

Shumaila Firdos*
Yu. Wenjie**
Xu. Sangyi***

The Influence of Greek Classics on Indian Culture in Ancient Era

Abstract:

The ancient Greeks were the “inventors” of more elements of civilization than any other people of the world. These elements of civilization can be viewed among historical writings especially associated with Herodotus and Thucydides, and the evolution of Democracy having foundational seeds in Athens. The Greeks view of the world was predominantly secular and rationalistic. It exalted the spirit of free inquiry and preferred knowledge to faith. With only a limited cultural inheritance of the past upon which to build, the Greeks produced intellectual and artistic monuments that had served ever since as standards of achievement. So in some ways the single most legacy of the ancient Greece is the civilization in India and ancient era is particularly influenced by the Greeks, especially in Art, language, culture and mostly covers the all aspects of Human life. This article is an attempt to explore cultural and religious evolution of India as an outcome of Indo Greek interaction. It further attempts to answer that why and how the India was influenced by the Greeks, Subsequently the Indian art particularly Gandhara appeared as the world’s famous Art of India.

Key Words: Greeks, India, Culture, Buddha, Gandhara, Mathura, Coins, Kanishka, Kushana.

Introduction:

The advent of Greeks in India dates back from 6th century (BC) to 5th century (AD) as an outcome of Greek expedition towards Persia. They intended to explore intellectuals and savvy conversant people in the fields of Philosophy, sea trade, Art, Diplomacy, administration, and empire governance. Their quest is manifested through materialization of long list comprising Kingdoms and Greek rulers who reigned India.¹ Greeks invaded Indus and the Ganges, the Plateaus of the Deccan and the Beaches of Gujrat; However, their infiltration into India remained void of some geographical parts.² Greeks came into India as merchants and traded to Malabar Coast of Coromandel, and the mercenaries they served in the places of Tamil kings.³ Until the British came no European race so thoroughly traversed and explored the great Sub-continent.

Though Greeks were also an alien nation like British; however unlikely British, the Greeks adapted to Indian climate and customs. Their progenies received eloquent influence of Indian religions and their contribution in Buddhism is

* Shumaila Firdos. PhD Scholar, History College Nanjing University, China. Email: Sfirdos111@outlook.com

** Prof. Yu.Wenjie, History College Nanjing University, China. Email: njuywj@163.com

*** Xu. Sangyi, PhD Scholar, History College Nanjing University, China. Email: xsy1990910@126.com

obvious. Regarding religious contribution and their involvement in Buddhism, the role of seer king Menander is most significant. Moreover, the Greeks added value to Indian intellect and cultural heritage in forms of introducing industrial techniques, development of Astronomy, and building the great school of Gandhara sculpture whose influence penetrated into the far corners of Asia.

However, the role of Greeks in India is largely associated with invasion of Alexander on India; whereas, the historical accounts suggest arrival of Greeks in India long ago the Alexander. It can be commented that huge historical coverage of Alexander has eclipsed the contribution of earlier Greek arrivals in India. It is narrated that at the time of invasion on India through the Passes of the Hindu Kush, Alexander got conversant with the fact that a number of Greeks from Bactria had already established in the fertile mountains that overlooked the valley of the Indus. The historical literature also suggests that Bactria Greeks ruled the parts of India that remained unknown to the Alexander. Various historical accounts suggest that the arrival of earlier Greeks in India took place approximately 2 centuries before the advent of Alexander. Their route of travel remained along the trade routes linking India, Persia, Ionian cities of Asia Minor. Some other accounts suggest that these journeys were glorified through expedition tales of Greek gods Dionysus and Heracles. It is narrated that these glorified legendary tales of Greek expedition to India inspired the Alexander to campaign for India in search of finding the great Ocean which he believed brought the world to an end somewhere beyond the Hindu Kush⁴.



The Empire of Alexander the Great

(Sanujit, *Cultural Links between India and Greco-Roman World*, February 2011,

<http://www.ancient.eu/article/208/>)

The validation of the claim that Indo Greek interaction took place long before the military campaign of the Alexander can be verified through ancient Greek and Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit literature suggests these people as formidable warriors and conversant with the knowledge of science that was strange to indigenous people.⁵

The contribution of Greeks in Indian knowledge and culture is so profound that it has maintained to survive more than two millenniums. It can be commented that their additions to Indian culture have become integral and considerable part of Indian cultural melting pot. During reign of Greek Bactrians in India, mutual exchange of skills took place that benefitted India with Greek expertise in sculpture making. Gandhara school of sculpture served as guiding institute in that regard. Similarly, Indian astronomy impressed the Greeks enough to innovate Zodiac sign. These inklings can be drawn from classical Indian literature of *Mahabharata* and *Yuga Purana*.⁶

