

Central Asian Contacts and their Results

The period around 200 BCE did not witness an empire as large as Mauryas but is regarded as an important period in terms of the intimate and widespread contacts between Central Asia and India. In Eastern India, Central India and the Deccan, the Mauryas were succeeded by a number of native rulers such as the [Sungas](#), the Kanvas and the Satavahanas. In north-western India, the Mauryas were succeeded by a number of ruling dynasties from Central Asia.

Get a comprehensive note on the [Mauryas](#) for the IAS exam in the linked article.

Indo-Greeks/Bactrian Greeks

A series of invasions took place from about 200 BCE. The first to cross the Hindukush were the Greeks, who ruled Bactria, lying south of the Oxus river in the area covered by north Afghanistan. One of the important causes of invasion was the weakness of the Seleucid empire, which had been established in Bactria and the adjoining areas of Iran called Parthia. Due to the growing pressure from the Scythian tribes, the later Greek rulers were unable to hold their power in this area. The construction of the Chinese wall prevented the Scythians from entering China. So, their attention turned towards Greeks and Parthians. Pushed by the Scythian tribes, the Bactrian Greeks were forced to invade India. The successors of Ashoka were too weak to thwart the attack.

- In the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, the [Indo-Greeks](#)/Bactrian Greeks were the first to invade India.
- The Indo-Greeks occupied a large part of north-western India, much larger than that conquered by Alexander.
- It is believed that they pushed forward to as far as Ayodhya and Pataliputra.
- However, the Greeks failed to establish a united rule in India. Two Greek dynasties ruled north-western India on parallel lines at the same time.
- The Indo-Bactrian rule is important in the history of India because of the large number of coins issued by the Greek kings.
- The Indo-Greeks were the first rulers in India to issue coins which can be definitely attributed to the kings.
- It is rather interesting to note that out of the forty-two Indo-Greek kings, as many as 34 are known only through their coins.

Demetrius (King of Bactria)

- Invaded India around 190 BCE and probably also came into conflict with Pushyamitra Sunga, founder of the Sunga dynasty.

- Conquered a large part of north-western India and also extended Bactrian rule to the south of the Hindukush.

Menander/Milinda/Minedra (165 BCE- 145 BCE)

- The most celebrated Indo-Greek ruler who stabilized Indo-Greek power and also extended his empire's frontiers in India.
- Also included southern Afghanistan and Gandhara, the region west of the Indus river.
- Had his capital at Sakala (modern Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan).
- It is believed that he invaded Ganga-Yamuna doab but had failed to retain it for long.
- He was converted to Buddhism by Nagasena, (also known as Nagarjuna). Menander has been identified with the king Milinda mentioned in the famous Buddhist text Milindapanho (Question of Milinda), which contains philosophical questions that Milinda asked Nagasena. The text claims that impressed by the answers, the king accepted Buddhism as his religion.
- He is also identified with king Minedra mentioned in a fragmented Kharosthi inscription found on a casket at Bajaur (presently in Pakistan) which refers to the enshrining of relics of the Buddha, probably in a stupa, during his reign.

Hermaeus

- He was the last ruler of this dynasty and was defeated by the Parthians around the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE, which led to the end of Greek rule in Bactria and the area to the south of the Hindukush.
- However, the Indo-Greek rule continued in north-western India for some more time.
- This north-western Gandhara region was also lost to Parthians and Shamas in due course of time.
- Later, in the late 1st century BCE or the early 1st century CE, the remaining part of the territory, i.e, the area to the east of the Jhelum also ceded to the Kshatrapa ruler Rajuvula.

Impact of the Indo-Greek Rule

- The Indo-Greeks were the first rulers in India to issue coins (gold, silver, copper and nickel). The coins of the Shamas, Parthians and the Kshatrapas followed the basic features of the Indo-Greek coinage, including the bilingual and bi-script legends. These coins provide important information about the religious sects and cults of that era (especially Shaiva and Bhagavata sects).
- The Indo-Greeks introduced Gandhara art in the north-west frontier of India, which was the outcome of the intermingling and influence of both Indian and central Asian contacts.
- The Indo-Greeks also introduced the practice of military governorship and the Governors were called strategos/satraps.
- The Hellenistic Greeks are well known for their monumental buildings and finely crafted objects. Excavation of the cities reveals a great talent in urban planning.

