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Travelogue of the Grand Old Buddhist Monk: Interpretation and Reinterpretation of the Buddhist Landscapes along the Silk Route

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ABSTRACT;

The grand old Buddhist monk, Xuan Zang was one of the most celebrated Chinese pilgrims, to visit India. He is considered as the most influential translator of Sanskrit or Indic language or Buddhist texts into Chinese. Xuan Zang is also known for his travel records of Central Asia and India. In his travelogue, he gave unique account of the Silk Route cities and countries. It provides a great deal of information on the history and the geography of India and also of Central Asia. His accounts also carry a lot of information on the social, cultural and religious life of Central Asia.

The travelogue of the grand old Buddhist monk Xuan Zang is widely accepted as genuine accounts without external bias or distortion of facts. It helps us to interpret and reinterpret the Buddhist landscapes along the Silk Route. In this research an attempt has been made to provide an interpretation of the cultural landscapes of Central Asia and the existence of Buddhist shrines along the Silk Route. This interpretation and reinterpretation of the Buddhist cultural landscapes along the Silk Route is largely based on the travel accounts of Xuan Zang.

KEY WORDS: Buddhism, Silk Route cities, Xuan Zang, Bamiyan, Balkh

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INTRODUCTION;

Faxian, Xuan Zang or Hiuen Tsang and many other Chinese monks visited India in the quest of Dharma (Buddhist wisdom) during the ancient period. Xuan Zang (600-664); was one of the most celebrated Buddhist monks and Chinese pilgrim, to visit India.

The name of the celebrated Chinese pilgrim and translator is spelt in English in the following ways (among others): -

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------|
| 1. M. Stanislas Julien | HiouenThsang. |
| 2. Mr. Mayers | Huan Chwang. |
| 3. Mr. Wylie | Yuen Chwang. |
| 4. Mr. Beal | HiuenTsiang. |
| 5. Prof. Legge | HsuanChwang. |
| 6. Prof. BunyiuNanjis | Hhuen Kwan. |

after Thomas Watters, 1904¹

The grand Chinese monk Xuan Zang visited India during the seventh century in search of Buddhist Knowledge. He is also considered as the most influential translator of Sanskrit or Indic language or Buddhist texts into Chinese. He is credited as having produced a synthesis of the Buddhist thought and philosophies. He, thus, helped to spread Buddhism in China and made a great contribution in the cultural exchange between the two ancient civilizations.

Xuan Zang is also known for his travel records of Central Asia and India. The great Chinese monk made his historic pilgrimage to India along the Great Silk Route. In his pursuit of the Right Dharma (Buddhist Path), the pilgrim passed through 110 Asian states.²As an explorer, he travelled about 16,000 km. or 10,000 miles, over both the northern and southern Silk Route. On his way to India and back to China, he traversed the great deserts and lofty mountain ranges of Asia. In his travelogue, he gave unique account of the Silk Route cities and countries. It provides a great deal of information on the history and the geography of Central Asia and also of India. His accounts also carry a lot of information on the social, cultural and religious life of Central Asia.

The travelogues of Xuan Zang are widely accepted as genuine accounts without external bias or distortion of facts. It helps us to interpret and reinterpret the Buddhist landscapes along the Silk Route.

In this research an attempt has been made to provide an interpretation of the cultural landscapes of Central Asia and a reinterpretation of the existence of Buddhist shrines along the Silk Route. This interpretation and reinterpretation of the Buddhist landscapes along the Silk Route is largely based on the travel accounts of Xuan Zang.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretation and reinterpretation of cultural landscape is an inevitable process of recreating the historical or cultural geography. Travelogues are important literary source as they give interesting, valuable and detailed account of a place or places. Scholars have long recognized the importance of travel accounts to the study of geography, history, ethnography, and related disciplines. While innumerable travel accounts have served as sources of information for both readers and researchers, a small number of them stand out as particularly important due to the wealth of material that they contain. The travel records of the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang (Huan Tsang) is surely included in that elite group.³

His detailed account provides the first reliable information about distant countries, their terrain and customs.⁴ It gives tremendous scope for recreating the historical or cultural geography. It also helps to analyse the void or silence of the archaeological sources.

