

ANCIENT NISA

CENTRE OF SYNERGY ALONG THE SILK ROUTE

P. L. Dash*

Abstract:

Emancipated from decades of Soviet rule, independent Turkmenistan looks forward, in a soul searching quest to play a pivotal role in Caspian energy politics and shape the regional scheme of political developments to its best pursuit and advantage. While energy reserve, particularly natural gas, has remained Turkmenistan's major asset in a largely energy hungry world, its more valuable asset is its cultural heritage which has significantly contributed to the assimilation and synthesis of the cultural ethos of the Orient and the Occident. Located at the confluence of various civilizations in Central Asia along the ancient Silk Route, Turkmenistan and its ancient cities of Merv and Nisa were famous trading centres. MIRAS, the Cultural Directorate of the Turkmenistan government, organized an international conference on 5-7 December, 2007 to revive the past of these cities along ancient Silk and Spice Routes that connected India, China and the rest of the world with Central Asia.

Keywords:

Nisa, Turkmenistan, Iran, Khorassan, Merv, Central Asia, India, Mongols, Silk Route.

Introduction:

Nisa an ancient city was famous for its urban settlement in 2nd and 3rd millennium BC. Situated not very far from the present capital Ashgabat, in the Kopet Dag valley in the Ahal velayat, it became the first capital of the Parthian empire. The Parthian emperor, Arsaces I, 250-211 BC, founded the city, and it was called Parthaunisa.¹ The city was the royal necropolis for successive Parthian kings. The archaeological excavations at Nisa have revealed a whole new world of information. What was hitherto unknown became known as a city centre of yore famous for its common cultural complex, providing a common trade space for India, Central Asia, China, and Iran and beyond to Egypt and the Roman empire. Similarity in the style of governance and management of social life implied that Nisa shared with others in the neighbourhood the ambience, mores, architectural designs, religion and above all major inventions and achievements of life in the fields of science, mathematics and medicines. Nisa represented in the 2nd millennium a globalized cosmos on a regional scale in and around Central Asia.

* **Professor, Centre for Eurasian Studies, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India.**

¹ Nisa kept its name high through various rulers. When Mithradates I ruled Nisa around 171-138 BC, he renamed the city after him. It became known as Mithradatkirt. Despite the change in name, Nisa continued as a centre of east-west activities. The cascading impact was widely felt across the confluence of cultures.

Soviet and post-Soviet excavations and discoveries at Nisa conclusively indicate the wider trade contacts and religious discourses of this city with the outside world while the art focus on the buildings indicate Hellenistic touch, the use of ivory in Nisa proves Indian connections, and possibly connections with Africa via Egypt. The structure of buildings and architectural designs evince a strong intermingling of Iranian, Oriental Indian as well as western cultures of the epoch. Traders and preachers from India used to travel to Kopet Dag to trade and preach and brought back the local skills of carpet weaving, sheep breeding and other artifacts which continued to prevail across the Indus valley. Thus Nisa had pre-Islamic contacts with India, Iran and China.²

With regard to India – one of the pre-Islamic civilizations - the mutual outreach was synergetic and symbiotic, indicating India's civilizational outreach was pervasive over distant lands including Nisa, which was just located in the periphery and even at one point of time called Nisapur. The ambit of interaction and mutual influence permeated to appreciation for art and style of building constructions, ceramic and bronze inscriptions, metal tools, weapons and instruments, religious ideology and value system, science and art, medicines and poetry. Form and style of dance, dress code for different occasions and marriage and burial rites were almost identical with a little regional variation. One thus finds many other similarities, including how they battled and how they conducted peace deals, besides sharing discoveries across a borderless space.

New Nisa:

Nisa grew to be one of the most famous medieval feudal cities characteristics by an urban life style, compact in itself, catering to the growing merchant demands travelling across, but at the same time, outreaching to the world through its growing commerce. It remained the largest economic centre of Central Asia and played a significant role in the political life of Khorasan. Pottery, weaponry and crockery manufacture facilitated further growth of Nisa. The city layout marked for new amorphous buildings was supported by a unique canal system, cultural palaces and other urban set-ups including distilleries.

The city was distinctly divided in to two parts: old and new Nisa. The former was famous for production of traditional items, and the later took case of new urban needs. Soviet Archaeologist, Victor Nikolaevich

² The corroborative evidence is on display in the museum exposures at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. These exhibits are demonstrative of the fact that Nisa was once upon a time a great city, a cultural centre, and a trading hub.

