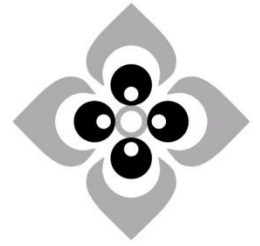


HISTORY



Subject : History
(For under graduate student)

Paper No. : Paper-I
History of India

Topic No. & Title : Topic-9
Post Mauryan Developments

Lecture No. & Title : Lecture-2
SAKA and KUSHANA

SAKA and KUSHANA

Greek Rule in Bactria came to an end around 130 B.C. due to political developments that took place in the steppes of Central Asia, and had nothing to do with events in Bactria or the subcontinent. The Bactrian monarchy, weakened by foreign wars and internal dissensions, fell an easy prey to ferocious nomadic hordes. This decline of the Greek kingdoms in the north-west coincided with complicated migrations and movements of people's from central Asia towards northern India.

Chinese texts and some Greek accounts indicate that the vast steppes of Central Asia were inhabited by a number of fierce wars like nomadic groups, among who were the Hsiung-nu of the Chinese texts, the Scythians or Sakas, and later, the most important of them the Yueh-chi or the mighty Kushanas. These nomadic groups often proved to be a menace to the Qin polity in China, and the Bactrian rulers in the non Afghanistan region. This also explains why Chinese and Greek texts spoke about them.

Around 130 B.C the Scythians possibly along with the Yueh-chi swooped down upon Bactria and ended the Greek presence there, thus beginning the gradual push of the Scythians or the Sakas from the north-western border land of the sub-continent into other parts of India. The main source materials for these developments come from Greek texts, some inscriptions, and a variety of coins. Having first first unseated the Bactrian Greeks, the Sakas advanced to Kabul, from where they moved southwards, through the northern part of Kashmir and entered the subcontinent, and then into the plains of western Punjab.

There were several groups of Saka rulers mainly in the north-western part of the sub-continent. The earliest Saka ruler of India seems to have been Maues or Moga,(appears in the Taxila plate of satrap Patika) who established Saka power in the Gandhara region round about 92 B C.

The two ethnic types- Sakas and Parthians/Pahlavas - are no doubt constantly associated with each other in Indian literature and inscriptions, so that it becomes difficult to differentiate between the two. The date of Maues is uncertain though Sten Konow believes that he began to rule in about 90 B.C. Maues was followed by Azes, who extended Saka rule over eastern Punjab. He is credited with the creation of an era in 58 BC., which was definitely a marker of the political prominence of the ruler. It is also considered as their contribution to the cultural history of India, and the beginning of a system of counting dates. In Indian tradition, the era starting around 57-58 B.C was associated with the name of Vikramaditya. The significant point here, in the light of recently discovered inscriptions, is that the ruler, who

initiated the era of 57 B.C was not the Vikramaditya of Indian tradition but a Saka ruler Azes I. The legend of Vikramaditya may have got associated with this era later. According to numismatic evidence Azilises came after Azes I, who seems to have pushed further east into the Mathura area. He was succeeded by Azes II, after whom the Saka territories passed under the sway of Gondophernes.

Mithradates II established a Parthian presence in India in the first century BC., as did Vonones and Spalirises a little later. Their names clearly indicate that they were non-Indian in origin, and possibly of Iranian extraction.

The Vonones group of rulers was located essentially in Arachosia i.e. in the region of Kandahar, from where they occasionally entered into the western part of the sub-continent. On his coins Vonones is associated with his brothers, Spalirises and Spalahores, and his nephew, Spalagadames. They may have been his viceroys in the conquered regions.

An important group of Scytho-Parthians were represented by Gondophernes, identified with king Guduvhara, mentioned in an inscription found at Takht-i-Bahi, on the basis of which, his rule is placed in the mid-first century CE. On his coins, Gondophernes is associated with Abdagases, and his military governors, Aspavarman and Sasa, and they indicate that he became master of the Saka-Pahlava dominions both in eastern Iran and north-western India. Gondophernes was finally ousted from north-western India by the Kushanas.

