

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

XII. THE AGE OF THE INDO-GREEKS, SAKAS: PARTHIANS AND KUSHANAS: ASPECTS OF POLITY, SOCIETY, RELIGION, ART AND CRAFT, COMMERCE AND TOWNS

The Maurya empire collapsed in 187 BC and with it, ended the epoch of a nearly pan-Indian political power. The five centuries subsequent to the fall of the Maurya empire saw several formidable political powers, often engaged in conflicts in different regions of the subcontinent. The political scenario of what is called the post-Mauryan period in Indian history assumes further complexities as some groups of West and Central Asian origin began to play an important role in the subcontinental polity. For instance, the Greek, Saka, Parthian and Kushana rulers left their mark in the politics of this phase. The principal arena of their political and military prowess is the north-western part of the subcontinent and the north-western borderland.

The political situation in the north-western part, especially the borderlands of the subcontinent became considerably complex from the close of the third century BCE. The north-west provided regular linkages with West and Central Asia because of its geographical location. The Maurya political control over Kabul, Kandahar and the Laghman regions of Afghanistan was established by gaining these territories from the Seleucid authority. Near Kabul was situated the ancient area of Bactria under the Seleucid control. By the late third century BCE the local Greek satrap Diodotus I overthrew his allegiance to the Seleucid authority and established what is known as the Bactrian Greek kingdom in Bactria with its capital at Bactra. Bactria was ideally in a position to maintain

intimate connections-political, commercial and cultural-with Central and West Asia on one hand and South Asia on the other. Its capital Bactra stood at the crossroad of Asian overland long-distance commerce.

During the early years of the second century BCE, the Greek rulers of Bactria became ambitious enough to have launched several incursions into the subcontinent through the north-western corridor. These are the rulers who are referred to in the Puranas as Yavana invaders towards the last days of the Mauryan rule. Euthydemus or his son Demetrius is generally credited with the beginning of Yavana incursions into the subcontinent. This pattern of Greek incursions continued during the successive reigns of Apollodotus, Pantaleon, Agathocles.

The power struggle in Bactria between two contestant groups eventually resulted in the establishment of the rule of one group of Greek kings exclusively in the subcontinent; they came to be known as Indo-Greeks, distinct from the Bactrian Greek kings. One such Indo-Greek ruler, Antialkidas was certainly in control of Gandhara in the second century BC; his ambassador Heliodorus visited Kasiputra Bhagabhadra, the king of Vidisa (Besnagar pillar inscription of Heliodorus), near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. The most formidable among the IndoGreek kings was probably Menander. His silver tetradrachm coins (bust of the king: Athena hurling thunderbolt), according to B.N. Mukherjee, may indicate his association with Bactria. Menander, identified with king Milinda, is particularly famous for his conversion to Buddhism under the influence of his teacher Nagasena, a matter which is the subject of the Pali text, Milindapanho (Questions of Milinda). His capital was Sagala, near Sialkot (Pakistan).

The Greek rule in Bactria came to an end in 130 BC, judging in the light of Strabo's account and the annals of Early Han dynasty of China (Chien Han shu), as it succumbed to the raids of a few fierce Central Asiatic nomadic groups. Among such nomadic groups were the Sai or Sek or the Scythians (the Sakas in

Indian sources) and the Yueh-zhi (probably pronounced as Ye-tti, according to B.N. Mukherjee), the latter Speaking Tocharian language. These groups obviously moved westwards from the Central Asian steppes and destroyed the Bactrian Greek kingdom.

One group of the Scythian people, according to the Chinese texts, migrated from the lake Issyk-Kol area in Central Asia and reached Chi-pin (Jibin) or Kipin after having passed through Kashgarh and the Pamir plateau. It was Sylvan Levi who first successfully identified ca Chi-pin (Jibin) with Kashmir. That Kashmir, Gandhara and the contiguous Swat area (to the west of the Indus) came under Saka rule is indicated by an inscription. It records a donation made by kshatrapa (subordinate ruler) Patika at Taxila in the year 78 when his overlord Maues (Moga) was in power. In his silver coins (carrying both Greek and Prakrit legends), Maues bears the Indian epithet rajatiraja (king of kings). Such an epithet strongly suggests his control over a sizeable territory in the north-western part, including the borderlands of the subcontinent. No less significant is the use of an Indian epithet in the coins of a Saka king.

