

Sharda: The Glory of The Past and The Preservation of Ancient Site in Azad Kashmir

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Abstract

The Sharda Temple, known as ancient “Buddhist University” or “Sharda Peeth” and its construction is associated with King Jaloka, the popular Buddhist ruler of Kashmir. This temple is in Neelum Valley 130 km away from Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad State of Jammu and Kashmir. Amongst all other places in Muzaffarabad Division, this is much jubilant place which popularly narrated in history, religion, culture, ethnicity and geostrategic significance being located on LoC between India and Pakistan in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. It is evidence that this land remained center of Buddhism religious studies and place of special worship. These ruins invite the researchers to explore the splendid past of this fabulous historical monument of Kashmir. Although it is a very significant place but like other historical places, the Sharda temple has also been demolished and obliterated in the last 77 years, no remarkable work has been done to improve its position and preservation of this national asset. This study is to highlight the significance of ancient university at Sharda but also explore the potential value of this monument.

Key Words: Sharda University, Buddhism, Hindu temples, Monks, Kaniskha, preservation, archaeological sites

The human mind wonders how people came and settled on this land, how many powerful governments were established and destroyed. When man started settling on the earth, with the passage of time, he continued to change distinctive styles which turned into civilizational dynamism. Human beings settled on the shores and riverbanks, and they adorned their

facilitation with innovative construction and living techniques. With the passage of time, these buildings and constructions were turned into

So, because of some earthquakes, the foundations were destroyed, and these magnificent buildings became piles of ruins. Kashmir is one of the most ancient cultural regions of the world, there are innumerable cultural monuments from the Stone Age to the semi-historical and historical periods, most of which were destroyed by foreign invaders, local people and the negligence of the relevant government institutions in the ancient era. (Hussain, 2001) The cause has been wiped out, but despite this, many such ancient cultural monuments/relics are scattered in various areas around Kashmir. Azad Jammu and Kashmir have a prominent place in the archaeological and cultural heritage. Visiting forts reflect architectural style, while minarets, mosques, stupas and gurdwaras reflect religious harmony. (Hashmi A. R.; Aziz, K. Z. & Swati, N. I, 2022)

In the Azad Jammu Kashmir Muzaffarabad division, the most famous place in terms of archeology is Sharda, which is the capital of the second tehsil of Neelam district. It has created a prominent place due to which Kashmir was known as Sharda Peth, it is considered a holy place not only in Kashmir but also in India. This study is carried out with the reference of some historical references from Nilamatapurana, Pandit Kalhana's Rajatarangni, Ancient Geography of Kashmir by Zon Raj, Zeena Raj Tarangni, Al-Baruni's Al Hind, Abul Fazl's Ain Akbari, Charles Ellison Bates's Gazetteer of Kashmir, Sir Mark Earl Stein's Notes, Alexander Cunningham's notes; the Ancient Geography of Kashmir, Pir Ghulam Hasan Shah's Tarikh Hasan and other historians including Dr. Elmzi have been described in their writings.

In the Neelum Valley 130 km away from Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Azad State of Jamm and Kashmir, stands Sharada Peeth, a demolished Hindu temple which was historic educational institution.

Sharda Peth is a famous temple proposed as Dharma astapans of Kashmir like Swami Amarnath, Chakra Ishwar Devi, Hari Parbat, Bahadar Kali of Handwara, Kher Bhavani of Tola Molla, Oma Devi of Uttar Sava Mangri, Jala Devi of Kheru, Patan, Pair and Gothar. (Koul, 2003) This site has special importance in the Surya temple of Martand and Naristan. It was one of the most well-known temple universities on the Indian subcontinent from the sixth to the twelfth centuries CE. (Singh, 2017) It is especially well-known for its library, and legend has it that academics travel great distances to study its books. It was a major factor in the Sharada script's growth and popularity in North India, leading to its naming and the creation of the "Sharada Desh" (literally "country of Sharada") for Kashmir. Hindus consider it to be one of the Maha Shakti Peethas, symbolizing the spiritual site of the fallen right hand of the goddess Sati. (Bangroo, 2008)

