russian Turkestan), through Afghanistan following the ancient Trade Routes and lasted there until the Muslim conquests in 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.

A number of religions such as; Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity,

Islam, Hinduism, and spiritual traditions reached their highest development due to the accessibility of the Silk Road. Thus, the Silk Road has promoted through the ages a lasting cultural and religious dialogue. This dialogue has taken also the form of interactions among religions. The historians of comparative religions have said that each religion of the Silk Road, has been borrowing from and been transformed by the other religions in their message and teachings as well. This reciprocal transformation, in a long span of time, give evidence of the religious tolerance which has been for a long time, in particular from the Mongol Empire, until recently, a high mark of the Silk Road.

As such, the Silk Road was an ideal ground for Buddhism to grow and develop. The prologue of the teachings of the Buddhism was first noticed in China then it reached Afghanistan and other areas. The recognition of Gandhara was established due to its capital known as “Taxila” which was a great centre of learning and an immense resort of students from all parts of India. Since the Achaemenian times through the times of Alexander the Great, the Mauryan Emperor Asoka, the Scythians, the Parthians, the Kushanas, the Huns and even down through Muslim period to the great Mughuls, when big *caravansarais* were built here, Gandhara, specially Taxila continued to maintain a link between east and west civilizations.

The Archaeological Excavations carried out at Taxila Valley have brought out numerous items of commodities, art, objects, and materials of everyday use, coins and extensive architectural remains which clearly show that such contacts were accumulated<sup>12</sup>. The Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Persian) and other missionaries all followed the ancient Silk Road, putting permanent footprints. Then there were also Chinese pilgrims, like Fa-Hian, HiuenTsang, Sung Yun and Hebrew merchants, Roman artists, and travelers of different kinds<sup>13</sup>.



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Taxila, the ancient city and a prized UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1980, served as the second home of Buddhism in ancient times, which is strategically situated where three ancient routes converge; from the western world, Central Asia and mainland India. These routes not only lured invaders, settlers, students but also traders of commodities and innovative social ideas. These people, commodities and ideas all of diverse origin when they met and mingled at Taxila gave the city a cosmopolitan character right from the beginning which it retained at least up-to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It was a great educational, scientific, religious and commercial centre of Central and South Asia. It was esteemed and revered by all the major religions of the area namely Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, but it was Buddhism which gave the city a pre-eminence and high status during 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. It was a city that had an attraction for all that moved along the “Silk Road”.

The historical records mentions that the city of Taxila was under Achaemenian Rule during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and it was introduced in the western world for the first time by the historians of Alexander the Great in the last quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. When Alexander the Great visited here, Raja Ambhi was the ruler of Taxila. Then it came under the Mauryas in or about 317 BCE. It was constantly under the heels of foreign rulers namely Greeks, Scythians, Kushans, Sassanians, Kidara Kushans and the White Huns. These all used Taxila as a hub for their imperial expansion.



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The archaeological excavations have revealed that Taxila city was built at four or five places in Taxila Valley i.e. Sarai Khola (Saria Kala) Hathial, Bhir Mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh. With the discovery of a cave near Khanpur with micro-lithic blade industry the chronology of Taxila has been pushed back to pre- historic period from the beginning of middle of 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE to the Mughul era. The Greek companions of Alexander the Great came across Buddhism in northern India, where it had been forced to confine itself by the Brahmanic reaction. The Indo-Greek princes, the descendants of Alexander the Great's companions were Buddhists, and it was under their rule that began the amazing art style that combined Hellenic forms and characteristics, with Buddhist format and motifs and was later known as the art of Gandhara. The advance of Buddhism towards the east carried it first to China and later to Korea and then to Japan.

At the time when Gandhara was thriving around Peshawar, and Charsada, Taxila was already a flourishing centre of commerce and trade. By 530 BCE Cyrus the Great had built his vast empire from Greece to the Indus which included Gandhara as a province within this empire. The ancient city of Taxila was then the capital of the eastern bastion of the Persian Empire and was already a centre of trade and industry. In the Mahayana form, Buddhism spread into the arid inland region of Asia. The Silk Road became an ideal ground for Buddhism to grow and develop.

At the beginning of the 5th century BCE, Taxila which was the capital of Gandhara began to develop as a great centre of learning. Gradually it rose to as one of the two greatest educational centers in South-Asia, the other being Nalanda in Bihar, India. The fame of Gandhara rested on Taxila, a great centre of learning and a resort of students from all parts of India. Taxila was the seat of a famous university where astronomy, mathematics, medicine. Sanskrit and Prakrit grammar were taught. The country's cities were centres where artistic corporations and guilds of craftsmen were organized, with skills and crafts handed down from generation to generation. Caravans crossing the Khyber Pass descended into the valleys of Gandhara loaded with goods from distant lands, through which Gandhara got acquainted with the arts and crafts of other people.

