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FROM AMBARAN TO THE PRESENT: THE EVOLUTION OF BUDDHISM IN JAMMU

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Abstract: The study of Buddhism in the northwestern subcontinent has long gravitated toward two poles: the Kashmir Valley, celebrated as the seat of Sarvāstivāda learning and the Fourth Buddhist Council, and Ladakh, whose Vajrayāna monasteries have survived unbroken since the tenth century. The Jammu province, caught between these two well-funded research traditions, has until recently been treated as a historiographical afterthought. This paper argues that the neglect is unwarranted. Drawing primarily on the ASI excavations at Ambaran (Akhnoor) conducted between 1999 and 2001, it reconstructs the life of a major monastic complex whose stratigraphic record spans the second century BCE to the seventh century CE. The site has yielded a wheel-plan stupa with eight internal spokes, a nested gold-silver-copper reliquary bearing a coin of Kanishka I, and a corpus of terracotta sculpture, the so-called "Akhnoor Terracottas", that blends late Gandhāra naturalism with the idealising tendencies of Gupta-period workshops. From this material base the paper traces the subsequent decline of institutional Buddhism in the Jammu plains, attributing it less to any single military catastrophe than to the combined effects of trade-route contraction, the withdrawal of royal patronage, and the absorptive logic of Purāṇic Hinduism, which folded the Buddha into the Vaishnava pantheon as the ninth avatar. A final section examines the Paddar Valley in Kishtwar District, where a small Drukpa Kagyü community, numbering roughly a tenth of the local population according to the 2011 Census, has maintained its trans-Himalayan religious ties into the present, connected to Zaskar by the Umasi La rather than to the Jammu plains below. Taken together, the evidence suggests that Buddhism in Jammu was shaped above all by the geography of the Chenab corridor: sustained by trade when the corridor was active, and preserved by altitude when it was not.

Index Terms - Buddhism, Jammu, Ambaran, Akhnoor Terracottas, Stupa, Kushan, Paddar Valley, Chenab Corridor, Gandhāra, Archaeological Survey of India.

1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The distribution of scholarly attention in the study of Western Himalayan Buddhism is strikingly uneven. Kashmir, with its association to the Fourth Buddhist Council and figures of the stature of Vasubandhu, has attracted sustained interest from Indologists for well over a century [1]. Ladakh, whose monastic institutions were re-established during the so-called Second Diffusion of the tenth and eleventh centuries, has been the subject of a parallel and growing body of work in anthropology and Tibetology [2]. The Jammu region falls between these two areas, geographically, administratively, and, as a consequence, historiographically. Lying south of the Pir Panjal and north of the Punjab plains, the Shivalik foothills and the valleys of the Tawi and Chenab rivers were for most of the twentieth century regarded as the heartland of Dogra Hinduism, a territory whose religious past was assumed to begin and end with Shaivism. Few researchers questioned this characterisation, and fewer still invested fieldwork hours in the mounds and scattered surface finds of the sub-Himalayan zone.

The reasons for this neglect are partly archival. Kashmir possesses Kalhaṇa's twelfth-century *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, a chronicle of unusual sophistication for its time, as well as the *Nilamata Purāṇa*. Ladakh has its royal genealogies, the *La-dvags-rgyal-rabs*. For Jammu, there is no comparable early text [3]. The available documentation is limited to scattered inscriptions, oral traditions of uncertain date, and late chronicles such as Ganeshdas Badehra's *Rajdarshani*, a Persian-language work overwhelmingly concerned with Dogra lineages and largely silent on pre-medieval religious history [4]. Confronted with this textual vacuum, colonial surveyors, Cunningham above all, concentrated their efforts on Kashmir and the trans-Indus sites where Chinese pilgrims' accounts provided a ready interpretive framework [5]. Jammu was passed over. Its stupa mounds remained unexcavated; the terracotta fragments that turned up in farmers' fields ended up in private hands or were simply discarded.

