

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

VI. IRANIAN AND MACEDONIAN INVASIONS, ALEXANDER'S INVASION AND IMPACT

The political developments experienced in the Ganga valley in course of the rise of the rise of Magadha mahajanpada are not matched elsewhere in the subcontinent. Contemporary peninsular India had no mahajanapad like formation. In the north-western sector, the prominent power was the mahajanpada of Gandhara with its famous capital Takshasila (Taxila). But it was not as powerful as Magadha, Avanti or Kosala. Its importance however lies in its location in the north-western fringes of the subcontinent which offered opportunities of linkages with West and Central Asia. At the time when Magadha was making its presence felt in the Ganga Valley politics, Gandhara and north western part of India experienced intimate contacts with West Asia as a result of the conquest of this region by the Achaemenid rulers of ancient Iran. The story of the Achaemenid occupation becomes available to us by their inscriptions and Herodotus' Historia and a few later Classic texts.

Historically, this was to be a region with changing suzerainties between north India and Afghanistan and Iran.

In north-east India, smaller principalities and republics gradually merged with the Magadhan empire. North-west India, however, presented a different pictures in the sixth century BCE. Several small principalities such as those of the Khambojas, Gandhara and Madras fought one another. This area did not have any powerful kingdom like that of Magadha to weld the warring communities into one organized kingdom. As the area was fertile and rich in natural

resources, it attracted the attention of its neighbours. In addition, it could be easily penetrated through the passes in the Hindu Kush.

In the 6th century BCE, the Persian empire extended upto the north-western borders of the subcontinent.

The Achaemenian rulers of Iran, who expanded their empire at the same time as the Magadhan princes, took advantage of the political disunity on the north-west frontier. The Iranian ruler Darius penetrated north-west India in 516 BCE and annexed the Punjab, west of the Indus, and Sindh. This area was converted into the twentieth province or satrapy of Iran, which had a total number of twenty-eight satrapies. The Indian satrapy included Sindh, the north-west frontier, and the part of Punjab that lay to the west of Indus. It was the most fertile and populous part of the empire. It paid a tribute of 360 talents of gold, which accounted for one-third of the total revenue Iran received from its Asian provinces. The Indian subjects were also enrolled in the Iranian army.

Darius was succeeded by his son Khshayarsha or Xerxes who maintained his hold on the province of Gadara (Gandhara) and Hidu (Hindus, inhabitants of the lower Indus Valley). The Persian empire declined after Xerxes' death.

Xerxes employed Indians in the long war against the Greeks. It appeared that India continued to be a part of the Iranian empire till its invasion by Alexander.

The Indo-Iranian contact lasted for about two hundred years. It gave an impetus to Indo-Iranian trade and commerce. The cultural results were more significant. Iranian scripts brought into India a form of writing that came to be known as the Kharoshthi scripts. Iranian coins are also found in the north-west frontier region which points to the exchange of goods with Iran. However, Iranian influence on Maurya sculpture is clearly perceptible. The monuments of Ashoka's time, especially the bell-shaped capitals owed something to the Iranian models.

In the 4th century BCE, the Greeks and the Iranians fought for the supremacy of the world. Under the leadership of Alexander of Macedonia, the Greeks eventually destroyed the Iranian empire. Alexander conquered not only Asia Minor and Iraq but also Iran. From Iran he marched into India obviously attracted by its great wealth.

By the time of Alexander's invasion (327–326 BCE), the Persian hold over their Indian provinces must have been nominal or non-existent. After decisively defeating the Persian army led by Darius (Darius III), the Macedonian conqueror turned towards the eastern provinces of the erstwhile Persian empire. He established a series of outposts in Afghanistan before venturing further into the subcontinent. According to the Greeks, at that time, the north-west was peppered with a number of principalities.

In 326 BCE, Alexander's army crossed the Indus. Ambhi, the ruler of Taxila, extended support to the Greeks. Porus (Puru or Paurava), who ruled the area between the Jhelum and Chenab, offered resistance, but was overpowered. From the Jhelum, Alexander moved onwards and captured the area between the Chenab and Ravi. Movement beyond the Beas was prevented by the resistance of his own soldiers, who were weary after many years of fighting and yearned to go home. Alexander retreated to the Jhelum and began his journey towards the Indus delta, leaving the territories he had so recently conquered in the hands of Porus, Ambhi, and Abhisara. The areas lying to the west of the Punjab were entrusted to satraps (governors) and Macedonian garrisons. Alexander finally reached the Indus delta, from where he took the land route towards Babylon through Gedrosia. He died two years later.

IMPACT OF ALEXANDER'S INVASION

Alexander's invasion provided the first occasion when ancient Europe came into close contact with Ancient South Asia. Alexander's India campaign was a

triumphant success. He added to his empire an Indian province which was much larger than the that conquered by Iran. However the Greek possessions of India were soon lost to the Maurya rulers.

The most important outcome of this invasion was the establishment of a direct contact between India and Greece in various fields. Alexander's campaign opened four distinct routes by land and sea, paving the way for Greek merchants and craftsmen, and increasing the existing facilities for trade.

Although there were some Greek living in the north-west even prior to Alexander's invasion, the invasion multiplied Greek settlements in this area. The most important of these were the city of Alexandria, in the Kabul region, Boukephala on the Jhelum, and Alexandria in the Sindh. Although the entire area was conquered by the Mauryas, the Greeks continued to live under both Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka.

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