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Kashmir and the Neighbouring world: From Earliest to Eighth Century CE

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Kashmir, the northern most region of India though surrounded by a ring of mountain ramparts is endowed with a distinctive geographical advantage situated as it has been amidst the great civilizations of the ancient and medieval world with which it maintained contacts through a number of passes leading through its natural defenses. With China toward its east, Central Asia towards the north, Afghanistan and Iran towards northwest and Indian sub-continent towards its south and north, Kashmir became the meeting ground of the great civilizations - Chinese, Central Asian, West Asian and Indian civilizations. It is also true that these civilizations were themselves influenced by many other civilizations. In this way they collectively formed global civilization. Having been inextricably intertwined with the history of the neighbouring territories, the Kashmir culture cannot be understood without situating it with the civilizations that emerged on its borders from time to time.

There is more or less unanimity among the scientists that the Anatomically Modern Man (AMM) first actually appeared about 115,000 years ago in the archaeological record of South Africa. Beyond Africa he appeared in West Asia in 100000, in Australia in 65000 and in Sri Lanka, in 34000.ⁱ In the immediate neighbourhood of Kashmir the AMM first appeared in the Soan Valley (Western Punjab) between 60000 and 20000 years ago.ⁱⁱ The existence of modern human in Kashmir around 18000 years ago is fairly attested by the archaeological evidence.ⁱⁱⁱ Considering the much recent existence of AMM in Kashmir as compared to his appearance in the Soan Valley, it is logical to infer that the Anatomically Modern Man entered into Kashmir from the neighbouring Soan Valley. The continuity of cultural growth was, however, disrupted which is shown by the absence of the Mesolithic Culture.

It is believed that around 10000 BC cooler conditions prevailed in Kashmir. The period witnessed excessive rains forcing the people to move out.^{iv} And it was only after the climatic conditions improved around 5000 B.P. that Kashmir became habitable attracting the Neolithic people of the neighbouring territories to settle here. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Neolithic Culture which began in Kashmir around 2920 BC,

presents a striking affinity with the Neolithic cultures of China, Russia, Iran, West Asia and Central Asia. Pit dwelling and bone tools of Kashmir Neolithic Culture had a long history in China, Russia, Central Asia and Iran;^v many pottery types that we find in Kashmir Neolithic have parallels in China and Iran;^{vi} the perforated stone harvesters found at Neolithic Gufkral originated in China;^{vii} dog burial (of Neolithic Burzahom) was a common practice in China;^{viii} red-painted burials found at Burzahom have parallels in China, Japan, Russia and West Asia;^{ix} the hair pin that we found at Gufkral actually originated in the Mediterranean world and spread to Persian Gulf, Caucasus to the Indus;^x the Neolithic crops of Kashmir namely wheat, barley, lentil, pea, almond, walnuts, peach, apricot originated in China, Central Asia and West Asia.^{xi}

In the immediate neighbourhood of Kashmir all these aspects of Kashmir Neolithic have been found in Potwar Plateau, Swat Valley, Gomal Valley, and Baluchistan.^{xii} There is so much affinity between the Neolithic culture of Kashmir and the Neolithic cultures of Potwar region and Swat Valley that Allichins consider them belonging "to a single complex".^{xiii} This shows clearly that the earliest settlers of Kashmir came from north and north-west neighbourhood of Kashmir. This is also substantiated by the Kashmiri language and the earliest known religious cult of Kashmir (Naga cult). According to the eminent linguist, Sir George Garrison, Kashmiri language belongs to the Dardic group of languages spoken in the vast area that borders Kashmir's north and northwest.^{xiv} According to the available evidence Naga worship was in vogue from Khotan through Chilas to Punjab since very early times.^{xv}

Around 1500 B.C. another wave of immigrations and settlements is substantiated by the presence of a new culture alongside the old one. The new culture is underlined by Megaliths, cist graves, iron, rubble structures and rice and millet cultivations.^{xvi} Such developments- multi-cropping system, stone walled houses, rectangular stones, sickles in Swat around 1700 BC have been explained in the context of wide ranging cultural exchanges including immigrations particularly of Indo-Aryans.^{xvii} The same may hold true of Kashmir as well. The period I of Semthan has revealed grey ware along with other types of wares.^{xviii} Archaeologists call it Pre-Northern Black Polished Ware, i.e. the ware which is encountered in India during the Aryan phase. Recently a site named Dard Kot has been spotted on the highest terrace of Village Hutmur overlooking the river Lidder. An important discovery was of plain grey ware which, as we know, is anterior to painted grey ware.^{xix} A later work *Nilamatapurana*, canonical work of Kashmiri Brahmans, written in seventh or eighth century, also records the arrival of Aryans though it is clothed in folklore and informed by the dominant tradition Brahmanism.^{xx} As Megaliths originated in Mediterranean^{xxi} and rice, millet and grapes originated in China,^{xxii} and Iron in West Asia,^{xxiii} the Aryan Culture was obviously a syncretic culture drawn from various civilizations including their homeland namely Central Asia.

