

# INNER ASIA AND INDIA THROUGH THE AGES

—Nirmal C. Sinha

## PROLOGUE

Inner Asia and this sub-continent known as India have been closely connected through impact on each other for over four thousand years down to our times. The impact of India on Inner Asia in ancient times is common knowledge thanks to discoveries and explorations of Western scholars like Aurel Stein if only one name is to be mentioned. Inner Asia's impact on India is however not as well known. Among reasons of our ignorance is our preferential reading of history, that India radiated enlightenment all over Asia. Positive evidence of religion and philosophy, arts and culture from India migrating and thriving for centuries in Inner Asia pampers our amour propre. Reproduction of Ajanta in Tun Huang, replica of Kailasa Monolith on the Khullam or the work of Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow monopolises our academic pursuits. The words Ratna, Mani and Guru in Tibet and Mongolia, and the transformation of the word Vihara into Bokhara or of Sartha into Sart in Western Turkestan are no doubt survivals of Indian culture there. I need not amplify this point.

I would devote myself here into the other side of the medal, that is, what Inner Asia has meant for India's history and civilization. I humbly draw inspiration from the greatest savant of this century, Rabindranath Tagore, who not only in his famous poem but in many of his writings and utterances highlighted the role of Inner Asian peoples in our past. I own with pride the lessons I had at the feet of Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, who in my knowledge, was the first scholar to highlight as a historian the role of Inner Asia in the life and culture of the entire country.

A few scholars had earlier written on the races from Inner Asia finding their permanent habitat in India. James Tod in the last century wrote his monumental work on the tribes and dynasties later known as Rajput.

---

Text of Prabodh Bagchi Memorial Lecture at Visva-Bharati on 19 January 1987. The four notes, printed at the end, were read as prefatory to the Lecture.

Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, in the first quarter of this century, wrote on foreign elements in Indian population, particularly of Western India. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee wrote on foreign diction in Indian languages particularly in Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi from around 1925 made a survey of "Central Asian nomads" setting in, or passing through, India from pre-historic times. He did not confine himself to ethno-linguistic or regional aspects, but presented his findings as a historian of the entire sub-continent, in a few writings, which are not less important than his great contributions as Sinologist or Sanskritist.

Professor Bagchi's untimely death (1956) took place when the Soviet archaeologists had unearthed in Western Turkestan an enormous haul of Kushana antiquities. If he had lived for five years more, I am certain, Professor Bagchi would have ably supplemented the findings of Western scholars like Harold Bailey, Bongard Levin or Litvinsky. India's loss in the field of Inner Asian studies remains irreparable.

I am neither an antiquarian nor a linguist and I am not fit to follow the trail blazed by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi. My homage to the great polymath is an exercise to condense four thousand years' contacts between Inner Asia and India in an hour long essay. As a student of history I am well aware of the pitfalls in such summing up whether in twenty pages or in as many volumes. I feel diffident when I remember the lapses of the foremost historical scholar of our times Arnold Toynbee, whether in his mammoth work *A Study of History* or in his interesting monograph *Between the Oxus and the Jumna*. I thank the Visva Bharati Vice-Chancellor for this gracious invitation to deliver the Bagchi Memorial Lecture. I thank my fellow students and my fellow teachers that you bear with me for an hour.

#### WHAT IS INNER ASIA? WHAT IS INDIA?

The expressions Inner Asia and India may be explained at the outset. Why not Central Asia and why not Bharat?

The expression 'Central Asia' has been variously understood. For most, Central Asia includes Pamirs and all Turkish speaking regions within Russia and China. Some would include only Uzbek, Kirghiz, Kazak and Tadzhik areas of Russia and Sinkiang of China. Some recently have included Afghanistan. Many on the otherhand exclude Afghanistan, and with good reason include Tibet and Inner Mongolia. In fact all these regions have been so much interconnected from pre-historic times through folk movements and in historical times through commerce and trade that the expression 'Inner Asia' provides a commodious form. Inner Asia comprehends, in my submission, all the Asian highlands and steppes which are landlocked that is, far away from

the warm waters of the high seas or oceans. 'High seas' is more relevant because to peoples of this landlocked landmass all lakes - big or small -- have all through been 'seas'. In my study I thus include the mass of lands spreading clockwise from the Baikals in the northeast to the Caspian in the southwest. The southern limits marked by the mountains like the Himalayas are clear while the northern limits are lost in the snows and steppes. To use modern geographical terms People's Republic of Mongolia; Inner Mongolia, Sinkiang, Amdo, Kham and Tibet regions of People's Republic of China; and Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tadzhik, Uzbek and Turkmen besides Buriat, Kalmyk and Tuva republics of USSR constitute Inner Asia. The Baikals in the north and the Pamirs in the south are within Inner Asia as much as Kokonor in the east and Aral Sea in the west.

India in my study here denotes the sub-continent known in our old popular writings as Jambudvipa and in ancient Greek writings vaguely as Indies. In the Mughal period the expression Hindostan was used without any religious or sectarian tone. I use 'India' not as a synonym for 'Bharat' as in our Constitution. I use the term for the Indic sub-continent which includes in modern terms India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal besides eastern regions of Afghanistan. I do so as a student of history and need emphasise that all parts of this sub-continent came under Inner Asian impact.

#### PRE-HISTORIC GEOGRAPHY

Some observations on the pre-historic geography of both Inner Asia and India are needed as the memories of these pre-historic times continued in the legends and myths, idiom and imagery, of the peoples and races inhabiting the lands down to the opening centuries of the Christian era.

