

Examrace

Competitive Exams: History And Impact Of Indo-Greeks

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After Alexander the Great, the Greek Seleucid dynasty of Persia held on to the trans-Indus region. After Seleukos Nikator was defeated by Chanragupta Maurya in 303 B. C. The trans-Indus region was transferred to the Mauryas. In mid third century B. C. The Seleucid rule was ended by two peoples. In Iran the Parthians became independent and their Sassanians in 226 A. D. In like manner the Greeks of Bactria rose in revolt under the leadership of Diodotus. These Greeks were later known as Indo-Greeks when they gained a foothold in the Indian sub-continent.

Bactria situated between the Hindu Kush and the Oxus, was a fertile region and it controlled the trade routes from Gandhara to the West. The Greek settlement in Bactria began in the 5th century B. C. When Persian emperors settled the Greek exiles in that area.

Bactria figured in history with the revolt of Diodotus against Antiochus the Seleucid king. This breakaway of Bactria was recognised by the Seleucids when the grandson of Diodotus, Antiochus, was given a Seleucid bride in about 200 B. C.

About the same time the Seleucid king defeated King Subhagasena after crossing the Hindu Kush in 206 B. C. This defeat reveals the unguarded nature of northwestern India.

Thus begins the history of Indo-Greeks. The history of the Indo-Greeks is mainly gathered from their coins. This evidence is very often confusing because many kings had identical names.

The son of Euthydemus, Demetrius, conquered modern southern Afghanistan and the Makran area he also occupied some parts of Punjab. Then around 175 B. C. The homeland of Bactrians came to be ruled by Eukratides, another branch of the Bactrians. His son Demetrius II penetrated deep into the Punjab proceeding along the Indus, he penetrated till Kutch.

The most known Indo-Greek was Menander, whose claim rests on the Buddhist treatise the Questions of King Milinda-discussion between Menander and the Buddhist philosopher, Nagasena and he ruled the Punjab from c. 160 to 140 B. C.

Menander not only stabilized his power but extended his frontiers. His coins are to be found in the region extending from Kabul to Mathura near Delhi. He attempted to conquer the Ganges valley but in vain. Probably he was defeated by the Sungas.

After Menander one Strato ruled. At that time Bactria was ruled by a different group of Bactrians. Probably Mithradates-I of Persia annexed the region of Taxila during the third quarter of the second century B. C.

A little later, Antialkidas ruled from Taxila as known from the inscription from Besnagar near Bhilsa. This inscription was incised on the order of Heliodoros, who was the envoy of Antialkidas in the court of Besnagar. Heliodoros got a monolithic column built in honour of Vasudeva. Thus began the Bhakti cult of Vasudeva.

The last known Greek kings were Hippostratos and Hermaeus, the former defeated by Moga and the latter by Khadphisus.

Indo-Greek influence declined from the time Bactria itself was attacked by the nomadic tribes from central Asia, the Scythians.

The penetration of Indo-Greeks, as well as of Sakas, Pahlavas and Kushana influenced the government, society, religion, literature and art of ancient India. The very fact that India absorbed influences of these foreigners speaks for the then youthful nature of Indian civilization.

The extent of Greek influence on Indian Civilisation is a moot point. Whatever the Greek influence that was felt by India came in the wake of Alexander's invasion of the east and the settlement of Greeks in the Bactrian region. Alexander himself cannot be regarded as the standard bearer of the heritage of ancient Greece. By the time Alexander and his soldiers marched towards the east the culture of Greece was on the decline hence at the most Alexander and his men could have spread a debased version of the great Greek civilization represented by Socrates, Plato, Phidias, Aristotle, Sophocles, Pythagoras and others. Despite the fact that Alexander and his men could not be the true torch bearers of Greek culture to the east, the traces of Greek influence could be definitely found on India civilization.

Talking of social life, a number of Greeks figure as donors in the inscription of the Karle caves. The Greek mode of wearing hair and the habit of eating in a lying posture came into vogue. Also when some of the Indo-Greeks settled in India, they took to trade and they became affluent merchants. Even Tamil literature refers to Greek ships bringing cargoes, and the Greek section of Kaveripattinam was very prosperous. And some of the Tamil kings kept Greek body-guards.

Regarding science, contemporary writers admit the greatness of the Greek scientists. The Gargi Samhita admits that the Greeks were like gods in science and they penetrated into India as far as Pataliputra. Varahmihira, during the Gupta age was in the know of Greek science and used a number of Greek technical terms in his works, It is also argued that Charaka was influenced by the works of Hippocrates, the father of Medicine, but there is no evidence to confirm this view. Thus it is difficult to conjecture the extent to which ancient scientists of India were influenced by the scientific knowledge of Greeks.

In the field of art, first the Indo-Greeks did contribute to the cutters' art. They showed a remarkable skill in making the portraits of rulers. Also the Greek kings adopted some of the indigenous methods of minting the coins. Although Indians did not fully learn the fine art of die-cutting, the coins of Indian rulers were influenced by the Greeks. Indians adopted the art of

striking coins with two dies, the obverse and the reverse. Secondly, the curious open air theatre that came into being in this period was directly a Greek legacy. The term Yavanika for curtain shows that Indian drama, at least on one point, was influenced by the Greek model. Thirdly, the Greek form of sculpture influenced the Gandhara art of the Kushan period. The school began in the Kabul valley where the Greek influence was the maximum. Accordingly, the terracottas of toys and plaques were all influenced by the Greeks.

In the religious field too, the Greek influence was felt, as borne out by Millinda-Panho and the Besnagar inscription. Legions of Greeks were converted into Indian religions of the day. One Greek officer, Theodorus, got the relics of the Buddha enshrined in the Swat valley. Besides, Hindu iconography was greatly changed because of the Indo-Greek influences. It is difficult to say how many Babylonian and Iranian Gods were incorporated in Hindu religions. A few deities were taken over by the Parthians and they were adopted by the Kushans. But it is doubtful to say as to which of the Greek deities were incorporated in the Pantheon of Indian gods.

All told, the Greek influence was mostly felt in art (the Gandhara sculptures, which probably influenced the later day Mathura sculptures) and in religion (gave a fillip to Mahayana Buddhism and popularized the Bhakti aspect of religion as pioneered by the Vasudeva cult).

Sungas

The Sunga rule, extending a little over a century, is an interlude in the history of India. There is nothing extraordinary about the political events associated with the Sungas. The significance of their history, on the other hand, primarily consists in the place they occupy in the social and cultural history of India.

The founder of the dynasty, Pushyamitra Sunga, overthrew the Mauryas; either in 187 B. C. or 184 B. C. After him there were nine other rulers. Among them, Agnimitra, Vasumitra, Bhagvata and Devabhumi were the prominent ones. The names of the first two were associated with some events in political history, whereas the latter two were known for their long rule, they being 32 and 10 years respectively.

There is some controversy about the identity of Pushyamitra Sunga. It was stated in a Sutra that he belonged to a family of teachers. Patanjali claims that he was a Brahmin of the Bhardwaja gotra. Iyavardana stated that the Sungas were related to the Mauryas. A Malavikagnimitram refers to them as Brahmins belonging to the Kashyap gotra.

After the overthrow of Brihadrata, Pushyamitra Sunga waged a few wars to consolidate his position. Evidence shows that Pushyamitra Sunga defeated the Yavanas. This is confirmed by Patanjali's Mahabhashya. And the claim made in the Hathigumpha inscription that Kharavela of Kalinga defeated Pushyamitra Sunga cannot be sustained because Kharavela ruled in the second half of the first century B. C. Later, Vasumitra, the grandson of Pushyamitra Sunga, defeated the Yavanas. This is confirmed by the Malavikagnimitram and Gargi Samhita. Both Agnimitra and Veerasena fought against Vidarbha rule of the Sungas ended c. 75 B. C.

Some scholars regard that the establishment of Sunga dynasty was symbolic of the brahminical reaction to the Mauryan bias towards Buddhism. Pushyamitra Sunga performed the vedic sacrifices of asvamedha, and the others like aginstoma, Rajasuya and vajpeiya. But some facts of his reign clearly show that he did not persecute Buddhists. The claim of Divyavandana, that Pushyamitra Sunga destroyed 84,000 Buddhist stupas and slaughtered sramans, has no corroborative evidence. Interestingly, the sculptured stone gateway and the massive stone railing around Sanchi stupa were executed during the time of Pushyamitra Sunga. Also the Bharhut stupa and the sculpture relating to Jataka stories around it came into existence during the same period. One of the donors of Bharhut stupa was Champadevi wife of the Idisha King, who was a worshipper of Vishnu. This fact bears testimony to the high degree of tolerance prevailing during the period (And some minor works of Sunga art are to be found at Mathura, Kausambi and Sarnath).

It at all there was anything like persecution of Buddhists during the days of Pushyamitra Sunga, it could be in the context of Menander's invasion. Maybe, the Buddhists of India welcomed the invasion of Menander and this might have resulted in Pushyamitra Sunga's wrath falling on the Buddhists. Or, maybe withdrawal of royal patronage with the coming of the Sungas apparently enraged the Buddhists and thus the Buddhist writers present an exaggerated account of their troubles.

