

Iranian and Macedonian Invasions

Iranian Invasion

In north-east India, smaller principalities and republics gradually merged with the Magadhan empire. North-west India, however, presented a different picture in the sixth century BC. Several small principalities, such as those of the Kambojas, Gandharas, and Madras fought one another. This area did not have any powerful kingdom like that of Magadha to weld the warring communities into one organized kingdom. As the area was fertile and rich in natural resources, it attracted the attention of its neighbours. In addition, it could be easily penetrated through the passes in the Hindu Kush.

The Achaemenian rulers of Iran, who expanded their empire at the same time as the Magadhan princes, took advantage of the political disunity on the north-west frontier. The Iranian ruler Darius penetrated north-west India in 516 BC and annexed the Punjab, west of the Indus, and Sindh. This area was converted into the twentieth province or satrapy of Iran, which had a total number of twenty-eight satrapies. The Indian satrapy included Sindh, the north-west frontier, and the part of Punjab that lay to the west of the Indus. It was the most fertile and populous part of the empire. It paid a tribute of 360 talents of gold, which accounted for onethird of the total revenue Iran received from its Asian provinces. The Indian subjects were also enrolled in the Iranian army. Xerxes, Darius's successor, employed Indians in the long war against the Greeks. It appears that India continued to be a part of the Iranian empire till its invasion by Alexander.

Results of the Contact

The Indo-Iranian contact lasted for about 200 years. It gave an impetus to Indo-Iranian trade and commerce. The cultural results were more significant. Iranian scribes brought into India a form of writing that came to be known as the Kharoshthi script. It was written from right to left like the Arabic. Some Ashokan inscriptions in north-west India were written in the third century BC in this script, which continued to be used in India till the third century AD. Iranian coins are also found in the north-west frontier region which points to the exchange of goods with Iran. It is, however, wrong to think that the punch-marked coins came into use in India as a result of contact with Iran. However, Iranian influence on Maurya sculpture is clearly perceptible. The monuments of Ashoka's time, especially the bell-shaped capitals, owed something to the Iranian models. Iranian influence may also be traced in the preamble to Ashoka's edicts as well as in certain terms used in them. For instance, for the Iranian term *dipi*, the Ashokan scribe used the term *lipi*. Also it appears that through the Iranians, the Greeks learnt about the great wealth of India, which whetted their greed and led to Alexander's invasion of India.

Alexander's Invasion

In the fourth century BC, the Greeks and the Iranians fought for the supremacy of the world. Under the leadership of Alexander of Macedonia, the Greeks eventually destroyed the Iranian empire. Alexander conquered not only Asia Minor and Iraq but also Iran. From Iran he marched to India, obviously attracted by its great wealth. Herodotus, who is called the father of history, and other Greek writers had painted India as a fabulous land, which tempted Alexander to invade it. Alexander also had a strong passion for geographical inquiry and natural history. He had heard that the Caspian Sea continued on the eastern side of India. He was also inspired by the mythical exploits of past conquerors whom he wanted to emulate and surpass.

The political condition of north-west India suited his plans. The area was parcelled out into many independent monarchies and tribal republics, which were strongly wedded to the soil and had a fierce dedication to the principality in which they lived. Alexander found it easy to conquer these principalities one by one. Among the rulers of these territories, two were well known: Ambhi, the prince of Taxila, and Porus whose kingdom lay between the Jhelum and the Chenab. Together they might have effectively resisted Alexander's advance, but

they could not put up a joint front; and the Khyber pass remained unguarded.

Following the conquest of Iran, Alexander moved on to Kabul, from where he marched to India through the Khyber pass in 326 BC. It took him five months to reach the Indus. Ambhi, the ruler of Taxila, readily submitted to the invader, augmenting Alexander's army and replenishing his treasure. When he reached the Jhelum, Alexander encountered the first and the strongest resistance from Porus. Although Alexander defeated Porus, he was impressed by the bravery and courage of the Indian prince. He therefore restored his kingdom to him and made him his ally. He then advanced as far as the Beas river. He wanted to move still further eastward, but his army refused to accompany him. The Greek soldiers had grown war-weary, and diseased. The hot climate of India and ten years of continuous campaigning had made them terribly homesick. They had also had a taste of Indian fighting qualities on the banks of the Indus, which made them desist from advancing further. As the Greek historian Arrian tells us: 'In the art of war the Indians were far superior to the other nations inhabiting the area at that time.' In particular, the Greek soldiers were told of a formidable power on the Ganges. This was obviously the kingdom of Magadha ruled by the Nandas who maintained an army far outnumbering Alexander's. So, despite the repeated appeals by Alexander for their advance, the Greek soldiers refused to budge. Alexander lamented: 'I am trying to rouse the hearts that are disloyal and crushed with craven fears.' The king who had never known defeat at the hands of his enemies had to accept defeat from his own men. He was forced to retreat, and his dream of an eastern empire remained unfulfilled. On his return march Alexander vanquished many small republics until he reached the end of the Indian frontier. He remained in India for nineteen months (326–5 BC) of continual battle, leaving him barely any time to organize his conquests. Still, he made some arrangements. Most of the conquered states were restored to their rulers who submitted to his authority. His own territorial possessions were however divided into three parts and placed under three Greek governors. He also founded a number of cities to maintain his power in this area.

Effects of Alexander's Invasion

Alexander's invasion provided the first occasion when ancient Europe came into close contact with ancient South Asia. Alexander's Indian campaign was a triumphant success. He added to his empire an Indian province which was much larger than that conquered by Iran. However, the Greek possessions in India were soon lost to the Maurya rulers.

The most important outcome of this invasion was the establishment of direct contact between India and Greece in various fields. Alexander's campaign opened up four distinct routes by land and sea, paving the way for Greek merchants and craftsmen, and increasing the existing facilities for trade.

Although we hear of some Greeks living on the north-west even prior to Alexander's invasion, the invasion multiplied Greek settlements in this area. The most important of these were the city of Alexandria in the Kabul region, Boukephala on the Jhelum, and Alexandria in Sindh. Although the entire area was conquered by the Mauryas, the Greeks continued to live under both Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka.

Alexander was deeply interested in the geography of the mysterious ocean which he saw for the first time at the mouth of the Indus. He therefore dispatched his new fleet under his friend Nearchus to explore the coast and search for harbours from the mouth of the Indus to that of the Euphrates. As a result Alexander's historians left valuable geographical accounts and also clearly dated records of Alexander's campaign, which enable us to definitively establish Indian chronology for subsequent events. Alexander's historians also provide us with important information about the social and economic conditions of the time. They tell us about the sati system, the sale of girls in marketplaces by poor parents, and the fine breed of oxen in north-west India. Alexander sent from there 200,000 oxen to Macedonia for use in Greece. The art of carpentry was the most flourishing craft in India, and carpenters built chariots, boats, and ships.

By destroying the power of petty states in north-west India, Alexander's invasion paved the way for the expansion of the Maurya empire in that area. According to tradition, Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Maurya empire, had seen something of the working of Alexander's military machine and had acquired some knowledge that helped him to destroy the power of the Nandas.

Chronology

(BC)

6 C	In north-east India, the independent principalities and republics merged with the Magadha empire.
516	The Iranian ruler Darius annexed Punjab and Sindh.
4 C	The Greeks conquered the Iranian empire.
326	Alexander invaded India.
326–5	Alexander remained in India for nineteen months.
3 C–AD 3 C	Kharoshthi script brought by Iranian scribes to India.