This paper is an attempt to bring the Jammu evidence together. The argument unfolds in four parts. The first and longest section deals with the monastic complex at Ambaran (Akhnoor): its stratigraphy, its wheel-plan stupa, the reliquary deposit, and the celebrated terracottas. The second section addresses the long medieval decline, not as a single catastrophic event but as a slow process of economic contraction, political realignment, and religious absorption. The third turns to the Paddar Valley, the remote upper-Chenab enclave where a Drukpa Kagyü community has survived into the present. The fourth considers the modern rediscovery of Ambaran and the heritage politics that have accompanied it. The underlying contention is straightforward: Buddhism in Jammu was not an anomaly or a brief foreign incursion. It was a regional tradition, rooted in the commercial geography of the Chenab corridor, and its trajectory, from institutional flourishing through quiet assimilation to high-altitude survival, tells us something about how Buddhism actually worked in the sub-Himalayan zone that grander narratives centred on Kashmir or Gandhāra tend to obscure.

1.1 Historiographical Silence and the Colonial Gaze

The marginalisation of Jammu in Buddhist studies owes a good deal to the priorities of nineteenth-century colonial archaeology. Cunningham and his successors at the ASI were preoccupied with identifying the sites described by the Chinese pilgrims Fāxiān and Xuánzàng, and these accounts led them to Taxila, to the Kashmir Valley, and to the great Gandhāran monasteries, not to the Shivalik foothills [5]. The intermediate zone between the Punjab plains and the Kashmir basin simply did not feature in the pilgrim itineraries, and it was accordingly left off the research map.

There was also an ideological dimension. Colonial scholarship had a tendency to assign each region a fixed religious identity: Kashmir was Buddhist (and then Shaiva), Ladakh was Tibetan Buddhist, and Jammu was Hindu [7]. This framework, crude as it was, proved remarkably durable. It survived into the post-independence period and continued to influence the allocation of research funding and archaeological attention well into the late twentieth century. Stupa mounds in the Jammu foothills were noted in district gazetteers but rarely investigated. The terracotta finds from Akhnoor, which Charles Fabri published in the 1950s, attracted art-historical interest but did not prompt systematic excavation of the site from which they came. It took the ASI campaign of 1999–2001 to break this pattern.

1.2 The Pir Panjal Barrier: Geography and Perception

Part of the problem lies in the way the Pir Panjal range has been understood. The range, which rises above 4,500 metres and separates the Jammu division from the Kashmir Valley, has been treated by many historians as an effective cultural barrier, a wall that kept Kashmiri Buddhism in the valley and Dogra Hinduism on the plains. There is an element of truth in this: the passes are high, the winters are severe, and movement across the range has always been seasonal and difficult.

But the barrier was never absolute. The Banihal pass, the Pir Panjal pass (the so-called Mughal Road), and the Toshamaidan route all carried traffic in antiquity, and the Chenab itself cuts a deep corridor through the mountains. The monastic remains at Ambaran sit at the southern exit of precisely this corridor, a location that only makes sense if we assume regular movement along it. The Pir Panjal, in other words, was less a wall than a filter: it slowed transmission without stopping it, and it channelled movement along the river valleys rather than across the ridgelines. Recognising this changes the way we read the archaeological evidence.

2. AMBARAN (AKHNOOR): A MONASTIC COMPLEX ON THE CHENAB (2ND C. BCE – 7TH C. CE)

Akhnoor lies roughly twenty-eight kilometres northwest of Jammu city, at the point where the Chenab, the Asiknī of Vedic texts, emerges from the foothills onto the plains [8]. The site of Ambaran occupies the right bank of the river at what was once a natural ford. In the early historical period this position gave it considerable commercial and strategic value. The location sat along a branch of the Uttarāpatha, the northern trunk route connecting Taxila and the Gandhāran heartland with the Kashmir Valley and, beyond that, with the cities of the Gangetic plain.

