

**Gautama Buddha may have been born in India, but the religion he inspired flourished in the lands that became Pakistan.**

**ARSHAD AWAN**

**I**n contrast to India's conquest of Buddhism's multimillion-dollar tourism market and brand as the land of Lord Buddha, Pakistan's participation in its Buddhist tradition has received significantly less attention despite having more Buddhist sacred sites than the land of Lord Buddha. Indeed, Buddha was born in India, but Buddhism flourished from the region of Pakistan.

Buddhist symbolism is prominent on India's national flag and emblem and on well-known Buddhist sites in India. Thanks to its well-positioned tourist policies and programmes, the Ajanta Caves and Bodhi Gaya are the focal points of India's thriving religious tourism. Although the region that is in Pakistan is the birthplace of Buddhism, Pakistan has failed to promote a better knowledge of its relative religious tourism strategy and tap its market potential. Dedicated attention to Buddhist sites can place Pakistan on the international tourist map and energise the Buddhist heritage route throughout the Gandhara region.

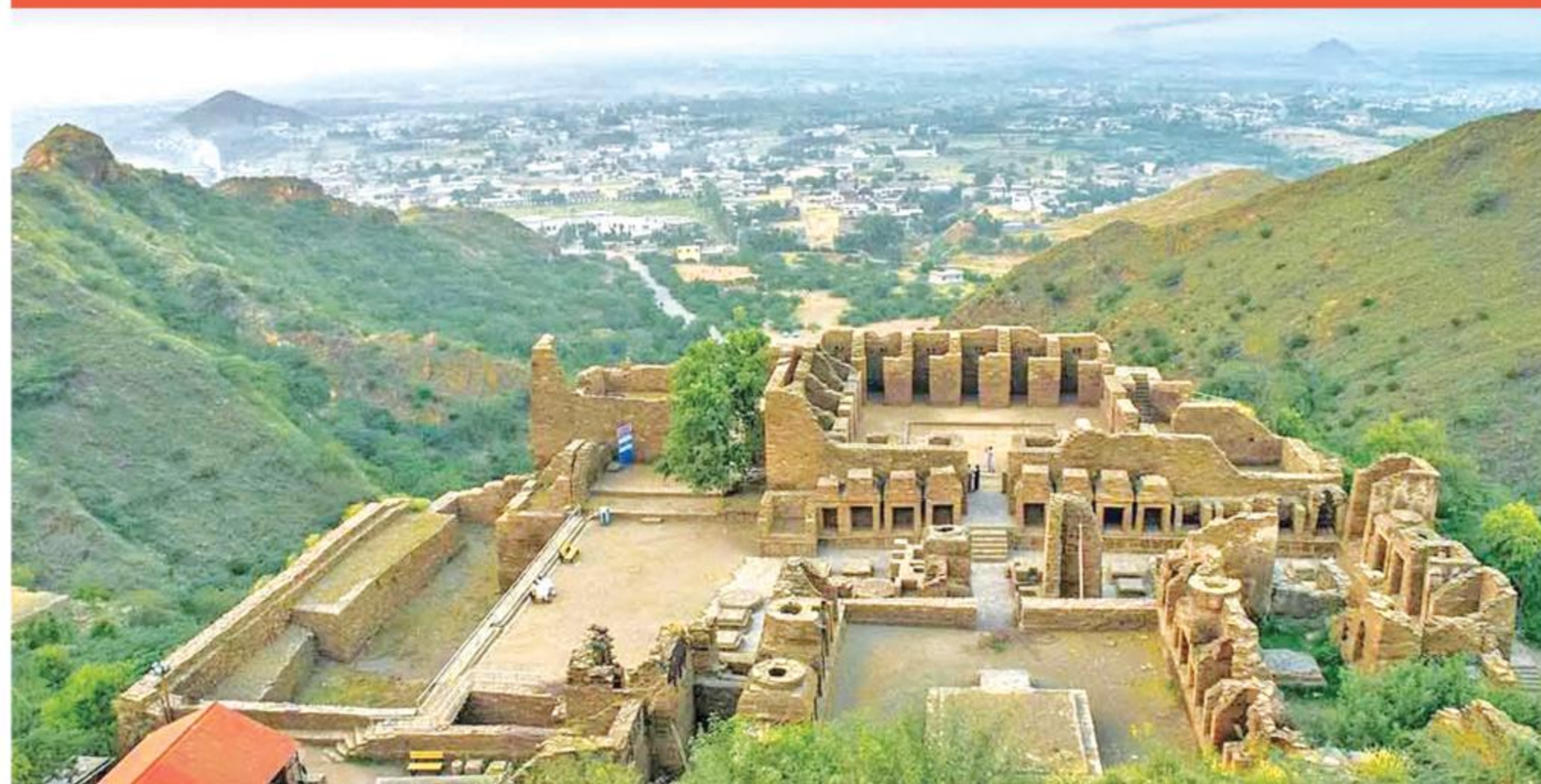
### **RICH HERITAGE AND HISTORY**

Pakistan possesses a vast untapped potential for worldwide religious tourism due to its rich heritage and history if adequate security is provided for foreign religious tourists. Six places in Pakistan have been declared the World Heritage Sites, while twenty-six sites are on the tentative list. The holiest Buddhist religious sites are Taxila and the Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi, and the Remains at Sahr-i-Ahlool. These landmarks can market the country as the world's most popular Buddhist destination, put Pakistan on the international tourism map and revitalise the Buddhist cultural path throughout the entire Gandhara region. To realise the full potential of religious tourism in Pakistan, a small step in the right direction can translate into a quantum leap tomorrow.