In 516 B.C. Darius, the Achaemenian ruler of Iran, extended his empire upto India by annexing Sindh and Gandhara (North West frontier and the parts of Punjab). We learn from the Greek Sources that at that time of Iranian invasion Kashmir was a part of Gandhara.^{xxiv} As the Iranians ruled over these territories upto Alexander's invasion of India in 326 BC, it would suggest that Achaemenian rule continued in Kashmir for about 200 years paving the way for huge Iranian influences. It would be significant to mention that the Achaemenians introduced writing in India, and also their script Aramaic. The Kharoshti script, which became common in Kashmir was also carved out of Aramaic. The Persian influence is also marked in various aspects of Indian polity and culture including the profound influence of Zoroastrianism of which we find deep imprints on the culture of ancient Kashmir.^{xxv}

Towards the beginning of third century BC the mighty Mauryan Empire emerged on the borders of Kashmir which extended up to eastern Afghanistan. All the extant sources namely Greek records, Milinda Panha and Buddhist texts unanimously say that at this time Kashmir and Gandhara formed one political entity.^{xxvi} It is, therefore, quite logical to say that Kashmir became the part of the Mauryan empire with its occupation of Gandhara. This is further substantiated by the famous Kashmiri chronicle *Rajatarangini* and the archaeological evidences. It is remarkable to note that Ashoka is the first historical figure mentioned by Kalhana in his *Rajatarangini*.^{xxvii} The famous archaeological site, Semthan has yielded two important traits of Mauryan culture namely Punch Marked Coins and Northern Black Polished Ware.^{xxviii} That Ashoka ruled Kashmir is also corroborated by Hieun Tsang (625 A.D) who saw Ashokan stupas in the Valley.^{xxix} The Mauryan influences resulted into the intensive use of Iron, promotion of rice culture, introduction of Northern Black Polished Ware, Punch Marked Coins, popularization of Kharoshti script, beginning of urbanism (Srinagar was built by Ashoka), organisation of elaborate system of administration and last but not least Buddhism was introduced in Kashmir during the period of Ashoka.^{xxx}

From about 200 BC to the first half of the 6th century A.D. i.e. for about 500 years Kashmir was successively occupied by Bactrian Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, Kushans, Kidarites and Huns. This is sufficiently corroborated by both the archaeological and literary evidence. During this long period of intimate contact with Central Asia, Kashmir underwent a remarkable development not only because it was integrated with an international market but also because it was greatly benefited by the great civilization which emerged in Central Asia on account of the synthesis of the most developed civilizations of the time namely Chinese, Greek, Iranian and Indian. This is evident from a huge material evidence revealed by a host of archaeological sites such as Semthan, Harwan, Ushkur, Hoinar, Hutmur, Doen pather, Kanispora etc.^{xxxi} Additional evidence in this regard is provided by numismatics, written sources, word fund of Kashmiri language, and place names.^{xxxii} Following the immigrations and settlements of the people from neighbouring world and the network of interactions there was hardly any aspect which remained uninfluenced.^{xxxiii} What is perhaps more significant is that Kashmiri culture became a mini global culture.

This is evident from the Harwan tiles which according to Percy Brown, "represent half a dozen ancient civilizations besides the other indigenous cultures".^{xxxiv} That the Central Asian empires which extended their control over Kashmir essentially represented a syncretic civilization is also typically shown by Kushan coinage where we find the different deities belonging to Greek, Roman, Iranian, Central Asian and Indian pantheons.^{xxxv} Apart from making significant additions to the already ethnically and culturally mosaic society of Kashmir, Kashmir's technology, economy and culture received an unprecedented boost in the wake of integration of the valley with the highly advanced civilizations. It is interesting to know that the Kashmiri masses became familiar with the money currency for the first time during this period. This is evident from the Kashmiri word *diyar* used for money currency. *Diyar* is the Kashmirized version of Greek *dinarus*. The democratization of money currency was obviously the result of the unprecedented growth of Kashmir's external trade. That Kashmir's technology was greatly benefited by its contacts with the neighbouring civilizations, Harwan site presents a vivid evidence.^{xxxvi}