Three routes converged here. From the west, a sub-montane track followed the Salt Range from Gandhāra and Taxila. The Chenab corridor itself ran roughly east–west, linking the site with Kashmir. And to the north, the upper Chenab, ascending through Kishtwar and the Paddar Valley to the Umasi La, provided a connection, albeit a difficult one, to Zaskar and Ladakh. Ambaran, in short, was a junction, and the monastery that grew up there was a junction monastery: the kind of institution that depended on passing traffic for its economic survival.

This last point is worth stressing, because it bears on everything that follows. Buddhist monasteries in the early historical period were not the cloistered retreats of the popular imagination. A vihāra like Ambaran would have offered lodging to travelling merchants, stored goods, and in some cases provided credit. The merchants reciprocated with donations, land, cash, luxury goods, that funded construction and ritual activity [9]. The arrangement was mutually beneficial, and it explains the well-known pattern of monasteries clustering along trade routes. It also explains, as we shall see, why the monasteries collapsed when the routes did.

2.1 Stratigraphic Sequence and Chronological Framework

The ASI excavations of 1999–2001, directed by B. R. Mani, established a four-period stratigraphic sequence at Ambaran [10]:

Period I (c. 2nd – 1st century BCE). The lowest occupation levels yielded plain red ware, grey ware, mud-brick and pebble structures, and the bones of domesticated animals. The settlement appears to have been a small farming community, but the presence of punch-marked and cast copper coins shows it was already tied into regional exchange networks. A few simple terracotta votive plaques hint at early Buddhist influence, probably post-Mauryan in date.

Period II (c. 1st – 3rd century CE). This is the main construction phase. The monastic complex, central stupa, subsidiary stupas, monastic cells, courtyards, a drainage system, was laid out in standardised fired brick (36 × 24 × 6 cm). Copper coins of Kanishka I, Huvishka, and the vassal ruler Soter Megas fix the chronology securely within the Kushan period [11]. Red polished ware, decorative tiles, and terracotta figurines point to a well-resourced institution.

Period III (c. 4th – 5th century CE). The layout was retained but the buildings were repaired and embellished, particularly with stucco and terracotta panels. This is the layer that produced the Akhnoor terracottas, the modelled clay heads and figures that have given the site its art-historical reputation. Coins of the Kidara Kushans and early Gupta rulers indicate continued, if shifting, political connections [12].

Period IV (c. 6th – 7th century CE). A phase of visible decline. The masonry is cruder, the pottery coarser, and luxury goods are scarce. Coins of the Alchon Hūṇa ruler Toramāṇa place the occupation within the period of Hūṇa dominance [11]. The sequence ends with evidence of fire and thick alluvial deposits, a combination that suggests both violence and flooding. After this the site was abandoned and gradually buried under Chenab silt.

2.2 The Eight-Spoke Stūpa

The main stūpa at Ambaran has a square base of roughly six metres per side. What makes it unusual is the internal plan: the circular dome core is divided by eight radial brick walls, "spokes", radiating from a central hub, with the interstices packed with earth and river gravel [11]. The result is a wheel-shaped cross-section, structurally robust and symbolically loaded.

As an engineering solution, the spoke-and-fill technique distributes the load of the dome and provides resistance to lateral thrust, no small consideration in a seismically active zone. As a religious symbol, the eight spokes invoke the Dharmacakra and the Eightfold Path [12]. The builders, in other words, turned a doctrinal concept into a structural principle. Whether the pilgrims who circumambulated the stupa knew what lay inside its walls is another question; what matters is that the builders did.

Parallels for this plan exist at Sanghol in the Punjab, at Dharmarajika in Taxila, and at several sites in the Krishna River valley, Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati among them [13]. The technique was widely used in the Sātavāhana and Ikshvāku kingdoms, where four-, six-, eight-, and twelve-spoke plans are all attested [14]. Its appearance at Ambaran, far to the north, is evidence that the monastery's builders were plugged into a subcontinental network of architectural knowledge, probably through the movement of specialist craftsmen along the trade routes that sustained the institution more generally.

