

---

## **Contribution of Buddhism in adaptation of the Indo-Greeks:**

### **An Observation**

**Dr. Renu Shukla**

*Professor, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture & Archaeology  
Kanya Gurukul Campus, Dehradun (GKV, Haridwar), Uttarakhand, India*

#### **ABSTRACT:**

*The Greek and Indian civilizations have had contacts since ancient times. Both of these cultures have been two highly fascinating cultures and their contribution towards a humanistic universal civilization is great. Since both of them have been advanced in different aspects and have the characteristics to make the impact on others so it is quite interesting to study the process of interaction between them. The Greeks were rational in thinking and believed in the equality of people. So the religious beliefs like Buddhism, Bhāgvatism, which were intended to produce a sense of harmony, had obviously attracted them the most. Coincidentally Buddhists were in majority in Greek ruled territories in India so they came into contact with them and made a slow and imperceptible impact on each other. The present paper focuses on the period of Indo-Greek rule in India. They came as invaders and very soon get adapted to this land. There are numerous evidences to suggest that under the rule of Indo-Greeks Buddhism flourished in India and it played a remarkable role in their acceptance amongst the local inhabitants of the land. The paper examines assimilation of Indo-Greeks to this country and role of Buddhist ideology in giving impetus to this process and making it successful.*

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Buddhism has had a long history in India and deep influence on different parts of the world. It has attracted people of different origins and great variety of cultures and also played a remarkable role in the assimilation of the people of different shades and colours, who came to this country as travelers, religious missionaries and invaders during ancient period. Looking back at Indian history we find that first two centuries were dominated by Achaemenians followed by Alexander's invasion. Soon after the demise of Aśoka, the Bactrian Greeks led their armies towards this country followed by the Śakas, Pahlavas, Kuṣanas, Huṇas and so

forth. All of them including Indo-Greeks, who were the most advanced culturally, tried to keep their identity for a long time. But since they were in intimate contact with one another, they were bound to be influenced by each other. Thus there has been a continuous process of struggle, interaction and cultural synthesis. India assimilated the foreign elements in an admirable manner. So much so that in some cases the proof of indebtedness is difficult to elucidate. (Sagar: 1992; 10)

The bond between Buddhism and people outside India was very intense and interesting. The first impetus to the spread of Buddhism was given by the missionary activity under the patronage of Aśoka but its further progress was accelerated by the patronage of foreign rulers like the Greeks, Śakas and the Kusāṇhas who had intimate association with western and central Asia. Through these regions Buddhism gradually penetrated into China, Burma and the other parts of eastern and southern Asia. They not only adopted the religion of the Buddha but also actively propagated it and contributed for its development. Among the foreigners who settled in India, influenced by Buddhism and contributed in its promotion, the Indo-Greeks were very prominent.

### **AŚOKAS' EFFORTS TO PROPAGATE DHAMMA**

For the first time in Indian history Aśoka made sincere efforts to propagate the principles of Dhamma to alien nations, including the Yonas. According to Buddhist sources Thera Mahārakkhita went to Yona region and converted the people of this region by preaching Kālkārama Suttanta. (Geiger: 1912; 85) A bilingual inscription in Greek and Aramaic found in Kandhar (Afghanistan) further supports the idea of his close association with Indo-Greeks (Yona). In the light of this Inscription it can be said that Aśoka tried to propagate dhamma in that region and Greeks living there were also well aware of his ethical and religious ideas. The Yonaka Dhammarakkhita Thera preached the Aggikhandhopama Sutta and is reported to have converted 37 thousand people. (Geiger: 1912; 85) These converted yonas are described in Anguttara Commentary as moving around clad in white robes, in memory of the religion which was once prevalent in their country, which shows that they had preserved certain rituals or beliefs of their own religion. (Malalsekera: 1995; 698)