Inner Asia for ages prior to the Paleolithic was mostly in ice age and several areas had glaciers or glacial rivers. In warmer Paleolithic age, the rivers and lakes became prized landmarks for the races around. Even in historical times the rivers and lakes would often wander and sometimes disappear. The ancient Greek belief that in most ancient times the rivers Oxus and Jaxartes flowed direct into the Caspian Sea is not turned down by modern geologists. Appearance of Aral Sea in its present dimensions cannot be dated today. Lake Lobnor has shifted from place to place in the age of Chinese travellers as even during the days of Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein once. Rivers have changed courses as Oxus, Jaxartes and Tarim in the first millennium after Christ. The Jaxartes now pouring into the Aral Sea used to be tributary of the Oxus in the first millennium A.D. Some rivers in Gobi and its north are now altogether lost in sands and steppes. The Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in Tibet changed its direction from west to east.

Even with all these changes, a firm concept of 'Seven Rivers', whatever be their location, was in the mind of Inner Asian man from the Paleolithic times. Iranian 'Hapta Hindu' Sanskrit, 'Sapta Sindhu', Slav 'Semirechye' or Turkish 'Jiti -su' are echoes from the pre-historic past. Only geologists and antiquarians cannot be precise about the Seven Rivers. I may add another peculiarity of Inner Asian soil. Upheavals upto 1000 ft. or more are well-known. What is not so well-known is that swamps or sandbogs have turned into rocky soil in even less than three centuries. I have on-the-spot knowledge of what was a Dam (swamp) even in early eighteenth century and in 1950s a ready landing ground for supersonic aircraft in Tibet Region of China.

In India particularly in the north, physical geography underwent great changes in pre-Paleolithic times. The most notable change is that of the North Indian River. I cannot do better than speak in the words of Geologist Wadia, whom I had the privilege to know. "Ample evidence is found on the common ancestry of the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Indus rivers, their reversal and capture before attaining their present state which has influenced the course of Indian history at many a turn and corner. It was the notable pre-historic river, named the Siwalik, that flowed from the head of the Sindh gulf to the Punjab and thence at the feet of embryonic Himalaya chains through Simla and Nainital to Assam. Post-Siwalik earth movements in the Punjab brought about a dismemberment of this river system into three subsidiary systems: (1) the present Indus from North-West Hazara; (2) the five tributary rivers of the Indus; and (3) the rivers belonging to the Ganges system which finally took a south-eastern course". I need only emphasise that the common ancestry of these rivers continues to be in the catchment area of Kailas-Manas. I add that the estuaries of the Indus and the Ganges have changed their outlets considerably through last fifteen centuries. I also add how the thirsty Thar swallowed up the Saraswati in post-Vedic centuries.

#### GIFTS FROM INNER ASIA

In Post-Vedic literature, in Buddhist as well as Hindu legends, mountain Meru (Sumeru or Hemameru) and the neighbouring regions featured as Devakshetra. Mount Meru or the mountain system Meru has to be spotted somewhere from the Kun Lun in the east to the Pamirs in the west. The location of Meru as that of Bindu Sarovar is long forgotten in India while the veneration for these regions were adored as treasure lands. In grateful imagination of our remote forefathers Jambudvipa, south of Himavat, had the choicest gifts from the Devabhumi, north of Himavat. Tribistaba or Tibet, was in these Deva regions.

History bears testimony to these gifts counted in our legends as innumerable and immeasurable. I may reduce the count to "three", an auspicious number both in Inner Asia and India in ancient times. The three are : RIVER, MAN and HORSE. The river fed by eternal snow, the man with brains and brawns and the mount with majesty and mobility shaped the history of India since ancient most times.

While the rivers and the races attract much notice through this essay, for obvious reasons, the horses cannot command the notice they deserve. I may quote here how the Vedic Rishis portrayed the noble animal.

hayo bhutvā devān avahad vājī gandharvān  
arvā asurān aśvo manuṣyān

(This animal carried the Deva as Haya, the Gandharva as Vajin, the Asura as Arvan and the Manushya as Asva.)

As is well known even today with "mechanized cavalry", say around the Pamirs, the old fashioned "hoofed carrier" is handy and indispensable for reconnoitring, scouting and supply services. Internal combustion engine has not completely replaced the "Ass from Asia" as the ancient Egyptians described the strange animal used by some Hyksos warriors. Till the Indus script is deciphered we have to be in the dark to know how the Indus people described the mount of the Aryan invader. Even an animal less noble, that is, Asvatara or mule, was of use to the Aryan and succeeding immigrants from Inner Asia.

## THE RIVERS

A country is rightly described as the gift of a river, if the history or life of the people there is determined by the river. Thus we have the saying "Egypt is the gift of Nile". It will not be wrong to say that the entire continent of Asia is the gift of its great rivers.

All the great rivers of Asia, except the four in Deccan (South India) and the two in Mesopotamia (Iraq), rise in Inner Asia and flow into the warm waters of high seas. These great rivers may be mentioned clockwise. These are Amur, Hwang Ho, Yantze Kiang, Mekong, Salween, Irawaddy, Brahmaputra, Ganges and Indus. The two great beneficiaries, from the Inner Asian fons et origo are China and India. China from ancient times considered the great streams as indispensable material wealth to be systematically drawn upon. India from ancient times esteemed the great streams as divine waters: āpo devīh or āpo divyāh. In later times even the Muslims or Christians of Indian

stock would prize the rivers as gifts of God rather than bounties from Nature. It is only from the beginning of the current century that a materialist attitude to our great rivers may be noticed. From the middle of the century all countries of the Indic sub-continent are fully awake to the material or mundane merits of the divine water.