At least four inscriptions in the Mathura region have indicated the eastward expansion of Scytho-Parthian rule probably by Rajuvula, who initially had the title of mahakshatrapa, but for all practical purposes became an independent ruler in the Mathura area, and was succeeded by his Kshatrapa son Sodasha. This also signifies their occupation of the Ganga-Yamuna doab region.

The mightiest of the non-indigenous powers that came to be associated with India's political history of this phase

were the Kushanas. In the Chinese annals of the Han dynasty, they were known as the Yueh-chi. During the very early phase of Yueh-chi history, they were located originally on either side of the middle course of the Amu Darya (Oxus) in central Asia. When they were driven out by the Hsiung-nu from their usual habitat, the Yueh-chi dispersed towards the west and reached the region of Bactria, where they unseated the Sakas. Within the next fifty years the Yueh-chi became divided into five clans.

According to the Chinese texts, of the Han Dynasty, one of the clans was known as Kuei-shang, from which emerged the celebrated Kushanas. The Kushanas were essentially central Asiatic in origin, who left a profound impact on the history of South Asia. The rise of the Kushana power was actually a story of their transformation from a nomadic warrior group to a settled territorial polity.

The key to understanding this transformation may be traced from their rise in Bactria. In their early history, the Kuei-shang are known to have settled down at

Tukhara or Tushara which indicates the eastern part of Bactria. Bactria with its capital at Bactra, presently Mazar-e-Sharif, was the most important area of the Kushana polity, and the launching pad of the fascinating expansion of Kushana political and military power. B.N Mukherjee's study of the Kushanas, in his book 'The Rise and Fall of the Kushana Empire,' informs us that Kushana rule began to take its roots not only in Bactria, but in the neighbouring regions of Afghanistan, and the north-western border lands of the sub-continent, during the time of a very powerful king named Kujula Kadphises.

According to Chinese texts, he conquered the region of Kaofu or Kabul, which brought him closer to the border land of the sub-continent. Kaofu or Kabul happened to be a very prominent centre of long distance commerce.

According to Chinese annals, Kujula Kadphises was succeeded by his son, Vima Kadphises, who is credited with the conquest of Saathi or Saketa. The same Chinese text, Hou Han Shu credits him with the conquest of Sindu, obviously referring to the lower Indus Valley. The

wide distribution of his coins and the assumption of high sounding titles like, 'the king of kings', 'the lord of all the people', show that his authority extended east of the Indus, to the Punjab, and possibly also to present day Uttar Pradesh. Chinese texts indicate that with the conquest of Sindu, the Yueh-chis began to derive the enormous advantage of trade with the Roman Empire.

B.N Mukherjee very ably demonstrates how economic factors, particularly the advantages of long distance trade prompted the Kushana king to push his military campaign from the north-western border land area, to the Indus Delta, and the lower Indus Valley. That Vima Kadphises was also in occupation of Mathura has been indicated by his inscriptions, and a magnificent seated image of him in full regalia found from Mathura itself. This is indeed of great significance, as from now on the most important centre of the Kushanas within the sub-continent would be Mathura. To Vima Kadphises also goes the credit of issuing gold coins, for the first time in south Asian history. His coins were based on the coins of the Parthian rulers, Gotarzes I who was ruling around 71 B.C to about

58 B.C. Vima Kadphises's rule roughly corresponded to the second half of the first century B.C.

Thus from its base in Bactria, Kushana power had steadily expanded to Kabul, Arachosia, Kandahar and Taxila, and then through the Punjab plains into the Ganga Yamuna Doab area up to Mathura. The stage was now set for the maximum expansion of Kushana power under Kanishka, the greatest of the Kushana rulers.