Along with the Amarnath Temple and the Martand Sun Temple, Sharada Peeth is one of the three most sacred places for Kashmiri Pandits to

visit. Sharada Peeth is around 130 kilometers (81 miles) from Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, and 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Kashmir. The Line of authority, which separates the parts of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under Indian and Pakistani authority, is 10 kilometers distant. (Godbole, 2018) It is located 1,981 meters above sea level in the hamlet of Sharda, (Jameel, 2017) along the Neelum River, in the Mount Harmukh valley, which Kashmiri Pandits consider to be Shiva's home. (Kumar, 1999)

Sharada Peeth means "the seat of Sharada," the Kashmiri name for the Hindu deity Saraswati. (Raina, 1994) The origins of Sharada Peeth are unknown, and the topic of origins is complicated since Sharada Peeth might have been both a temple and an educational institution. It was most likely commissioned by Lalitaditya Maktapeda (724 CE-760 CE), but there is no definite evidence to support this. (Rashid, 2018) Al-Biruni described the site for the first time as a respected shrine with a wooden picture of Sharda; nevertheless, he had never visited Kashmir and relied on hearsay. (Rashid, 2018)

Historians have referred to Sharada Peeth as a center of learning, highlighting its legendary significance in ancient India. Its historical evolution is traced back through references to it in different historical sources. Although the Sharada script did not originate in Kashmir, it was widely employed at Sharada Peeth and derived its name from the institution. This has contributed to the widespread notion that the script was invented in Kashmir. Some historians argue that Sharada Peeth was never a center of learning because there are no significant remnants from a putative educational facility today. In response, it has been claimed that Sharda is prone to earthquakes, and that rubble from a collapsed abandoned university was likely exploited by residents for various purposes. (Qazi, 2015)

Sharda as a Temple

By the eighth century, the temple had become a pilgrimage destination, attracting people from as far away as present-day Bengal. (Stein, 1900) By 11th century, it was one of the most venerated sites of devotion in the Indian subcontinent, according to Al-Biruni's chronicle of India. Notably, it appeared not in his description of Kashmir, but on his list of the most prominent Hindu temples in the Indian subcontinent, with the Multan Sun Temple, the Sthaneshwar Mahadev Temple, and the Somnath Temple. (Raina M. Q., 2013) Jonaraja recalls the Kashmiri Muslim sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's arrival in 1422 CE. The sultan went to the temple to meet the goddess, but he became irritated when she did not come to him in person. She showed up to him in a dream when he slept in the temple's court in frustration. Sharada Peeth was referred to as a "stone temple.... regarded with great veneration" by Abul-Fazl, the grand vizier of the Mughal emperor Akbar, in the sixteenth century. (Fazl, NA) He also explained the widespread

belief in miracles at the shrine: "it is believed that it begins to shake and produces the most extraordinary effect on every eighth tithe of the bright half of the month." (Raina M. Q., 2013), (Qazi, 2015), (Rashid, 2018)

Another version of event's states that Shandilya was rewarded for his fervent prayers to the goddess Sharada when she appeared to him and promised to reveal her true, celestial form. His voyage was full of wonderful events when she told him to look for the Sharada Forest. He saw the deity Ganesha on the eastern slope of a hill while traveling. He washed in the Neelum River when he arrived, and half of his body turned golden. The goddess eventually invited him to her home after revealing herself to him in her triple form as Sharada, Saraswati, and Vagdevi. He fetched water from the Mahasindhu as he was getting ready for a ceremony. (Stein, 1900)

Half of this water was converted to honey and turned into the Madhumati stream.