The river as a deity was possibly there among the Pre-Aryan peoples, Dravidian or Kolarian. But the divinity, sanctity or sublimity attached to the rivers of Jambudvipa may be traced to the Rig Veda, that is, the Aryan invaders who settled down in the Punjab. The rivers are referred to with respect in Rig Veda and the object of highest veneration in Saraswati, the Naditama. The honorific for a river was Sindhu, though this term was principally for the Indus in the beginning and exclusively for the Indus later. This honorific, Sindhu, was in respect of seven rivers only, as is evidenced from a number of occurrences in Rig Veda and later Samhitas. It is however not clear what are the seven rivers, though Indus itself and the river par excellence Saraswati would certainly be in Sapta Sindhu, if the seven rivers were in the land where Rig Veda was composed.

Hindus and Buddhists in Jambudvipa preserved the tradition of Seven Rivers down the centuries. In Puranas and like literature rivers flowing out of Bindu Sarovara were named also. The elite as well as the common folk in India however never bothered much about the exact rivers collectively called Sapta Sindhu. Max Muller, at the end of the last century, identified the seven as the Indus with its five tributaries plus Naditama Saraswati. Other scholars preferred Kapisa (Kubha/Kabul) or Oxus in place of Saraswati. Macdonnell and others held that the "seven sacred streams" of Rig Veda should not be identified with any actual physical streams. (Vide Vedic Index). This theory is no mere running away from any historical reality. Sri Aurobindo, the sage of Pondichery, has the last word when he says that the seven streams of Rig Veda are symbolic of the virtues like Energy, Light or Truth. In my submission the Sapta Sindhu of Rig Veda had no reality in physical world. The expression no doubt was a firm reality, come with the Aryans from their earlier habitat in the Oxus-Jaxartes plains. It may have some legendary origins or it may be that some seven rivers were conspicuous in pre-historic Inner Asia. The Aryans carried the imagery of seven rivers down to Punjab and much beyond. It should however be noted that at least 27 rivers find mention in Rig Veda. In my submission Sapta Sindhavah, occurring only once in Rig Veda, did not refer to Punjab. I may add here that even in the evolution of the word 'Sindhu' Han, Tokhar and Hittite elements are noticed. Not unlikely both Sindhu and Sapta Sindhu were in the dialect of the Aryans before they crossed the Hindukush.

Sri Aurobindo is right in his warning that comparative philology or physical geography cannot guide us to the inner metaphysical meaning of the Veda. The Vedic words and expressions have an external as well as an internal connotation. It is beyond the scope of my present task, as also beyond my abilities, to speak on the inner metaphysical meanings of Sindhu, Sapta Sindhu and other terms in Rig Veda. Sri Aurobindo's writings (1914-16) later collected in the book On the Veda (Pondicherry 1956) may be consulted.

#### SAPTA SINDHU

The point I contend is that the imagery or nomenclature of Seven Rivers was so firm in the mind of the Aryan immigrants that they christened the rivers around their new settlement as Sapta Sindhu. No amount of research can establish beyond caveat the names and locations of the Seven Rivers of Rig Veda.

Post Vedic literature - Buddhist, Jain and Puranic - records traditions of seven streams radiating from lake or lakes across the Himalayas: Lake Bindusaras being most commonly cited. The seven rivers streaming out of Bindusaras are Ganga, Nalini, Plavani, Hladini, Sita, Chakshu and Sindhu. Ganga or Ganges, Sindhu or Indus, Sita or Jaxartes and Chakshu or Oxus are clear and legible. D.C. Sircar identified, tentatively, Hladini with upper Brahmaputra (Tsangpo in Tibet), Plavani with Irawaddy, and Nalini with Salween or Mekong. (Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India Varanasi 1960). S.M. Ali, a geographer drawing upon ancient literary sources as also modern geological data, holds that the waters from this legendary lake "not only flowed through visible outlets but also through subterranean channels, which according to the Puranas were legitimate outlets for enclosed watersheds." (The Geography of the Puranas New Delhi 1966). The orthodox belief that Gangotri has subterranean feeders from Manas-Kailas area is not rejected by geologists today. S.M. Ali's conjecture that Yangtze Kiang is the principal eastern river from the legendary lakes seems correct; the source of Salween or Irawaddy would be far away from the legendary spot.

If Sapta Sindhavah of Rig Veda referred to any definite land, it was in their homeland dominated by some seven streams.

#### SEVEN RIVERS IN INNER ASIA AND INDIA

Geology confirms that in pre-historic as well as historic times there have been many rivers spread over Inner Asia. Of these many, the several inland rivers, that is, those which did not reach any high seas or oceans were of vital importance in the life and welfare of the races, nomadic or sedentary. Geology can not be sure about the seven particular rivers.

The memory of races and tribes of Inner Asia however has preserved the imagery of seven rivers down to the days of Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin. Thus Sanskrit Sapta Sindhu made room for some Tokhar expression whose Turki equivalent in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was Jiti-su, rendered in Russian as Semirechye. Semirechye, in Russian administrative geography, comprised only the eastern side of the Oxus-Jaxartes plains and mainly the basins of the lakes Issik-Kul and Balkhash. In the period of Mongol Empire and till the seventeenth century Semirechye included portions of Eastern Turkestan (Sinkiang). Scholars, like Vasily Vladimir Barthold, hint about the changing boundaries of the land of seven rivers in the middle ages. (Vide for example Barthold's "History of the Semirechye" in Four Studies in the History of Central Asia Leiden, 1962). The concept of Sapta Sindhu as a geographical fact or a historical reality was subject to changes in frontiers or dimensions in Inner Asia, and likewise in India.

Rig Veda refers to Sapta Sindhu conspicuously but never names the seven Sindhus. The Tenth Mandala refers to 21 rivers and names them; Verse 75 gives the most comprehensive list. More significant than curious is the first name in the list, that is, Ganga; and strangely enough Sindhu with its western tributaries are named at the end. The last Mandala of Rig Veda was composed when the Aryans had on-the-ground knowledge of Ganga and Yamuna. The Verse 75, in my submission, not only upholds the sanctity of Ganga but also hints a sanctity far higher than that of Sindhu.