---

## **INDO-GREEK RULE AND BUDDHISM**

The next phase of close bonding between Greeks and Buddhism is the period of the Indo-Greek rule in North-West India. The Greeks were civilized and had inherited a strong tradition of “Pragmatic Humanism”. They were the first to recognize the supremacy of the mind, (Hamilt: 1993; 14-16) which made them more rational in thinking. Since the fifth century B.C. a cosmopolitan trend emerged in Greek thought in reaction to the Peloponesian trend (Avi Yonah: 1978; 137). All the Greek thinkers of the period believed in the equality of people. The religious beliefs like Buddhism, Bhāgvatism, which were liberal in nature and intended to produce a sense of harmony, had obviously attracted them the most. Coincidentally Buddhists were in majority in Greek ruled territories in India so they came into contact with them and made a slow and imperceptible impact on each other. We have evidence that some of the Indo-Greek rulers became patrons of Buddhism and one of them Menander is said to have converted to the faith of Gautama the Buddha. (Rhys Davids: 1996; 377) There are numerous evidences to suggest that under the rule of Indo-Greeks Buddhism flourished in India and it played a remarkable role in their acceptance amongst the local inhabitants of the land.

When Indo-Greeks had expanded their kingdom into North India Buddhism was flourishing in that region. It was quite evident for them to sympathize with Buddhist causes to get support of the Buddhist community in his territory. In Milindapañha we get very positive description of Yona country (Rhys Davids: 1996; 2) which proves that Greek kings were great supporters of Buddhism. The popularity and respect of Buddhism among Greek Kings is proved by the other sources as well. (Bopearachchi: 1990; 1-15) Greek king Agathocles issued a unique coin depicting a Buddhist stūpa surmounted by a star and the legend ‘Akathukreyasa’; on the reverse is a tree inside a railing with the legend ‘Hirañasame’. (Lahiri: 1965; II.10; 41) The coin, like others issued by the same king, is monolingual and inscribed exclusively in Kharosthi. From this coin it is evident that some Greeks were familiar with Buddhist symbols and that Agathocles favoured Buddhism in his dominion. Pāli books and inscriptions also provide us with a number of Indianised names of Yonaka monks. The reference of Sinhalese Buddhist chronicle Mahāvamsa tells us about the inauguration of Rowanvali Dagoba Stūpa in which the Sinhalese king Dutugamunu invited all the important foreign delegations. A large number of Buddhists from Greek territories including Thera

Yonamahādammarakita along with his 30 thousand monks came to attend the ceremony. (Geiger: 1912; 194) The (exaggerated) number of monks suggests that Buddhism was popular in that region at that time.

Greek kings were honoured in Buddhism and some of them made an identifiable position in Indian society and religion. Menander was the most remembered king in this regard. He was given the title of “Mahārājasa Dharmikas Menandrasa” (Menander the righteous king) which was unusual for a Greco-Bactrian king. The another unusual fact about him, which is even more interesting and noteworthy, is that he had been chosen as one of the main characters of Milindapañha, a very important non canonical Buddhist source. The questions put by Milinda before Nāgasena served as a tool to explain the Buddhist Philosophy.

How Buddhism embraced Indo-Greeks is further proved by the Plutarch’s (Greek historian) statement. He narrated in his work that after the death of Menander different cities claim their share of ash of this king- “...the cities celebrated his funeral as usual in other respects, but in respect of his remains they put forth rival claims and only with difficulty came to terms, agreeing that they should divide the ashes equally and go away and should erect monuments to him in all their cities”. (Fowler: 1936; 278) This reminds us the famous story of Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya (Rhys Davids: 1995; 133-35) in which the same treatment was given to Lord Buddha’s ashes and carried back to the different places to make the Stūpa. This shows the profound regard of Menander amongst the Buddhist and also proves his support and encouragement for Buddhism. The inscription found over the Buddhist reliquary of Bajour bearing the date of the 14th year of the reign of Menander is clear evidence of his close link with Buddhism. (EI, XXVI: 1985; 318-321) We find the evidence of Buddhist monument at Pushkalāvati from Charsaddā excavation. An Aerial Photograph of Shaikhān Dehri taken by Mortimer Wheeler also shows an image of Stūpa. (Wheeler: 1862; 16-17) Both these places were in the territory of Menander. Above mentioned evidences give us enough of reason to believe that he was deeply associated with Buddhism which seems to be the most popular religion of his territory. He was so close to Buddhist community that they considered him as one of their own. (Zimmer: 1952; 505) The depiction of a wheel on an isolated copper coin of Menander Dikaios (Dharmikas) is also important in this context. It has been identified by some scholars with Buddhist Dharma Cakra (The wheel of the doctrine) but it is a highly debatable issue because Cakra in India

was not exclusively a Buddhist symbol. (Vassiliades: 1958; 59) According to Vassiliades the symbolism of the wheel occurs also in the Greek tradition. (Vassiliades: 1958; 59)