2.3 The Reliquary

The excavation of the stupa core produced a three-tiered reliquary deposit at the centre of the base, the kind of find that establishes a stupa's status beyond doubt [11].

The gold casket held charred bone fragments (the śārīrika-dhātu of Buddhist relic tradition), gold and silver foils cut into lotus-petal shapes, beads of pearl, coral, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, and a small worn copper coin of Kanishka I.

The casket itself is tiny, 2.4 centimetres tall, and the gold is thin. This was not a lavish royal foundation of the Taxila type. But the symbolism matters more than the scale. A stupa with relics was, in the doctrinal understanding of the period, qualitatively different from a stupa without them. Relics made a stupa a site of active merit-generation, and merit-generation attracted pilgrims, and pilgrims attracted donors [15]. The triple-nested deposit at Ambaran, copper protecting silver protecting gold protecting bone, shows a community that grasped this logic and acted on it, even if its resources were modest by Gandhāran standards.

2.4 The Akhnoor Terracottas

The terracottas are what gave Ambaran its reputation before the excavations filled in the institutional picture. Fabri, who published the first serious study of them in 1955, placed them alongside the best stucco work from Hadda, a comparison that later scholars have generally accepted [16]. They are, by any standard, accomplished pieces of clay sculpture.

Originally the terracottas formed part of multi-figured narrative panels attached to the exterior walls of the stupa and the monastic shrines: scenes from the life of the Buddha, Jātaka episodes, representations of celestial

realms. The medium was local, fine silty clay from the Chenab banks, mixed with straw, rice husk, or animal hair to control shrinkage and cracking during firing.

The art-historical interest of the pieces lies in their stylistic position. Two distinct currents converge in them. One is late Gandhāran: naturalistic, emotionally direct, with deeply undercut hair and faces that read as individual portraits. The other is Gupta: smoother, more idealised, with the elongated half-closed eyes and serene expression characteristic of Mathurā and Sārnāth. What is unusual about the Akhnoor heads is that these two tendencies are not merely present side by side but are fused, sometimes within a single sculpture. An elderly monk will have Gandhāran wrinkles and Gupta composure; a bodhisattva will combine Gupta plasticity with Gandhāran drapery folds [13]. This kind of synthesis does not happen by accident. It implies a workshop, probably a local one, given the medium, staffed by artists who had absorbed both traditions and could work between them with confidence.

Gandhāran elements. Close parallels with the stucco sculptures of Hadda and Jaulian (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan): realistic facial features, deeply carved wavy hair, expressive and individualised faces. The heads of elderly monks show wrinkles; representations of Māra's army are deliberately grotesque [13].

Gupta elements. The smooth modelling, soft transitions, and spiritual poise characteristic of fifth-century Mathurā and Sārnāth. The Buddha and bodhisattva heads have oval faces, lotus-petal eyes, and the inward gaze of meditation.

Medium and technique. The choice of clay over stone was determined by local geology and economics. Grey schist (the Gandhāran material) and red sandstone (the Mathurā material) are not locally available in the Jammu foothills; alluvial clay is. The manufacturing process was skilled: faces were hand-modelled, while hair, crowns, and ornaments were mould-made and applied before firing. The fired pieces were slipped and painted, red, yellow, blue, so that the narrative panels would have been conspicuous to approaching pilgrims.

Range of subjects. The surviving heads fall into several categories: serene Buddhas with half-closed eyes; crowned bodhisattvas with gentle smiles; mourning disciples with furrowed brows and open mouths, evidently from parinirvāṇa scenes; and grotesque demons with bulging eyes and bared fangs, from scenes of Māra's assault. The range is striking, these were not craftsmen repeating a single formula.

Several of the finer pieces are now held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the National Museum (New Delhi), the Lahore Museum, and the Government Museum and Art Gallery (Chandigarh) [16].