Another branch of the Saka rulers had their stronghold in Kandahar and adjacent areas. The earliest rulers of this branch were Vonones, his junior co-ruler Spalahora and Spalahora's son Spalagadama. The names bear clear Scythian and Parthian elements, the latter coming from Iran. Inscriptions and coins throw light on three powerful and prominent Saka rulers of a later time. They are Azes I, Azilises and Azes II. The existence of two Azes will be evident from an inscription from Bajaur. The Saka rulers belonging to the Vonones group carved out an extensive area comprising the north-western region, Indus basin, the Punjab, upper Ganga valley and the Ganga-Yamuna doab up to Mathura. The growing power of the Sakas was thwarted by the rise of the Indo-Parthian king Gondophares. He is particularly known from an inscription from Takht-i-Bahi near Peshawar.

Saka domination in north-western India was followed by that of the Parthians and in many ancient Indian Sanskrit texts the two people are mentioned together as Saka-Pahlavas. In fact, both of them ruled over India in Parallel for some time. Originally the Parthians or Pahlavas lived in Iran from where they moved to India. In comparison to the Greeks and the Sakas, they occupied only a small portion of the north-western India in the first century CE. The most famous Parthian king was Gondophernes.

The Parthians were followed by the Kushans, who are also called Yuechis or Tocharians. The Tocharians were considered to be the same as the Scythians. The Kushans were one of the five clans into which the Yuechi tribe was divided. A nomadic people from the steppes of north Central Asia living in the neighbourhood of China, the Kushans first occupied Bactria or north Afghanistan where they displaced the Shakas. Gradually they moved to the Kabul valley and seized Gandhara by crossing the Hindu Kush, replacing the rule of the Greeks and Parthians in these areas. They eventually established their authority over the lower Indus basin and the greater part of the Gangetic basin.

Their empire extended from the Oxus to the Ganges, from Khorasan in Central Asia to Pataliputra in Bihar. A substantial part of Central Asia now included in the Commonwealth of Independent States (in the former USSR), a portion of Iran, a portion of Afghanistan, almost the whole of Pakistan, and almost the whole of northern India were brought under one rule by the Kushans. Because of this, the Kushan empire in India is sometimes called a Central Asian empire. In any case, the empire created a unique opportunity for the interaction of peoples and cultures, and the process gave rise to a new type of culture which embraced nine modern countries.

There were two successive dynasties of Kushans. The first was founded by a house of chiefs who were called Kadphises and who ruled for twenty-eight

years from about AD 50 under two kings. The first was Kadphises I, who issued coins south of the Hindu Kush, minting copper coins in imitation of Roman coins. The second king was Kadphises II, who issued a large number of gold money and spread his kingdom east of the Indus.

The house of Kadphises was succeeded by that of Kanishka. Its kings extended Kushan power over upper India and the lower Indus basin.

Kanishka was the son of Kadphises II and is perhaps the most famous Kushana king, under whose reign the Kushana empire reached its zenith. It expanded from Central Asia to Afghanistan and north-western India, to further east into the Ganga valley and southwards into the Malwa region, and included Varanasi, Kaushambi, and Shravasti in Uttar Pradesh and Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. The centre of this huge empire was Bactria, as evident in the use of the Bactrian language in Kanishka's coins and inscriptions. The famous Rabatak Inscription (in modern Baghran province, Afghanistan) presents valuable information on Kanishka.

Kanishka had two capitals: Purushapura (present day Peshawar): He built a giant stupa to house the Buddha's relics in the city of Purushapura. The building was still intact with all its magnificence when the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien visited the area later in the early fifth century CE and Mathura.

The immediate successors of Kanishka were Vasishka, Huvishka, Kanishka II (who adopted the title of 'Kaiser'), and Vasudeva I. Vasudeva II was the last Kushana emperor.

Kushana power gradually declined from the early third century CE.