The Greeks in Ancient India:

It is believed that the Alexander was ambitious military leader whose ambitions were curtailed owing to geographical and climatic constraints of Monsoon in India. However, post Alexandrian period observed infest of Bactrian Greeks which was catalyzed with the decline of Mauryan empire in India. It resulted augmentation of Greek influence in India upto a level of managing various Bactrian kingdoms in India.⁷

The Greek and Classical Indian Literature:

The classical Indian literature comprising *Yuga Purana*, *Mahabharata*, and Buddhist literature provide historical narrations of Indo Greek interaction in ancient times. The information through these accounts suggests that Greeks were called “*Yavanas*” by the indigenous people. These accounts are also mentioned in an Astrology book named “*Gargi Samhita*”⁸. The passages of this work, there we can find more unanimity of interpretation than about the account of Pushyamitra’s death. This information found from a main source on the Greek invasion of *Pataliputra*.⁹

Among available historical literature, there is narrative dearth regarding Indo Greek wars. *Yuga Purana* elaborates military campaign of the Greeks mainly mentioning their resistance against Sketa in Oudh, and annexing of Panchalas between the Ganges and the Jumna. Moreover, it gives speculative information about their period of stay in Pataliputra. The exact chronological accounts regarding these events are missing in ancient either Indian or Greek literature.¹⁰

Though there is exactitude lapse among inferences from *Yuga Purana*, yet some mentions of Mahabhasya written by Patanjli¹¹ about siege of ‘Sketa’¹² and ‘Madyamika’¹³ provide alternative account to substantiate events mentioned in “*Yuga Purana*”¹⁴. As the Patanjli was contemporary to those events, hence his writings can be trusted in terms of its oral accounts¹⁵. These writings have some allusions of war stating :“*The Yavana was besieging Sketa*”¹⁶. *The Yavana was besieging Madyamika.*” Patanjali lived in second century B.C, and this time which he used as illustration precisely because they were fresh in the minds of his readers.¹⁷The reference to the siege of Sketa confirms the information given in the *Yuga Purana*. But the reference of Madyamika takes us into a quite different area of Greek invasions in India. Madyamika was situated far to the south of Menander’s invasion route to Pataliputra.¹⁸

There is another famous source which expresses the Greeks military actions in north central India. *Malavikagnimitra*, was a play written by Kalidasa and it

expressed the tradition shortly before the birth of Christ. The *Mahabharata* is a major Indian epic, features Bhagadatta, described as a *Yavana* king; who plays a prominent role in the epic's climactic war. King Menander, a successor of the Greco-Bactrian king Demetrius, conquered large parts of northern India and features in a major Buddhist text, the *Milindapanha* (Questions of Milinda). A philosophical dispute about Buddhism, between Milinda and the Buddhist sage Nagasena, comprises the bulk of the text.

Buddhism in India:

Actually Buddhism in India is a very turning point in the world of art and culture, as well as in philosophy and religion. The Greek- Indian Buddhist religious thought appeared as the new dawn across Asia and Europe more than all other religious faiths. There is an opinion that the Buddha neither thought to set up a new religion nor looked upon his doctrine as a different form of the popular cults of the time.¹⁹ But here a question is arose that his followers raised his status almost to divinity even during his life time; and after his death they worshiped him by his symbols the *stupa*, recalling his *parinivana* and the *Bodhi* tree. During the reign of Ashoka such kinds of stupas were built all over the India. But in all these Buddhist sculptures of that concerned era there is no show of Buddha himself. But displayed by such emblems as a wheel, an empty throne, a pair of footprints or a pipal tree.²⁰

Greek Influences on Indian Sculpture:

The Greek artistic approaches largely influenced on Indian art by the Buddhist tradition and persisted into the later Gupta period. The Greeks are very famous for their innovative and the anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha in Indian sculpture

In the Greeks' campaigns, The Buddhists were oppressed in the Eastern side by Sunga dynasty. Between the two cultures, they also lead the artistic commerce. The Gandhara School of Buddhist art hence grown up under the great influence of the Greeks. The Greek initiation of sculpting the Buddha in human form matured and it became a major part of the Buddhist iconography.

The Greeks also introduced their own architectural and sculptural forms, like cupids, friezes and Corinthian columns into the Buddhist school. Several Greek mythological figures were incorporated into Buddhist architectural works, including Heracles, who became equated to *Vajrapani*²¹. The Greek skills and techniques were endured till the epoch of Gupta. Gupta's realistic anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha reflect the legacy of the Greek artistic influence.