3. THE LONG TWILIGHT: MEDIEVAL DECLINE AND ASSIMILATION (8TH – 19TH C. CE)

Kalhaṇa, in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, blames the Huns, Mihirakula in particular, for the destruction of Buddhist monasteries in the region [1]. There is probably something to this: the sixth century was a violent period. But the evidence from Ambaran does not support a narrative of sudden annihilation. Coins of Toramāṇa (Mihirakula's father) occur in Period IV deposits alongside signs of continued, if reduced, habitation. The monastery did not fall in a single assault. It shrank, lost resources, and eventually went dark, sometime in the seventh century, judging by the stratigraphy. The decline was structural, not episodic.

Three interrelated processes account for it.

3.1 The Withdrawal of Royal Patronage

The collapse of the Kushan and Gupta imperial systems left the Jammu region politically fragmented. Power devolved to local dynasties, the Dev rajas of Jammu, various Dogra Rajput chiefs, whose legitimacy rested on Brahmanical authority rather than on the ecumenical patronage model that had sustained the monasteries [4]. These rulers made land grants (*agrahāras*) to Brahmins and built Vaishnava and Shaivite temples. The Saṅgha, which had depended on state-level support to maintain large monastic establishments, was progressively starved of funds.

The contrast with Kashmir is instructive. The Kārkota dynasty (c. 625–753 CE), and Lalitāditya in particular, continued to patronise both Hindu and Buddhist institutions, the viḥāra at Parihāspora alongside the Mārtaṇḍ temple. But the Kārkotas controlled a prosperous valley kingdom. The hill principalities of

Jammu, Reasi, and Jasrota were smaller and poorer. Their rulers had to choose, and they chose Brahmanical Hinduism.

3.2 The Contraction of Trade

The monastery-trade nexus that had sustained Ambaran depended on the continued functioning of the Uttarāpatha and its branch routes. The mid-seventh-century fall of the Sasanian Empire and the eighth-century Arab conquests of Central Asia disrupted the overland networks that had connected India with Iran, Bactria, and the Silk Road cities [9]. International commerce contracted sharply. The merchant guilds that had bankrolled Buddhist foundations lost their wealth, or redirected it. The sub-montane branch routes, exactly the ones that had given Ambaran its reason to exist, fell into disuse. Without merchant traffic, a junction monastery has nothing to be a junction of.

3.3 The Mechanics of Assimilation

The population of the Jammu plains did not abruptly stop believing in the Buddha. What happened was subtler and, in its way, more thorough.

Absorption into the Vaishnava framework. The Purāṇic tradition, including the Nīlamata Purāṇa (composed in Kashmir but widely influential in the Jammu hills), declared the Buddha to be the ninth avatar of Vishnu [17]. This doctrinal move allowed ordinary people to go on venerating the Buddha without maintaining a separate Saṅgha or separate institutions. The worship continued; the infrastructure did not.

Physical reuse of sites. Ruined stupas became quarries. Their bricks were incorporated into early medieval temples. Sites like Babour (near Thalora) and Krimachi (near Udhampur) show architectural continuities that suggest this kind of material recycling, and local tradition has reframed the ruins as the work of the Pāṇḍavas, Hindu mythological heritage replacing Buddhist historical memory [4].

Convergence with the Nāg cult. Serpent worship has deep roots in the Jammu hills and remains active today. In the Buddhist period, Nāg deities were incorporated into the faith as Dharma-protectors, Mucalinda sheltering the meditating Buddha is the canonical example. When the monasteries closed, the serpent shrines survived. Temples to Vāsuki Nāg in Bhaderwah and Kishtwar preserve iconographic motifs, lotus seats, multi-headed protective hoods, that almost certainly derive from Buddhist-period models [18].

4. THE PADDAR VALLEY: SURVIVAL AT ALTITUDE (KISHTWAR DISTRICT)

Buddhism did not die out entirely in the Jammu division. It withdrew upward, into the mountains, away from the plains where the trade had stopped and where Vaishnava and Shaiva temples now stood on what had been monastic land. The place where it held on is the Paddar Valley: a remote, high-altitude subdivision of Kishtwar District in the northeastern corner of the province. Paddar is closer to Zaskar, geographically and culturally, than it is to Jammu city.

