

ANCIENT INDIA AND IRAN: POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO CIVILISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

India and Iran are, politically and culturally, not similar countries in the modern world. In fact, both had well-known contacts in the field of political, cultural and religious since the pre-historic period. This such relation continued till the formation of Pakistan, as a separate state from the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Historical documents revealed that they came out the same, Indo-Aryan, stock and lived together in the present central Asian terrain since the immemorial age and later on, they split themselves, due to the different reasons and moved into the different regions. Since they built various kingdoms and empires in ancient and medieval periods in their regions and they also fought each other for dominance in the region. Most importantly, they, more or less, succeeded to pursue the trade and cultural relations during the colonial period also. The article is an attempt to analyse the political, cultural and religious links between India and Iran/Persian in the Ancient period.

KEY WORDS

Indo-Iranians, Satrap, Kharoshthi, Tower of Silence, Great Split, Achaemenian, Parthians, and Sassanian.

INTRODUCTION

The past studies indicate that the origin of Indo-Iranians, similar to that of Indo-Aryans, is connected with the Indo-Europeans. The people of India and Iran began their contact in the pre-historic period around 2000-3000 B.C. The Indo-Iranians lived together as one community in surrounding areas of the present Central Asian region for a long period and shared common traditions, religion, language, and customs. As a result of this long lived relation, they developed a specific Indo-Iranian culture which could be seen in the ancient monuments of those regions. History reveals that the 'Great Split' led to the division of the Indo-Iranians into two different groups and then, they moved into separate regions in around 1700 and 1500 B.C (Irfan Habib 2002:15). The various discourses are existing regarding the motives behind the split of Indo-Iranians. Irfan Habib and Nalinee M Chapekar, are well known Indian historians. Habib says in his book, prehistoric (2002), as the contact between

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the Indians and Iranians reached its peak in the earliest and the mid of the third millennium. After that, their contacts reduced significantly due to the environmental stress and strain in the early second millennium. M. Chapekar says, in her book 'Ancient Civilization of India Iran: A Study of their Cultural Contacts' (1962), that the Indo-Iranians were believers and then, found a considerable contradiction in 'worshipping God' that eventually led to their split. Therefore, these sects of people migrated into the southward region and then settled separately in different regions. The Iranian people moved into the Highland of Iran through the flat passable area of South-East Caspian Sea, while the Indians moved to the Indian sub-continent (www.Iran Embassy.com).

INDO-IRANIAN ANCIENT EMPIRES

Jawaharlal Nehru says in his book 'The Discovery of India',

“among the many peoples and races who have come in contact with and influenced India's life and culture, the oldest and most persistent have been the Iranians. Indeed the relationship precedes even the beginnings of Indo-Aryan civilisation, for it was out of some common stock, that the Indo-Aryans and the ancient Iranians diverged and took their different ways”.²

Since then, both of their relationships developed throughout the ancient, medieval and modern ages. The Achaemenian, Parthians, and Sassanians, were the major ancient Persian empires³ established cultural, political and religious contacts with such Indian empires as Mauryan, Gupta and Kushan. These ancient dynasties were engaged in reciprocal cultural activities in their respective periods. They had exchanged many scholars and experts particularly in the fields of art, literature, language, music, architecture and philosophy.

ACHAEMENIAN AND MAURYA

In B.C 512, Achaemenian empire⁴ ruler Darius conquered and ruled Punjab and Sind, the North-West regions of India. It shows the political links between Persia and India. Punjab continued under the control of Persian Empire till the invasion of Alexander the Great in the western part of India in 330 B.C. The major kingdoms of India and Persia exchanged joint

² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1946)

³ The Persian Empire consists Achaemenid (550-330 BC), Parthian (247-224 BC) and Sassanian (224-651) dynasties and it spanned from Egypt in the west to Turkey in the north and Mesopotamia to the Indus River in the east. (Ancient Civilisation, United States History Organization, www.ushistory.org).

⁴ The Achaemenid Empire was the largest empire the ancient world had seen, extending from Anatolia and Et across western Asia to northern India and Central Asia. (www.metmuseum.org).

military aid in the wars, particularly in the age of Mauryas. Chandragupta, Mauryan ruler, re-captured the region with the backup of Persian military. Darius III, Achaemenian Emperor, extended military supports to the Indian rulers while they fought against Alexander. In return, Indian soldiers joined with the Achaemenian military when they fought against the Greece.

Historians evidently argue that the Mauryan rulers were greatly impressed by the administrative system and court procedures of Persian empires especially Achaemenian. Therefore, Mauryas' officials introduced the Persian model of punishment like that of shaving head in half. Ashoka (304-232 B.C.E), the third king of Mauryan dynasty, had a great passion to the Achaemenian rulers, particularly to Darius and Cyrus; the founder of Persian dynasty. Ashoka used Kharoshthi language⁵ which was familiar in the regions of India and Iran to frame the edicts or laws of the state.

