

THE IMAGINATION OF GANDHARA IN THE PUNJAB  
A VIEW FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY, UNIVERSITY  
OF THE PUNJAB, LAHORE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18067043>

**Keywords**

**Article History**

Received: 11 October 2025

Accepted: 21 November 2025

Published: 25 December 2025

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**Abstract**

*Gandhara in cultural and civilizational terms is still a contested entity. Long ago, probably some Indian nationalist gurus looked down upon it. It is clear from the words used by one such person. He said that Gandhara was nothing but an episode in Indian history. This episodic representation aimed at denying any crucial place to it in the long march of the history of the region. However, such thinking can still be found here and there. In this context, this study aims to seek views from the Punjab with a focus on the archaeology students from the Punjab University, Lahore. Twenty nine students and faculty members were randomly approached and indepth discussions were held with them. Their understanding of Gandhara, interest in it and response to this largely Khyber Pakhtunkhwa archaeology make major themes in this paper. A scholarly engagement with the students also brings additional insights to the fore.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Historical study of the past has always been beset by controversies. The reasons, beyond those relating to scholarly concerns and interests, are of political and ideological nature. Other pragmatic considerations also make knowledge creation and its consumption a contested activity and phenomenon. In other words, cultural and political bias and the question of power and material condition lead to create different perspectives about the past. And this makes the story unsmooth (Chakrabarti 1997; Trigger 1989/2010). Gandhara, Gandhara civilization or Gandhara art can be one of the fascinating examples to show the ways national and cultural biases manifest themselves.

We all know very well about Gandhara. So there is no need to explain it except that it is situated across Durand Line in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However,

it should be pointed out that like other parts of the world, Gandhara is studied in the higher education institutions in Pakistan. Researches on various aspects of Gandhara are also done. Education and academic degrees obtained in Pakistan familiarize students with this historical culture and heritage. One of the courses taught is called “Gandhara Civilization” (although the word civilization embodies a highly value-loaded concept). Similarly, students come across Gandhara via visiting archaeological sites and museums. If museums in Pakistan, as across the world, enable students to closely observe Gandharan culture, it rarely happen that they visit Gandharan sites. In the former case it is the matter of easy access while in the latter situation physical distance makes obstructions. And this is truer in the case of students from the Punjab,

Sindh and Balochistan. Students from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are rather blessed in this regard. However, they would have the same experience when it comes to the Harappan archaeology of Sindh and the Punjab or the pre-historic cultures of Balochistan. Cultural association and regional insulation also seem to be a factor which influences a person not to get immersed in what is rather the imagined *other*.

In order to address these issues, I conducted a preliminary work at the Department of Archaeology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, over the last some months. Twenty seven students, both from MPhil and BS programmes, and two faculty members were randomly selected for discussion. They were also provided with five open-ended questions which they answered. The questions are:

1. What do you know about Gandhara?
2. Where Gandhara is located?
3. Is Gandhara important in historical and heritage studies in South Asia?
4. Would you like to study and research in the field of Gandhara which is away from the Punjab?
5. Do you feel more for Harappa or Gandhara?

## Results

Various responses were received to each of the questions. To the first question of familiarity with Gandhara the respondents mentioned Afghanistan, Pakistan, Persia, Taxila, Dir, Swat, Hastinapura, Lahore Museum, Ashoka, Ambi Raja, the Buddha and Buddhism, Gandhara art and architecture, Jatakas, Indus civilization, Greek art, Jainism, chronological frame of the first millennium BCE and CE. These were very general remarks but overall all this shows that all the respondents were familiar in one way or another with Gandhara and its art and architecture.

The location of Gandhara was indicated correctly almost by all the respondents. The answers ranged from Afghanistan and Pakistan in a general way to northern part of Pakistan, Peshawar, Mardan, Swat, Dir, Hazara, Taxila, northern Punjab, Kabul, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and even Gilgit-Baltistan. Some mistakenly mentioned the Salt Mountain Range, Punjab or southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On the whole, the location was correctly described.

The question of the significance of Gandhara in the context of South Asian historical and heritage studies received interesting responses. Contributions of Gandhara to human history were seen as an important legacy. Its art and architecture were appreciated. One response was that “Gandhara is the rich asset of Pakistan.” Another respondent states, “Gandhara plays a vital role in understanding the historical development, artistic legacy, and cultural complexities of South Asia making it a significant subject for historical and heritage studies.” Some others said: “Gandhara is very important for history. There are many heritage site[s] of different religions in Gandhara.” A fascinating answer was: “it is really necessary to know about Gandhara as it is connected with a lot of things from cultural aspect to art, religion, geographical impacts etc. It has contributed a lot to South Asia and its ramification can still be felt.” This response exhibits awareness about the uses of history and Gandhara in the present milieu. His mention of geographical impacts of history is particularly provides food for thought. Others also mentioned tourism, pilgrimage, Unesco and foreign work in the field.

That students and archaeology workers from the Punjab would like to study and do research in the field of Gandhara archaeology received encouraging responses. Many said they would like to study and investigate Gandharan history and objects. The reasons as indicated include: Buddhist teachings, art and architecture, curiosity, etc. Nearly all of the respondents said that geographical distances do not matter for them. One student said that they would like to work on Gandhara the way they would love to investigate archaeology of Harappa and Mehrgarh. Another one wanted to “study Gandhara [to] see world heritage.” Some wanted to study Gandhara art and explore sites. One respondent stated: “I would love to [study Gandhara]. In fact I do have aims to work for it. And the facilities that are provided by the KPK (. . . Directorate) and government [are] really appealing.’ Some notes and an absolutely not also are stated by others. It is interesting to note that a response was: “especially it’s my dream to research on Gandhara Bamiyan Afghanistan.”