The valley occupies the upper Chenab basin at elevations between roughly 2,000 and 3,500 metres. The Umasi La (5,342 m), one of the highest regularly used passes in the Western Himalayas, connects it to Zaskar and Ladakh to the north. The main Buddhist settlements, Haloti, Kabban, Kundail, Gulabgarh, follow the Drukpa Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism.

4.1 Geography and Insulation

Paddar is bordered by Zaskar to the north, Chamba to the south, and the main Kishtwar valley to the west. Snow closes the passes for months at a time. This isolation, which has always been the valley's curse in administrative terms, proved to be its religious salvation: the political and religious changes that swept the Jammu plains between the eighth and nineteenth centuries simply did not penetrate.

The people of Paddar consequently maintained closer ties with Zaskar and Ladakh than with the lowlands. The local dialect, Paddari, is classified within the Western Pahari group but carries substantial lexical and grammatical borrowings from Tibetic languages, a linguistic signature of the valley's dual orientation [19].

4.2 The Dogra Annexation

Paddar's political status changed in the 1830s, when General Zorawar Singh, acting on behalf of the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh, annexed the valley as part of a broader campaign to conquer Ladakh and Baltistan. Paddar had previously been under the Raja of Chamba; its seizure secured a military corridor from Jammu to the trans-Himalayan north [6].

The Dogra administration established offices at Gulabgarh but did not, in practice, interfere with the Buddhist community's religious life or monastic landholdings. The valley was too remote and too poor to attract sustained administrative attention, and its monasteries continued to function much as they had before.

4.3 Demographics and Social Life

The 2011 Census records Buddhists as approximately 9.5% of the Paddar subdivision's population, several thousand people, concentrated in the upper reaches of the valley [20]. Subsistence agriculture (barley, buckwheat, potatoes) and seasonal pastoralism define daily life. The valley also contains the Paddar Sapphire Mines, near Sumcham at over 4,500 metres, a resource that has historically attracted outside interest and occasional conflict [21].

Hindu and Buddhist communities in Paddar coexist and share certain practices, joint pilgrimages to sacred peaks, for instance, and festivals that mix elements from both traditions along with older animistic observances.

4.4 The Gompas

Religious life centres on the valley's gompas, built in the Western Tibetan manner: local stone, timber framing, flat roofs, whitewashed walls. Inside, the shrines hold images of the Buddha, Padmasambhava, and Avalokiteśvara, along with painted frescoes, Tibetan scriptures, and ritual instruments.

The Drukpa Kagyü affiliation links Paddar to a broader network that includes Zaskar, Lahaul, and Bhutan. Because the local monasteries are small and cannot support full monastic colleges, young men who wish to take ordination are sent to Zaskar or Ladakh for training. Senior monks and teachers from Zaskar visit Paddar periodically to conduct major rituals and oversee local affairs [19].

The village lamas of Paddar are typically married householders rather than celibate monks, a pattern common in the Drukpa Kagyü tradition in rural areas. They officiate at agricultural ceremonies, funerary rites, and healing rituals. This domestic, practical character has arguably been central to the tradition's survival: it is embedded in the community's daily life in a way that a large, institutionally dependent monastery could not sustain in such a marginal environment.

4.5 Festivals

Two festivals anchor the Buddhist calendar in Paddar. Losar, the Tibetan New Year, is celebrated in late winter with prayers, communal meals, and gift exchanges. Mela Cham, held at the monasteries in summer, features masked dances (cham) performed by visiting Zanskari monks. The dancers wear painted wooden masks representing protective deities and historical figures; the performances, accompanied by drums and long horns, are understood as ritual acts with protective and purifying power [19].