When Aryanisation of the entire country was complete and when the sacred rivers had to be located, only seven were found worthy. Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Jambudvipa Bharatavarsha was now become Sapta Sindhavah and each Sindhu in the list was declared as holy as Ganga.

The sages of Mahabharata recognise in the form of ablution prayer that the Seven Rivers were the springs of our material as well as moral wealth.

#### PRE-ARYANS FROM INNER ASIA

It is generally thought that the Aryans or Indo-Aryans were the first invaders from Inner Asia. Some scholars suggest that a Mongoloid race, may be called Tibeto-Burman, were first such invaders or immigrants in fair numbers. A Tibeto-Burman race movement beginning from the Pamirs marched southeast along both sides of the Himalayas. Those on the southern tracks completed their wanderings in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Some however sought home in the Himalayas.

In the Harappa sites, besides large numbers of Dravidian and Aryan skeletal remains, not insignificant quantity of Mongoloid skulls and bones have been



found. Mongoloid traders and travellers to Indus Valley cannot be ruled out in those days because of esoteric mystic cult flourishing in Indus Valley with Pamirs-Kailas as focal point in such religion. (cf. Mircea Eliade: Shamanism London, 1964). Some scholars hold that the Aryans had with them Mongoloid soldiers who were already familiar with northern parts of the Indus Valley. A British archaeologist, serving as a Brigadier during the War, used very modern terms to describe these Mongoloids of 2000 B.C. He put the question "Did the Aryan invaders have with them Gurkha scouts and pioneers?" (Mortimer Wheeler): Indus Civilization Cambridge, 1953).

The Tibeto-Burman migration through the plains below the southern slopes of the Himalayas began c. 2000 B.C. and continued for nearly a thousand years. Around 1000 B.C. all over the Himalayas from Ladakh to Lohit there were colonies of Tibetan speaking population. It is such pre-Aryans from Inner Asia who gave this country words or names like Ganga, Anga, Vanga and Kalinga. Even the word Linga first occurring in later Vedic literature was a Tibetan word (Gling), later Aryanized and Indianized. Ganga for example is Sanskrit form of Gang-ri-mo (daughter of snow mountain) or Gang-mo (daughter of snow). Along with such diction, Mongoloid esoteric mysticism got duly Indianised. It is not necessary to digress here into the subject of Tibetan Tantra in Indian system. (Vide Prabodh Bagchi: Studies in the Tantras Calcutta 1939; Mircea Eliade: Yoga New York 1969; and works of Arthur Avalon/John Woodroffe,) It is necessary to emphasise that such foreign elements go back to the Pre-Aryan period. (Vide Bagchi: Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India Calcutta 1929).

#### THE INDO-ARYANS

The branch of Aryans who invaded and settled in India are designated Indo-Aryans. The invasion may be dated between 2000 B.C. and 1500 B.C. Their first military encounters were with the people who had built a rich civilization in the Indus Valley and were progressing eastward inside the sub-continent. Destruction of forts, cities and even waterworks, as evidenced from the ruins of the so-called Harappa sites, speaks of total victory of the Indo-Aryans.

Horse, the new engine of war, was no doubt superior to elephant and bull. A superior weapon of war was also used by the invader. The Indo-Aryan weapon was of the hardest metal known to man ever since. It was iron against which copper or bronze was of no avail. From the legendary period of sage Dadhichi to the historical period of poet Rudyard Kipling, it is iron -- cold iron -- which has decided the course of battles in Punjab, India and all over the world.

May be the Deva worshippers had perfected the iron tool earlier. The Asura Vritra would be a Dravidian if he was slain when Rig Veda was composed. I accept the brilliant suggestion of Kalyan Kumar Ganguli that Vajra marks the transition from stone or bronze to iron. Indra's weapon was perhaps blessed by the sage who donated his bones to breathe mystic spirit into it.

It was, however, neither horse nor sword, which primarily accounted for Aryan expansion over the entire sub-continent: in the north upto the estuary of the Ganges within a few centuries; in the south upto Kumarika within a thousand years. All Jambudvipa, south of Himavat, was by and large Aryanized, when Gautama Buddha preached a religion different from the Vedic system. The Indo-Aryan victors were as great statesmen as warriors. The victors were masters and could not readily treat the conquered natives as their equals. The Indo-Aryans, however, wanted to be at home in their homeland; there was thus no question of segregation or apartheid. "There are no slaves in India" was the pithy remark of Greek observers of Chandragupta Maurya's time. Co-operation of the conquered was warmly sought; gods and rituals of the vanquished were tolerated and even adopted or adapted; the learning or knowledge of the victors was duly shared with eligibles. As a result Jambudvipa was the Golden Hind when Cyrus the Great (c. 550 B.C.) invaded Gandhara.

I cannot deny, nor do I admire, the evil features like "caste". I praise the merits of the Indo-Aryans to affirm that the later Inner Asian invaders like Sakas, Kushanas and Hunas merely followed the wise tradition of being at home in their new homeland.

In fact I do not intend to speak on the grand achievements in arts and sciences or philosophies and religions traceable to the Aryans. I should refer you to the testimony of foreigners. Well-known are the names of William Jones, Max Muller, Woodroffe, Zeland, and my late lamented friend Basham. I better mention only three and none of them Indologist: Arthur Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson and Romain Rolland.

#### QUINTESENCE OF INDO-ARYAN LEGACY

I must however present the quintessence of the legacy of these great nomads from Inner Asia. This is usually little noticed because the long lists of achievements in arts and sciences or philosophies and religions divert one from the highest truth of Indo-Aryan way of life.

