

## Buddhist Art in the Upper Beas and Sutlej Valleys

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**Abstract:** Buddhism had flourished in the Upper Beas and Sutlej valleys from the very beginning. The followers of Buddhism were sent to this region to preach the teachings of Buddha by Ashok, the great ruler of Mauryan dynasty, who himself was the staunch follower of Buddhism. Accounts of Hiuen Tsang say that Buddha himself visited this region and Aśoka, a Mauryan emperor, built a *stupa* in the middle of the Kulūta state. We find many evidences which prove that this sect flourished in this region in ninth-tenth centuries CE. The accounts of Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsang and archaeological evidences also indicate the presence of Buddhism in this remote area. In the present paper, the researcher tried to throw light on the growth and development of Buddhism in this remote region through the study of sculptural art of this sect. The paper is the outcome and based on the field surveys done in the study area and by carefully studying the available photographs. In this research paper descriptive research is done on the available archaeological evidences based on the vital information provided in the accounts of Hiuen Tsang.

**Keywords:** Art, Beas, Buddha, Buddhism, *mudrā*, *padmāsana*, Sutlej.

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## INTRODUCTION

When Buddhism reached in the Upper Beas and Sutlej valleys is uncertain. The antiquity of Buddhism in this region goes back to the second century CE. Many symbols that appear on the Kulūta coins such as *triratna* and *chaitya* or mountain may have been used by the Buddhists of Kulūta, however, such symbols were also commonly used by various *gaṇas* on their coins. A copper *lotā* (vase) which was accidentally discovered by Major Hay in 1857 at Kundlah, now can be identified with Ghondhola in Lahaul, has a scene which looks as if Siddhartha is seated beneath an umbrella (Birdwood. 1880. 154-55).

The reliable textual evidence regarding the existence of Buddhism in Kulūta, which is part of Upper Beas valley, is provided by Hiuen Tsang who visited this region in the seventh century CE. He states that 'in the middle of the country is a *stūpa* built by Aśokarājā. The old Tathāgata came to this country with his followers to preach the law and to save men. This *stūpa* is a memory of the traces of his presence' (Beal: 1969. 177). He has noticed twenty *Sanghāramas* in which about one thousand monks live. Most of them were the followers of *Mahāyāna*, a few being *Hīnayānists*. Thus, from the records of Hiuen Tsang we know that Buddha himself visited Kulūta and Aśoka, the Mauryan monarch constructed a *stūpa*. But at the present traces of such *stūpa* have so far not been discovered.

Besides this, one another important archaeological evidence of Buddhism in this region is found at Kalath, three kilometers south of Manali. It is a stone image of Avalokiteśvara in the temple of Kapil Muni (Hutchison and Vogel. 1933. 418; Thakur. 2001. 39). Two Buddha statues are presently in the Parshurāma temple at Nirmand. Both were commented upon by Penelope Chetwode who photographed them in 1981 during the Bhuṇḍā ceremony (Chetwode. 1984. 18-19). There are some more Buddhist images found in the region which indicate that in the ancient times Buddhism was flourishing in this remote area. These images are under worship in the Brāhmaṇical temples of the Kulūta region. There are some metallic images of Buddha of circa eighth-ninth century under worship in the TriyugīNārāyaṇa temple at Diyar. At Thawa, there are two metallic images; one of them may be Padmasambhava and another one is that of an unknown lāmā. On the basis of the above-mentioned evidences, we can say that Buddhism was introduced in this region from very early period and Mahāyāna branch had a good hold in this region. But with the revival of the brāhmaṇism, this sect lost its earlier hold.

## BUDDHA

Buddhism was flourished in the Upper Beas and Sutlej valleys in the first half of the seventh century when a Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited this region. Thereafter, it declined rapidly in the valleys. There are few traces of Buddhist sculpture in this region but their number is insignificant. So far, the following sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas are known from the valleys:

1. Two Buddhas, now in the collection of Paraśūrāma temple at Nirmand;
2. Metal Buddhas in the sanctum of the TriyugīNārāyaṇa temple, Diyar;
3. Buddha from Naggar, and
4. Stone sculpture of Avalokiteśvara from Kalath.
5. *Standing Image of Buddha*

A bronze image of 32.5 cm tall of Buddha is in the Paraśūrāmabhaṇḍāra which was brought out during the Bhuṇḍā festival in 1981 (Fig. 1). The figure has been published by Penelope Chetwode in 1984 and was witness to a Bhuṇḍā ceremony; and discussed by Thakur. The image is depicted in standing position. There is a little gap between the two feet. The knees are carved well. The waist is cylindrical in shape. The torso is broad in the upper part and attenuated in the lower section. Face is oval-shaped. Ears are depicted elongated. Eyes are open wide. Forehead is broad. Buddha's right hand is in *varadamudrā* while left is in *vyākhyānamudrā*. We can notice a local art influence on his face, hands and head. He wears a long transparent drapery which covers his body till ankles except his right shoulder. The sculpture is in well proportion. How the Buddha statue reached Nirmand's Paraśūrāmabhaṇḍāra is a mystery. Considering the fact that no Buddhist remains have been found at Nirmand it was deposited in the bhaṇḍāra like other dozen metallic statues, including the magnificent metal *moharā* of SujjunīDevī brought to notice by J. Ph. Vogel.