Sharada Peeth has been mentioned in several literary and historical works. The Nilamatapurana (6th–8th century CE) has the oldest reference to it. The intellectual and spiritual aspects of Sharada Peeth are described by the Kashmiri poet Bilhana in the eleventh century. (Hashmi A. R.; Aziz, K. Z. & Swati, N. I, 2022) He characterizes Sharada Peeth as the origin of Kashmir's position as a patron of learning. Additionally, he claims that the goddess Sharada:

The Madhumati stream, which is determined to compete with the Ganga, "resemble[s] a swan, carrying as her diadem the [glittering gold washed from the sand]. Rivaling the Ganga River and spreading radiance via her notoriety as her diadem. Even Mount Himalaya, Gauri's preceptor, raises his head (referring to his summits) [in pride] of her residency there, spreading brilliance with her reputation, sparkling as crystal". (Stein, 1900) Sharada Peeth's view of the Neelum Valley: Sharada Peeth is mentioned as a place of widespread adoration in Kalhana's epic Rajatarangni, written in the 12th century: as in verse 35: the Ganga source sanctifies the Bheda hill, where the goddess Saraswati herself appears as a swan in a lake [located] atop the hill. Also in verse 37: the river Madhumati and [the river of] Saraswati, which poets revere, are reached there when one visits the goddess Sharada. (Stein, 1900) Furthermore, Kalhana highlights further noteworthy political incidents involving Sharada Peeth. Under the pretense of a journey to Sharada Peeth, a troop of assassins from the Gauda Kingdom entered Kashmir under the reign of Lalitaditya (713–755). During his own lifetime, Kalhana also recounts a revolt. Lothana, Vighararaja, and Bhoja were three princes who revolted against Kashmir's King Jayasimha. (Kaw, 1941)

As the Royal Army pursued them, these princes took sanctuary at the Sirahsila Castle in the upper Kishanganga Valley. Because Sharada Peeth provided the wide space needed for a makeshift military settlement and because the region around Sirahsila Castle was too small to accommodate a

camp for a siege without making the siege army susceptible to archers, Kalhana thought that the Royal Army sought sanctuary there. (Kumar, 1999) The Sarvajna Peetham, or Throne of Omniscience, is a test that Sharada Peeth alone can take, according to the 14th-century classic Madhaviya Shankara Vijayam. Only an educated man from that direction could symbolically unlock the four thrones, each of which represented a temple door that corresponded to one of the compass's points. Since no one from the south of Kashmir had yet to succeed despite the other doors being opened, Adi Shankara, a native of South India, decided to take on the challenge himself. (Qazi, 2015) It was reported that while the local intellectuals questioned him, the general populace embraced him.

The 19th-century musician Muthuswami Dikshitar describes Sharada Peeth as Saraswati's home in the Carnatic hymn Kalavathi kamalasana yuvathi. The song, which is set in the raga yagapriya, honors Saraswati:

Vara śāradā, kāśmīra vihāra.

Sharada, the person who lives in Kashmir. (Kalanidhi, 1997)

Sharada Peeth is still a part of South Indian Brahmin customs today. Certain Brahmin groups do ceremonial prostrations toward Sharada Peeth at the start of formal schooling. During the Yagnopavit celebration, Saraswat Brahmin groups in Karnataka are also said to include the Sharada Stotram into their morning prayers and undertake a rite in which they take seven strides towards Kashmir before turning around.

Sarada Devi Kashmira Mandala Vasini Namaste.