Vedic religion has been described with so many different words: pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, monism, mysticism and what not. The Vedic seers summed up:

Ekaṁ Sat : Viprā bahudhā vadanti

That which Is, is One. Wise men speak of It in many ways. (Eng. Tr. Suniti Kumar Chetterji). Whether we date this wise saying to 1500 B.C. or 1000 B.C., here we have the first recorded statement that the Absolute or Transcendental may be described or realized in diverse ways. In no other religion, earlier or later, we come across such sentiments. Inspiration of this wise saying could have been in the wonderful environment of Inner Asia. "My religion right or wrong or "My God is true God" was never practised in Inner Asia till the middle of the last century. I shall refer to this later again. I, however, anticipate a little known fact: Islam did not use sword much in Turkestan.

"God has many names" or that "Different beliefs are different routes to the summit" is the Indo-Aryan legacy for the world. The legacy was given to world in modern times by Ramakrishna Paramahansa through Swami Vivekananda. Definition of the Absolute was considered a dogma and as is well-known Buddha was altogether silent on God.

No reference to Buddha can be worthwhile if it is not emphasised that Buddha was the first prophet to preach a religion for all. Confucius, Moses, Zoroaster and even the Vedic seers preached for their own people and all these religions were ethnocentric. Buddha's religion was for all mankind and it is an undisputed fact that Dharma was not propagated with sword. In all countries Sthaviras or Theras were welcome and in many countries Buddhist missionaries went on invitation. In Inner Asia even when Dharma had full state patronage, believers in other religions did not suffer any disability. I may anticipate here that the Mongol Khans had high seats for the Lamas in open court where all else had to stand all the time. Yet in Mongol administration, both civil and military, there were Confucians, Hebrews, Christians and Moselms in high offices.

#### LEGACY FOR INDIA

Ya eko'varṇo bahudhā śaktiyogāt  
 Varnān anekān nihitārtho dadhāti  
 Vicaiti cānte viśvam ādau sa devaṇ  
 Sa no buddhyā śubhayā Saṁyunaktu

He who is one, who is above all colour distinctions, who dispenses the inherent needs of men of all colours, who comprehends all things from their beginning to the end, let Him unite us to one another with wisdom which is the wisdom of goodness. (Eng. Tr. Rabindranath Tagore).

To be at home in their new homeland, the Aryans had to recognise the original or earlier inhabitants as indispensable both for material and moral development. Thus exchange of religious speculations, rituals or deities at

different levels, in different regions, was a spontaneous process spread over centuries. there was no compulsion on either side.

Sanskrit, the language of the scriptures, was for the elite, Aryan or not. Vernaculars of the pre-Aryans were supported while popular dialects (Prakrit) were permitted to grow. Sanskrit alphabet, after the invention of Brahmi, naturally became the alphabet of even Dravidian languages with modifications. Even if the script of every language was not all conformist to the Brahmi, a common Varnamala effectively united the different languages and those who spoke these languages. Loan words in Sanskrit from native languages strengthened the ties between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. Sanskrit accommodating non-Aryan deities and rituals became sacred for the non-Aryans. The Use of Vermilion for rituals or any auspicious occasion was learnt from the Mundari people (Source : Sarat Chandra Roy & Nirmal Kumar Bose). In due course Vermilion became the mark of sanctity as well as prosperity all over the Aryanised sub-continent. The master colour, SINDURA, united all castes and all colours.

The daily remembrance of the Seven Rivers – Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri – was more than an act of piety. It was a reminder of the unity of the vast country which drew sustenance from the seven rivers. Fundamental unity of India was the workmanship of Indo-Aryan sages.

#### POST-ARYAN NOMADS

Sanskrit literature, Hindu as well as Buddhist provide long lists of invaders and immigrants from Inner Asia besides the Yavanas and Parasikas from West. The most important from Inner Asia were Saka, Kushana and Huna.

In Sanskrit accounts the Sakas precede the Yavanas, that is, the Greeks. Western scholars found this wrong on the basis of Chinese evidence that the Sakas entered India in first century B.C. Prabodh Bagchi made a thorough examination of the movements of different groups of Saka race from Sanskrit, Chinese as well as Greek accounts and concluded firm that a group or tribe of Saka race had invaded and settled in India long before the establishment of Yavana rule in India. (Vide Bagchi's Presidential Address to Indian History Congress, Aligarh in the Journal of Greater India Society, Calcutta 1943). This conclusion has cleared up several obscure points in our ancient history. We have also to thank Prabodh Bagchi for his finding that the famous Kamboja people, associated with Gandhara, were post-Aryan immigrants from Inner Asia. Both Saka and Kamboja peoples are known to have left their legacy in Sanskrit diction. Much has been revealed by researches of P.C. Bagchi, H.W. Bailey and F.W. Thomas to mention only three such scholars. The epithet 'Tathagata' for Buddha and "the spotless white horse" associated with Gautama siddhartha are, according to many scholars, of Inner Asia background.

## SAKA KUSHANA HUNA

The Sakas came in much larger numbers in the first century B.C. and settled down mostly in Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. There were Saka colonies in Gangetic plains and perhaps in Karnataka in South. They became completely Indianized in a century or so and became patrons or protectors of Indian religion(s). The Kshatrapas or Mahakshatrapas are well known figures of our history and I need not detail their achievements. The growth of Vaishnavism or Bhagavata Cult and the spread of sun worship through Sakadvipi Brahmanas are attributed to Saka patronage. I would draw your notice to Saka Era (beginning with 78 A.D.) Whoever might have invented this era had studied the longterm atmospheric and consequent seasonal changes so scientifically that Meghnad Saha advised the government of Independent India to fix the reckoning of months Vaisakha onward as in Saka Era for our national calendar. It may be noted that Meghnad Saha, besides being the leading astro-physicist, probed deep into all ancient calendars including those of Babylon, Chaldea and Egypt.

