Zehanpora archaeological site

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance | History*

Why in News?

The ongoing excavation at Zehanpora put the spotlight on the significance of Kashmir in Buddhist history.

- It is a ***Buddhist site*** dating back nearly 2,000 years to the ***Kushan period.***
- **Located in –** Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Structures found –** Stupas, monk living spaces, and carefully planned stone foundations.
- **Possible Links –** Archaeologists believe Zehanpora may have had links with ***Huvishkapura,*** an ancient Kushan capital often mentioned in historical texts.
- **Architecture –** The stupa layouts show ***Gandharan influence***, indicating cultural exchange with north-western Buddhist regions.
- **Strategic Location –** Zehanpora, situated on an ***ancient trade and pilgrimage corridor*** linking Gandhara and Kashmir, enabled the movement of monks, merchants, and religious ideas.
- **Cultural Importance –** It shows Kashmir's role as a major Buddhist centre and a hub in ancient trade and pilgrimage networks.

Other Significance of Jammu & Kashmir

- **Historical Significance -** Emperor Ashoka, who is believed to have founded the ***city of Srinagar,*** established monasteries and stupas in the region.
- **Geographical Significance –** Kashmir's position between the Indus-Gandhara region and the Himalayas made it a natural link between India and Asia.
- **Learning Centre –** Early Buddhist and Sanskrit texts describe Kashmir as ***Sharada Pitha***, a major centre of learning in ancient and medieval times.
- **4th Buddhist Council –** King Kanishka convened a Buddhist council in Kashmir, led by Vasumitra and attended by Ashvaghosha.
- This council played a key role in organising and spreading Mahayana Buddhism.
- **Philosophical significance** – Nagarjuna's ***Madhyamaka philosophy*** peaked in Kashmir, making it a ***hub of Mahayana Buddhist thought***.
- **Global outreach –** Kashmir spread Mahayana ideas westward to Qandhar, Kabul, and Bactria and preserved Buddhist knowledge through the ***Gilgit Manuscripts*** (among the oldest Buddhist texts).
- Kashmir was a key launchpad for global Buddhism, not a peripheral region.

References

1. Indian Express | Zehanpora excavation
2. Times of India | Zehanpora excavation

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