Gandhara Art, Exquisite Touch of the Buddhism:

During the reign of Kushana Kings, the Gandhara School of art and sculpture much flourished in the area of lower Kabul Valley and upper Indus side around Peshawar and Mathura. This geographical belt earned status of founding the place to honor the Buddha's images. Mostly Indian dynamic regimes regard that the presentation of Buddha images originated at Mathura, South of Delhi. Around 140 B.C after the death of Menander, the Central Asian Kushana infested with Bactria and terminated the Greek rule there. Around the 80 B.C the Sakas were despoorted

by their Parthian cousins from Iran.²² They moved into Gandhara and in different parts of Pakistan and in West India. After a time an Indo-Parthian dynasty succeeded to accede to governance control at Gandhara²³. And thus the Parthians continued to give favor to the Greek artistic traditions. Gandhara art largely expanded in Kushana's reign, thus the Kushana's era is considered the golden period in the development of Gandhara civilization. In this epoch Gandhara art produced some of the best pieces of Indian sculpture.²⁴The Gandhara Civilization reached its epitome in the period of great Kushan King Kanis (128-151 A.D). Texila and Peshawar were expanded and Peshawar was declared as the capital of the Eastern province of India to central Asia a great empire stretching from Bengal.

The Buddhist faith was most significant for Kanishka, and it quickly spread from central Asia to the East. From this point Kinshka's empire met with the Chinese Han Empire.²⁵ The Buddha's sculptures and the Buddhist beliefs gravitated the Chinese pilgrims to visit the monuments that were associated with tales and Jatkas. In this way, Gandhara turned from profane to sacred land of Buddhism.²⁶

In Gandhara, Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished and Buddha was represented in human form. Under the Kushan supervision, new Buddha stupas were built and old ones were enlarged. Huge statues of the Buddha were erected in monasteries and carved into the hillsides. Kanishka also built a great tower to a height of 400 feet at Peshawar. This tower was reported by Faxian (*Fa-hsien*), Songyun (*Sung-yun*) and Xuanzang (*Hsuan-tsang*). This structure was destroyed and rebuilt many times until it was at last destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni, in 11th century AD.²⁷

The golden period of Gandhara civilization expired in White Huns dynasty. It is narrated that the white Huns under their ruthless king Mihirakula, brought the tradition of Greek-o-Buddhist art in India to an abrupt end. Many of the Buddhist monasteries were deserted forever, and the bodies of the massacred monks of Texila were left lying in the debris of their chapels. The archeological sites in Taxilla in 20th century explored their skeletons²⁸. The scenes of desolation are narrated by a Chinese envoy Hsuan-tsang who happened to cross this region a century later than the Han invasion. He narrated almost absolute desolation and depopulation of the area with small communities of the surviving monks. Their golden age seemed expired. The very sites of the former Greek cities were abandoned; the sculptures, workshops destroyed and the artists either killed or dispersed, and the last period of Greek influence had come to an end.



Gandhara Buddha

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/lp9wEwU9RrC4De5WrDawtg>

Interestingly, however, a vestige survived in one Indian region where the Greeks had never ruled; In Kashmir until the tenth century A.D. Temples with Corinthian pillars were still being built in a degenerated Gandhara style.²⁹

Coins:

The innovations in Indian culture credited to the Hellenistic Greeks by the mostly scholars of the last century. It is a fact that the invasion of Alexander the great India came into close contact with the classical world, subsequently the Indian culture was influenced to a considerable extent by Greek culture.³⁰ Indian history started to take this influence in 327 B.C with the invasion of Alexander in India. It was, therefore thought the coinage was also introduced into India by the Greeks of Bactria.³¹ However, now takes this argument seriously as there is the most persuasive evidence to prove the coinage existed in India before the Indians came in contact with the Greeks. In this context the discovery of Taxila of a large hoard of over a thousand punch-marked; together with two coins of Alexander the great and the coins of Philip Arridaeus is of great importance.



Mint Coins at Taxila 450 B.C.

(<http://www.vcoins.com/ancient/ecin/store/viewItem.asp?idProduct=2315&large=1>)
(downloaded Oct. 2006)



Philip III Arridaeus 323-317 B.C

(http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/macedonia/kings/philip_III/i.html)

The punch marked coins from the collections were very effective. These coins suggested that they must have been in circulation for a considerable time long before the advent of the coins of Arridaeus and Alexander. These coins were incidentally in mint condition. Carbon dating process manifests that these hordes of coins were buried approximately in 317 B.C. The archeological estimates suggest currency of these coins almost century older than their burial period of 317 BC. It leads to infer that there is no evidence to support the theory of the Greek origin of Indian coinage. Moreover, there is no similarity whatsoever between the punch-marked coins of India and the Greek drachm.³²

The coins of Kanishka's epoch considered the legends in Greek script and describe the Greek Theology. Consequently coins put up with legends in Bactrian, and the Kushana's Iranian Language, and Greek religious beliefs were substituted by corresponding Iranic ones. The modified Greek script was written on all Kushan coins that represented the words of Kushan and Kanishka.³³ While, the Buddhist coins of Kanishka are rare and it's hard to find them as compared to others.



