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Indo-Iranian Cultural Ties: A Shared Heritage

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Abstract

Indians and Iranians share a common ancestry, a common linguistic past as also the contacts between Achaemenian Persia, Sassanian Persia and ancient India .

Introduction

India and Iran have been close neighbors for most of the period in their history. Historical and cultural overlaps has been very marked between the two countries.

On the basis of linguistic evidence the people who arrived on the southern slopes of Alborz mountains in North Iran and in Western Iran, are regarded as having originally been Indo-Iranians who for a long period shared a common tradition while living as Nomads in the Central Asian steppes. Eventually the two linguistically related groups separated and migrated southwards. The Iranian group moved into the highlands of Iran through the flat passable area south-east of Caspian Sea, while the Indian tribes migrated into the Indian sub-continent.[1]

Iran supplied silver, gold, lead, zinc, turquoise to ancient India. Ivory was imported from India.[2] The Harappan people are believed to have imported silver, copper, turquoise and lapis lazuli from Persia and Afghanistan.[3] In the second millennium B.C. there was close agreement between the language and mythology, religious traditions and social institutions of Indians and Iranians on the one hand and those of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans and Slavs on the other. For a considerable period after their separation from their western kinsmen, the Indians and Iranians are believed to have lived together.[4]The scriptures Vedas (of the Indian Aryans) and the Avesta (of the Iranians) both agree on the cause, which led to the migration of the Aryans from their original homeland (called Airyana Vaejo in Avesta). In the Vedic account, it is a flood of water that is referred to and in the Avestan account it is a flood of snow and frost. The praleya signifying snow or frost is derived from pralaya or deluge in Sanskrit by Panini. That there was a huge flood in pre-historic times in some parts of the then known world is proved by Semitic sources which seem to have borrowed their account from Aryan sources. The name of the person who escaped this disaster is Noah, according to them (more correctly Nuh as in Arabic which is a

contracted form of Manuh, nominative form of Manu). In both Indian and Iranian versions, he is the son of the same person – Vivasvat or Vivanghat. According to the tradition of the Vendidad, the ancestors of the Iranians lived in 15 other countries turn by turn. One of these was Haptahindu, i.e. Saptasindhu, the cradle land of Indo-Aryan civilization.[5] India is mentioned in the Avesta and there is some description of north India in it. In the Rig Veda there are references to Persia – the Persians who were called Parshavas and later Parasikas, from which the modern word Parsi is derived. The Parthians were referred to as Parthavas.[6] Sanskrit and Avesta have a common basic vocabulary and common grammar. The name of Haptahindu (land of seven rivers) is mentioned in Avesta whereas Ariya (the name of Persia) is mentioned in the Vedas.[7]

Vedic and Persian religions (both Aryan) mingled in Gandhar, where stood the Indian city called Taxila by the Greek. By the age of Darius (6th century BC), the most refined of its cult had evolved into what was later known as Zoroastrianism – a dualist religion accounting for the problem of evil in terms of struggle of a good with an evil god.[8]

By around 1000 BC, Indians and Persians had established themselves as distinct cultural and racial entities with their boundaries meeting at Kabul and Sistan.[9] The founder of the Achaemenian dynasty in Persia was Hakhamanis (Sakhamani in Sanskrit, meaning one who has allies/friends – Hakha/Sakha of crystalline fidelity - mani). During the Achaemenian period, some parts of northwest India came under Persian rule. Indian emissaries were present in the courts of Medes and Emperor Cyrus in 550 – 529 BC.[10]

The Persepolis inscription mentions Punjab as a part of the Persian empire. The epigraph of Nagsh-i-Rustam shows India as the 24th state of his empire. When Cyrus the Great was invaded by King Croesus of Lydia in Greece, a contemporary Indian king is believed to have rendered military assistance to the Iranian emperor.[11]

It is also believed that cane sugar was first used by man in Polynesia from where it spread to India. In 510 BC the Emperor Darius found in India "the reed which gives honey without bees", which he then brought to Persia.[12]