### **THEORY OF MENANDER’S CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM:**

From Milindapañha we know that Menander was not only a great supporter of Buddhism but at the end of his life he adopted Buddhism- “...afterwards, taking delight in the wisdom of the elder, he handed over his kingdom to his son, and abandoning the household life for the houseless state, grew great insight, and himself attained to arhatship.” (Rhys Davids, 1996; p.374) The theory of Milindapañha of the conversion of Menander to Buddhism is not accepted by number of scholars (Shukla: 2010; 43-45) but they have not denied his closeness with the religion. In this context it is worth mentioning here that we find a different view of Francois Wideman, who does not agree with the Menander’s image of a wise philosopher or a man of wisdom portrayed in Milindapañha. On the contrary he relates the huge quantity and inferior quality (of certain series) of his coins to his restless war like activities. (Wideman: 2007; 15-16) Plutarch’s information about the sudden demise of Menander is important in this regard which is supported by the numismatic evidences as well. Osmund Bopearachchi proves it by giving numismatic evidences that Menander's widowed wife Agathocleia was regent during the infancy of her son Strato. With the growth of her son Agathocleia gradually ceases to be queen- regent, until her portrait and her name disappear completely from the coinage.

- (i) On the first series of Agathocleia’s coins (in chronological order) we find the portrait of Agathocleia together with her name in Greek which appears on the obverse: “ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ ΑΓΑΘΟΚΛΕΙΑΣ” while the name and title of Strato in Kharoshthi, without portrait, are relegated to the reverse: “Maharajasa tratarasa dhramikas Stratarasa.” On the next issue she takes the title "ΘΕΟΤΡΟΠΟΣ"
- (ii) In the second stage the portrait of Agathocleia occurs in association with that of Strato, with the legend in Greek “ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΣΤΡΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΓΑΘΟΚΛΕΙΑΣ” and on the reverse, appears the legend in Kharoshthi: “Maharajasa Tratarasa dhramikasa Stratarasa Agathukriai” associated with her husband's monetary type Athena Alkidemos.

- (iii) In the next series the name of Agathocleia disappears from the Kharoshthi legend. This shows that she loses her power in favour of her son as he grows. (Bopearachchi: 1990; 3)

Bopearachchi also held the same view on account of monograms found on the coins of Menander, Agathocleia, Strato I and Zoilos I. Menander's wife Agathocleia did not inherit any of his monogram which means she inherited none of her husband's territories. The only monogram common to Menander and Strato I appear on one of his coin characterized by a middle aged portrait (Bopearachchi: 1990; 3) while five of Menander's monograms appear on the coins of Zoilos I. On the basis of these evidences he is certain that all these three were the immediate successors of Menander and came to power at the same time in different territories, broadly Zoilos I in Paropamisadae and Strato I in Gandhara. (Bopearachchi: 1990; 4) Bopearachchi's observations support the information of Plutarch regarding sudden demise of Menander and we may assume that Zoilos I was responsible for it. In the light of given circumstances the theory of the conversion of Menander Soter to Buddhism, has been rejected by the scholars. (Shukla: 2010; 46) It is also worth mentioning here that the information of the conversion of Menander to Buddhism is given at the end of pāli version of Milindapāṇha but the authenticity of its last three chapters is controversial and number of scholars suggest that these chapters were added in later period. The Chinese translation of the book also contains only first three chapters. (Ibid: 2010; 44) If there is a question mark on authenticity of the last three chapters of the book then the conversion of Milinda (corroborated with Menander Soter) to Buddhism is also not a fact. None of Menander's coin show any sign of his conversion. Bopearachchi is not even ready to accept his inclination towards the religion of the Buddha.

