

UNIT 148 – UPSC - HISTORY AND IMPACT OF Indo-Greeks

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 Megasthenes and the latter by Kadphises.

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 Kushans 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 Civilization 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 Indian civilization.

To begin with, the invasion of Alexander left very little imprint on Indian civilization. Indian rulers did not adopt the military tactics of Alexander, but continued to rely on their traditional organization. Although the region that was beyond the Hindu Kush in the Mauryan period was definitely in close contact with whatever the Greek influence that was there, the Greek influence was not felt in the interior of India. Probably the use of stone in buildings and sculptures by the Mauryas was inspired by the Greek practice of working in stone. Columns of the Ionic order were definitely used in the buildings of Taxila.

To speak point wise, the first influence of the Greeks was on the divine right theory of kingship. The Indo-Greeks took high sounding titles like divine kings, sons of gods, etc. and maintained the myth of Empire. Even before Indo-Greek rulers established themselves in India the services of the Greeks were utilized. Ashoka appointed a Greek as viceroy of his province. And after the Indo-Greek period, a Greek, during the period of Kushans, was entrusted with engineering work.

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 Kaveripatnam 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 not 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 die cutters' art. They showed a remarkable skill in making the portraits of rulers. Also the Greek kings adopt 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. Indian 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 tone author, 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).