POLITY

The Central Asian conquerors imposed their rule on numerous petty native princes. This led to the development of a feudatory organization. The Kushans

adopted the pompous title of king of kings, which indicates that they collected tributes from numerous small princes. The Shakas and Kushans strengthened the idea of the divine origin of kingship. Ashoka called himself 'dear to the gods, but the Kushan kings called themselves sons of god. This title was adopted by the Kushans from the Chinese, who called their king the son of heaven. It was naturally used in India to legitimize the royal authority. The Brahmanical lawmaker Manu asks people to respect the king even if he is a child because he is a great god ruling in the form of a human being. The Kushans strengthened the satrap system of government adopted by the Shakas. The empire was divided into numerous satrapies, and each placed under the rule of a satrap. Some curious practices such as hereditary dual rule, that is, two kings ruling in the same kingdom simultaneously were begun, with instances of father and son ruling jointly at the same time. It thus appears that there was less of centralization under these rulers. The Greeks also introduced the practice of military governorship, the governors called strategos. Military governors were necessary to maintain the power of the new rulers over the conquered people.

SOCIETY

The Greeks, the Shakas, the Parthians, and the Kushans eventually lost their identity in India, in the course of time becoming completely Indianized. As most of them came as conquerors they were absorbed in Indian society as warrior class, that is as kshatriyas. Their placement in the Brahmanical society was explained in a curious way. The lawmaker Manu stated that the Shakas and the Parthians were kshatriyas who had deviated from their duties and fallen in status. In other words, they came to be considered second class kshatriyas. In no other period of ancient Indian history were foreigners assimilated into Indian society on such a large scale as they were in Maurya post- times.

RELIGION

Some rulers and others from Central Asia adopted Vaishnavism, which means the worship of Vishnu, the god of protection and preservation. The Greek ambassador called Heliodorus set up a pillar in honour of Vasudeva at Besnagar near Vidisa (headquarters of Vidisa district) in MP around the middle of the second century BC. A few other rulers adopted Buddhism. The famous Greek ruler Menander became a Buddhist. The questions and the answers that he exchanged with the Buddhist teacher Nagasena, also called Nagarjuna, is a good source for the intellectual history of the post-Maurya period. The Kushan rulers worshipped both Shiva and the Buddha, and the images of these two gods appeared on the Kushan coins. Several Kushan rulers were worshippers of Vishnu, as was certainly the case with the Kushan ruler Yasudeva, whose very name is a synonym for Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu.

THE ORIGIN OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Indian religions underwent changes in post-Maurya times partly due to a great leap in trade and artisanal activity and partly due to the large influx of people from Central Asia. Buddhism was especially affected. The Mahayana school of Buddhism flourished in this region. Kanishka became a great patron of the Mahayana Buddhism.

ART AND CRAFT

Art in the post-Mauryan period was predominantly religious. Two most important features concerning art and architecture of this period are the construction of stupas and development of regional schools of sculpture.

A stupa is a large hemispherical dome with a central chamber in which relics of the Buddha or some Buddhist monk is kept in a small casket. The base was surrounded by a path for pradakshina (clockwise circumambulation), enclosed by wooden railings which were later made in stone. Three prominent stupas of

this period are at Bharhut (which dates to the middle of the second century BCE and is significant for its sculptures; its railings are made of red stone), Sanchi (three big stupas were constructed at Sanchi in this period; the biggest of the three, which was built originally by emperor Ashoka, was enlarged to twice its size sometime in the second century BCE), and Amravati and Nagarjunkonda (both in Andhra Pradesh).

Schools of Sculptural Art:

Idols of the Buddha were carved out for the first time in this period. The Central Asian rulers became enthusiastic patrons of Indian art and literature and showcased great zeal in establishing new schools of art. There were three major schools of sculptural art which developed in this period. These were: Gandhara School of art, Mathura school of art, and Amravati school of art.

The Kushana empire brought together masons and artisans trained in different art forms and belonging to different nationalities, which further enriched the diverse cultures. There was a synthesis of both local (Indian) and Central Asian elements in the new images of Buddha. Indian craftsmen came into contact with the central Asians, Greeks and Romans, especially in the north-western frontier of India in Gandhara. This gave rise to a new kind of art form known as Gandhara school of art wherein the theme of sculptures is predominantly Buddhist but their style is Greek.

TRADE AND COMMERCE

Due to the establishment of intimate contacts between Central Asia and India, trade between the two regions also flourished. India imported a good deal of gold from the Altai mountains of Central Asia. Due to the extensive control of the Kushanas on the Silk Route, the economy of the Kushanas was replenished with the tolls levied from the traders and this income helped in building a large prosperous empire. It is rather pertinent to note that even though it was the

Indo-Greeks who introduced gold coins in India, it was the Kushanas who were the first rulers in India to issue the gold coins on such a wide scale.

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