During the Kushan period Kashmir became a great centre of Buddhism so much so that it attracted Kanishka to convene Fourth World Buddhist Council in Kashmir in which, according to Hieun Tsang, hundreds of Buddhist savants participated.^{xxxvii}

Kashmir's pre-eminence as great centre of Buddhist learning survived for centuries together. Even though in the early 6th century A.D Buddhists of Kashmir and the North-West of India faced worst persecution at the hands of Meharkul,^{xxxviii} and despite the ascendancy of Brahmanism in Kashmir from then onwards, Kashmir continued to be a centre of Buddhist learning at least for two-three centuries i.e. upto eighth century A.D. Not surprisingly, therefore, the famous Chinese pilgrims, Hieun Tsang (631-33) and Ou'kong (759 AD) came to Kashmir to learn at the feet of Kashmiri Buddhist scholars.

From sixth century A.D. Kashmir emerged as a great political power. *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana gives us a glowing account of the conquests made by the Hun rulers of Kashmir.^{xxxix} Some of them are even credited to have reached up to the deep South and to Bengal in the east.^{xl} Notwithstanding the exaggerations there is no denying the fact that before the Karkotas Kashmir had emerged a great empire. According to the Chinese Annals, Kashmiri rulers controlled the route from China to Ki-pin (Kabul) around 627 AD.^{xli} Hieun tsang also found all the adjacent territories on the west and north, down to the Taksasila, Hazara, Salt rang and smaller hill states as tributaries of Kashmir in 631 AD.^{xlii} Certainly, the emergence of Kashmir as a great empire was the handiwork of Huns which they bequeathed to the Karkotas who maintained the tradition as true heirs of their great ancestors. The founder of Karkota dynasty, Durlabhavardhana was the son-in-law of the last Hun ruler of Kashmir, Baladitya. He had served as an official in the court of Baladitya.^{xliii}

It is in place to mention here that whereas prior to 6th century A.D Kashmir remained more gravitated to Central Asia, the situation changed then onwards as we find Kashmir being equally influenced by Indian culture. Although the Huns belonged to Central Asia they, while remaining in the Indian environment, were thoroughly influenced by the Indian culture which is evident from their personal names. Little wonder then that we find either Saivism or Vaisnavism as the dominant religious traditions of Kashmir.^{xliv} The profound Indian influence is also evident from the archaeological and numismatics evidence.

The Karkotas (620-855) expanded the boundaries of Kashmir empire beyond any precedent in the history of Kashmir. Kalhana gives a hyperbolic account of the conquest of the great Karkota ruler, Lalitaditya, yet there is no doubt that he defeated Yasuvarman, the famous ruler of Kanauj, and brought all the immediate neighbouring territories under his control.^{xlv} Certainly, during the period of Lalitaditya Kashmir emerged the greatest power in the whole of northern India. As a result, there was a great influx of talent from the neighbouring world making Kashmir a famous seat of learning and a great centre of hybrid civilization.^{xlvi} Lalitaditya's Prime Minister was a Tukharian Buddhist, Cankun by name,^{xlvii} and the five high offices which were newly instituted by the king were manned by 'the Sahis and other princess'.^{xlviii} The outstanding progress which Kashmir achieved on account of the streaming of men of learning from the neighbouring world is evident from the world famous Martand temple constructed by Lalitaditya which puzzle even the modern mind. The foreign styles which played a major role in the development of Kashmiri stone architecture filtered through west Asia.^{xlix} For example, Kashmir owes to Iran for a very important architectural feature namely formation of intersecting cross-members best known as 'lantern' sealing derived from wooden models introduced by the Parthians in the north-west.¹ About the Awantiswamin temple built by Avantivarman (855-883) Robert E. Fisher says, "Nearly all the pilasters are decorated with a rich variety of motifs, some native of India others reflecting West-Asian tastes as found upon Sassanian silver: i.e. roundels that enclose lotuses, geese, mythical creatures, paired humans, birds and flowers as well as numerous geometrical patterns".^{li}

Equally, rather more, significant is to see Kashmir becoming a reputed centre of dialogic tradition attracting the scholars of different beliefs to put across their respective views. On the authority of a contemporary Muslim chronicler we know that during the Karkota dynasty, Kashmir had become an important intellectual centre where "Hindus and Turkish Buddhists of the neighbouring and allied states of Gandhara mingled with foreign scholars".^{lii}

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