From the perspective of religious tourism, Pakistan can become the next major destination for Buddhist religious tourism. However, this potential has long been hampered by bureaucratic red tape, law and order issues, religious extremism, and denigration of religious minority ceremonies and sites. Successive governments disregarded the preservation of Pakistan's archaeological heritage. This ignorance causes damage to Pakistan's culture and traditions.

According to the Travel and Tourist Competitiveness Index compiled by the World Economic Forum, Pakistan performs poorly

# REMEMBERING PAKISTAN'S BUDDHIST PAST



**Sacred Buddhist sites in Gandhara**

on all sub-indicators vital to any nation's tourism industry. Out of 140 countries on the list, Pakistan is ranked 130th for having an enabling environment, 138th for safety and security, 102nd for health and hygiene, 138th for human resources and labour market, 123rd for travel and tourism policy and enabling conditions, 120th for government prioritisation of travel and tourism, and 107th for tourism infrastructure. Pakistan is ranked 141st out of 142 nations for environmental sustainability.

### **RELIGIOUS TOURISM**

Pakistan is one of those nations where people suffer from various deficiencies, lack of tolerance and understanding being a very significant one. For Pakistan, religious tourism is one of the driving forces that attract visitors from around the globe to witness the nation's attempts to pre-

serve its tangible and intangible cultural legacy. Pakistan's Buddhist and Hinduism history are the stuff of myths and legends. From the authoring and recitation of the *Mahabharata*, the greatest Hindu epic, in the Gandhara region during the early historical period to the preeminence of the ancient heartland of Buddhist learning, the region has a long history of cultural significance.

Since time immemorial, the legend of Gandhara as the cradle of Buddhism history and heritage has always inspired the imagination of people from diverse lands. Once strategically placed at the intersection of caravan routes that connected Southern, Western, and Central Asian areas to the West, the Gandhara region was a melting pot of civilisations, including the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Mauryan, Greco-Bactrian, Kushan, Gupta, Hun, and lastly, Muslim. Chinese monks, including Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang, arrived at Gandhara to study the earliest Pali Buddhist literature. Megasthenes, a Greek

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diplomat who spent fifteen years in the Mauryan Court, gave extensive descriptions of Gandhara's main centre, Taxila. The neo-Pythagorean sage Apollonius of Tyana visited Gandhara in the first century AD. His biographer Philostratus described the Gandhara region, its walled cities with a symmetrical layout, and compared their scale to Nineveh, an ancient city of the Assyrian empire. Christian traditions show that the apostle Thomas, who was sent by Jesus Christ on a divine mission to promote Christianity in India, visited Buddhist Gandhara during the Parthian period.

Pakistan is the origin of Mahayana Buddhism, the greatest Buddhist sect today. More than half of its adherents are in Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, Tibet, Malaysia, Mongolia, Bangladesh, and some other countries. As they recovered in the decades following the Second World War, several East Asian nations, such as Japan and South Korea, began to embrace their Buddhist past, as did some countries of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Currently, 97 percent of the world's Buddhist population resides on the Asian continent. Several nations, including Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, view Buddhism as fundamental to their national identity and values. Despite being a communist nation, China promotes Buddhism as a fundamental pillar of its cultural diplomacy, and that is because it has the greatest Buddhist population of any country in the world.

Pakistan is also revered by millions of Buddhists of all factions worldwide. Guru Rinpoche and Monk Marananta, two renowned Buddhist mystics, were born here. Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, was reincarnated in the Swat valley. Buddhists in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan consider Padmasambhava the "second Buddha." Monk Marananta is said to have originated in the present-day Swabi region of Chhota (little) Lahore. He travelled from Chhota Lahore to Korea through China, where he preached Buddhism.

The province of Gandhara in Pakistan fostered Mahayana Buddhism and the famed Gandhara culture, art, and learning. Gandhara contains the ancient and highly revered Buddhist Stupas of Taxila and Swat. The Gilgit Manuscripts discovered in Pakistan's Gilgit-

Baltistan region are among the oldest surviving Buddhist scriptures. As a Buddhist holy site, Pakistan is home to the Buddhist heritage monuments, artwork, and iconography of unprecedented importance to Buddhist worshippers, scholars, and tourists.

In recent years, the fast growth of religious and cultural tourism has provided governments of many countries with new revenue generating opportunities. With the assistance of the corporate sector, governments have initiated a range of tourism projects. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of religious tourism potential in Pakistan, the country has yet to fully grasp the notion. This new tourism trend is not difficult to understand; unlike simple religious tourism and sightseeing tours, religious and cultural tourism has a deeper meaning and may serve the diverse needs of tourists in Pakistan.

Religious and cultural tourism provides pilgrimage travel services for the believers and offers service activities for the public to comprehend, experience and recognise religious culture. The emergence of specialised kinds of religious tourism has resulted from the necessity to accommodate pilgrims and the location of ancient sites and shrines. Religion and tourism are intricately intertwined, as revealed by a closer examination of tourism's historical backdrop, particularly if religion is considered one of the first causes of human movement and a fundamental need to travel.

To popularise Buddhism religious tourism, Pakistan needs to develop policies that encourage approaches to develop, manage, and promote tourism in religious sites. Pakistan's road infrastructure is far better than that of India. It is for the government to develop religious tourist routes, cross-country pilgrimages, and networks of religious tourism locations as an efficient tool to promote regional growth and integration.

A modest move in the right direction is required for Buddhist religious tourism in Pakistan to realise its great potential.

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