**INCLINATION TOWARDS NATIVE BELIEFS UNDER GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES:**

The evidences support the disturbed political situation of the time which would have fatigued Indo-Greeks. The Indo-Greeks, as Abhay Singh observes, were cut off from the Greek mainland and they had known more revolts and rivalries than the other Greeks. They were disturbed by the sudden change in location and environment and reacted with an inclination towards Indian socio-religious way of life to get over their sense of loneliness. (Singh: 1991; 183) The sense of helplessness would have diverted them towards native beliefs. Their

inquisitiveness and interest in Indian spiritual thought is well represented in Milindapañha. Till the time the Indo-Greeks came to power in northern India, Hellenism was on its decline. According to Michael Avi Yonah the gods of Greece had lost their hold upon the mind of men. (Avi Yonah: 1978; 35) Local and syncretic deities became popular most essentially Hellenistic deities lost ground. (Singh: 1991; 183) Time compelled the Indo-Greeks to think the Indian way.

The evidences show that Greeks had a tradition of uncritical admiration for most of the Indians. Indians were considered as “good barbarians”; the one who were seldom attacked by disease, who abhorred luxury, who had wealth, arts, philosophy, omen and magic. (Arora: 1982; 470, 481) Greek writers have described the Sambastae as good people living in the cities in a democratic manner. (Avi Yonah: 1978; 164) The Ariaspian were praised as justice loving like the best of Greeks. The people of Patala were recognized as organized like Spartans. ((Avi Yonah: 1978; 164) Even before that we notice the legend about the conquest of Dionysius and the expedition of Heracles, the stories about the gold-digging ants, fantastic men and animals which show Greek’s fascination since long for India. (Arora: 1991; 90-91) In classical works India was described as the land of unusual beauty, great prosperity, genial seasons, blessed in highest degree and its people were mentioned as the most-just, long-lived, healthy, very tall, truth loving honest, peaceful and most fortunate on this earth. Ibid: 1991; 90) The kind of admiration which Greeks had for India would have made the Indo-Greeks think that they had found the best of all lands. (Mc Crindle: 1877; 1-2)

The Greeks were always guided by prevailing circumstances. We know that there was a good number of Buddhists in their territory so as good kings they adapted their policies according to given circumstances. Even before Indo-Greeks foreigners made great effort to claim a respectable position and gain support of Indians for political purpose. They adopted indigenous names, (EI: VIII; 89) intermarried with the native people on a mass scale (EI: VIII; 49) practiced charitable deeds, (Mookerji: 1981; 197) paid respect to the religious beliefs of the native people (EI: VIII; 176-77, 179) to smoothen the hostility and to get the support from local people of their territory. Heliodorus was a devotee of the Bhāgvatism. Kanishka was a devout Buddhist. The Scythian rulers and people were generally the followers of Buddhism. (EI: XX; 4)The Stathmoi Parthikoi by Isidor of Charax referred the presence of white-skinned People of Greek descent in the population of Arachosia. The Greeks were referred as "White India" in the text. We have some common instances of

sharing of life span and religious merits in Buddhist Jataka tales and Greek myths of Admetus and his wife and Orphenus and Eurydike. (Bhattacharji: 1993; 3-12) The motifs at Indo-Greek coins like humped bull, (Srivastava: 1969; Diomedes, III, Philoxenos, VI ) elephant, (Srivastava: 1969; Heliokles, II; Lysias, II; Zoiles, VI; Menander, VI; Apolladotus, III) trident, (Srivastava: 1969; XXIV; Lahiri: 1965; XII.7) tree in railing, (Srivastava: 1969; Agathocles I) stupa (Lahiri: 1965; II.10; Srivastava: 1969; Agathocles I) surmounted by star, three-headed Hecate, (Srivastava: 1969; XXI) and legend like “Nagardevata Kapisaye” (Narain: 1980; 33) (a legend) are testimony of their generous attitude towards local deities and native religious traditions.

### **FACTORS BEHIND**

We get information of the Greek invasion against Śunga dynasty of India during II Century BCE by Yuga Purana of Gārgi Samhita, (Jayaswal: 1928; 410) Mahābhāṣya (Shastri: 2001; 250) written by Patanjali, Mālvikāgnimitra (Tripathi: 2012; 648) play by Kalidāsa, Ayodhyā (EI: XX; 54-58) Hāthigumphā (Ibid: XX; 54-58) and Reh inscriptions. The ruler Pushyamitra was a follower, protector and promoter of Brahmanism. Before that Buddhist enjoyed great privileges at the time of Mauryan emperor Aśoka. The rise of Brahmanism was a setback for them. No wonder if they had looked upon Indo-Greek kings as their savior and protector against the rising Śunga Power (Bopearachchi: 1990; 9) and had shown respect and admiration for them. Being ruler of a part of this country Greeks also had to adapt and adjust to the cultural traditions of India. Thus the close bonding between Greeks and Buddhism can also be seen as a politically motivated move.