Pilipko, has revealed a bright history of this city of 2500 years. Similarly other archaeologists have thrown light upon the genesis, rise and fall as well as the prevalent social customs, trade and commercial culture, which helped assimilate peoples of the peripheral regions.³

Famous as the granary of Khorassan, Nisa developed into an advanced agricultural zone of that time, with vast stretches of fertile land lying in the valleys and plains providing for agricultural activities. Since these fields ran through the very heart of the Silk Route, it served as an important trade link between the East and the West, both in terms exporting agricultural products, and in terms of commerce. The high level of craftsmanship, the meticulous designs painted on crockery and glass items of the period imply assimilation of beautiful ideas across a common cultural space on the cockpit of Asia.

Ancient Nisa was divided into two parts: northern complex and southern complex markedly differentiated from each other in layout. The northern complex had square houses. They had become the treasure house of Tsarist relics. The city was no doubt an economic warehouse, a repository of various artifacts carved into life by master craftsmen of that epoch.⁴ The systematic arrangement of life in an orderly fashion further implies that the system of governance was strict and smooth. Further the discovery of ivory works and utensils tell us a tale that Nisa was a flourishing centres of commerce and trade and a hub of allied activities. Commercial establishments were the hallmark of northern Nisa.

On the other hand, southern Nisa was laced with palaces, temples and groups of buildings, thereby implying that that part of the city was unquestionably the administrative city centre. The rulers and the ruled lived apart in different parts of the city exhibiting a social hierarchy. The palace complex throws lights on the systematic arrangement of administrative machinery, included many chambers, a large audience hall, closed yards with porticos and guard rooms. The temples were

³ The very name, Nisapur provides an Indian connotation, further accentuating the fact that the square size structures of old Nisa perfectly fitted into the Vastu Shastra. Various statues and ivory articles, terracotta figures, horse riders, sphinx, spacious palaces and many things associated with medieval India are reminiscent of the findings of ancient Nisa. The trident, a holistic Hindu symbol is among the excavated artifacts and preserved in Turkmenistan. There are many similarities of how women in rural India grind and pound millets today with those devices and instruments used in ancient Nisa.

⁴ The archaeological excavations have unearthed beautiful marble statuettes, imported glass, more than two thousand five hundred various types of rocks with inscriptions in Partian and Arameian scripts. The discovery of a throne and armaments clearly implies that the city had a developed system of governance with the king at the helm.

round and tower, surrounded by wide arched corridors. Thus Nisa is a representation of an antique township with country estates laced with gardens - characteristic of ancient cities having love for greenery and beautiful environs. The ancient Nisa residences also had their ecological sense reflected in town planning.

The Persian Connections:

Parthians traded with China and battled the Romans with the famous Parthians shots (mounted archers). Between 247 BC and 224 AD, the Parthian brought accolades to their rulers from across Persia. Hailing from the Steppes, east of the Caspian, these brave pastoralists, with their inimitable quality of cavalry, subjugated the region from Scythia in the north, Sogdiana across Amu Darya and Khorasmia (Present day Afghanistan). They travelled south up to Gedrosia and in the east reached India. The eastern edges of the Indus river to the western flanks of the Euphrates constituted Parthian habitat of trade and commerce, cultural assimilation and confluence of mores.⁵

The Iranians are indebted to the Parthian for having established the second Persian Empire between 247 BC and 224 AD. It is this Persian connectivity that provides a wider connotation to the Parthian heritage that both Iran and Turkmenistan must feel proud of. In the days of yore, when Mesopotamia and Indus valley were two bordering civilizations, ancient Turkmenistan was a contiguous territory not on the fringes; but on the very heartland of the Silk Route that took concrete shape as the main highway of commerce and culture in that area. A Soviet researcher T. Shirinov writes: "This was the huge continent shared by the first civilizations of the East and the basin of Amu Darya was its northern rim, where the civilization of Turan emerged."⁶ Another Soviet researcher, V.M. Masson put the record straight by saying that "the emergence of early culture complexes in the Murgab delta was connected with those who came from the Oases of the ancient urban culture that was located in the sub-mountainous land near the Kopet Dag (Keleli Complex) and afterwards, with the coming of certain ethnic groups, which had migrated from north Iran (Gissar area)."⁷

⁵ "Iran: Born at the Crossroads and the Empire of Persia", *National Geographic*, August, 2008.

