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Effect of Indian religion and culture on the Shaka rulers of Mathura; In the context of inscriptions and coins

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Introduction

In the history of India, foreign groups arriving from the northwest profoundly influenced the nation's cultural and religious life. Among these foreign powers, the Shakas (Indo-Scythians) constituted a significant group, establishing their dominion over a vast territory of North India from the 1st century BCE through the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Mathura—which had served as a prominent religious, cultural, and commercial hub since ancient times—emerged as a center of exceptional importance under the rule of the Shaka rulers. The present research paper, titled "The Influence of Indian Religion and Culture on the Shaka Rulers of Mathura: With Reference to Inscriptions and Coins," attempts—within this historical context—to analyze the religious outlook of the Shaka Satraps of Mathura, the patronage they extended, and the impact that Indian religions had upon them.

Mathura was one of those cities in ancient India where the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition, Buddhism, and Jainism developed in parallel. The city also held immense significance as a confluence point for various trade routes. Mathura was already a religious and cultural center prior to the arrival of the Shaka rulers; however, Shaka rule imparted a new direction to this existing pluralism. Despite their foreign origins, the Shaka rulers not only accepted local religious traditions but also extended active patronage to them. This clearly demonstrates that their religious policy was not repressive, but rather tolerant and syncretic.

When analyzing the religious policy of the Shaka rulers, it is essential to bear in mind that they originally hailed from a Central Asian background. However, after establishing their authority within the Indian subcontinent, they endeavored to adopt the Indian socio-cultural framework. The depiction of Indian symbols on their coinage, the use of the Brahmi script, and the adoption of Indian titles serve as evidence of this cultural adaptation. This was not merely a political expediency, but also a form of cultural engagement that fostered religious harmony.

Ultimately, this study also addresses the broader historical inquiry regarding how rulers of foreign origin assimilated into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining cultural continuity. The example of Mathura demonstrates that, despite political changes, religious and cultural traditions not only survived but became even more robust within the new circumstances. The religious policies and patronage of the Shaka rulers established Mathura as a confluence of diverse religious

and cultural traditions—an influence that is subsequently reflected in the religious developments of the Kushana and Gupta periods.

Thus, the present research paper endeavors to offer a comprehensive and analytical study of the religious policies, patronage, and cultural impact of the Saka rulers of Mathura on Indian religious traditions. The objective is to demonstrate that Saka rule constituted not merely a political chapter in Indian religious history, but also a significant phase characterized by cultural synthesis and religious coexistence.

Saka Rule in Mathura

The Sakas (Indo-Scythians), who entered the Indian subcontinent from the northwest, originally belonged to the nomadic traditions of Central Asia. The existence of the Saka dynasty has been known since antiquity; indeed, references to them can be found in the Persepolis inscription of the Iranian ruler Darius.¹

Furthermore, according to Herodotus, the Saka tribe predates the era of Darius; the Sakas conquered the Medes before Darius and brought the regions of eastern Iran under their control.²

Due to pressure from the Yuezhi tribe, they migrated southward and southeastward. In the course of this historical process, they established themselves first in Bactria and subsequently in the Gandhara region. Gradually, their political influence expanded toward Punjab and North India. In this progression, Mathura emerged as a significant center, where the Saka rulers firmly established their authority.³

The rise of Shaka power in Mathura occurred during a period when North India was undergoing a phase of political transition. Following the decline of the Mauryan Empire, the power of the Shunga and Kanva dynasties had become limited. Various local powers were emerging. In this context, Shaka rulers found the opportunity to establish their authority. While their military might and organized leadership secured them initial success, they achieved stability through harmony and integration with the local society.

Among the early Shaka rulers in the Mathura region, the names of Hagamasha and Hagana figure prominently. Following them, the mention of Rajuvula is of particular significance. Rajuvula adorned himself with the title of 'Mahakshatrapa,' a designation indicative of his political supremacy. During his reign, Mathura emerged as the principal center of Shaka power. Rajuvula's coins and inscriptions clearly demonstrate that he endeavored to legitimize his authority by respecting and accommodating the local social and religious fabric.

Following Rajuvula, his successor, Shodasa, became the preeminent Shaka ruler of Mathura. During Shodasa's reign, the administrative system appears to have become even more robust. Coins and inscriptions bearing his name indicate that Shaka authority in Mathura was not confined merely to military control; rather, an organized administrative framework had been developed.