Shakas/Scythians

Shakas is the Indian term for the people called the Scythians, who originally belonged to Central Asia. The Greeks were followed by the Shakas, who controlled a much larger part of India than 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. Prominent rulers of this branch were Vonones and Spalirises.
- The second branch settled in Punjab with Taxila as their capital. Maues was a prominent ruler.
- The third branch settled in Mathura, where they ruled for about two centuries. Azilises was a prominent ruler.
- The fourth branch established its hold over western India, where they continued to rule till the 4th century CE.
 - They ruled for the maximum period owing to a flourishing economy based on the sea-borne trade in Gujarat and also issued a large number of silver coins.
 - One of the famous Shaka rulers was Rudradaman 1 (CE 130-150).
 - He ruled over Sindh, Kutch and Gujarat and also recovered from the Satavahanas, Kokan, the Narmada valley, Malwa and Kathiawar.
 - He is famous in history because of the repairs he undertook to improve the Sudarsana lake in the semi-arid zone of Kathiawar.
 - He was a great lover of Sanskrit and issued the first-ever long inscription in chaste Sanskrit.
 - All the earlier longer inscriptions were composed in Prakrit.
- The fifth branch of the Shakas established its power in the upper Deccan.

The Shakas did not meet effective resistance from the rulers and the masses of India. The king of Ujjain (around 58 BCE), effectively fought and succeeded in throwing the Shakas out. He called himself **Vikramaditya** and an era called Vikram-Samvat is reckoned from the event of his victory over the Shakas in 58 BCE. From this time onwards, Vikramaditya became a coveted title and whoever achieved anything great adopted this title, as the Roman emperors adopted the title Caesar in order to emphasize their great power.

Parthians

In the mid 1st century CE, the Shakas' domination in northwest India was followed by that of the Parthians.

- In many ancient Sanskrit texts, they are mentioned together as the Shaka-Pahlava.
- In fact, they ruled on parallel lines for some time.

- Originally the Parthians lived in Iran, from where they moved to India and in comparison with the Greeks and the Shakas they occupied a small portion of north-western India in the 1st century.
- The most famous Parthian king was Gondophernes (mentioned in an inscription dated 45 CE found at Takht-i-Bahi, recovered from Mardan near Peshawar) in whose reign Saint Thomas came to India to propagate Christianity.
- In due course of time, the Parthians, like the Shakas, became assimilated into Indian society and became an integral part of it. The Kushanas ultimately ousted the successors of Gondophernes from north-west India.

Kushanas

The Parthians were followed by the Kushanas who were also called Yue-Chis (moon tribe) or Tocharians. The Kushanas were one of the five clans into which the Yue-Chis tribe was divided. They were nomadic tribal people who were originally from the steppes of North Central Asia, in the neighbourhood of China. They first occupied Bactria or north Afghanistan where they displaced the Shakas, and gradually moved to the Kabul valley and seized Gandhara by crossing the Hindu Kush, replacing the rule of the Greeks and the Parthians in these areas. Finally, they set up their authority over the lower Indus basin and the greater part of the Gangetic basin. Their empire extended from the Oxus to the Ganga, from Khorasan in Central Asia to Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. A good part of Central Asia, a portion of Iran, a portion of Afghanistan, the whole of Pakistan and almost the whole of northern India were brought under one rule by the Kushanas.

The Kushana dynasty was founded by a house of chiefs called Kadphises.

Kujula Kadphises 1 (15 CE - 64 CE)

- He laid the foundation of a unified Kushana empire by amalgamating the five clans of the Yue-Chi tribe.
- He minted the coins in copper and is believed to have imitated the Roman ‘aurei’ type coins to facilitate trade.
- His coins have been found south of the Hindukush.
- His coins give an idea about his association with Buddhism.
- He adopted the epithet ‘Dharmathida’ and ‘Sachadharma thida’.

Vima Kadphises 2 (64 CE - 78 CE)

- He was the son of Kadphises 1.
- He conquered Gandhara from the Parthians and extended the kingdom to the east of the Indus till Mathura region.
- He issued a large number of gold coins.

- He was a firm devotee of Lord Shiva and proclaimed himself as 'Mahishvara' on his coins.