Kanishka is known to us from a large number of inscriptions, coins and through his statues. He appears to have ruled for at least twenty-three years. It is significant that Kanishka's regnal reckonings were continued without any interruptions by his successors, Vasishka, Huvishka, Kanishka II, Vasudeva I, Kanishka III, and Vasudeva II. In terms of political history, it is clear that Kanishka established an era, since it was continued by his successors. But there exists an acute problem in ancient Indian history, regarding the actual date of the beginning of Kanishka's reign. Several international conferences, as well as a large number of publications have yet to resolve

the problem. Several dates have been proposed. It could be 128 A.D, or 144 A.D. or 78 A.D. However a large number of specialists on the Kushanas in the sub-continent prefer to associate the beginning of Kanishka's reign with the establishment of the Saka era that began in 78 A.D. A new inscription found in 1993 at Rabatak near Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, in the Bactrian language and in Greek script, has considerably changed our understanding of Kanishka's rule. It is interesting to note that from the time of Kanishka, the official language of the Kushana Empire became Bactrian, as all the Kushana coins thenceforward were inscribed only in the Bactrian language. The name Bactrian language was coined by a famous scholar named W.B. Henning for the type of middle Iranian language used in the inscription.

The Rabatak inscription dated in the very first year of Kanishka's reign suggests that there was an unbroken chain of succession from Kujula Kadphises, and Vima Kadphises to Kanishka, and thereby negates the long standing theory that there were two groups of rulers, - the Kadphises group of rulers and the Kanishka group of

rulers. In the light of this inscription, the genealogy of the Kushanas now appears as an unbroken continuity of succession, from Kujula Kadphises to Kanishka. The more significant point is, that even in the very first years of Kanishka's reign, he is recognized as ruling over Ujjain in Western Malwa, Sanchi in eastern Malwa, Kausambi near Allahabad, Saketa near Ayodhya, Palibothro or Pataliputra and Sri Champa, near Bhagalpur, the eastern most part of Bihar. In addition to these areas Kanishka was in control of an empire that stretched over Bactria, Kabul, Kandahar, the lower Indus Valley, and Mathura as well. Kanishka appears to have been in occupation of the Pamir region and Khotan in central Asia according to Chinese chronicles.

His empire was indeed multi-ethnic, and was one of the four great powers in contemporary Asia and Eurasia. In east Asia, the Huns were at the zenith of their power, in west Asia, the Parthians were a formidable power, while in south Asia, the greater part of north India along with the north-western border land, was firmly under Kanishka. Eurasia particularly the region of Syria, Jordan

and north eastern Africa, Egypt, eastern Mediterranean, was controlled by the Roman Empire.

It is unlikely that Kanishka's successors were able to retain their political hold over areas to the east of Mathura, like Varanasi, Kausambi, Pataliputra or Champa. These parts were possibly lost soon after Kanishka's reign, during the time of his successors, though they were definitely able to retain their firm hold over the Mathura region as long as their rule lasted.

Huvishka was a powerful Kushana ruler who had a long reign that lasted from the twenty-eighth to the sixtieth year of the Kanishka era. Similarly the next ruler Vasudeva also ruled for a lengthy period, from the sixtieth to the ninety-eighth year, or the middle of the second century A.D.

While discussing the Kushanas, an important factor that should be noted is that, it was Bactria that held the key, to the story of their rise and fall. Earlier Indian scholars were under the impression that the Kushanas were a

central Asiatic clan, who became Indianised, and then expanded outside the borderland of India. But thanks to major research work done by scholars like B.N. Mukherjee and Gerard Fussman on the subject, previously held ideas have been reversed. It has now been established that Kushana rule spread to the different parts of the sub-continent from Bactria.

Kushana rule came to an end around 262 A.D. when the Sasanid ruler Sapor I conquered the Kushana realm, by capturing power from the last Kushana ruler, who was possibly Vasudeva II, who ruled from 230 – 262 A.D.