This research is based on the interpretations of travelogue of Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang (Huan Tsang)

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE GRAND OLD BUDDHIST MONK;

The grand Buddhist monk Xuan Zang is remembered as a great scholar for his translations of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese. He is also remembered for his descriptions of the places he visited during his 16 years of pilgrimage; the great Silk Road cities of Kashgar and Samarkand and the great Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The record of his pilgrimage helps us to understand Buddhist landscape and the cultural centres along the Silk routes. Works of Xuan Zang is significant both as an account of religious pilgrimage and as a historical record.

Xuan Zang or Huan Tsang was born in AD 602. Already, during his childhood he became absorbed in the study of the Sacred Books of Chinese literature. While still young he was ordained as a Buddhist priest to the Temple of Heavenly Radiance in Hangchow. Soon thereafter was transferred to the Temple of Great Learning in Changan. Here (in Changan) a community of monks had devoted their lives to the translation of the Sacred Books from India. Listening to the variety of their interpretations young Xuan Zang conceived the bold plan to travel to India and bringing back more Sacred Buddhist Books to China.⁵

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the South Asian monks from Nalanda were active in China. Xuan Zang may have come to know about the renowned educational institution in India through the works of these South Asian monks and their disciples.⁶ Xuan Zang studied at the great university of Nalanda and returned to China in 695 with nearly 600 Sutras, commentaries and other works. The rest of his life was spent translating the Buddhist sutras into Chinese, which he had

collected from India. Between 700 and 712 he translated 56 works (230 volumes).⁷Xuan Zang, was well versed in both Sanskrit and Chinese and his translations were accordingly of a high standard. (Bosworth and Asimov,2000)Xuan Zang became the great masters of translation. His translations of important Buddhist works are still in use today.⁸

At the request of the Tang Emperor Taizong (626-649) he composed a description of the lands through which he travelled. The account of the journey, from China through Inner Asia to India and back, contain information that is to be found in no other source.⁹These accounts have been accepted as truthful and trustworthy. These are credible and authentic.

THE TRAVELOGUE;

The Buddhist monk departed the Tang capital (Changan) in 629 and returned in 645, after spending 16 years in India. He travelled on both the northern and southern Silk routes through China and the Central Asia.

In western China, Xuan Zang travelled to Turfan and Kucha. The king of Turfan gave him letters of introduction the rulers of the oases along the way, thereby providing the assistance that made his pilgrimage successful.¹⁰Afterwards, he crossed the Bedel pass and reached near the Lake Issyk-Kul.

In his journey of Central Asia, he visited the areas in the Chu Valley (Bishkek). He traversed through Chach (Tashkent, the capital of modern Uzbekistan) and Samarkand. Traveling through Samarkand he described about the great imperial city which governed a powerful state.¹¹Continuing southward, he crossed the Amu Darya and travelled along Termez. Further south, he travelled to Balkh and Nava Vihara (Nawbahar), before crossing Hindu Kush and Himalayas into India. Here the Buddhist monk had the opportunity to see the Buddhist sites and relics. At the Nawbahar, Xuan Zang found over 3,000 Buddhist monks, including the young Monk Prajnakara; a monk with whom Xuan Zang studied early Buddhist scriptures. In Afghanistan he visited the cave of the Buddha in Bamiyan.

Bamiyan had many Buddhist monasteries, in addition to the two large Bamiyan Buddha. It was carved out of the rock-face (The Bamiyan statues have been destroyed in 2001 AD). From Bamiyan, the Chinese monks reached to Kapisi. It was the regional capital. According to Xuan Zang, at that time Kapisi sported over 100 Buddhist Monasteries and 6,000 monks. From Kapisi, Xuan Zang pushed on to Jalalabad. From Jalalabad he reached Peshawar; the former capital of Gandhara. Later, he passed through the Khyber Pass in his way to Peshawar. In Peshawar, Xuan Zang visited several stupas in and around the settlement. Xuan Zang left Peshawar and travelled to the Swat Valley. Thereafter he headed to Taxila, from where the journey naturally led into Kashmir in India.

