

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Saka Era (The Sakas) [NCERT Notes - Ancient Indian History for UPSC]

After the decline of the Mauryan Empire, northwest India was constantly under attack from various invaders from Central and West Asia. The Indo-Greek rule lasted from about 180 BC till about 55 BC. The Sakas (also written Shakas), alternatively known as Indo-Scythians, invaded northwest India in the first century BC onwards.



Saka Era Origin

The beginning of the Saka Era can be related to the ascent of the king Chashtana. The period of the Saka Era falls between 11 years and 52 years. This information was retrieved from the inscriptions of the king Chashtana.

- Scythians (referred to as Sakas in Indian sources) were a group of Iranian nomadic pastoral tribes.
- In the second century BC, central Asian nomadic tribes and tribes from the Chinese region invaded the region of present-day Kazakhstan whose inhabitants were Scythians.
- This promoted the Scythians to move towards Bactria and Parthia. After defeating the Parthian king, they moved towards India. Scythians who migrated to India are known as Indo-Scythians.

- The Sakas had an Indian kingdom larger than the Indo-Greeks.

Rulers during the Saka Era

Maues (Reign 80 BC – 65 BC)

- Maues, also known as Moga was the earliest Indo-Scythian king.
- He ruled over Gandhara (present Pakistan and Afghanistan).
- He invaded the Indo-Greek territories but unsuccessfully.
- His capital was at Sirkap (Punjab, Pakistan).
- Many coins issued by Maues have been found. They contain Buddhist and also Hindu symbols. The languages used in these coins were Greek and Kharoshthi.
- His son Azes I acquired the remaining Indo-Greek territories by defeating Hippostratos.

Chashtana (Reign 78 AD – 130 AD)

- He was a Saka ruler of the Western Kshatrapas (Satraps) dynasty who ruled over Ujjain.
- The Saka Era is believed to have started at his ascension to power in 78 AD.
- Ptolemy mentions him as “Tiasthenes” or “Testenes”.
- He was the founder of one of the two major Saka Kshatrapa dynasties in northwest India, the Bhadramukhas. The other dynasty was called Kshaharatas and included the king Nahapana (who was defeated by Satavahana king Gautamiputra Satakarni).

Rudradaman I (Reign 130 AD – 150 AD)

- He is considered the greatest of the Saka rulers.
- He is from the Western Kshatrapa dynasty.
- He was the grandson of Chastana.
- His kingdom included Konkan, Narmada valley, Kathiawar, other parts of Gujarat and Malwa.
- He conducted the repair work of the Sudarshana Lake at Kathiawar.
- He married a Hindu woman and had converted to Hinduism.
- He also issued the first long inscription in chaste Sanskrit.
- He took up the title of Makakshatrapa after becoming king.
- He maintained marital relationships with the Satavahanas. Vashishtiputra Satakarni was his son-in-law. But he also fought numerous wars with them.
- He regained through conquests most of the territories previously under Nahapana.
- He supported Sanskrit literature and cultural arts.
- It was during Rudradaman's reign that Yavaneshwara, the Greek writer lived in India and translated the Yavanajataka from Greek to Sanskrit.

Decline of the Sakas

- The Saka Empire started declining after their defeat at the hands of the Satavahana Emperor Gautamiputra Satakarni.
- The Saka rule in northwest India and Pakistan came to an end after the death of Azes II (12 BC) when the region came under the Kushanas.
- In western India, their rule came to an end in the 4th century AD when the last Western Satrap Saka ruler Rudrasimha III was defeated by Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty.