

Central Asian Contact and Mutual Impact

I Political Aspects

The period that began in about 200 BC did not witness a large empire like that of the Mauryas, but it is notable for intimate and widespread contacts between Central Asia and India. 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. Of them, the Kushans became the most famous.

The Indo-Greeks

A series of invasions began in about 200 BC. 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. The invaders came one after another, but some of them ruled simultaneously. 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. On account of growing pressure from the Scythian tribes, the later Greek rulers were unable to sustain power in this area. With the construction of the Chinese wall, the Scythians were pushed back from the Chinese border. They therefore turned their attention towards the neighbouring Greeks and Parthians. 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.

The first to invade India were the Greeks, who are called the Indo-Greeks or Indo-Bactrians. In the beginning of the second century BC, the Indo-Greeks occupied a large part of north-western India, a much larger area than that conquered by Alexander. It is said that they pushed forward as far as Ayodhya and Pataliputra. However, the Greeks failed to establish united rule in India. 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. He is known for the variety and wide spread of coins in his dominions. He was converted to Buddhism by Nagasena, who is also known as Nagarjuna. 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 that can be definitively attributed to particular kings. This is not possible in the case of the early punch-marked coins, which cannot be assigned with certainty to any particular dynasty. 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, but this was not purely Greek but the outcome of Greek contact with non-Greek conquered peoples after Alexander's death. 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 Shakas did not face any effective resistance from the rulers and peoples of India. In about 57–58 BC we hear of 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. From this time onwards, Vikramaditya became a coveted title. Whoever achieved anything great adopted this title just as the Roman emperors adopted the title Caesar to demonstrate their great power. As a result of this practice, we have as many as fourteen Vikramadityas in Indian history, Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty being the most famous of them. The title continued to be fashionable with the Indian kings till the twelfth century, and it was especially prevalent in the western part of India and the western Deccan.

Although the Shakas established their rule in different parts of the country, only those who ruled in western India held power for any considerable length of time, for about four centuries or so. They benefited from the sea-borne trade in Gujarat and issued numerous silver coins. 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.

Rudradaman was a great lover of Sanskrit. Although he had Central Asian ancestors, he issued the first-ever long inscription in chaste Sanskrit. All the earlier longer inscriptions that we have in India were composed in Prakrit which had been made the state language by Ashoka.

The Parthians

Shaka 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 Shaka–Pahlavas. In fact, both of them ruled over India in parallel for some time. Originally the Parthians or the Pahlavas lived in Iran from where they moved to India. In comparison to the Greeks and the Shakas, they occupied only a small portion of north-western India in the first century AD. The most famous Parthian king was Gondopernes during whose reign St Thomas is said to have come to India to propagate Christianity. In course of time, the Parthians, like the Shakas before them, became an integral part of Indian polity and society.

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. 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. The early Kushan kings issued numerous gold coins with a higher degree of metallic purity than is found in the Gupta gold coins. 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. Hence, besides the Ganga– Yamuna doab they had established their authority in the greater part of the middle Gangetic basin. 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. Although outside the borders of India, he seems to have suffered defeat at the hands of the Chinese, 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. Kanishka was also a great patron of art and architecture. Kanishka's successors continued to rule in north-western India till about AD 230, and some of them bore a typical Indian name such as Vasudeva.

The Kushan empire in Afghanistan and in the area west of the Indus was supplanted in the mid-third century by the Sassanian power which originated in Iran. However, Kushan principalities continued to exist in India for about a century. The Kushan authority seems to have lingered in the Kabul valley, Kapisa, Bactria, Khorezm, and Sogdiana (coterminous with Bokhara and Samarkand in Central Asia) in the third–fourth centuries. Many Kushan coins, inscriptions, and terracottas have been found in these areas. This is especially so at a place called Toprak-Kala in Khorezm, situated south of the Aral Sea on the Oxus, where a huge Kushan palace of the third–fourth centuries has been unearthed. It housed an administrative archive containing inscriptions and documents written in Aramaic script and the Khorezmian language.

The Indo-Sassanians

However, by the middle of the third century, the Sassanians had occupied the lower Indus region. Initially they called this region Hindu, not in the sense of religion but in the sense of the Indus people. A Sassanian inscription of AD 262 uses the term Hindustan for this region. Thus the term Hindustan used for India in Mughal and modern times was first used in the third century AD. The Sassanians, also called the Indo-Sassanians, ruled in India for less than a century but they contributed to the Indian economy by issuing a large number of coins.

II Cultural Consequences

Structures and Pottery

The Shaka–Kushan phase saw a distinct advance in building activities. Excavations have revealed several layers of construction, sometimes over half a dozen, at various sites in north India. In them we find the use of burnt bricks for flooring and tiles for both flooring and roofing. However, the use of tiles may not have been adopted from outside. The period also saw the construction of brick-walls. The characteristic pottery is red ware, both plain and polished, with

medium to fine fabric. The distinctive pots are sprinklers and spouted channels. They remind us of red pottery with thin fabric found in the same period in Kushan layers in Central Asia. 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 settled in India for good and completely identified themselves with its culture. As they did not have their own script, written language, or any organized religion, they adopted these components of culture from India and became an integral part of Indian society to which they contributed considerably. They introduced better cavalry and the use of the riding horse on a large scale.

They popularized the use of reins and saddles, which appear in the Buddhist sculpture of the second and third centuries AD. 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. Some of these foreign horsemen were heavily armoured and fought with spears and lances. Presumably they also used some form of toe stirrup made of rope which facilitated their movements. 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. Given these advantages, they made a clean sweep of their opponents in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Later, when this military technology spread in India, the dependent princes turned them to good use against their former conquerors.

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. Gold may also have been received by it through trade with the Roman empire. 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. This route was a source of substantial income for the Kushans, and they built a large prosperous empire on the strength of the tolls

levied from traders. 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 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.

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. 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 post-Maurya times.

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 Heliiodorus 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 Vasudeva, 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 monks and nuns could not afford to lose the cash donations from the growing body of traders and artisans concentrated in towns. Large numbers of coins are found in the monastic areas of Nagarjunakonda in AP. Also, the Buddhists welcomed foreigners who were non-vegetarians. All this meant laxity in the day-to-day living of the nuns and monks who led an austere life. They now accepted gold and silver, took to non-vegetarian food, and wore elaborate robes. 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. These were replaced with his images at the time when the Christian era began. Image worship started with Buddhism but was followed on a large scale in Brahmanism. 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. Kanishka got these commentaries engraved on sheets of red copper, enclosed them in a stone receptacle, and raised a stupa over it. If this tradition is correct, the discovery of the stupa with its copper inscriptions could shed new light on Buddhist texts and teachings. Kanishka set up many other stupas to perpetuate the memory of the Buddha.

Gandhara and Mathura Schools of Art

The foreign princes became enthusiastic patrons of Indian art and literature, and displayed the zeal characteristic of new converts. 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. It also produced several stone images of Vardhamana Mahavira. Its pre-Gupta sculpture and inscriptions ignore Krishna, although Mathura is considered his birthplace and the scene of his early life. The Mathura school of art flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era, and its products made of red sandstone are found even outside Mathura. Currently the Mathura Museum possesses the largest collection of the pieces of Kushan sculpture in India.

During the same period, beautiful works of art were created at several places south of the Vindhya. Wonderful Buddhist caves were constructed out of rock in Maharashtra. In AP, Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati became great centres of Buddhist art, and stories associated with the Buddha were portrayed on numerous panels. The earliest panels dealing with Buddhism are to be found at Bodhi-Gaya, Sanchi, and Bharhut, and relate to the second century BC. However, further development in sculpture occurred in the early centuries of the Christian era.

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. Similarly, they used Greek, Prakrit, and Sanskrit-influenced Prakrit, and towards the end of their rule pure Sanskrit. The rulers thus officially recognized three scripts and four languages, and Kushana coins and inscriptions suggest the commingling and coexistence of different scripts and languages. The Kushan method of communicating with the people also indicates literacy in their times. More importantly, although the Mauryas and Satavahanas patronized Prakrit, some Central Asian princes patronized and cultivated Sanskrit literature. The earliest specimen of the *kavya* style is found in the Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman in Kathiawar in about AD 150. From then onwards, inscriptions began to be composed in chaste Sanskrit, although the use of Prakrit in composing inscriptions continued till the fourth century and even later.