The importance of the Sungas, therefore, was primarily in the context of cultural and social development. In the social field, the emergence of Hinduism had a wide impact. The Sungas attempted to revive the caste system with the social supremacy of the brahmins. This is more than evident in the work of Manu (Manusmriti) wherein he reassures the position of the brahmins in the fourfold society. Even then, the most significant development of the Sunga era was marked by various adjustments and adaptations leading to the emergence of mixed castes and the assimilation of the foreigners in India society. Thus we notice that Brahminism gradually transformed itself in a direction towards Hinduism.

In the field of literature Sanskrit gradually gained ascendancy and became the language of the court. Patanjali was patronized by Pushyamitra Sunga and he was the second great grammarian of Sanskrit. Patanjali refers to a Sanskrit poet, Vararuchi, who wrote in the Kavya style and which was later perfected by Kalidasa. Some Buddhist works of this age were written in Sanskrit.

In the field of art, there was immediate reaction against the Buddhist era of the Mauryas. Nevertheless, there were certain differences. The Sunga art reflects more of the mind, culture, tradition and ideology than what the Mauryan art did. During the Sunga period, stone replaced wood in the railings and the gateways of the Buddhist stupas as noticed at Bharhut and Sanchi. Bharhut stupa is replete with sculptures—apart from floral designs, animal figures, Yakshas and human figures. Even the stone railing around the Sanchi Stupa is in rich relief work. This age definitely witnessed the increasing use of symbols and human figures in architecture. Besides, the Sunga art is a manifestation of popular artistic genius—the artistic activity was because of the initiative of individuals, corporations or villages. A part of the

gateway of Sanchi was constructed by the artisans of Vidisha. Even temple building began in this period. A Vishnu temple was built near Vidisha. There was an increase in the construction of rock-cut temple as noticed in the Chaitya Hall. In the temples and household worship we find the idols of Shiva and Vishnu.

All told the importance of the Sunga dynasty lies in the restoration of Real politik while abandoning the Asokan approach. In the cultural field the beginnings as well as accomplishments in sculpture and architecture are of tremendous significance. In the field of religion too they not only revived the earlier tradition but also gave an impetus to new approaches combative towards the heterodox sects the cult of Katakana the god of war the resurgence of Bhagvata cult and the supremacy of Vasudeva in the Hindu pantheon.

Kushans

In the post-Mauryan era, central Asia and north-western India witnessed hectic and shifting political scenes. The Great Yuehi-chi driven out of fertile land in Western China migrated towards the Aral Sea. There they encountered the Sakas near Syr Darya river and evicted them. The Great Yuehi-Chi tribes settled in the valley of Oxus and with the occupation of the Bactrian lands the great hordes were divided into five principalities. A century later the Kushan section or sect of Yuehi-Chi attained predominance over the others. Their leader was Kadphises. Thus began the history of Kushans.

The unique geographical position of the Kushans empire made it a colossus astride on the spine of Asia uniting the Greco-Roman civilization in the west the Chinese civilization in the east and Indian civilisation in the south-east.

The leader of the Kushans was Kadphises and his rule probably began in 40 A. D. He attacked the regions south of Hindu Kush, conquered Kabul and annexed Gandhara including the kingdom of Taxila. Kadphises died in 77 A. D. Or 78 A. D. By then the Kushans had supplanted the princes belonging to the Indo-Greek Saka and Indo-Parthian communities along the frontiers of India. The successor of Kadphises was Vima-Kadphises. He conquered large parts of northern India. His coins show that his authority extended as far as Banaras and as well as the Indus basin. In all likelihood his power extended as far as Narbada and the Saka satraps in Malwa and Western India acknowledged his sovereignty.

By that time the Chinese reasserted their authority in the north and this led to a collusion with the Kushans. The Chinese general Pan-Chao conquered Chinese Turkistan and established the Chinese authority in Parthia that is on the territory south of the Caspian sea.

These advances frightened the Kushans. In 87 AD Kadphises II, claimed the hand of a Chinese prince, an acknowledgement of his equality with the son of Heaven. The proposal was rejected and Kadphises, dispatched a large army, but the army was decimated because of the difficult terrain. And it was easily defeated by the Chinese. The Kushan ruler was compelled to pay tribute to China and the Chinese records so that the Kushans continued to send missions to China till the close of the century. Possibly the reign of Kadphises II ended c. 110 A. D.

The next ruler, Kanishka probably belonged to the little Yuehi-chi section of the horde. His capital was Purushapura and here he erected a large number of Buddhist buildings. In his early years he annexed Kashmir and consolidated his rule in the Indus and the Gangetic basin. His army crossed the Pamirs and inflicted a defeat on the Chinese. The chief of Khotan, Yarkand and the Ksshgar were made to pay tribute. Tradition states that while Kanishka was on his return from the Chinese Turkistan, he was sothered to death by his officers who had got weary of his campaigns. Most of his time was spent on waging wars.

