

# THE SAKAS (PART-1)

**B.A. HISTORY(HONS) PART-1 PAPER-1**

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# INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the first millennium of the Common Era, North India was in turmoil. The central authority of the Mauryas had declined and a number of smaller kingdoms and principalities had emerged. Taking advantage of this, the Indo-Greek or the Yavanas had established their power in North-Western India, making an audacious bid for the prized city of Pataliputra. But they were to be displaced by even more powerful force. The pushback from China and the ripple effect this had on the tribes across the Central Asian Steppes forced a number of nomadic tribes to migrate to India and make it their home. The most prominent among them were the Indo-Scythians or the Sakas, and the Indo-Parthians or the Pahlavas. Over the next few centuries, they would come into India, embrace it and leave an incredible mark on Indian culture and society.

# INTRODUCTION

Some would even make their way into the Bible and later renditions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Sakas, displaced by the Yeuzhi and pushed towards India, went on to defeat the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms on India's frontier in Northern Afghanistan. This, in turn, pushed the Indo-Greeks into Punjab. In a short span of time, the Sakas seem to have chased the Greco-Bactrians into Punjab and defeated them around 145 BCE. It is said that the Sakas burnt the Greek city of Ai-Khanoum (in present-day Takhar Province of North-Eastern Afghanistan) to the ground. This Saka conquest of the Bactrian-Greek kingdoms on India's frontier made waves around the world. The 1st century A.D. Greek Geographer Strabo in his text Geographia, mentions, *'The nomads who became most famous were those who took away Bactriana from the Greeks – the Asiani (Yeuzhi), the Tochari and the Sacae (Sakas).'*

# THE SAKAS

The earliest Saka kingdom was established by c. 158 B.C. in a region of the extreme north-western section of the Indian subcontinent, which included Darel and Swat on the Indus and also Gilgit and the Chilas area. The area was then known as a part of Chi-pin. It is not certain whether the Kashmir valley was a part of the Saka kingdom. We also do not know the name of the earliest Saka king in India. However, there is an indication that the Saka power spread southwards via the Hazara region. A Kharoshti inscription on a rock near the Hazara country refers to a king called Damijada (or Namijada) as a Saka. Obviously the king had the Hazara area under his sway. Regarding the extension of Saka inroads into India it may be noted that they must have been aware of the existing trade routes penetrating the Indian subcontinent.

# THE SAKAS

For example, the Audambaras and the Indo-Greeks had busy trade relations based on favourable commercial routes joining Kashmir with the Gangetic valley. The extension of the Saka rule to the Shah Dheri (ancient Taxila) area is suggested by an inscription found in that locality. It records a pious act at or near Takhasila by Patika, the son of Liaka Kusuluka, a scion of the Kshaharata (family) and the Kshatrapa of Chukhsa, in the year 78 and during the reign of the Great King, the Great Moga. The name indicates a Scythian affiliation. It appears that the territory of Chukhsa or the Sind Sagar Doab between the Indus and Jhelum (including Taxila or Shah Dheri near Rawalpindi) was ruled by a governor named Moga in the year 78.

# THE SAKAS

The year can be attributed to the so-called old Saka Era of 170 B.C. Thus, by c.92 B.C. Moga, probably of a group of Sakas, occupied a part of the Punjab (now in Pakistan). Moga has been universally identified with Moa and Maues of legends on several varieties of coins. Maues probably conquered Gandhara to the west of the Indus from the Indo-Greek ruler, Artemidorus. From the group of Maues, if not from the Greeks themselves, the hegemony over Arachosia passed to the Imperial Parthians. With the end of the hegemony of the group of Maues towards the close of the first quarter of the first century B.C. ended the first phase of the Saka or Saka-Pahlava rule in India.

(To be continued)