Parthians, an Iranian tribe with much Inner Asian associations, came almost the sametime with the Sakas, and ruled in the Indus Valley till the rise of Kushanas. The Parthians seemed to have introduced Surya Puja which had much patronage of the Sakas.

The Sakas, Parasikas and Kushanas brought in a number of icons of which Amitabha and Avalokitesvara are final Indianized forms. Manjusri, a deity associated with Prajna Paramita: the basic scripture of Mahayana, was no doubt come from far in the northeast, the border regions of Mongolia-Manchuria, the earliest habitat of Yueh-chi race. The recent finds of Kushana antiquities in Western Turkestan support the hypothesis that iconic forms of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya Buddhas were in the making there independent of Hellenistic inspiration. (Vide Gafurov, Bongard Levin etc: Kushan Studies in USSR Calcutta 1970).

Ignoring the fresh controversies in the chronology of the Sakas and Kushanas, I may highlight an important outcome of Saka Kushana rule in political thought. In Vedic and Post-Vedic periods monarchy and republican tribes were the normal institutions while divinity for kings was unknown. Buddha even spoke of contract in tracing the origins of state and kingship. Concept of Son of Heaven (Devaputra) came with the Yueh-chis and the concept of Rex Imperator as semi-divine came with the Saka. Yueh-chis were under Han influence and Sakas were under influence of Caesarism.

This concept of Divine Monarchy was prized by Purana compilers and the great Gupta kings were nothing short of Parama Daivata, Parama Bhatta-

raka or Parama Bhagavata. Divine Right became an integral part of Hindu philosophy. The Hunas, who invaded Gupta Empire, also brought the Han doctrine of Son of Heaven but it was no novelty for India then.

The Hunas were notorious for their violent acts and cruel treatment of the conquered. Even then, when they found permanent homes in the conquered land; they sought admission to the religion or way of life of the natives. Their descendants mostly settled in Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat became good Hindu and as is well-known under names like Gurjara, Pratihara, Paramara, Chauhana or Rathora their descendants fought and successfully resisted the Arabs, Afghans and Turks who came with a mission to preach their religion and settle in India with their religion as the state religion. I return to this later.

Meanwhile I speak on several racial groups collectively called Tukhara in Sanskrit accounts. Tukhara as distinguished from Kushana and Huna was in India during the Kushana rule and later during Harsha's reign. What exactly happened to them and when some of them got Indianized will remain a problem till the chronology of Kushana rule and the affinities of numerous foreign invaders till Harsha's time (606-647) are satisfactorily fixed.

I may note the important Tukhara contribution in Indian vocabulary. The word 'Thakura', unknown to Vedic and Classical Sanskrit, does not occur in Sanskrit literature before 500 A.D. The word was possibly current in many north Indian dialects before the Imperial Guptas. Sylvain Levi, Frederick Thomas and Harold Bailey among foreign scholars and Prabodh Bagchi, Suniti Chatterji and Buddha Prakash among Indian scholars agree on 'Thakura' being a loan word from Inner Asia, Tukhara regions. (Vide Buddha Prakash in Central Asiatic Journal Vol III, No. 3). It may be noted that in South India among orthodox Brahmins, Thakura or Thakur is not a popular term obviously because of its Tukhara or Turuska background.

Expressions like Saka-Huna or Saka-Kushana-Huna generally stand for all Post-Aryan nomads from Inner Asia till the advent of Islam. Puranas and Buddhist texts give long lists which cannot be incorporated in this summary view. Besides all the races and/or tribes listed cannot be satisfactorily identified. Kamboja and Tukhara, mentioned earlier, still defy both ethnologists and linguists. Khasa, featuring in Sanskrit accounts, settled in Central Himalayas, and the principal language of Nepal, Khaskura, is a reminder of the Khasa immigrants. Did the Khasas come from Kashgar? Some hold the Khasas to be a branch of the Kassities migrating to the Pamirs. An additional problem is that when the different successive nomads settled down they would sometimes be mixed up through marriages or common occupations. Gujars in many places of Punjab and Rajasthan have both Saka and Huna blood in their veins.

I notice two peoples, Murundas and Chulikas, about whom Prabodh Bagchi made pioneer comments. Murundas were often bracketed with Sakas in some inscriptions and books. Bagchi highlighted the Puranic knowledge of the Murundas as quite distinct from Sakas, and traced their advent much before the foundation of the Gupta empire and spread upto Pataliputra in third century, A.D. From Chinese records, Bagchi noticed an interesting event, that in the middle of third century, a Murunda king of Pataliputra exchanged gifts with a king of Funan. The Murunda king's presents included "four horses of Yueh-chi country". Murunda expansion to Anga, Pundra and Radha regions is now accepted.

Bagchi made a very important contribution about the ancient ancestors of the Chalukyas and presented cogent facts to trace the first Chalukyas to the Sogdians come into northwest India along with Saka-Yavana-Pahlava invaders about the Christian Era. These Sogdians, mostly mercantile and agricultural were known in Prakrit as Sulika or Chulika. The Sulkis who settled down in the northwest mainly around Multan, long after Indianization, came to be known as the Sud Khettris. But many of the Sogdians are known to have gone towards south along with the Sakas. The tribal name Sulika or Chulika had many variants in South: Sulika, Solaki or Solanki; and Chalika, Chulika, or Chalukya. (Vide P.C. Bagchi: India and Central Asia Calcutta 1955).

I refer to the Murundas and Chulikas to draw your notice to my submission made at the beginning that all the Inner Asian invaders made their impact all over this sub-continent. The horses with Murundas were either from Mongolia or from Kirghiz-Kazakh regions as later also till the mid-nineteenth century. The Multani Khettris, I may emphasise, used to have their own mercantile agencies in Samarkand, Tashkent, Bokhara and around till the middle of the last century. Their decline followed the rising encounter between British and Russians from about the seventies of nineteenth century.