Here Xuan Zang spent two years (631-633) studying about different schools of Buddhism. In 633 AD, Xuan Zang left Kashmir. Thereafter he travelled to the different parts of India. In his journey, he visited all the great Buddha pilgrimage sites in Indu (Yin tu) or India, including different places in Nepal and Bhutan.¹²

Xuan Zang traversed over four highest mountain ranges in Asia, that included the Tian Shan, Hindu Kush, Pamirs, Karakorum and Himalayas. On the return Journey he travelled through Pakistan and Afghanistan to reach Kashgar (Xinjiang-Uyghur Region of China), via Yarkant and Khotan along the Southern Silk Route. Finally, he returned to China in 645 AD.

After a long journey Xuan Zang reappeared on the land of China. Xuan Zang crossed the dread waste of desert safely and reached Khotan and Dunhuang - the Taklamakan desert. He has described about the Dunhuang in great details. He deposited his precious manuscripts in the monastic library of Dunhuang. It was situated at the caves of the Thousand Buddhas. (Irma Marx, 1997) Several years later, the Great Wild Goose pagoda was commissioned by the Tang Emperor to house these sacred objects and it became a great centre of Buddhist learning, with pilgrims coming from all over East Asia to study.¹³

Like Faxian, another early Silk Road explorer, Xuan Zang took note of the Indic influences in Central Asia. His detailed travel accounts from the Silk Roads provides reliable information about distant countries. In later centuries he was immortalized as a saint and his journey popularized in fables and vernacular literature. However, for historians and explorers he contributed a precise account of the many countries along the Silk Road.¹⁴

REINTERPRETATION OF THE BUDDHIST LANDSCAPES;

Buddhism was probably never strong in Sogdiana. Xuan Zang and later Chinese travellers found only a few remnants of Buddhism in Sogdiana. According to the reports of Xuan Zang the ruler and people of Samarkand were fire worshippers. Tang shu, however, reports that Sogdians honour the Buddhist religion. According to the reports of Xuan Zang the city had two Buddhist temples, but there was no priest in them,¹⁵ at the time of his visit.

According to the legends, Alexander the Great built the city of Baktra (Balkh). Under the rule of Kushans and Huns, Bactria was a major centre of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. According to the reports of Xuan Zang it had 100 convents and 3000 monks. The city had four statues of the Buddha. These statues were adorned with gems and gold jewellery.¹⁶

According to Xuan Zang, Buddhism was brought to Bactria by Trapusa and Bhallika, the two merchants who were the first to offer food to the Buddha after his enlightenment. Whereas, this must be mere legend because Buddhist inscriptions found in these areas were only from the Kushan

period.¹⁷ During that period (writing in 629) Balkh was one of the largest towns. Xuan Zang describes it as Po-ho (Balkh). This ancient Bactrian capital was even called 'little Rajagriha'.¹⁸ According to his report, there were, 100 Buddhist monasteries (*viharas*) with 3,000 monks.¹⁹ Probably as early as the Kushana period the Navaviharawas founded in Balkh. This location is still known as NawBahar. It was a centre of Buddhist study and pilgrimage. When it was visited by Xuan Zang (around 630 AD), there was an impressive monastery, outside the town. It had about one hundred monks.²⁰

Xuan Zang, a Chinese Buddhist monk of the early seventh century, reports on the other Bactrian centres of Buddhism. Some of these we know from archaeological remains, such as Bamiyan and the monastery of Hadda near Jalalabad.²¹ It was at Bamiyan that Xuan Zang saw gigantic standing figures of the Buddha. The Chinese traveller was also struck by the size of the figure of the Buddha reclining in Nirvana. Two huge standing figures of the Buddha carved in the stone cliff, one 38 m in height and the other 53 m.²² There were 10 Buddhist monasteries with 1,000 monks.