I give thanks to the Kashmiri goddess Sharada. (Subramony, 2019)

Kashmiri Pandit religious tradition has always placed a high value on the Sharada shrine. With following shrines like the Kheer Bhawani and Vaishno Devi temples, it is said to be the first shrine in Kashmir devoted to Shaktism, or Hindu goddess worship. Additionally, it promoted the value of education and knowledge in Kashmiri Pandit culture, which endured even after the Pandits were reduced to a minority in Kashmir. According to Kashmiri Pandits, the goddess Sharada, who is worshipped at Sharada Peeth, is a triple representation of the goddess Shakti: Saraswati, who is the goddess of wisdom; Vagdevi, who is the goddess of speech, which expresses strength; and Sharada, who is the goddess of learning. The shrine has a stone slab covering the spring beneath, which the Kashmiri Pandits believe is the spring where the goddess Sharada showed herself to Sandilya. This is in accordance with their belief that springs that are the homes of goddesses should not be directly viewed. (Raina M. Q., 2013)

The pilgrimage lost significance when Muslim kings of the Bomba clan governed the Neelum Valley during the Mughal and Afghan eras. When Maharaja Gulab Singh restored the temple and gave a monthly stipend to the Gautheng Brahmans, who asserted their inherited guardianship of the temple, it recovered its position during the Dogra era. Since then, the area

around the Sharada Peeth teerath (or pilgrimage) has been home to a flourishing Kashmiri Pandit population. Saints and their followers were among them, as were priests and merchants. (Stein, 1900) To receive the goddess Sharada's blessings, Kashmiri Pandit theologians would present their writings on covered platters to her statues as part of a religious rite. They thought that by leaving the pages of texts untouched, the goddess would express her approval, and by leaving the pages ruffled, her disdain. (Godbole, 2018) Additionally, pilgrims would come to Kupwara (in Kashmir) to worship the goddess Sharada, and an annual fair would be held in Shardi hamlet. Kashmiri Pandits hold that the Sharada pilgrimage is like Shandilya's voyage and that a pilgrim's sins are forgiven by washing in the confluence of the Madhumati stream and the Neelum River.

Some of the stone idols were relocated to Tikker in Kupwara in 1947 by the Kashmiri saint Swami Nand Lal Ji. Later, some of people were relocated to Devibal in Baramulla. After the 1947–1948 Indo-Pakistani War divided the princely state of Kashmir into the Indian-administered area of Jammu and Kashmir and the Pakistani-administered territory of Azad Kashmir, the shrine was abandoned. As a result, many Kashmiri Pandits moved from Shardi to Jammu & Kashmir, which is governed by India. Since then, Kashmiri Pandits who are unable to go to the shrine have established "substitutes" for the pilgrimage throughout Jammu and Kashmir, such as Srinagar, Bandipore, and Gush. (Chitkara, 2002)

Sharda site

The village of Sharda has historical significance being a sacred religious place for the Buddhists, located with a spectacular view on the left bank of the Neelum River (Kishan Ganga River) in Neelum Valley of the Azad State of Jammu and Kashmir. The Sharda site is situated at 30-43 latitude and 14-74 longitude, 136 km away from Srinagar and 200 km away from Muzaffarabad via Patikka-Nauseri and Authmuqam-Kairan routes. This site is about 2000 feet above sea level in the series of Karnah-Tethwaal 130 km away. The fame of Sharda temple is due to its distinct past position as "Sharda Peth or Sharda Temple or ancient Sharda University". (Bates, 1991) This was series of ancient Buddhist holy places like Sira Shalakot, Ganesh Ghati Cave and Dogra Fort and its literature was written in Sharda Script. (Stein, 1900)

The Sharda Temple is located on the right bank of Madhu Mati River (Sharda Nala) a tributary of the Kishan Ganga River (the Neelum River) in the Neelum District of the State of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. This River flows from north to south, is nearly 250 meters away from the Temple and from the confluence of Madho Mati Nala (Sharda Nala) and Saras Wati Nala (Surgan Nala) with Kishan Ganga River (Neelum River). (Rehman, 2019) Currently, the River Neelum flows about 100 meters below the temple which is assumed that after the natural disasters, the land erosion took place and

slippery terrain on the northern west side of the river gradually cut down and turn nearly perpendicular like. (Mughal, 2019) The Sharda temple was surrounded by the all the plain area on both sides of the river, which is now divided into three parts. The eastern and northern hills above the river comprised of sedimentary rocks and sandstones which is evidence that the river was flowing behind the opposite hill of Sharda temple. On the temple side was divided into two parts as a small stream (nala) cut down that land into two parts. (Khan, 2019)