It appears that some of the great creative writers such as Ashvaghosha enjoyed the patronage of the Kushans. 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). Most of these texts were composed in what is now known as Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit with the sole objective of communicating the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism to the people. 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. The plan of the theatre is supposed to be of Greek origin. Some scholars doubt this type of Greek influence, but there is little doubt that the curtain entered Indian theatre under Greek influence. 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.

However, India's contribution to the development of theatre is undeniable. Around 150 BC, Patanjali mentions the presentation of such scenes as the binding of Bali or the killing of Kansa. More importantly, 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. Attributed to the third century AD, it is the earliest work on erotics dealing with sex and lovemaking. It gives us a picture of the life of a city-bred person or *nagaraka* who lived in a period of thriving urbanism.

Science and Technology

In post-Maurya times Indian astronomy and astrology profited from contact with the Greeks. Many Greek terms concerning the movement of planets appear in Sanskrit texts. 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 coins, which were properly shaped and stamped, were a great improvement on punch-marked coins. 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. Dogs, cattle, spices, and ivory pieces were exported by the Greeks, but whether they learnt any craft from India is not clear.

However, the Indians did not owe anything striking to the Greeks in medicine, botany, and chemistry. These three subjects were dealt with by Charaka and Sushruta. The *Charakasamhita* contains names of numerous plants and herbs from which drugs were prepared. The processes described for pounding and mixing the plants give us an insight into the developed knowledge of chemistry in ancient India. 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*.

In the field of technology too, the Indians seem to have benefited from the contact with the Central Asians. Kanishka is represented as wearing trousers and long boots. The introduction of the stirrup is also attributed to the Kushans. Possibly the practice of making leather shoes began in India during their period. In any event, the Kushan copper coins in India were imitations of Roman coins. Similarly, gold coins in India were struck by the Kushans in imitation of the Roman gold coins. We hear of two embassies being exchanged between the Indian kings and their Roman counterparts. Embassies were sent from India to the court of the Roman emperor Augustus in AD 27–8 and also to the Roman emperor Trajan in AD 110–20. Thus, the contacts of Rome with ancient India may have introduced new practices in technology. Working in glass during this

period was especially influenced by foreign ideas and practices. In no other period in ancient India did glass-making progress as much as it did during this period.

Chronology

(BC)

200 Intimate and widespread contacts with Central Asia began.

2 C The earliest Buddhist panels in Bodh-Gaya, Sanchi, and Bharhut. The Indo-Greeks occupied a part of the north-west, a much larger region than that occupied by Alexander. The Greek ambassador, Haliodorus, set up a pillar in honour of Vasudeva near Vidisa.

165–145 Date of Menander or Milinda.

58–57 The tradition that Vikramaditya, the king of Ujjain, defeated the Shakas and an era called Vikrama Samvat started from this time.

(AD)

27–8 Indian missions sent to the court of the Roman emperor Augustus.

50 Kadphises group of Kushan rulers ruled from this date.

78 The Shaka era started by Kanishka.

110–20 Embassies sent from India to the Roman emperor Trajan.

130–50 The reign of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman I.

150 The earliest specimen of the *kavya* style in the Junagarh inscription of Rudradaman.

2–3 C The Shakas and Kushans introduced the rope stirrup.

230 The end of Kushan rule in north-western India.

250 The Kushan empire in Afghanistan and west of the Indus supplanted by the Sassanian power of Iran.

Early centuries The Mathura school of art flourished.

3 C The *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana.

262 A Sassanian inscription of this date mentions the term

- Hindustan, used later in Mughal and modern India.
- 3–4 C Kushan coins, inscriptions, and terracottas of this period have been found in a substantial part of Central Asia, especially the excavation of a huge Kushan palace of this date at Toprak-Kala in Khorezm on the Oxus.
- 4 C Prakrit inscriptions continued till this time. The branch of Shakas who occupied western India continued to rule there until this time.
- 12 C The title Vikramaditya favoured by the kings till this time.