Prevailing circumstances, generous behavior of Indo-Greeks, compulsions of the time, Indian expectations from them and Indian acceptability for people of varied beliefs- were the factors combined together to shape the favourable attitude and policies of the Indo-Greeks towards religion of the Buddha. In view of the above facts there remains no doubt about the Indo-Greeks disposition which manifested best in the sphere of religion. Buddhism seems to be most significant religion which became popular amongst them because of its liberal nature and practical beliefs. The Milindapañha can be seen as a propaganda text by some scholars but it is the best example of the Indo-Greeks' close association with Buddhism and the significance of Buddhist ideology in their adaptation to the native land. The interaction between these two cultures shows two trends- the effort to maintain their identity as Greeks

and transformations in their attitude towards Indian tradition. Both these trends are well represented in their beliefs policies and different forms of expression of the period under review.

**WORK CITED:**

- i. Arora, U.P., “*Greek Images of the Indian Society*”, Makedonikon Thessalonike, 1982.
- ii. Arora, U.P., “*Classical Accounts on India: Some Observation*” in *Graeco Indica* (ed.) by U.P. Arora, Ramanand Vidya Bhawan, New Delhi, 1991.
- iii. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XX, 1930; Vol. XXVI, 1929.
- iv. Shastri, Dwarikadas, *Milindapañhapāli*, Baudh Bharti Grantha Mala, Varanasi, 1990;
- v. Geiger, W., *The Mahavamsa or The great chronicle of Ceylon*, London, 1912.
- vi. Hamilt, Edith, *The Greek way to Western Civilization*, WW Norton & Comp., New York, 1993.
- vii. Jayswal, K.P., 'Historical data in the Gargi Samhita and the Brahmanical Empire', *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, 14, 1928.
- viii. Lahiri, A.N., *Corpus of Indo-Greek Coins*, Calcutta, 1965.
- ix. Shastri, Bal., *Patañjali's Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣyam*, Vol. III. Pratibha Prakashan, Delhi, 2001.
- x. Malalsekera, G.P., *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, Munshiram Manoharlal Pub., New Delhi, 1995.
- xi. Mc Crindle, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, vol. II, Calcutta, 1877.
- xii. Michael Avi Yonah, *Hellenism and the East*, Univ. Microfilm International, Michigan USA, 1978.
- xiii. Mukerjee, B.N., *Mathura and its Society: The Saka Pahlava Phase*, Calcutta, 1981.
- xiv. Osmund Boppearachchi, 'King Milinda's Conversion to Buddhism Fact or Fiction' in *Ancient Ceylon Journal of the Archaeological Survey Deptt. of Sri Lanka*, No. 7, Vol. I, 1990.
- xv. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 821 trans. H.N. Fowler 1936.
- xvi. Rhys Davids, T.W., *The Questions of King Milinda, Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXXVI, New Delhi, 1996.
- xvii. Sagar, K.C., *Foreign Influence on Ancient India*, New Delhi, 1992.

- 
- xviii. Singh, Abhay Kumar, "*The Indo-Greek Disposition*", in *Graeco-Indica*, ed. by Prof. U.P. Arora, 1991.
- xix. Sircar, D.C., "*Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilization*," Vol. I, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1986.
- xx. Shukla, Renu, "*Menander's Conversion to Buddhism: An Observation*" in *History Today*, Ed. by Vandana Kaushik, Vol. 11, 2010.
- xxi. Tripathi, Brahmanand (ed.) *Kalidas Granthavali*, Choukhamba Surbharti, Varanasi, 2012.
- xxii. Vassiliades, Demetrios Th., *The Greeks in India A survey in Philosophical Understanding*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1958.
- xxiii. Wheeler, Mortimer, *Charsadda: A Metropolis of the North West Frontier*, 1962.
- xxiv. Wideman, Francois "*Civil Wars and Alliance in Bactria and North West India after usurpation of king Eucratides*, East and West, Vol. 57, Nos. 1-4, December 2007.
- xxv. Zimmer, Heinrich., *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell, New York, 1951.