This ancient temple of Sharda which is a rare masterpiece of Kashmiri architecture stands in a dilapidated state. The southern part of the back of the temple enclosure has been eroded by the erosion of periodic floods from Nala Mathematic (Kachal Ka Katha). (Khan S. A., 2019) The three sides of the back cover around the rest of the temple are in a broken state due to the changing conditions of time and weather effects. The 63 steps to enter the Temple/Peth are also broken, and the soldiers have tried to repair them. Large stone carvings can be seen, but the door that was once installed here is no longer visible. (Mughal, 2019) After entering the enclosure, a few steps have been made to enter the central place. This central building, around which the whole history revolves, has carved heavy stones on the three sides and installed them in the walls in such a way that today Makes the engineer wonder. (Chowdhury, 2022)

In this way, historians commonly rely on objective circumstances and assumptions in the absence of evidence and various speculations have been made about the historical profile, construction of this temple and style of worship too, which surrounded by many different claims and controversies. The claims of Buddhists are supported by the era of construction while Hindu claims as well covered by same debate. (Khoihami, 1960) Kalhana claims that Maktapeda or Laltaditya during his reign 697-733 AD disciples of the Goud king had come all the way from Bengal to Kashmir to play visit this, Sharda Temple. (Stein M. A., 1989) Furthermore, this evidence is gone under suspicion by the Brigadier Pandit Rattan Koul that this temple was present in the reign of Laltaditya. So, the debate of construction of this Peth by Laltaditya is not comprehensively rejected as Maktapeda or Laltaditya (697-733 AD), was a successful military expeditionary. He was equally a great builder, he built very fine and massive temples including world famous son temple at Martand, which was also known as Muktapeda, even Sharda (Temple) Maktapeda in late chronicles. (Kalla, 1997)

This was the era when Al-Baruni and Pandit Kalhana wrote introductory notes on the Sharda. If the foundation of new temple was made by this king, then impartial historian's pen surely mentioned it. (Asghar, 1998) Although, this king was remembered with the glorious name of Mako Kund thence, he must be remembered as founder of Sharda temple. The fact which comes through the thorough analysis of the historical evidence may

determine as another temple also built by this king but as per Sharda Peth, it was constructed too early from this king. (Kudelska, 2016)

Sir Mark Earl Stein, who visited November 26, 1862, Hungary, and October 26, 1943, Kabul, was a brilliant scholar and an accomplished translator. who translated Pandit Kalhan's famous work, *Rajatarangni*, from Sanskrit to English. Stein is one of the foreign researchers who has studied the history and culture of Kashmir, archeology, language and literature and civilization. (Shah, 2014) Guna started a new chapter in his research efforts in the field of Kashmir by working on Pahlavi. He visited Kashmir for the first time in 1891 and came to Sharda in September 1892 to search for the Sharda Mandir/Peth. In the eleventh century AD, during the reign of Raja Jai Singh (1115 - 1128 AD), he writes in his notes with reference to the Sharda Temple: "According to the story that when Hemachandra (1088-1175) was commissioned by king Jayasimha of Gujarat (now in west Pakistan) to compose a new grammar, he requested to be supplemented with the necessary materials in the shape of the eight older grammars which could be found complete only in the library of the Goddess Saraswati, (Sharda) in Kashmir the King was also Jayasimha (1128-1115) Jayasimha sent at once high officials to Pravarapura to obtain the manuscripts.) and offered their prayer. The manuscripts were there upon delivered to the king's envoys and brought by them to Hemachandra who, after perusing them, composed his own great grammatical work the *Siddhahemachandra*." (Stein A. , 1892)