⁶ T. Shirinov, "Contacts between Central Asia and Indian Subcontinent in the Second Millennium BC", *India and Central Asia, Pre-Islamic Period*, Tashkent, 2000, p.11.

⁷ V. M. Masson, *Altyn Depe*, Leningrad, 1981, pp.130-31; Also refer to A. Asyrov, (General Editor) *Nisa: An Ancient Hearth of the World Culture Development*, Abstracts of the Conference Proceedings (5-7 December, 2007), Ashgabat, 2007.

Mongol Invasion:

As the Nisa continued to impact the region from Persia to Mongolia, the final turning point was the invasion by the Mongol hordes. From Mongolia via Russia through Central Asia and right up to India, the Mongols had in their agenda to lord over this vast and rich geo-cultural space. Since Nisa was a prosperous city centre right on the road of Mongol conquest, it was at the receiving end in men and material.⁸ Nisa never recovered from this loss of men and materials. Although it started building anew its life in the 13th – 15th centuries, it could never regain the glory. The new constructions used white and blue China clay on the contours of the buildings and followed middle age architectural partners.

Destroyed over the period of centuries and ravaged by the vicissitude of time, Nisa has never failed to preserve its antique value in historic-cultural sense. The city is the physical symbol of Turkmen material culture.⁹ Nisa and Merv – located in the confluence of cultures – produced scientists and scholars, writers and poets, religious pundits and political philosophers, whose contribution was outstanding and far outstretching. Invasion was no episode to arrest the spreading impact of the influential ethos of these people with intellectual orientation. The UNESCO has declared Nisa as a centre of cultural heritage and enlisted it among the famous centers of World Cultural Heritage on 23 August 2007 for its contribution to the realm of knowledge.¹⁰

The Mongol invasion caused an irreparable loss not only for Turkmenistan but also for a lot of other countries such as India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Iraq and so on – a region vexed in a cultural whole by the Parthians. The Mongols were thus a common enemy of the region since they destroyed the common cultural heritage and edifices of cultural significance including Parthian art of war.¹¹

⁸ Soviet historians estimate that 70,000 men were killed and many more thousands injured.

⁹ A cursory visit to the museum of Ali-Abu, the famous merchant, who lived in Nisa through 10th – 11th centuries, reveals many secrets of the Turkmen past. What distinguished Nisa and Merv – the present day Mary and the contiguous territory in that Velayat – was their cultural legacy that no invasion could have destroyed.

¹⁰ It is an established fact that many scholars and scientists who fled the Mongol invasion took shelter in Nisa fortress. By providing a sanctuary to the intellectuals of the epoch, Nisa rendered to the posterity a yeoman's service in preserving the Turkmen cultural and intellectual heritage forever.

¹¹ The pictures of the Parthian epoch available in the museums depict horse riders opposing their enemy in the battlefield. The Parthian warriors were famous in two ways: for their light armored and heavily armed cavalry. Since Nisa was a fortress, it had fortified walls around it. With width of five meters, the remnants of these walls are visible today at the Nisa archaeological site located at a height of 12-13 meters.

Nisa was an ideal place to devise innovations to be applied in warfare and to peaceful cultural development. Nisa owed its prosperity to tremendous amount of skill in manufacturing, coupled with aesthetics of royal houses in a social milieu of blending and assimilation. The combination of all these attributes helped the residents of Nisa to embrace whatever was alien and blend it with the local besides geography providing Nisa an enviable locale which facilitated the flowering of a city centre at the juncture of the Silk Route to connect East with the West and North with the South.

The role of the state or urban centre with the king as its head in running the economy was recognized as a crucial element of governance. The kings, looked interested in the economic wellbeing of their estate and people and the state undertook building roads, dams, public buildings and many other facilities, collected taxes from the populace to support and run infrastructure of the kingdom. Nisa taxation system appears to be impacted by economic treaties of Kautilya of India and Confucius of China where we come across an equitable taxation system not very exorbitant but reasonable and proportionate to income. Strength of Nisa social system and state structure was its judicial system, based on *Nyaya* or justice. Periodic organization of *Nyaya Panchayats* was a regular feature. The fact that an aggrieved person can approach the highest authority of the land, the king, in his open durbar for justice was a clear sign of democratic dispensation of justice through a well organized judicial system. It consisted of judges to dispense justice, lawyers to interpret laws, and prisons to hold guilty.