#### INVADERS AND RULERS FROM WEST

The first Muslim invasion was that of Sind by Arabs in 711. The Arabs could not penetrate further because of the Rajputs, descendants of Saka-Huna settlers. A century later Arab merchants visited regularly the Saurashtra coast. The Rashtrakuta rulers who had given asylum to the Iranian (Parsi) refugees on condition that the refugees would respect the religious beliefs of this country, gave facilities to Arab merchants for trade but no rights to proselyte. In mid-tenth century arose the Kingdom of Ghazni with both secular and religious aspirations. Sultan Mahmud (998-1030) invaded India seventeen times, and looted the rich towns and temples including Multan in

Punjab, Kangra in Himalayas, Kanauj and Mathura in Gangetic plains and Somnath in Gujarat. Mahmud could not build an empire in India but drained the material resources of the country and damaged the morale of the people. India posed no difficulty to the Pathans and Turks in Afghanistan. India was now open for conquest and conversion

From 1192 when Prithviraja Chauhana lost to Muhammad Ghori till 1526 when Ibrahim Lodi lost to Babur Mughal, Muslim Sultans ruled over North India and Deccan. They were zealous believers, directly concerned with the conversion of natives to their faith and professed allegiance to the Caliph of Islam.

#### INVADERS FROM INNER ASIA

Zahiruddin Babur (1526-1530) called himself Padshah and did not recognise the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph. His ancestors on mother's side, Chengiz Khan and immediate successors, had conquered Turkestan from the Caliphate (1208-20; 1235; 1255). His paternal ancestor Timur (Tamerlane) had proclaimed himself Grand Amir of Transoxania (c. 1370) and even invaded Syria-Mesopotamia (c. 1400). The Ottoman Caliph was a mere phantom for Turkestan when Babur was born (1483). Ironically in Europe since 1453 the Ottoman Sultan on his Divan of Constantinople was a dreaded barbarian

Arabs brought Islam into Western Turkestan from about 750 and Semirechye was converted about 960. Islam spread over Eastern Turkestan in eleventh and twelfth centuries. Buddhism was in decline and Shamanism was reviving. Therefore Islam had not to use sword much. On the otherhand Muslim scholars and priests would probe into Buddhist learning; and according to Barthold and others, the first Madrasas were inspired by the Buddhist Viharas. This spirit of respect for merits of non-believers very much flourished when the Mongol Khans conquered Turkestan in the thirteenth century. I may refer to the well-known Mongol patronage to scholars and administrators of all religions though the Mongol State religion was Mahayana Buddhism. After the fall of Mongol Khanate, the Mongols in Turkestan intermarried with the Turks and underwent conversion into Islam. The spirit of co-existence continued in Turkestan. Even the great Timur was more interested in conquest than in conversion. Turkestan in the fourteenth century produced a scholar-scientist in Mirza Ulugh-beg (1394-1449). Ulugh-beg's astronomical tables and astronomical observatory at Samarkand were pioneer efforts which inspired similar projects in other countries including India. Ulugh-beg was not very orthodox and was murdered by men professing to be orthodox.



Inner Asia in the second half of fifteenth century was not the special preserve of one particular religion. The great saint of medieval Asia, Guru Nanak (1469-1538), made pilgrimage to holy places of all religions. Among the regions the great saint visited was Oxus Valley and Kailas-Manas. I repeat that the environment or ethos of Inner Asia proclaims the varied and vast grandeur of the Transcendental. Concord and peace follow realization of this truth. The first Great Mughal, Babur, though loyal to his own faith, came from the land which fostered concord and peace.

The Mughal Empire in India was the first Islamic state to be outside the authority of the Caliphate; and from its inception till the accession of Aurangzeb (1657) this Empire had no special mission to proselyte or to treat the Hindus or other non-Muslims as second class citizens.

To be fair to the pre-Mughal rulers, I have to point out two names. Shah Zainul Abidin (1420-1470) of Kashmir and Sher Shah the last Pathan Emperor (1539-1545) ruled as the protector of all communities and could recognise merits in their subjects irrespective of their religious beliefs. These two names stand out as exceptions to the norm of the Pre-Mughal Muslim regime in India.

The Inner Asian tradition of "five faiths as five fingers on one's hand", proclaimed by the Mongol Khans, found its finest efflorescence in the reign of the Greatest Mughal, Jalaluddin Akbar (b. 1542, acc. 1556 & d. 1605). It is not necessary to detail here Akbar's administrative measures and reforms, his matrimonial alliances with the descendants of the Sakas/Hunas and his wise or unwise formulation of a religion for all. A British bureaucrat-cum-historian, Vincent Smith, aptly describes Akbar's new city Fatehpur Sikri with a forum for all faiths as "the reflex of Akbar's mind". Akbar's two immediate successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan were no doubt smaller than Akbar and committed a few indiscreet acts against the Hindus. Even then the spirit of mutual understanding or respect for others' beliefs continued till Aurangzeb won the War of Succession and killed his eldest Dara Shukoh (1657). Dara Shukoh was extremely well-read in the Vedanta, the Talmud, the New Testament and the Sufi writings. A leading administrator of the Company Raj, William Sleeman, while watching the grave of Dara Shukoh thought aloud that had Dara lived to occupy the throne the nature of education and therewith the destiny of India would have been different.