Charles Ellison Bates has described the Sharda temple in some detail as this temple consists of the usual cella surrounded by a walled enclosure, stands at the foot of a spur which rises above the right bank of the Madmatti stream, and slopes up gradually for some distance until it culminates in the precipitous pine-clad mountain which is traversed. by the direct path leading towards Kashmir. The temple is approached by staircase about 9 feet which of step, stone steps, some 63 in number, having on either side a massive balustrade, which is now falling to ruin. (Hardy, 1995) The entrance was through a double porch way at the south-west corner of the enclosure. A portion of the north side is still standing and shows that the archway on the inside was the trefoil, or Arian order, which a plain square doorway in the middle. (Bates C. E., 1873)

The walls of the enclosure are heavy and massive and rise to a height of about 11 feet to the coping stone inside, which on the outside their elevation depended upon the configuration of the ground on the west side, facing the staircase they are about 30 feet high. (Ahmad, J., Et al., 2022) On the side of the enclosure wall, which ran parallel to the bank, of the stream, has mostly fallen. At the east side of the coping rises in pyramidal from about 8 or 9 feet from the top of the wall and this coping appears originally to have been carried all-round the enclosure. In the middle of the inner side of the enclosing wall to the east, there is a trefoil arched chamber, with a chimney in the roof, and close to it a plain square postern. In the middle of the wall

on the north side is an arched recess, which contains a lingam. (Samad, 2020) The enclosure is now choaked with weeds and grass and contains a few jungle trees.

The cella, which is about 22 feet square, stands on an elevated plinth about 4 feet from the present level of the ground. The entrance is on the west side facing the porch way. On each of the other three sides of the cella a blank trefoiled archway stands out in bold relief frame the face of the walls, which are standing to a height of about 20 feet from the basement, almost to the apex of the arches. (Dutt, 1887) The entrance is approached by a staircase of a few steps. On each side of the porch were two square pillars about 16 feet high and about 2 feet 6 apart. The capital of booth pillars seems to have been hewn from a single stone. Though exhibiting all the peculiar characteristics of the Arian order of architecture, the general effects of the Shardi temple are ponderous and wanting in elegance. (Brown, 1959)

After chalking out the above story, it will be concluded by continuing the statement of Raqim Khawaja Abdul Ghani that, the historian, whether he is Pandit Kalhan, Al-Biruni or Zon Raj, only extends his history to kings and war chiefs. It is limited, that is, our history mentions the political and social powers in detail, but it is a pity that the mention of the architects, artists, scientists who gave power to these kings and kings is completely forgotten or the mention of these great people is not mentioned in history. (Khan, M. A., & Rahman, G. u., 2016) Placing history on paper is a disgrace to the art of history writing. In this context, it would be a tragedy if Pandit Kalhan Jaya Simha wrote an entire article on the death of Rani's pet cat for himself. If Kamal knows, on the other hand, mentioning these great architects and artists of Sharda would be disrespectful to historiography. It is a misfortune that has spoiled the objective nature of our history. (Cunningham, 1848)

A stone slab which the Hindus believed to be a sacred object of the Sharda temple, which was present in the Sharda temple premises. According to Bates in Sharda temple a large rough slab of unpolished stone was laid on the ground. This slab was placed in placed with red pigment and flowers are inserted in the cracks. (Bates C. E., 1873)

The story of this holy temple is very long but the issue of conservation of this place is still a question of time. Great efforts have been made to secure this site, but questions are still alive. Crowds of tourists and foreign visitors are wandering carelessly, and this national asset is getting damaged day by day. The people of Azad Kashmir and various organizations are also working for restoration and preservation. While an organization called "Save Sharda Committee" started an organized movement from Occupied Kashmir during 2018. Who also wrote letters to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, the Prime Minister of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Azad Kashmir and the Ministry of Tourism and Archeology. Which was immediately implemented at that time and the repair and restoration work of this archeology started, but soon those

splendors faded away. This sacred historical place is once again waiting for another Jaluka to revive it.

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