The kingdom had not only a sway over social, political and economic life, but evidently it had a rapprochement between the rulers and the ruled. The place of worship was central to dispensation of justice in as much as it was central to all social activities. Both the king and his subjects looked at the place of worship to imbibe strength for whatever they did. Much before the Church surrounded the kings in Europe to remain a part of the judicial system, the Central Asians had developed religious shrines as the pivot of their judicial life and source of legitimacy of their power.

Nisa was very strong in three other aspects: managing the environment, devising a healthcare system and developing science and technology.¹² They looked at climate change in a wider perspective and even connected the phenomenon of monsoon to the existence of arid desert climate in their region.¹³ The people of ancient Nisa believed that

¹² Gaurav, "Rediscovering Asian Identity", *Zeitgeist Asia*, June 2008, pp. 10-16.

¹³ It is in fact true that the Central Asian deserts from Gobi and Taklamakan to Pamir and even Thar in India generated a cumulative heat in summer months that

they have to give to the environment more than take from it to ensure sustainable development. In ancient Nisa, therefore, farmers were used to a pattern of crop rotation so that enough bio-fertilizers and nutrients go back to the soil. This also avoided soil erosion and helped maintain soil nutrients intact for better crop.

Located between the land of Ayurveda and Acupuncture, the Central Asian in general and those living in Nisa in particular applied various systems of medicines, including those of Chinese and Indian. Persia's contribution to ancient system of medicines is well known. When Ibn Sina compiled his "Canon of Medicine" in the 11th century, the territory of modern Turkmenistan was within the ambit of Persian influence in terms of science and technology.¹⁴ The scientists of Nisa prior to Ibn Sina might have been aware of the Indian contributions of *Charaka* and *Susruta*, whose books on medicine and surgery were highly valued in ancient times.

From Khorasan to Khorezm the entire space was buzzing with mathematics, astronomy, developed literature and allied sciences. The pioneering 9th century mathematician, Al-Khwarizmi (Khorezm and Khorasan are derivatives of his name) introduced Hindu numerical, including zero and popularized algorithm in algebra. The place was also prolifically famous for language of its poetry. These contributions are well recorded in world heritage. It is to many of these fundamental contributions that the modern world owe a lot in terms of genesis and growth of seminal ideas, flourishing into modern day science and technology, astronomy and astrophysics.

Conclusions:

Reviving the Silk Route in the contemporary context has a valid connotation to trace out the significance of these routes that mutually connected India and Central Asia from the days of yore. The validity is further enhanced when each country studded on this region traces its roots and culture on a wider platform of activities based on communality of cultural traits and close relations established between ancient civilizations of this area that one cannot separate black from the white. It is assumed as a single cultural geopolitical and geo-economic space from

subsequently invited cool air from the south resulting in monsoon rains through the following months.

¹⁴ Moreover, that book of Ibn Sina remained the primary textbook of medicine in Europe up the 17th century, which taught the world that tuberculosis was a highly contagious disease, and physical illness can affect emotional wellbeing of man. A copy of the "canon of Medicine is still preserved in the National Museum of Syria at Damascus for the posterity to see Ibn Sina's contribution to medical science.

the days immemorial because it was economic activities of artisans, commercial activities of traders and intellectual pursuits of scientists that served as the cornerstone of multilateral contacts.

While validity of the proposition to treat the area as unified entity has forceful resonance, what vivisects the region is a narrow approach to the understanding of civilizational heritage that linked peoples in their activities. Ethnic identity, religious dichotomy, territorial and boundary disputes and inter and intra-state bickering based on fissiparous principles take away the essence of that common heritage and pit one against the other along the same Silk Road that once united us. Prior to Islam, Buddhism as a religion had a forceful unifying impact on the whole region from Lumbini and Taxila to Bamiyan to Nisa to Kalmikia to Mongolia, China and beyond. Moreover, from horse riding to carpet weaving, from burial rituals to marriage ceremonies, there are too much common and similar evidence to be collectively ignored. In the growing context of a global village, when integration defies the logic of segregation, it is important that a small township like Nisa on the outskirts of Ashgabat could revive the memory of the past and inspire the youngsters to think anew about the common legacy of our heritage.¹⁵

¹⁵ Refer *India and Central Asia: Pre-Islamic Period*.