Kushana Gold Coins

<http://www.kushan.org/coins/huvishka/valuation.htm>

Accessed 25 November 2016)



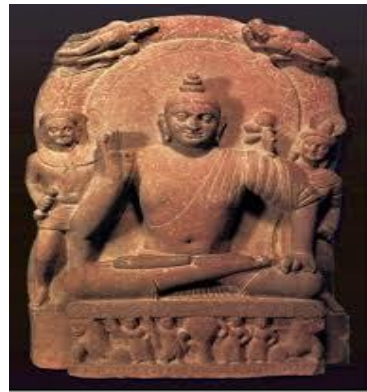
Kanishka in Buddhist Tradition

(Baldev, Kumar, *The Early Kuṣāṇas*. New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1973, p. 98)

Standing Buddha was carved on Kinshka coins, it represents the Hellenistic style.³⁴ And this style was mentioned in Greek script *Boddo*.³⁵ This style is visible in some later

The Origin and Development of Mathura Art:

A parallel school of Buddhist art to that of Gandhara had arisen during the second century A.D. Among the native Indian artists of Mathura One of the chief deities in Hindu religious center beside Jumna. It is situated almost 145 KM in the south of Delhi. Mathura and Gandhara had both formed the part of the realm of Menander³⁶. Besides this the Mathura art is considered as one the first two centers of production for images of the Buddha and the other being Gandhara. And in the second century A.D they both were under the control of Kushana Kings, who established a winter palace in Mathura and patronized Buddhism there as strongly as they had done in Taxila and Pashawer.³⁷



Mathura Buddha

<https://www.kimbellart.org/collection-object/seated-buddha-two-attendants>)

Taxila And Mathura were rival holy cities and their rivalry passed into the realm of art when Mathura became a center of Indian sculpture in the second century; and it began to distribute over Northern India the large numbers of Buddhist images which is workshops produced from the mottled red stone the local quarries. It could be seen that in this era the Mathura's native Indian art reached maturity; but many historians thought that this development was much influenced by the contemporary movement of Greek- Buddhist Art.³⁸ The both centers Gandhara and Mathura started to make human images of Buddha in first century A.D yet maintaining their artistic distinction.³⁹ The Style of Buddha's wearing wavy locks tucked up into a chignon and heavier toga-like-ropes. In Mathura the Buddha's production resembled some of the older Indian male fertility gods: curlier and shorter hair, the shoulders are broad and chest swells and the legs are firmly planted with feet spaced apart and shaven head. Under such kind of characteristics Mathura art reached its epitome during the reign of Kushan dynasty and Mathura city got the status of capital of the state.⁴⁰

The controversy centered principally upon the Buddha figure. Even in 19th century, without any question, it was accepted that this image of Buddha was

originated in Gandhara; but when the patriotic elements introduced in every aspect of Indian history, it led to a stubbornly defended contention that the first Mathura Buddha was produced in second century A.D., presenting those made in Gandhara.⁴¹ The Mathura Buddha in fact modified rather than change the essentials from the Buddha established in Gandhara. They retained its features. Above all, they substitute a feeling of abundant physicality for the somewhat rarefied intellectual quality of the best Gandhara Buddha.⁴²

Gupta Era: The two strains of Mathura and Gandhara are finally combined in the greatest school of Indian Buddhist art. During the last century of Greek-o-Buddhist era, the Gupta Empire arose in central India. In Gupta's sculptures, an ideological resonant of classical Greece took place. The physical existence of Mathura, the intellectuality of Gandhara, gave place to a quality of pure spirituality.⁴³ The Greek influence at this point was finally absorbed and transcended. It gave to Indian Art its techniques, its plasticity, mind its most sublime image; it has helped to liberate it from the primitive and uncouth images and forms of the ages before the Alexander; and now it dissolves, as Indian art begins to take its own course with the resurgence of the ancient Brahmanical gods.