The 2010 inauguration of the Gulabgarh Buddhist Centre by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama gave the community a modern institutional anchor: the centre houses a prayer hall, accommodation for visiting teachers, and a school offering instruction in Tibetan script, Buddhist philosophy, and traditional music.

5. REDISCOVERY AND THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE

Ambaran was effectively forgotten for most of the twentieth century. Local farmers knew the site, they turned up terracotta fragments when they ploughed, but it did not figure in mainstream historical narratives about the region.

5.1 The Archaeological Turning Point

The 1999–2001 ASI excavations changed this. The recovery of the stupa, the monastic complex, and the reliquary provided hard physical evidence for a Buddhist institutional presence in the Jammu foothills, evidence that could not be dismissed as stray surface finds. Mani's subsequent publications placed the site within the broader context of Kushan-period trade networks and art-historical development [12].

Ambaran is now a protected monument under the ASI's Srinagar Circle. The site has been fenced, visitor pathways laid out, and an information centre established. It receives regular visits from school and university groups, and has become a point of local pride in a region that has historically felt overshadowed by Kashmir in matters of cultural heritage.

The Department of Buddhist Studies at the University of Jammu has contributed to this process through seminars, field research, and collaborations with heritage organisations such as INTACH [8].

5.2 Pilgrimage and Tourism

The Dalai Lama's visit to Ambaran on 10 November 2012, during which he offered prayers at the stupa and spoke about the site's importance, marked a further shift. The visit attracted media attention and placed Ambaran within the awareness of the international Buddhist community. The site now draws visitors from East and Southeast Asia as well as from Ladakh. State authorities have begun incorporating Ambaran into heritage tourism plans and have explored its inclusion in the Government of India's "Buddhist Circuit" initiative, which links pilgrimage sites across Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and other states.

6. CONCLUSION

The history of Buddhism in Jammu unfolds across six broad phases: initial settlement at Ambaran in the pre-Kushana period (2nd–1st c. BCE); institutional growth under the Kushans, with stupa construction and coins of Kanishka (1st–3rd c. CE); the artistic high point of the post-Kushana/Gupta period, when the Akhnoor terracottas were produced (4th–5th c. CE); decline and abandonment in the wake of Hūna disruption and Chenab flooding (6th–7th c. CE); a long medieval period of assimilation in the plains and quiet survival in the mountains (8th–19th c. CE); and the modern phase of archaeological recovery and heritage construction (1999–present).

The monastery at Ambaran was a serious institution. Its wheel-plan stupa, its relic deposit, and the quality of its sculptural programme all point to a well-connected and adequately funded establishment, positioned to benefit from the trade that passed through the Chenab corridor. The Akhnoor terracottas, in particular, deserve wider recognition in the art-historical literature than they currently receive.

But the institution depended on conditions that did not last. Trade contracted. Royal patronage shifted to Brahmanical foundations. The Purāṇic absorption of the Buddha into the Vaishnava avatar sequence made it possible to honour the Buddha without maintaining a Saṅgha. Institutional Buddhism in the Jammu plains did not suffer a single dramatic collapse; it was gradually digested, its sites repurposed, its symbols reinterpreted, its memory folded into local Hindu tradition.

The Paddar Valley complicates and enriches this picture. There, at the upper limit of the Chenab basin, a Buddhist community survived because the geography that isolated it also protected it. Its monasteries are small, its population modest, its connections run north through the Umasi La to Zaskar rather than south to the plains. But it is a living tradition, linked by lineage and practice to the wider Drukpa Kagyü world, and its existence rules out any neat narrative of complete Buddhist disappearance from the Jammu division.

Geography, in the end, is the thread that connects the whole story. The Chenab corridor nourished the monastery at Ambaran when it carried trade; the mountains above the corridor sheltered the community in Paddar when the trade stopped. It is a local history, rooted in a specific river system and a specific set of passes, but it illuminates a broader pattern: the way Buddhism in the Western Himalayas was shaped less by doctrinal choices than by the physical landscape through which it moved.

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