Before I proceed with Aurangzeb and the later Mughals, I must emphasise the greatness of the Great Mughals till 1657. In contemporary Europe the state policy was 'cujus regio ejus religio' (religion of the king is the religion of the region) as most bigotedly inscribed in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). Hindus had protection while on pilgrimage to Kailas-Manas or Sita Chakshu and the Hindu merchants from Multan and Shikarpur freely operated in

Kashgar, Bokhara or Semarkand. Tibetan merchants and pilgrims came to Gaya and Varanasi and some would go upto Swat associated with Guru Padmasambhava. (Vide Tucci : Tibetan Pilgrims in Swat Valley Calcutta 1939).

#### THE AGE OF VASCO DA GAMA

Though Aurangzeb (1658-1707) was the last Great Mughal and he ruled over the largest extent of this sub-continent, the fall of this great empire began with him. Disunity and discord between different communities and rise of independent states both Hindu and Muslim began during Aurangzeb's reign, and invited the distant Western powers to prospects of conquering the Golden Hind. The Age of Vasco da Gama had already begun (1498). Reference to the advent of European powers has to be made for the simple reason that these powers would utilize all means for conquest or control: trade, sword and religion. Some powers like British and French would assign low priority to conversion and introduce the diplomacy of 'divide and rule' not only between different countries but also between different creeds in the Asiatic continent. Relevant to my subject is how such diplomacy was operated in Inner Asia and with India as background.

Indian pilgrims and Indian merchants, both Hindu and Moslem, continued in Inner Asia beyond the fall of the Mughal Empire. Khettris of Multan, Amils of Shikarpur, and Moslems of Kashmir valley traded all over Turkestan; and the Newars of Nepal and Muslims of Ladakh traded in Tibet. Fakirs and Sadhus moved all over what was called High Asia in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British while exploring trade prospects in Inner Asia found the different communities living in absolute harmony - a phenomenon unknown in Europe. The British, however, found a field for divide and rule in the fact that the vast plains of the two rivers: Oxus and Jaxartes had Muslim population while the rulers were Christians called Russian. The British sympathy for the subject Turk was thus provoked, while in India after the Mutiny (1857) and with Wahavi Movement, the British had antipathy for the Muslim. So most amazing events took place all over Asia and eastern Mediterranean which exposed the inner contradictions of Pax Britannica.

#### EPILOGUE : ARMA GEDDON

To a student of history, Inner Asia, the ancient home of sublime harmony is today the theatre of supreme conflict. A few events in the preceding hundred years will tell the tale.

From about 1870 Britain had to woo Ottoman Turkey for controlling the Near East and was all out to shed tears for the Muslims of Inner Asia. Only

British Liberals and Romanov Tsars would cry against Armenian Massacres and Bulgarian Atrocities committed by the Ottoman Sultan, venerated as Caliph by orthodox Muslims. When Kaiser Wilhelm II, German Emperor, swore eternal friendship with the Caliph, British moved towards reconciliation with Russia. In 1907 Britain and Russia became best friends on the stipulation that Britain would not be friends of Muslims in Turkestan and Russia would give Britain and China freehand in Tibet. During the First World War (1914-18) Britain managed to sabotage and break up the Ottoman Empire by sponsoring Arab nationalism, and at the same time -- without Arab knowledge -- promising restoration of the homeland for Jews. The War ended also in the victory of the Caliph's internal enemy, Mustafa Kamal Pasha, who changed his name to Kamal Ata Turk, not only terminated Caliph's office and introduced some democratic reforms but also modernized Turkey so much so that Islamic orthodoxy was put an end to. The Grey Wolf standard of Kamal Pasha symbolized as it were the ancient Mongol tradition of place for all beliefs.

Britain again encountered Russia now Communist in Inner Asia. Tears for the Muslims of Turkestan again rolled down the Whitehall corridors while in New Delhi some British bureaucrats would don Fez cap. Second World War again brought Britain and Russia on the same side but in the aftermath the encounter was on a world wide scale. America with Britain as good second would try to engage Soviet Russia around Pamirs. More curious is that USA and People's Republic of China would be meeting on Karakoram heights to contain Soviet Russia. The end of the Heartland Story is not yet in sight. In sight is the spectrum on the horizon of India as well as Tibet.

## NOTES

1. Use of first person singular is calculated. This is to emphasise my own individual responsibility, for facts, opinions and conclusions in my presentation here. I have been associated with several official and academic bodies engaged in study of subjects like Inner Asia or India, past or present, but these official or academic bodies are in no way responsible for the facts or views I state here. Use of words 'I', 'my', 'me' or 'myself' is not to claim scholarship but to disown responsibility of the academic and official bodies I have served for years.
2. The spellings of proper names in Roman transcription are generally as current in the middle of this century. The recent Chinese reform like Beijing for Peking is not followed, because such new nomenclature for Sinkiang, Tibet or Inner Mongolia would be confusing for reading the past history. For same reason place names in the Indian sub-continent are spelt as till the middle of this century.

3. Technical terms of geology and anthropology are avoided.
4. A basic premise in my study is that the so-called Aryans or that the race who spoke Vedic Sanskrit and composed the Rig Veda were not autochthonous in this sub-continent. I subscribe to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's finding that these Aryans, the Indo-Iranians, were settled in the vast valleys of the rivers: Oxus and Jaxartes, before they migrated South to Iran, Afghanistan and India. This conviction need not bind one to Tilak's other finding that the original home of The Aryans was in the Arctic. I also hold a basic premise that the authors of the Indus Civilization were pre-Aryan settlers who were Dravidian. Even before the Vedic Age was over the Aryans had to adopt and adapt a number of items from Dravidian religion and speech. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, a Bengali Brahmin, proudly called himself a Dravida (1925-30) and was not popular with all Brahmins who clung to their belief of Aryan ancestry. Two Western scholars, Burrows and Emeneau, have later listed the Dravidian loan words in Sanskrit; these words are for three thousand years now as sacred as those of Vedic vocabulary. I cite only two words: Pinda and Pandita.