

Ancient Indian History UPSC CSE

(Prelims + Mains)
Supplementary Study Material

Module 8: Post Mauryan Period

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Political Aspects

In the eastern and central parts of India and in the Deccan, the Mauryas were succeeded by several native rulers such as the Shungas, the Kanvas, and the Satavahanas. In north-western India they were succeeded by a number of ruling dynasties from Central Asia.

The Indo-Greeks

The first to cross the Hindu Kush were the Greeks, who ruled Bactria, or Bahlika, situated south of the Oxus river in the area covered by north Afghanistan.

- One important cause of the invasions was the weakness of the Seleucid empire that had been established in Bactria and the adjoining areas of Iran called Parthia.
- Pushed by the Scythian tribes, the Bactrian Greeks were forced to invade India. The successors of Ashoka were too weak to stem the tide of foreign invasions that began during this period.
- Two Greek dynasties simultaneously ruled northwestern India on parallel lines. The most famous Indo-Greek ruler was Menander (165–45 BC), also known as Milinda. He had his capital at Sakala (modern Sialkot) in the Punjab; and invaded the Ganga–Yamuna doab. He had a great many cities in his dominions including Sakala and Mathura.
- Menander asked Nagasena many questions relating to Buddhism. These questions and Nagasena's answers were recorded in the form of a book known as *Milinda Panho* or the *Questions of Milinda*.
- Indo-Greek rule is important in the history of India because of the large number of coins that the Greeks issued. The Indo-Greeks were the first rulers in India to issue coins.
- The Indo-Greeks were also the first to issue gold coins in India, and these increased in number
- under the Kushans. Greek rule introduced features of Hellenistic art in the north-west frontier of India, The best example of this was Gandhara art.

The Shakas

The Greeks were followed by the Shakas. The Shakas or the Scythians destroyed Greek power in both Bactria and India, and controlled a much larger part of India than had the Greeks.

- There were five branches of the Shakas with their seats of power in different parts of India and Afghanistan. One branch of the Shakas settled in Afghanistan; the second in the Punjab with Taxila as their capital; the third in Mathura where they ruled for about two centuries; the fourth branch established its hold over western India, where the Shakas continued to rule until the fourth century; the fifth branch established its power in the upper Deccan.
- The king of Ujjain who effectively fought against the Shakas and succeeded in driving them out during his reign. He called himself Vikramaditya, and an era called Vikrama Samvat is reckoned from his victory over the Shakas in 57 BC.
- The most famous Shaka ruler in India was Rudradaman I (AD 130–50). He ruled not only over Sindh, but also over a substantial part of Gujarat, Konkan, the Narmada valley, Malwa, and Kathiawar.
- He is famous in history because of the repairs he undertook to improve the Sudarshana lake in the semi-arid zone of Kathiawar which had been in use for irrigation for a long time and dated back to the Mauryas.

The Parthians

- Shaka domination in north-western India was followed by that of the Parthians. Originally the Parthians or the Pahlavas lived in Iran from where they moved to India.
- The most famous Parthian king was Gondophernes.

The Kushans

- 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.
- Their empire extended from the Oxus to the Ganges, from Khorasan in Central Asia to Pataliputra in Bihar. The Kushan empire in India is sometimes called a Central Asian empire. 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. Although the gold coins of the Kushans are found mainly west of the Indus, their inscriptions are distributed not only in north-western India and Sindh but also in Mathura, Shravasti, Kaushambi, and Varanasi. Kushan coins, inscriptions, constructions, and pieces of sculpture found in Mathura show that it was their second capital in India, the first being Purushapura or Peshawar, where Kanishka erected a monastery and a huge stupa or relic tower which excited the wonder of foreign travellers. Kanishka was the most famous Kushan ruler.
- He is known to history for two reasons. First, he started an era in AD 78, which is now known as the Shaka era and is used by the Government of India. Secondly, Kanishka extended his wholehearted patronage to Buddhism. He held a Buddhist council in Kashmir, where the doctrines of the Mahayana form of Buddhism were finalized.

Cultural Consequences

Structures and Pottery

- The period also saw the construction of brick-walls. The characteristic pottery is red ware, both plain and polished, with medium to fine fabric.
- Red pottery techniques were widely known in Central Asia and are to be found even in regions such as Farghana which lay on the peripheries of the Kushan cultural zone.

Better Cavalry

- The Shakas and Kushans added new ingredients to Indian culture and enriched it immensely. They introduced better cavalry and the use of the riding horse on a large scale.