The Persian ruler Darius firstly introduced the word 'Satrap'⁶. He divided the kingdom into more than twenty satrapies or provinces which controlled by a 'satrap governor'. Mauryan emperors widely adopted the system of satrap for an easy running of the administration. Ashoka adopted features of Persian court system such as 'Recording of Royal orders and directions' in the permanent form of hard materials like rock. The Mauryan rulers influenced the currency system of Persian and also used their method of road construction. For instance, Maurya's Royal Road⁷ from the western frontiers to the capital was built on the basis of Persian technology. The Achaemenian invasion of Punjab led to adopt the Persian model of weight system. In the period of Achaemenian Empire, the artisans, craftsmen, and traders visited India.

SAKAS AND KUSHAN

⁵Kharosthi was a script used in the north-western region of India between about the fourth century B.C. and the third century A.D. It was based on the Aramaic script used under the Achaemenid Empire. (www.ancientindia.co.uk).

⁶The Persian ruler Darius firstly introduced the word Satrap which means province(s) and he divided the kingdom into more than twenty satrapies or provinces which were controlled by a Satrap Governor.

⁷The Great Royal Road of the Maurya Empire began at the Himalayan border, ran through Taxila (near modern Rawalpindi, Pakistan), crossed the five streams of the Punjab, proceeded by way of Jumna to Prayag (Allahabad India), and continued to the mouth of the Ganges River. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The Sakas⁸, who came from the Sakastan which was a province of Iran, attacked the North West part of India. Sakas lived with Parthians before arriving India and they imbibed the cultural elements of Parthians and Iranians. People of India were influenced by the dual-cultures of Sakas assimilated with India's indigenous culture. Kushan also largest empire in India spread across the northern region. It is said to be that the genealogy of Kanishka, the greatest ruler of the Kushan dynasty, is connected with Iranian nomads. He encouraged the sun-cult system which was among the religious practices of ancient Iranians. The Kushan's rulers established well to contact with the various regions especially with Rome through the trade. Kanishka issued huge numbers of gold coins, which exhibit the figures of Greek, Roman, Hindu and Buddhist deities (Abolmajid, Yazdanpanah 2013:87). Moreover, Persian divine elements were punched on the coins of Kushanas. The people of Northern Province of India followed particular state religion, and it was the synthesis of both Buddhism and Zoroastrianism⁹. The Parthian rule in Persia, on the one hand and Buddhist predominance in India, on the other hand, revived the cultural affinities between India and Persia. Parthian rulers were the patrons of art and literature and they used to visit Buddhist monks in India. Obviously, their contacts see on rock temples of Maharashtra, and caves of Karli and Nasik (N.S Gorekar: 13).

SASSANIAN AND KUSHAN

The Sassanian dynasty (224-651 A.D) came to power in Persia after the reigns of Parthians and Seleucids. The Indian dynasty of Kushan and the Persian Sassanian maintained strong political and military contacts. Grumbates, the king of Kushan, helped the Sassanian king Shapur II in a war against the Romans. Sassanian's built the trade centre in Al-Hira¹⁰ and it helped Persians to access the Indian market and they introduced a common coin system. Persian and Indian empires established embassies and exchanged diplomats to deal with their contacts. The Sassanian monarchs established relations with the Gupta Empire of Patliputra and both exchanged officials through the system of foreign officials. Gupta arts and paintings were marked by Sassanian motifs such as Indian peacock, dragons, cocks and spiral creeper. The tiles of Harvan monastery near the Srinagar, Kashmir, is testifying the Sassanians' influence in the Kashmir valley (Abolmajid, Yazdanpanah 2013:196).The

⁸ Sakas was a nomadic warriors group of Ancient Iran

⁹ Zoroastrianism, ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran that survives there in isolated areas and, more prosperously, in India, where the descendants of Zoroastrian Iranian (Persian) immigrants are known as Parsis, or Parsees, (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) <https://www.britannica.com>

¹⁰ Al-Hira was the ancient capital of Lachmid dynasty and then it became the main trade place of Sassanian Empire

depictions of Ajanta rock indicates the contacts of Indians and Iranians in the ancient period. The Jain literature reveals that both Indians and Iranians continued sound trade system through the import and export of goods such as Chunk shells, Arecanut (Seeds of the Areca), Sandalwood, Agallochum (Resinous Wood), Magnet, Gold, Silver, Pearls, Precious Stones and Coral.

PERSIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCE

The People of India and Iran established cultural links even before starting the political contacts. The historians classified the Indo-Iranian contact into two phases as pre-Islamic and Islamic period. Arabs defeated the Sassanian ruler Yazdgerd III and conquered the Persia in 651 A.D. The Advent of Islam brought new changes in the political, cultural and social life of Persia which is considered as the commencement of modernity in Iran. Before the arrival of Islam, the contact between Indians and Iranians were limited only to the fields of trade and commerce, and not to the cultural spheres.