In order to know if there was a cultural bias against Gandhara in the Punjab, the respondents were asked whether they feel more attracted to Harappa or

Gandhara. The responses were quite balanced and mature. A number of them appreciated the respective potential and significance of each culture and historical period. However, some expressed interest in Harappa due to its easy accessibility and familiarity with it. It was also stated: "I feel more for Harappa as it connects with us." This is a pragmatic consideration. A response says: "I feel more about Harappa because Harappa is big civilization and its town planning and culture [and] everything [else] is more than Gandhara." One respondent felt more about Gandhara. He said that both Harappa and Gandhara are important "but Gandharan Heritage is more interesting and attached to land and people of [the] land." Still another response was: "Gandhara is preferred site in my dictionary to travel [in] and research [on]." Feelings for the preservation of heritage were also expressed. Some said that they felt more for Gandhara as compared to Harappa. One respondent said that owing to the popularity of Gandhara, he loved Gandhara art more than anything from Harappa.

## Discussion

I wanted to test two assumptions through this study. First, Gandhara is a geographical and cultural other to workers and learners in the field of archaeology. Second, it is their material condition which halts them go and work on Gandharan archaeology. Let us first elaborate both the assumption a bit.

Archaeology and history are everywhere used for political purposes. Sometimes the past is used to construct nations, regions, ideologies, politics and ethnicities and at times it is manipulated to disprove and otherize alternative schemes and programmes (Misztal 2003; Thapar 2004). Gandhara is not immune to all this. The art which we nowadays call Gandhara art was previously known as Greco-Buddhist art. It shows that its discovery prompted colonial scholars and others to appreciate its sophistication in terms of classical influence. In the early twentieth century, colonialism and Indian nationalism led to the emergence of alternative frame of thinking. European orientalism no more dominated the cultural and academic phenomenon. One of the influential names in this regard was that of Aurobindo Ghose who lived between 1872 and 1950. He came to be called Shri Aurobindo.

From an early age Aurobindo was exposed to English culture through his education and at the age of seven he was sent to England for education. The purpose was to prepare him for entering into Indian Civil Service. He learnt the classics and read about India through the works of orientalist such as Elphinstone and James Mill. Aurobindo, however, left the path of the Indian Civil Service unpursued. He rather became a nationalist writer making efforts to make the Indian spirit known to the world. He also got involved in politics and later on retired to practice yoga as a path to spirituality. Aurobindo did not think of Europeans to be fit for understanding India, its society and history. He believed that Indian culture should be judged 'by Indian standards' (Heehs 2003: 175). Aurobindo was very much critical of another issue of orientalism. It was European "tendency to trace Indian achievements, back to European, usually Greek, predecessors' (Heehs 2003: 177). And this embittered Aurobindo. "Where Greek influence was evident, as in the Gandharan school of sculpture, he condemned the work as inferior to 'pure' Indian styles' (Heehs 2003: 177). Another example of this approach to Gandhara can be found in another Indian professor's saying that "Gandhara is nothing but an 'episode'" (Khan 2013: 267). But this view is challenged and criticized (Khan 2013: 267). In a different context, which prevails in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the last more than two decades, there is a feeling among Pashtuns that heritage destruction is a tacitly commissioned campaign by Punjabi power elites. The attacks on the Bamiyan and Jahanabad statues of the Buddha in 2001 and 2007, respectively, are seen in this way (Khan 2021). Against this backdrop, the data of my fieldwork and the insights which it warrants are encouraging.

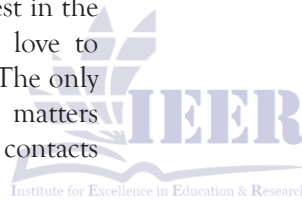
It is to be argued that there are no hateful remarks about or antagonistic indifference towards Gandhara. On the other hand, my respondents wished to have opportunity to work in the field of Gandharan archaeology. It is true that some of them candidly said that they would prefer for Harappa. But the main reason seems to be the easy approach to Harappan sites in the Punjab. Similarly, their association with Harappa does not have anything negative to do with Gandhara.



The Harappan preference, therefore, should be seen in another way as well. It all depends on person's material conditions and resourcefulness which either allow or restrain them to do or not to do something. And in the framework of the knowledge-power relationship, doing archaeology in Pakistan by Pakistani practitioners entails a number of restrictions. They can hardly afford to carry out unsponsored research projects beyond their immediate surroundings. It is expressed by one respondent as they stated that they felt more for Harappa "because we study about Indus Valley Civilization and also visited Harappa so I know about Harappa more than Gandhara."

## Concluding Remarks

In the final remarks, I would like to say that Pakistani archaeology practitioners like archaeology of different parts of the country. They can be interested in working in different regions and periods of archaeology. It does not hold ground to say that practitioners of one area lack interest in the archaeology of another area. They would love to work across regions and historical periods. The only obstacles in their way relate to financial matters which can be removed through academic contacts and collaborations.



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