## Seated Image of Buddha

In the *garbhagriha* of the TriyugīNārāyaṇa temple at Diyar, there are some metal sculptures in front of the stone sculpture of TriyugīNārāyaṇa. There are two small images of Buddha (Fig. 2). Both these images are in seated position. The larger Buddha is shown seated in *padmāsana*. Image of Buddha is depicted lean, waist is cylindrical and neck is conch-shaped. Face is elongated, oval-shaped and tilted little downwards against his chest. Facial expressions are calm. Ears are elongated which shows the influence of Gandhara art. Forehead is very broad. Hair are shown wavy and curly as shown in



Figure 1: A metal sculpture of Buddha in Paraśurāmaḥaṇḍāra, Nirmand. (Courtesy: O. C. Handa)



Figure 2: A metal sculpture of seated Buddha in the *garbhagriha* of Triyugī Nārāyaṇa temple at Diyar



Figure 3: A metal sculpture of seated Buddha from Naggar. (Courtesy: O. C. Handa)



Figure 4: A metal sculpture of Padmasambhava in Murlidhara temple at Thawa (Courtesy: O. C. Handa)



Figure 5: A stone sculpture of Avalokiteśvara at Kalath. (Courtesy: O. C. Handa)

Gandhara art. On the top of the head is *uṣṇīṣa* which is tied with some kind of broad band. He is shown seated in *bhūmisparśa-mudrā*. He wears a transparent *sanghāti* which covers his left shoulder and arm. The lower part of his body is covered with a *dhotī* like cloth. The *āsana* on which the bigger image is shown seated is not visible. But the smaller image is shown seated on a rectangular metal pedestal. Both sculptures are cast in well proportion and show Gandhara art influence. These could be assigned to eighth-ninth century CE (Handa. 2015. 88).

Another bronze image of Buddha from Naggar was published by Svetoslav Roerich (Fig. 3) (Roerich. 2004. 14). It is 13.5 cm high. Buddha is shown seated on a full-bloomed lotus *āsana*. He is depicted seated in *padmāsana*. Under his legs at the centre, it seems that there is depicted a head and face of an animal. Maybe it is a deer. Buddha is shown seated on the *mrigacarma* (deer skin). This *mrigacarma* is spread on the *padmāsana*. The upper part of the torso is broad while the lower part is slightly depicted attenuated. Neck is conch-shaped. His face is depicted square in shape with a curved chin. Nose is long and broad. Eyes are lotus-petal-shaped and open. He has elongated ears with elongated ear-lobes as seen in the Gandhara art. There is *urṇā* in the centre of the forehead. His facial expressions are calm and graceful. His right hand is in *abhayamudrā* whereas the left hand is shown kept on his left knee in *tarjinimudrā*. He wears a transparent *aṅgavastra*, plaits of which are depicted naturally. The pedestal on which Buddha is seated shows the influence of local art as we can notice in the metal images from Chamba (Ohri. 1991. 2.45). On the bases of artistic style the sculpture may be assigned to eighth-ninth century.

An image of metal kept on the raised platform is in the *maṅḍapa* of the temple of Thawa, is of a seated Padmasambhava (Fig. 4). Pedestal is of *ḍamarū*-shaped. On the pedestal full-bloomed lotus is carved on which the image is kept. Padmasambhava is depicted as seated in *padmāsana-mudrā*. Left knee has broken. Feet are broad at front while attenuated towards the heels and look like oval-shaped. It seems the work of local artist. Upper part of the torso is broad while lower part is attenuated. Shoulders are broad, neck is conch-shaped. Face is depicted oval-shaped. He is adorned with a single-beaded chained necklace, *kaṅganās* and flower-shaped ear ornaments. On his head, he wears flat-topped

round head gear. Upper part of his body is covered with a floral-designed *aṅgavastra*. Lower part of the body of Padmasambhava is covered with a *dhotī*. His right hand is in *vyākhyānamudrā* while in the left hand he holds a bowl. This sculpture seems a work of much later period.

### Stone Sculpture of Bodhisattava Avalokiteśvara

A stone sculpture of Bodhisattava Avalokiteśvara is in the *garbhagriha* of Kapil Muni temple at Kalath village (Fig. 5). The sculpture is carved on a rectangular schist stone. The image is effaced badly; therefore, we cannot make proper artistic analysis. The image is depicted as seated in *lalitāsana*. His face is round in shape with big ears. It seems to be a four-armed sculpture. Handa says that the image is six-armed (Handa. 2015. 71). The lower right hand is in *varadamudrā* while in the lower left hand he holds a rosary. Vogel identifies the rosary as a trident or a snake (Vogel. 1902. 38-9). Upper right hand may be in *abhayamudrā* at the face level. In his upper left hand what he holds at the face level is not clearly visible. Amitabha, Buddha is depicted on the head of Avalokiteśvara. Amitabha is shown seated in *padmāsana*. He is depicted with joined hands. His face is also round in shape with big ears. The chin of Avalokiteśvara is little curved while Amitabha has flat chin. Both are adorned with ear ornaments. Unusual lotus petals are carved on the border of this rectangular slab. The sculpture is weathered so badly that more artistic details are not possible to describe.

### CONCLUSION

We reach to the conclusion that in this region there are some peculiar characteristics of these sculptures. The Buddhist sculptures found in this region are of metal like bronze, brass, copper and *aṣṭadhātu*. Drapery which is depicted transparent covered whole body except the right shoulder. *Uṣṇīṣa* is executed on the top of Buddha's head and hair are shown curly and wavy. Faces of these images are oval-shaped. Artistic style is influenced by Gandharan art, western-Himalayan art and local art. The metal images are small in size and could be transported from one place to another. Whether they are manufactured in the upper Beas and Sutlej valley or elsewhere is uncertain.

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