In the Ancient period, the empires of India and Iran shared the inscriptions of art, literature, architecture, languages, and religion. In the art field, some evidence could be seen in different territories of India, particularly in Punjab, Sind, Bihar, Takshashila and Kashmir. For instance, the technical term satrap or province is used in Punjab and Kharoshthi scripts were used for the framing of laws and clothes decorated with Babylonian and Persian embroideries. Archeological evidence indicates that Mauryan rulers especially Ashoka adopted the Persian architectural technology for modification of Sarnath pillars. For instance, the pillared hall of Ashoka's Royal Palace is an evidence of the Persian architectural fusion. He tried to follow the architectural models of Persian palaces, particularly those of King Darius. Moreover, some royal houses of Iranians in India were constructed in similar ways. The architectural features of Persepolis¹¹ and Susa¹² were engraved on stone works in the period of Ashoka.

The Indians used Vedic Sanskrit language for communication in ancient period. In this time, people of Iran used Avestan and Farsal, old Persian languages according to their convenience. The inscription of their religious text Avesta in the Avestan language testifies the bestowal of importance and sanctity upon the language. The Avestic and Sanskrit languages have close

¹¹ Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of Achaemenid Empire of Persia.

¹² Susa was an ancient city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires of Iran

similarities regarding vocabulary, grammar, syntax, meter, diction, vowels, and phonetics and even in writing styles.

RELIGION

The similarities as well as the differences of ancient Indians and Iranians in religious practices reflected in their scriptures such as Vedas and Avesta, respectively. These two ancient texts have been written in different languages; the Vedas in Sanskrit and the Avesta in Persian. However, some scripts of both the texts have similarities in basic vocabulary and grammar. (Nalinee M Chapeker: 1982:09). Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It was originated in the ancient Indo-Iranian region around 2nd Millennium. Then it became the prominent and official religion of the Persian empires such as Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian. The principles of Zoroastrianism influenced the other religions like Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Conquest of Achaemenid dynasty by Alexander the Great and later the Arab invasion led to dwindling of the Zoroastrian religion. Forcible religious conversions and persecutions of rulers resulted in the migration of Zoroastrians into various parts of the World. The Indian subcontinent was the prime terrain of migration of Zoroastrians. They possessed important political and economic places in India. Many Zoroastrians became the prestigious leaders of India in different fields. For Instance, Dadbhai Naororji, the grand old man of India belonged Zoroastrian sect and he was a political and social leader in India. Now Mumbai and Pune in India are the major Zoroastrian populated areas. The demographic strength of Zoroastrians is under decline stage in all over the world particularly Iran and India. In 2001, the population of Zoroastrians was 69,601, and their number was 145,544 in 1855 in India (<http://www.heritageinstitute.com>)¹³.

The funeral function of Zoroastrianism is differed from other religious tradition. Instead of burial or burning the dead body, they laid it out on a special tower to be exposed to the sun and eaten by birds of prey such as vultures. This special funeral tower of Zoroastrianism is known as "Towers of Silence"¹⁴. The major Zoroastrian Towers of Silence is located at Mumbai in India which is focused on. Because it is one of the few places in the world where this tradition can still be upheld (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>). The Zoroastrian religious principle says that the earth, air and fire are the sacred elements of nature never to spoil it by the traditional funeral or dead body of a human.

¹³ Heritage Institute is a cooperative governance and human relations organization, located at Canada

¹⁴ Tower of Silence, a tall open-topped structure on which Parsees traditionally place and leave exposed the body of someone who has died.

CONCLUSION

No other countries in the modern period as India and Iran had this such deep civilisational and cultural relationship. We could see ancient Iranian tangible cultural influence across India especially northern region. Northern regions of India is the classical examples of ancient Indo-Iranian cultural exchanges. Historians say that much of Indo-Iranian tangible cultural monuments disappeared due to lack of preservation. Archeological department of India also failed not only preserve the ancient but also the medieval period monuments in some regions especially in Hyderabad. Authority and common people have to give proper attention to keep the monuments in ancient and medieval periods and no doubt, it is evident-variables to understand the historical and political relationship between the countries. India and Iran always using their age old ties as variables to revive their modern political and diplomatic relations. Both sides leaders exchange the views of their nations' past relations during the state level meeting and foreign affairs ministers visits and both countries, foreign affairs documents showing the strength of Indo-Iranian ties in the past. Now, Iran is under threat and major powers challenged its nuclear programme. India is also involved Iranian nuclear issue with its perspective, and it voted three times at IAEA and inclined to the U.S. Subsequently, irritation occurred between India and Iran since both countries leaders highlight the past relation that helped to resolve their present political issues to some extent.

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M. Chapekar says, in her book ‘Ancient Civilization of India Iran a Study of their Cultural Contacts’