Kanishka (78 CE - 105 CE)

- The most famous Kushan ruler was Kanishka.
- During his reign, the kingdom expanded from Central Asia to Afghanistan and from northwestern India to further east into the Ganga valley and also southwards into the Malwa region. The empire also included Varanasi, Kaushambi and Shravasti in Uttar Pradesh and Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. The centre of this huge empire was Bactria, as is evident in the use of the Bactrian language in Kanishka's coins and inscriptions.
- The valuable information about Kanishka is provided by the famous Rabatak inscription (Afghanistan).
- Adopted the title of 'Devputra' and on some coins has been shown wearing a peaked helmet.
- His empire had two capitals - the first one was at Purushapura (Peshawar) where Kanishka erected a monastery and a huge stupa to house the Buddha's relics. The second one was at Mathura in India.
- Kanishka is famous for two reasons:
 1. First, he started an era in 78 CE which is now known as the Shaka era and is used by the government of India for its calendar.
 2. Secondly, Kanishka extended his whole-hearted patronage to Buddhism. He also convened the **fourth Buddhist council** to discuss matters relating to Buddhist theology and doctrine. It was held at Kundalavana monastery near Srinagar (Kashmir) under the presidency of Vasumitra. **It was in this council that Buddhism was split into two schools - the Hinayana and the Mahayana.**
- Kanishka patronized Buddhist scholars of that era like Vasumitra (authored Mahavibhasa), Ashvagosha (wrote the hagiographic Buddhacharita), Charaka (The father of Ayurveda), Nagarjuna (a great advocate of the Mahayana doctrine and propounded the Madhyamaka which focuses on emptiness or Sunyata).
- Kanishka embraced Buddhism in the early part of his reign. However, his coins exhibit the images of not only Buddha but also of Greek and Hindu Gods. It reflects Kanishka's tolerance towards other religions.
- Kanishka also patronised the Gandhara and the Mathura schools of sculpture. At Mathura, a headless statue of Kanishka depicting him as a warrior has been found.

Vasudeva (the last Kushana emperor)

- The successors of Kanishka were Vasishka, Huvishka, Kanishka II (who adopted the title of 'Kaiser') and Vasudeva - the last important Kushana ruler. The Kushana empire was very much

reduced in his rule. Around the mid 2nd century he took the title ‘Shaono Shao Vasudevo Koshano’, which reflects that by this time the Kushanas were totally Indianised.

Kushana power gradually declined from the early third century CE. The [Kushana empire](#) in Afghanistan and in the area west of the Indus was supplanted by the Sassanian power (of Iran) in the mid-third century CE. But Kushan principalities continued to exist in India for about a century. Some remnants of the Kushanas lingered on in the Kabul valley, Kapisa, Bactria, Khorezm and Sogdian (identical with Bukhara and Samarkand) in the third-fourth century CE.

Impact of Central Asian Contacts

The Central Asian influence was felt in almost all spheres and aspects of social life. The Shaka-Kushana phase introduced new elements to trade and agriculture, art and literature, pottery, science and technology, etc.

Pottery and Architecture

- The typical pottery of this age (Shaka-Kushana) was red ware, both in plain and polished form with medium to fine fabric.
- The distinctive pots being sprinklers and spouted channels.
- The age was marked by the construction of brick walls. The use of burnt bricks for flooring and tiles for both roofing and flooring was evident.

Trade and Agriculture

- The Shaka-Kushana phase saw the establishment of direct contact between India and Central Asia which helped to develop trade between the two.
- India imported a good deal of gold from the Altai mountains of Central Asia. Gold also may have been received in India through trade with the Roman empire.
- The silk route which started from China and crossed through the empire in Central Asia and Afghanistan to Iran and Western Asia was controlled by the Kushanas.
- This route was a source of great income to the Kushanas and they built a large prosperous empire because of the tolls levied from the traders.
- Although the Indo-Greeks introduced gold coins in India, the Kushans were the first rulers in India to issue gold coins on a large scale.
- The Kushans also promoted agriculture. The archaeological traces of irrigation facilities have been discovered in parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Western Central Asia.

Military equipment

- The Shakas and the Kushanas introduced better cavalry and popularised the use of riding horses on a large scale.
- The use of reins, saddles and toe-stirrup made of rope was common in this phase.
- They also introduced tunic, turban, trousers, heavy long coats and long boots which facilitated victories in war.