With the merging Greeco-Buddhist art into the general tradition of Indian art, the last outward sign of the Greek presence in India disappeared. The Greeks themselves were lost in the mass of the Indian population, and their contributions to the culture of the country had been absorbed absolutely leaving no major Hellenistic strain visible after the fifth century. The Greek community failed to maintain their mosaic in India unlike Parsee and the Muslims. The reason lies that the ancient Greeks were by nature an undogmatic people. They carried with them to Asia a culture but not a creed. They set out to inquire, not to convert, and in the end it was they who, like their king, Menander were converted.

The Greeks influence on Indian Astronomy:

In the earlier ancient Indian culture, the advancement of astronomy in India came from the practice of astrology and the recognition of Indian astronomy is due to that of the ancient Greeks.⁴⁴ The Gargi Samhita of the *Yuga Purana* accredits as the mastermind of astronomy to the Greeks as well as the Aryabhata ascribes the Zodiac to the Greeks. The Indian astronomy found many innovations by the influence of Greek astronomical tradition. Such as India contributed in giving the name of the days of the week and precise calculation of the length of a year, this contribution to the science of astronomy go back to the Greeks period.⁴⁵ In the earlier era the astronomical texts were found in *Rigveda*, approximately it was written during 1700 to 1100 B.C.⁴⁶ However, The Greek astronomers, too, enjoyed and further imminent approaches gained from the Indian Vedas with two great ancient civilizations mostly glad to learn from each other in the interest of scientific progress, and the study of Indo-Greek astronomical knowledge and queries became more visible on post-*Vedic* tradition.⁴⁷ The ancient Greeks came across and ingested astronomical information that was arising from a well developed Mesopotamian civilization. Consequently the ancient Greek astronomy brought forth the magnificent scientists; they transferred the astronomical approaches into theoretical science. According to this science the Universe is

moving along with mathematical objectives that could be inferred by logic and reason as well.

In 5th century A.D. the Siddhantic period, is considered the Golden age of Indian astronomy. In this era the mathematical solutions to astronomical issues were gathered into astronomical texts. The famous astronomers Aryabhatta (476 A.D), Varahamihira (505 A.D), Brahmagupta (598 A.D) and Bhaskara (1114 A.D) are belong to this period.⁴⁸ This is mentioned in the Paitamaha Siddhantas "The detail of Greeks reflects a rather chaotic mix of Aristotelian and Babylonian notions invoked by various early Hellenistic theories that fell into oblivion after Ptolemy. Indian astronomers combined these concepts with other parameters and techniques in their astronomical tradition to produce the cosmological and computational models that became standard in Siddhantas."⁴⁹ AryaBhatta considered the first great mathematician and astronomer as well. In ancient Greek astronomy he introduced some extraordinary progress, such as the calculation and rotation of the Earth related to the specific stars as twenty three hours, fifty-six minutes and 4.1 seconds (actual 23:56:4.091) and the length of the year was 365 days 6 hours, 12 minutes 30 seconds was just 3 minutes 20 seconds out of the length of the year. This calculation is called of sidereal year.⁵⁰ However, there is a variety of discoveries that have been attributed to the origin of ancient Greece. As an example we can mention here that Anaxogoras (510-428 B.C) explained first time that the Moon shines due to the reflected sunlight. The Earth spins are attributed to Philolus. Nevertheless, the involvement through the astronomic sciences by such Indian astronomers as AryaBhatta and Brahma gupta were invaluable and, historically, second only to those of the ancient Greeks.⁵¹

In short the complex political and undeveloped social factors were the reason of Greek influence on Indian culture, art and many other fields of life. Somehow these influences can be finding even in present Indian society. For Instance, Zodiac is widely known in Indian astrological practice. And Indian people commonly use some names that are signed with Greeks in some aspects. The Temples of ancient India era and particularly the Buddhist stupas are ever considered the major and the most important Indian heritage. Thus, in this way the Greek influence in present era is a prominent element of India's cultural heritage.

Notes and References

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- ⁸ A hand book of astrology, the *Gargi Samhita*, and written in the form of prophecy, it is generally thought to derive from an actual historical chronicle written in Prakrit no more than a century after the events which it describes
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- ¹⁰ (ED) E.J. Rapson, *Cambridge History of India, Ancient India Vol. 1*, p. 21.
- ¹¹ Patanjali is major writer of that age who also commented on *Panini*
- ¹² It is written in the works of Patanjali "*The Yavana was besieging Sketa*"
- ¹³ It is written "*The Yavana was besieging Madyamika*"
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- ¹⁶ It is written in works of Patanjali "*The Yavana was besieging Sketa*"
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- ¹⁹ David-Neel, Alexandra, *Buddhism: its Doctrine and Methods*, London, 1939, p. 128.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*...p. 129

- ²¹ the mythological protector of the Buddha
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