Not surprisingly, administrative and political nomenclature in northern India at this time reflected that of western and Central Asia. The Persian term for the governor of a province, *khshathrapavan*, as used by the Achaemenians, was Hellenized into "satrap" and widely used by these dynasties. Its Sanskrit form was *ksatrapa*. It has been suggested that the idea of issuing decrees by Ashoka was borrowed from the Achaemenian emperors, especially from Darius (though the tone and content of Ashoka's edicts are different). The pillars, with their animal capitals (fine examples of Mauryan imperial art), are influenced by Achaemenian pillars.[13]

According to Herodotus, the Persian emperor Artaxerxes I (5th century BC) exempted the inhabitants of four Babylonian villages from taxation in return for their breeding Indian dogs for hunting and war. The dog is only once mentioned with respect in ancient Indian literature and was rarely, if ever, treated as a pet. The exception occurs in the Mahabharata, where the five Pandavas and their wife Draupadi take their dog with them on their final pilgrimage to heaven, and the eldest brother Yudhisthira refuses to enter without his faithful friend. It has been suggested that the episode shows Iranian influence, for with the Zoroastrians, the dog was a sacred animal.[14] The borderland areas of Kabul, Kandhar and Sistan, which were often politically parts of India, were the meeting place of Indians and Iranians. In later Parthians times they were called 'white India'. Referring to these areas the French savant, James Darmesteler says "Hindu civilization prevailed in those parts, which in fact in the two centuries before and after Christ were known as white India".[15] In the 1st century BC, Kanishka, the ruler of northwest India, became a great patron of Buddhist faith. Buddhism began to spread to Central Asia and the Far East. Kanishka patronized the Gandhara school of Buddhist art, which introduced Greek and Persian elements into Buddhist iconography.[16]

Buddhism became the religion of the east Iranian province of Khorasan through the Kushana emperors. The legendary biography of Buddha in Sanskrit – the *Buddha Charita* – composed by Ashvagosha was translated into Khotanese and then into Sogdian and Parthian – old Persian idioms, then into Pahlavi and into Arabic and other languages. Ibn Babaviah of Qom in his work *Akmal al din wa Tamam al Nimah* included a story based upon the Persian version of the above story by Zakariya Razi. The legend of Balohar and Budasaf became a part of European and Asian literature. In Iran, the story of Ibrahim ibn Adham, the prince who abandoned his kingdom to lead a religious life, is moulded on the model of Buddha.[17]

Paintings on the walls of Dukhang of Alchi monastery in Ladakh reproduced in detail Sassanian motives on textiles. They can be seen in round medallions with mythical animals. The most ancient stringed instrument from Persia – a red-sandalwood five-stringed vina – has been preserved at the Todaiji monastery in Nara, Japan since 8th century. It is decorated with a Persian motif in mother-of-pearl inlay and represents a cultural exchange between the Persian and the Buddhist world. The Tibetan histories of medicine relate that Jivaka the physician to Lord Buddha was born as the son of King Bimbisara. Grown up, one day he saw a group of white-clad men and asked his father: "Who are they". He said: "They are doctors and they protect people from diseases". He wished to become a doctor and he asked his father for permission. King Bimbisara sent him to Taxila. These white-clad men were Iranians, who were famous physicians as attested

by Sanskrit texts.[18] Around 7th century AD an Arabic translation from a Persian version of the *Charaka Samhita*, the famous Indian medical text, was made during this phase. Another early Arabic book *Zik-i-Shatro Ayar* an astronomical work based on Indian elements was translated into Arabic by Al Tamimi.[19]

Conclusion

So cultural overlap between India and Iran goes back to thousands of years. On the basis of linguistic evidence the people who arrived on the southern slopes of Alborz mountains in North Iran and in Western Iran, are regarded as having originally been along the Indo-Iranians who for a long period shared a common tradition while living as Nomads in the Central Asian steppes. Eventually the two linguistically related groups separated and migrated southwards. The Iranian group moved into the highlands of Iran through the flat passable area south-east of Caspian Sea, while the Indian tribes migrated into the Indian sub-continent. Not surprisingly, administrative and political nomenclature in northern India at this time reflected that of western and Central Asia. The Persian term for the governor of a province, *khshathrapavan*, as used by the Achaemenians, was Hellenized into "satrap" and widely used by these dynasties. Its Sanskrit form was *ksatrapa*. It has been suggested that the idea of issuing decrees by Ashoka was borrowed from the Achaemenian emperors, especially from Darius.

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