Polity

- The Shakas-Kushanas propagated the idea of the divine origin of kinship.
- The Kushan kings were called sons of god.
- The Kushanas introduced the “satrap system” of government wherein the empire was divided into numerous satrapies and each satrapy was placed under the rule of a Satrap.
- The Indo-Greeks introduced the practice of military governorship wherein they appointed their governors called strategos. Military governors were necessary to maintain the power of foreign rulers over the conquered people.

Indian Society

- The Shakas and the Kushanas added new elements to Indian culture and enriched it immensely.
- They settled in India for good and completely identified themselves with its culture.
- Since they did not have their own script, language or religion, they adopted these elements of culture from India.
- They became completely Indianised in course of time.
- As most of them came as conquerors they were absorbed in Indian society as a warrior class, Kshatriyas.
- The lawgiver Manu stated that the Shakas and the Parthians were the Kshatriyas who had fallen from their status and were thus considered as second-class Kshatriyas.
- In no other period of ancient history were foreigners assimilated into Indian society on such a large scale as they were in the post-Maurya period.

Religion

- Some of the foreign rulers converted to Vaishnavism (worshipped Vishnu - the god of protection and preservation).
- The Greek ambassador Heliodorus set up a pillar in honour of Vishnu near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh.
- A few others adopted Buddhism, as in the case of the Greek ruler Menander who became a Buddhist.
- The Kushana rulers worshipped both Shiva and the Buddha as is evident from the images of these two gods on the Kushana coins.

- **The origin of Mahayana Buddhism:** The Central Asian contacts also influenced the Indian religions especially Buddhism.
 - Buddhism in its original form was too puritanical and abstract for foreigners.
 - They did not appreciate the philosophical doctrines of Buddhism, emphasized by the existing Buddhist schools.
 - So, there developed a new form of Buddhism called the Mahayana or the Great Wheel, in which the image of the Buddha began to be worshipped.
 - This sect opened its doors for all sections of people.
 - Those who did not follow this sect (newly found) came to be known as the followers of the Hinayana sect or the Small Wheel.
 - Kanishka was a great patron of the Mahayana form of Buddhism who not only organised the fourth Buddhist council at Srinagar but also set up many stupas to perpetuate the memory of the Buddha.

Also read: [Buddhist Councils](#)

Art and Literature

The construction of stupas and development of regional schools of sculpture are the two main features concerning art and architecture of this period.

- **Stupas** - A stupa is a large hemispherical dome having a central chamber in which relics of the Buddha or some Buddhist monk are kept in a small casket. The base is surrounded by a path for clockwise circumambulation (pradakshina), enclosed by wooden railings which were later made in stone. The three main stupas of this period are at Bharhut (dates to the middle of the second century, its railings are made of red stone), Sanchi (three big stupas were constructed at Sanchi, the biggest one was originally made by Ashoka, which was enlarged to twice its size in the second century), and Amravati and Nagarjunkonda (Andhra Pradesh).
- **Schools of Sculpture** - The Central Asian rulers became enthusiastic patrons of Indian art and culture and showed great zeal in establishing new schools of art. The Kushana empire brought together masons and other artisans trained in different schools and countries. Indian craftsmen came into contact with the Greeks and the Romans, especially in the north-western frontier of India in Gandhara. The three main schools of sculptural art which developed in this period were - Gandhara school of Art, Mathura school of Art and Amravati school of Art.

Gandhara School of Art	Mathura School of Art	Amravati School of Art
It is also known as the Graeco-Buddhist school of art. It was based on Graeco Roman norms wherein the theme of sculptures is	It was a purely indigenous school of art. It evolved from the representation of Yakshas (male deities). The presentation of female beauty as a	This school of art was also indigenous in nature.

