

UNIT 150 – UPSC - 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 princess, 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 Keshgar were made to pay tribute. Tradition states that while Kanishka was on his return from the Chinese Turkistan, he was soothered 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 patron 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 - Zoroastrian, Greek, Mitraic, and Indian. The prominent Indian deity on the coins was Shiva. The peculiar assembly of deities by the Kushans offers a great deal of speculation. May be Kanishka followed a loose form of Zoroastrianism and freely venerated the deities of other creeds.

Also, Kanishka convened 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 delegates 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 Hellenized Alexandrian. The veneration for a dead teacher passed into a worship of living saviour.

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 annexed 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.



The next thing to be noted about the Kushana is their religion. In all likelihood, missionaries propagated Buddhism in central Asia and China in this period. Possibly, it was during the time of Kanishka that Mahayana Buddhism was

sanctified. The fourth Buddhist council that was summoned by Kanishka canonized the doctrines of Hinayana and Mahayana. The deliberations of the conference were engraved on sheets of copper and were sealed and deposited in a stupa, but they have not been found so far. But to regard Kanishka as the founder patron of the Mahayana sect, which came into existence under the Kushans, is a disputable point. Even though many scholars regard Kanishka as the second Asoka some writers do not agree with this view. In addition to these things, we must mention that the Kushana kings patronized all kinds of religions, including Hinduism. Kanishka was definitely an eclectic monarch as he honored a medley of gods belonging to the Greek, Zoroastrian and Hindu faiths. Not only Buddhism flourished under the Kushanas but there were definitely stirrings of Hinduism. Many brahminical sects started merging. Along with religion, Sanskrit language received an impetus. In a way the Kushan age constituted the prelude to the Gupta age.

In this manner, the services rendered by the Kushanas are commendable. A mere evaluation of the personality of Kanishka alone would not help us to estimate the importance of the Kushanas as the empire lasted for three centuries. To a certain extent, the prosperous time of peace during the Gupta period was directly due to the Kushans undertaking the unconscious role of the shield and buckler of Indian civilization and culture. The Kushan state was a buffer between the Aryan civilization and the nomadic hordes in central Asia who from time to time, had overrun the civilized worlds with the sweep of avalanches. It was also responsible for the exchange of ideas and goods between different civilizations because of the peculiar geographical position occupied by the Kushanas a clearing house for the ideas and goods of different civilizations.