A large number of inscriptions were incised during the times of Kanishka and his successor. According to evidence, Kanishka became an active partron of the Buddhist Church during the later part of his reign. Although the Buddhist records gloat over this fact and regard him as the second Asoka, his coins prove that he honoured a medley of gods-zoroastrain, Greek, Mitraic, and Indian. The prominent Indian duty on the coins was Shiva. The peculiar assembly of deities by the Kushans offers a great deal of speculation. May be Kansihka follwed a loose from of Zorostrianism and freely venerated the deities of other greeds.

Also, Kanishka covened a council of Buddhist theologians to settle disputes relating to Buddhist faith and practices. The conclusions of this council were engraved on copper sheets and preserved in the stupa of the capital. The delgates to the council primarily belonged to the Hinayana sect.

The Buddhism of this period was definitely a lax one. The Mahayana sect was popular. But early Buddhism was an India product and was based on the Indian ideas of rebirth, transmigration of souls and the blessedness of escape from the pains of being. This Buddhism was supported by a practical system of ethics inculcating a stoic devotion to duty for its own sake. Such a teaching needed fundamental changes to attract the sturdy mountaineer, the nomad horseman and the Helloe rized Alexandrian. The veneration for a dead teacher passed into a worship of living seviour.

Soon the Kushan power declined. Within the Kingdom, harm was done to the Kushan Empire by the Nagas and Yaudheyas. A Naga ruler probably performed ten ashvamedha sacrifices. Apart from these two communities, a few other tribes also, like the Malavas and the Kunindas, probably regained their importance at the expense of the Kushan empire.

Apart from the weaknesses to the successors of Kanishka, developments in the Persia influenced the history of North western India. The Parthians were overthrown by Ardashir in 226 A. D. Who established the Sassanian dynasty. His successors annxed Peshawar and Taxila during the middle of the 3rd century. And Kushan kings in the north-west became the vassals of the Sassanians. The successors of Kanishka, as established today, are the following: Vashiska (102 – 106), Hyvishka (106 – 138), and Vasudeva (c. 152 – 176). The history after this period is extremely vague. Over the ruins of the empire, in Central Asia and the west, rose the Sassanian empire of Persia and in India. The Gupta empire.

Speaking in general about the achievement of the Kushans, the first is the economic prosperity. As the Kushan empire was situated in a crucial geographical region. There was

brisk trade. Moreover, the very area covered by the Kushan empire helped the flow of trade between the east and the west. Some trade routes which came into existence in this period continued to serve the future also. Gold coins of great complexity were issued by the Kushans.

These coins speak of the prosperity of the people. The coins of Kanishka usually show the figure of Kanishka standing and sacrificing at altar, and on the obverse, deities belonging to various religions. The coins of the Kushans also show that the Kushans were in contact with the Romans-the weight of the Kushan coins has certain similarities with the Roman coins. According to the author of the Periplus gold and silver species were imported at Barygaza (Broach).

As regards art and literature, we have to state that their greatest contribution was the Gandhara art. It was in this period that the stone images of the Buddha and the Bodhisattavas were craved out. The chief of quality of this art is the blending of Buddhist subjects with Greek forms. Images of the Buddha appear in the likeness of Apollo, and the Yakshakubera is posed in the fasino of Zeus. The imprint of this school of art is still to be found in Mathura and Amarvati. Indeed, the carving of images and the building of temples was not neglected in earlier days, but under the Kushans they attained a refinement. The Chaitya built at Peshawar was as high as four storeys. Fa-Hien, passing through Gandhara, during the fifth century, praised the images of the Buddha, Bodhisattavas and numerous other deities. The early rulers fostered the Hellenistic art of Gandhara and also the Bhikshu Bela, and from this place artistic products were sent to Sarasvati and Sarnath. Kanishka was a great builder-tower at Peshawar, a new city in Taxila, a town in Kashmir and fine buildings and sculptures at Mathura. It was at the last place a portrait stature of Kanishka has been found but its head is not there. Further, the die-engravers employed by the Kushans were far from negligible. A special note is to be taken of coinage. The Kushan coins became the prototypes for many varieities of coins of Yadheyas, the imperial Guptas, some kings of Nepa and several Kings of Chedi. Eminent Buddhist writers-Nagajuna, Asvaghosha and Vasumitra were the names associated with Kanishka. The first was a poet, musician, scholar and a zealous Buddhist monk. Charaka was the court physician of Kanishka.

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