At a distance of some 1,800 m, the cliff was pierced at different levels by Buddhist cave in which splendid paintings, with Buddhist motifs, were preserved. The entire complex dates from the third and the seventh century. The large figure of the Buddha is probably linked to the Huns (Hephthalite) period. Xuan Zang has left a detailed description of the Buddhist centres and monastic life during the period of Huns, when he visited Bamiyan.²³

Xuan Zang depicted the Huns (Hephthalites), as ferocious persecutors of Buddhism. The Huns who conquered Gandhara and Taxila, during the second half of the fifth century, damaged Buddhist monasteries considerably.²⁴

Gandhara was historically a great centre of Buddhism. however, when Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited the Gandharan region, (in the seventh century) the Buddhism had already seriously declined. This was probably due to the decline of economic prosperity of the region. Most of the monasteries were now deserted and were lying in ruins. Even the temple of the Buddha's 'alms-bowl' (*patra*) was destroyed and the alms-bowl itself was taken away to Persia.²⁵

The urban life continued in Taxila and the monasteries were maintained, as attested by Xuan Zang during his visit in the seventh century.²⁶ Xuan Zang reported about the existence of six great stupas founded by Ashoka (268–233 BC) near the town of Taxila. Although, remains of many stupas and monasteries were detected in and around Taxila, but their date, to the Maurya time, is by no means certain.²⁷ According to his descriptions the capital cities of Kapisa, also continued to maintain their urban nature in this period.²⁸

Near Purushapura (Peshawar) a great stupa was constructed by Kanishka. He also built a monastery nearby, in the same area. During the visit of Xuan Zang, the stupa was still in existence, but the old monastery was dilapidated. A few monks studying Buddhist teachings still lived there. The same condition holds true for the old monastery of Pushkalavati (Charsadda). In the monastery near Varsapura (Shahbazgahi) Xuan Zang found little more than fifty monks. This could have been the result of a general decline in economic prosperity.²⁹

The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang also visited Kashmir. The Empire of Kashmir included the Kabul valley, the Swat valley and the mountain regions of Kashmir proper. In the south-east it extended as far as the Chenab river.³⁰

Important information about the territories of Tokharistan is given in the description of the journey made by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim.³¹ Xuan Zang noticed that Persia has two or three monasteries with several hundreds of monks, while in Makran there were some 100 monasteries and some 6,000 priests.³²

The early medieval town of Termez was of the same size as Balkh. At Termez Xuan Zang found a thriving community of more than a thousand Buddhist monks. He noted ten monasteries in Termez.^{33 34}

By the time of the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang (602–664), Kucha seems to have become a stronghold of the Buddhism. Xuan Zang has also mentioned ten or more monasteries with about two thousand monks, in Agni. Similar to Agni, Kashgar was also strong hold of Buddhism.³⁵ According to the reports of Xuan Zang the inhabitants of Khotan were also Buddhists.³⁶

CONCLUSION;

Xuan Zang was a monk, traveller, writer, historian, and translator. His pilgrimage to India allowed him to collect hundreds of priceless artefacts, which he brought back to China for further the study of Buddhism. Xuan Zang lived a long life and dedicated himself to translating the Buddhist sutras into Chinese. He is remembered as a great scholar for his translations from Sanskrit to Chinese. Some of his translations, for example of the Heart Sutra, are still in use today.

But he is also remembered for his descriptions of the places he visited. As a translator, Xuan Zang wanted to present Buddhist texts to the Chinese and so became well-known for his unabridged translations. The Chinese monk not only promoted Buddhist doctrines into the mainland of china through his writings, but he also created the perception of India as a holy land.

The works of Xuan Zang provides invaluable insight into cultural landscape along the silk route. It has been used by geographers and historians across the globe.

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