Further, in early Buddhist literature, particularly in the Buddhist *Jatakas*, Taxila is frequently mentioned as a university centre where students could get instruction in almost any subject, religious or secular

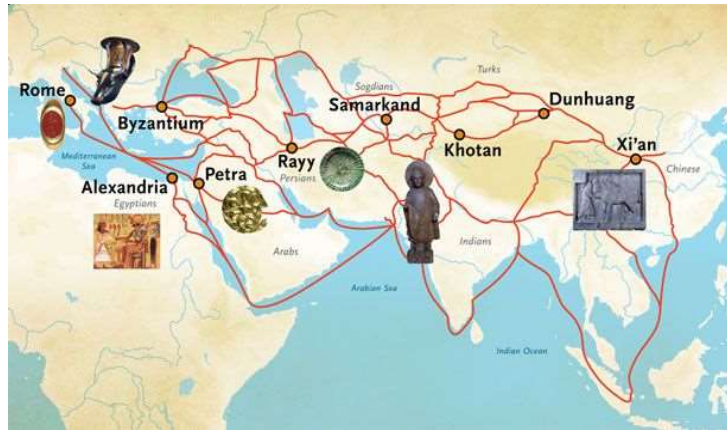
from the Veda to mathematics and medicine, even to astrology and archery. This pre-eminence of the city as a seat of academic and practical teaching was an outcome of her geographical position at the north-western gateway of South Asia. We learn from Pali texts that Brahmana youths, Khatriya princes and sons of *sethis* from Rajagriha, Kasi, Kosala and other places went to Taxila for learning the Vedas and eighteen sciences and arts. Jotipala, son of Purohita (court Brahmin) of the king of Benares, returned from Taxila with great proficiency in archery or military science and was later appointed Commander-in-Chief of Benares. Besides, Jivaka, the famous physician of Bimbisara who cured Buddha, learnt the science of medicine under a famous and renowned teacher at Taxila and on his return was appointed court physician at Magadha. Another illustrious product of Taxila was enlightened ruler of Kosala, Prasenjiit, who is intimately associated with the events of the time of the Buddha. Panini and Kautilya, two masterminds of ancient times, were also brought up in the academic traditions of Taxila. Though there was no organized university at Taxila, there was a cluster of schools, managed, maintained and presided over by eminent teachers, who partly drew upon the contributions of the local people and partly depended on the fees and presents of rich pupils. Most of these schools were centres of higher studies, rather than elementary education.

Moreover, Taxila is consistently mentioned as the place where young princes went for their higher studies. By travelling on foot through villages and towns, plains and deserts, countries and kingdoms they naturally gained rich experience. Taxila was not the resort only for princes but also for students from other classes and ranks of society. Certain cities become renowned for their learned teachers and achieved a reputation comparable to that of the university cities of medieval Europe. Chiefly among them were Benaras and 'Taxila which had already gained fame in the time of Buddha. Benaras was particularly renowned for its religious teaching but Taxila in the far North West laid more emphasis on secular studies. The Buddhist *Jataka* tales show that young sought knowledge in this city.

The tradition of Buddhist system of education was monastic as it functioned within monasteries. The domestic environment in the Brahmanical system did not favour the expansion of small schools under an individual teacher into large educational institutions, controlled by a collective body of teachers, as was the characteristic of the Buddhist system. Hence the latter gave birth to large scale monastic universities,

with thousands of teachers and students in the congregation, which during the last three to four centuries of Buddhism in India were famous all over Asia and attracted students from various parts of the continent. The history of Buddhist education really forms one aspect of the history of Buddhist civilization itself. Starting as a system of training for a monk, it expands its scope and purpose under the impact of new intellectual needs and interest finds new mental horizons, until the monastery becomes not just a place for cloistered meditation, but a seat of culture and learning. The Buddhist *Jataka Tales* show that young men from all over the civilized part of India sought education in Taxila. Among the famous learned men connected with Taxila were Panini, the grammarian of 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Kautilya, the Brahman Minister of Chandragupta and Charalka, one of the two greatest masters of Indian medical science. Interesting information about the educational system is also provided by Buddhist canonical texts as well as the *Jatakas*. During 2<sup>nd</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E, secular knowledge became an ideal of these monasteries. A large number of monasteries at Taxila thus gave the aspect of an educational centre there. The doors of these Buddhists establishments were opened not only to Bhikshus but to other students as well who were at liberty to leave the monastery and start the life of a common man once again after the completion of their education. It is, therefore in this transformed educational activity of the monasteries that one finds the roots of Buddhist education, in three Vedas and eighteen sciences and arts. The Vedas were learnt by heart. In other subjects, the practical course was left to be completed by the students themselves when they left their college. The princes had to demonstrate their technical knowledge to their fathers after returning from Taxila<sup>14</sup>.