predominantly Buddhist but their style is Greek.	vehicle of art was a novel experiment of the Mathura school.	
Found primarily in north-west India.	Found primarily in Mathura, Sonkh and Kankalitila (part of north India).	Found in Andhra Pradesh between the valleys of the rivers Krishna and Godavari.
It is believed to have flourished between 100 CE and 700 CE.	It is said to have flourished between 100 BCE and 600 CE.	It is believed to have flourished between 150 BCE and 350 CE.
The Kushanas were the main patrons of this form of art.	The Kushanas were the main patrons of this form of art.	The Satavahanas were the main patrons and were later propagated by their successors -Ikshvaku rulers.
Mainly Buddhist images are found. There is a great influence of Buddhism and Hellenistic realism. The famous Bamiyan Buddha of Afghanistan belongs to this school of art.	It is influenced by all the three religions - Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanism. It consists of the stone images of Buddha, Mahavira and also of Brahmanical deities. The sculptures of Brahmanical deities like Kartikeya, Vishnu, Kubera along with the headless erect statue of Kanishka were carved during the Kushana period. The Mathura school of art also produced sculptures of Jaina deities besides the ayagapatas or stone slabs to place objects of worship and Sarvatobhadrika image of four Jain Jinas. The sculptures of yakshas and yakshis, naga and naganis, and other sensual females are also part of this school of art.	The thematic representations include the stories from the life of the Buddha, mostly from Jatakas.
Chief characteristic features of Gandhara school of art - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sculpture is shown in spiritual state. Realistic images. 	Chief characteristic features of Mathura school of art- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sculpture in delighted mood. Images are lacking in spiritual look. 	The chief characteristic feature of the Amravati school is narrative art, depicting an incident in a natural way. For instance, one medallion depicts a whole

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less ornaments. • Lean body. • Expressive images. • Great detailing and rich carving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having strong muscular structure and energetic. • Attention is not paid to detailing. • Less expressive images. 	<p>story of ‘taming of an elephant by the Buddha’. There is a prominence of human figures in comparison to figures drawn from nature.</p>
<p>Features of Buddha sculpture -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Buddha. • Sad Buddha. • Bearded Buddha. • Buddha in yogi postures. • Buddha is depicted with a garment draped in Graeco-Roman style, with wavy hairs, large forehead and long ears. • Halo not decorated. <p>Different Mudras portrayed-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abhaya Mudra (don't fear). • Bhumisparsha Mudra (touching the earth). • Dhyana Mudra (meditation). • Dharmachakra Mudra (preaching pose). 	<p>Features of Buddha sculpture -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delighted Buddha. • Lacking spiritual look. • With no beard or moustache. • Shaven head and face. • Seated in Padmasana. • Graceful posture of Buddha. • The halo around the Buddha was heavily decorated with geometrical motifs. • Buddha is surrounded by two monk s- Padmapani (holding lotus) and Vajrapani (holding vajra). • The standing Buddha of Sravasti and Kaushambi. 	<p>Sculptures of this school are mainly found on the railings, plinths and other parts of stupas.</p>
<p>Predominantly, blue-grey stone used for making idols of Buddha and Bodhisattva.</p>	<p>Local red stone with black spots used to make the images.</p>	<p>Used white marble-like stone to carve out the figures.</p>

Literature and Learning

- The Central Asian rulers patronized and cultivated the Sanskrit language.
- The earliest specimen of the Kavya style is found in the inscription of Rudradaman in Kathiawar.
- Some of the great creative writers such as Asvaghosha enjoyed the patronage of the Kushanas.
 - Asvaghosha wrote the Buddhacharita, which is a biography of the Buddha.

- He also composed Saundarananda, which is an example of Sanskrit Kavya.
- The progress of Mahayana Buddhism led to the composition of numerous avadanas and these texts were written in Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit and the main objective of these texts was to preach the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.
 - Some of the important books of this genre were the Mahavastu and the Divyavadana.
- The Greeks also contributed to the development of the Indian theatre, by introducing the use of the curtain, which was called Yavanika.
- The Kamasutra (earliest erotic work on sex and lovemaking) was composed during this time by Vatsyayana and is considered the best example of secular literature of this period.

Science and Technology

- Indian astrology and astronomy profited from the contacts with the Greeks.
- The term ‘horasastra’ used for astrology in Sanskrit was derived from the Greek term ‘horoscope’.
- For cure of ailments, the ancient Indian physicians relied mainly on plants which are ‘oshadi’ in Sanskrit and as a result medicine was named ‘aushadhi’.
- The Greeks contributed much to the development of medicine, botany and chemistry.
- It seems that the process of making leather objects (boots) began during this period.
- The copper, gold coins were an imitation of Roman coins.
- Working in glassmaking during this period was especially influenced by foreign practices and in no other period in India did glass making make such progress as it did during this time.