- The Shakas and the Kushans were excellent horsemen. Their passion for horsemanship is shown by numerous equestrian terracotta figures of Kushan times discovered from Begram in Afghanistan.
- The Shakas and Kushans introduced the turban, tunic, trousers, and heavy long coat. Even now Afghans and Punjabis wear turbans, and the *sherwani* is a successor of the long coat. The Central Asians also brought in cap, helmet, and boots which were used by warriors.

Trade and Agriculture

- The coming of the Central Asian people established intimate contacts between Central Asia and India. India received a great fund of gold from the Altai mountains in Central Asia.
- The Kushans controlled the Silk Route, which started from China and passed through their empire in Central Asia and Afghanistan to Iran, and western Asia which formed part of the Roman empire in the eastern Mediterranean zone.
- It is significant that the Kushans were the first rulers in India to issue gold coins on a wide scale. The Kushans also promoted agriculture. The earliest archaeological traces of large-scale irrigation in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and western Central Asia date to the Kushan period.

Polity

- The Kushans adopted the pompous title of 'king of kings', which indicates that they collected tributes from numerous small princes. 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. 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.

New Elements in Indian 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 a warrior class, that is, as kshatriyas.

Religious Developments

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. Many kushan rulers also adopted Lord Shiva as new Gods(coins).

The Origin of Mahayana Buddhism

- Discipline became so lax that some renunciates even deserted the religious order or the samgha and resumed the householder's life. This new form of Buddhism came to be called Mahayana or the Great Vehicle.
- In the old puritan Buddhism, certain things associated with the Buddha were worshipped as his symbols. With the rise of Mahayana the old puritan school of Buddhism came to be known as the Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle.

Fortunately for the Mahayana school, Kanishka became its great patron. He convened in Kashmir a council, whose members composed 300,000 words, thoroughly elucidating the three *pitakas* or collections of Buddhist literature.

Gandhara and Mathura Schools of Art

- The Kushan empire brought together masons and other artisans trained in different schools and countries. This gave rise to several schools of art: Central Asian, Gandhara, and Mathura.
- Pieces of sculpture from Central Asia show a synthesis of both local and Indian elements influenced by Buddhism.
- 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 form of art in which images of the Buddha were made in the Graeco-Roman style, and his hair fashioned in the Graeco-Roman style.
- The influence of Gandhara art also spread to Mathura, which was primarily a centre of indigenous art. Mathura produced beautiful images of the Buddha, but it is also famous for the headless erect statue of Kanishka whose name is inscribed at its lower end.

Language, Literature, and Learning

- The Kushans were conscious of the fact that the people used various scripts and languages in their dominions, and therefore issued their coins and inscriptions in the Greek, Kharoshthi, and Brahmi scripts.
- The earliest specimen of the *kavya* style is found in the Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman in Kathiawar in about AD 150. Ashvaghosha wrote the *Buddhcharita*, which is a biography of the Buddha, and also composed *Saundarananda*, a fine example of Sanskrit *kavya*.
- The development of Mahayana Buddhism led to the composition of numerous *avadanas* (life history and teachings). Examples of important books of this genre were *Mahavastu* and *Divyavadana*.
- It is suggested that Indian theatre owed much to Greek influence. Both outdoor and indoor theatres appear in the caves of Ramgarh hill, 160 miles south of Banaras, and there is also a rest house for an actress.
- As it was borrowed from the Greeks, it came to be known as *yavanika*, a word derived from the term *yavana*, a Sanskritized form of Ionian, a branch of the Greeks known to the ancient Indians.
- Initially, the term *yavana* referred to the Greeks, but subsequently it began to be used for all foreigners.
- Bharata's *Natyasastra* was an important work on rhetoric and dramaturgy, and marked the entry of full-fledged theatre into India. The best example of secular literature is the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana.

Science and Technology

- Indian astrology was influenced by Greek ideas, and from the Greek term *horoscope* was derived the term *horashastra* that denotes astrology in Sanskrit.
- The Greek term *drachma* came to be known as *drama*. In return, the Greek rulers used the Brahmi script and represented some Indian motifs on their coins.
- The *Charakasamhita* contains names of numerous plants and herbs from which drugs were prepared. For the cure of ailments the ancient Indian physician relied chiefly on plants, for which the Sanskrit word is *oshadhi*, and as a result medicine itself came to be known as *aushadhi*.
- The introduction of the stirrup is also attributed to the Kushans. Possibly the practice of making leather shoes began in India during their period.