The Greek companions of Alexander the Great came across Buddhism in Northern India, The Indo-Greek princes, the descendants of Alexander the Great's companions were Buddhists and it was under their rule that began the amazing art style, combining Hellenic forms and characteristics with Buddhist arts & motifs and which came to known as the art of Gandhara<sup>15</sup>. However the real amalgamation and cultural interaction started in the Kushan dynasty and Gandhara was located in the heart of the Kushan regime. The events in the history of Buddhist Art like the creation of a Buddha image, and the remarkable development of relics of Buddha's life story took place after the last half of the first century C.E. At that time the Kushans (nomads from Central Asia) founded a great empire extending from Central Asia to India.



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The Kushan dynasty was an empire open to the outside world and had an ability to assimilate different cultures. The coins used by this dynasty for example which depict gods of three different worlds- Greco-Roman, Iranian and Indian testify to this. Gandhara art owed its prosperity to flourishing economic developments and cultural exchanges through dialogue between different civilizations promoted during the Kushan dynasty which controlled the important places along the Silk Road. As a result of the recent archaeological excavations carried out in the different areas of Gandhara it has been proved that Gandhara art lasted until the 5th - 6th Century C.E when a large number of statues of Buddha, Bodhisattva and religious donors were made. Buddhist Art however enjoyed its last glory at that time. Distinct facial types, some clearly portraits, appear throughout Gandharan art. Reminiscent of Roman portrait sculpture, perhaps modified by Bactrian intermediaries, these heads visually confirm the great variety of Gandharan culture. The range of facial types attests to the cosmopolitan nature of the area and to the fact that it was an obvious melting pot of foreign inhabitants monks, merchants, soldiers and others<sup>16</sup>.

Art and architecture of Gandhara is very well represented mainly by a multitude of stupas and monasteries which are located in the different areas including at Taxila Valley. It reflects the influence of Greek and Roman forms. The archaeological excavations have revealed a great deal of the monumental splendor like Charsadda, Sarah-e-Bahlol, Takht-e-Bahi, Shah-ji-ki-Dheri, Jamal Garhi, Taxila and Swat. The ancient city of Charsadda is one of the most important sites so far discovered in the

Gandhara region, where are lying the remains of the ancient capital of Gandhara once known as *Pushkalavati*.

### **Conclusion**

The historic city of Taxila, as the capital of Gandhara in ancient times had played an important role as a melting pot for cultural diffusion and interaction between different civilizations along the great Silk Road. It was here that religious teachings of Buddhism were spread to Central Asia, China and other countries of the world like Korea and Japan. Since from the Achaemenian time through Alexander the Great, the Mauryan Emperor Asoka, the Scythians, the Parthians, the Kushanas, the Huns and even down through the Muslim period to the great Mughuls, Gandhara specially Taxila continued to maintain a link between East and West civilizations through the ancient Silk Road.

The recent “Belt and Road” initiative of China is in fact a continuation of the ancient cultural interactions which already existed between different civilizations of the world as it is evident in the shape of thousands of petroglyphs along the Great Silk Road, which came in to being during the third century BCE and lived to see the many centuries of this era. Therefore, the cultural exchange of dialogue and mutual learning between different civilizations is an important element for progress of human civilizations, world peace and socio-economic development.

There is a great need that different civilizations should be encouraged to respect each other and live in harmony so that cultural exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations become a bridge for promoting friendship and peace between people of different faiths and religions in future as it was accomplished in the historic past. This friendship between the people of different faiths and regional environment will certainly help to promote tolerance to bring peace all around the world for posterity.

The monasteries cluster like economic nodes along the trade routes specialized in commodities such as horses, medicines, textiles, silks, wools, spices, precious stones, etc. which were exchanged in the nearby market places. Inside the monasteries, monks skilled in reading and writing taught literary languages and patronized religious arts. They thus enriched the cultural lives of the local inhabitants. Frequently their knowledge extended to the arts of magic, fortune-telling and medicine. Accordingly, they dispensed hospitality and catered to the spiritual and physical needs of merchants and missionaries bound on perilous journeys. In return, grateful merchants financed the monasteries facilitating the work of the monks.

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