The usage of the titles 'Kshatrapa' and 'Mahakshatrapa' during Shodasa's rule signifies that a formal structure of governance had indeed evolved.⁴

The nature of the establishment of Shaka rule in Mathura was based on the 'Kshatrapa' system rather than on direct monarchical governance. The term *Kshatrapa* is originally rooted in the Iranian tradition, signifying a provincial administrator or governor. In the Indian context, Shaka rulers adopted this designation for the purpose of local administration. Under this system, the *Mahakshatrapa* served as the supreme authority, while *Kshatrapas* administered the governance under his supervision. Evidence of this system in Mathura is derived from both epigraphic and numismatic sources.

The political structure and background of Shaka rule in Mathura serve as a compelling illustration of the fact that the stability of power cannot be achieved solely through military force; it also necessitates social acceptance, economic cooperation, and cultural harmony. By balancing these three dimensions, the Shaka rulers successfully established Mathura as the principal center of their dominion.

Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a historical and analytical study of the religious policies of the Saka rulers in Mathura and their impact on Indian religious traditions. Specifically, this study endeavors to understand how the Saka rulers, while governing a multi-religious hub like Mathura, formulated their policies toward various religious traditions and extended their patronage to them.

A significant objective of this study is also to analyze the religious outlook of the prominent Saka rulers who governed Mathura—such as Rajuvula and Sodasa—as well as the donations and patronage bestowed by them. Furthermore, based on epigraphic and archaeological evidence—particularly the Mathura Lion Capital Inscriptions—this research attempts to elucidate the nature of the impact that Saka rule had on the development of Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical religions in Mathura.

Additionally, this research aims to understand the role played by Saka patronage in the evolution of Mathura's art and culture. Ultimately, this study seeks to demonstrate that the religious policy of the Saka rulers was not merely confined to tolerance, but rather made a significant contribution to the development of Indian religious and cultural traditions.

Research Methodology

This research employs the historical research methodology, utilizing both descriptive and analytical approaches. Primary sources—specifically archival, numismatic, and archaeological evidence—held particular significance in this study. In particular, inscriptions such as the Mathura Lion Capital Inscription (recovered from the Mathura region), coins from the Saka period, and sculptural evidence have been examined. Furthermore, available archival and numismatic materials pertaining to Saka rulers—such as Rajuvula and Sodasa—have been analyzed.

Regarding secondary sources, research monographs on ancient Indian history, scholarly research papers, and archaeological reports have been consulted.

Literature Review

1. The Indo-Greeks – A. K. Narain

Written by A. K. Narain, this book is considered immensely significant for the study of the history of foreign rulers in North-Western India. Although its primary focus lies on the Indo-Greek rulers, A. K. Narain has also elucidated the historical background regarding the rise of the subsequent Saka and Kushana powers. The book features an in-depth analysis of epigraphic and numismatic evidence, which proves invaluable for understanding the administrative and cultural policies of these foreign rulers. Based on coins and inscriptions, the author attempts to demonstrate how these foreign rulers gradually assimilated into Indian society. This book serves as a crucial reference for understanding the evolution of Saka power in the Mathura region. However, the book does not address the specific manner in which the Saka rulers integrated into—and adopted—Indian religion, civilization, and culture.

2. *Mathura: The Cultural Heritage* – Doris Meth Srinivasan

This book presents a comprehensive study of the history, culture, and archaeological significance of Mathura. It analyzes the historical traditions of the region based on inscriptions, sculptures, coins, and other archaeological artifacts discovered in Mathura. This volume is particularly vital for understanding the religious and cultural development of Mathura, specifically in the context of the Saka and Kushana periods. The book also cites significant evidence, such as the Mathura Lion Capital Inscription, which provides insights into the presence of the Saka rulers and their acts of patronage. The author clearly establishes that, in ancient times, Mathura served as a confluence point for various religious traditions. In the context of this research, the book proves to be a primary source for comprehending the multi-religious fabric of Mathura and the cultural milieu of the Saka era. However, the book does not explicitly clarify the specific ways in which Indian religion and culture exerted their influence upon the Saka rulers.

Based on Epigraphic Evidence

The Mathura Lion Capital Inscription

Due to its fragmented nature, the Mathura Lion Capital Inscription is difficult to decipher clearly; however, according to scholars, it comprises three distinct inscriptions. The first inscription reveals that the Chief Queen (Agra-mahishi) of the Mahakshatrapa Rajula (Rajubula), together with her kinsmen, commissioned the construction of a stupa over the relics of the Buddha and donated it to the Sarvastivada sect. This indicates that, during that period, Buddhism exerted a significant influence over the Shakas.

The second and third inscriptions were inscribed under the orders of the Kshatrapa Shodasa, the son of Rajula. These records state that certain individuals constructed viharas (monasteries) and stupas, subsequently donating them to the Sarvastivada monk, Budhila. One of the inscriptions

also makes mention of the Mahasamghika sect, thereby indicating that various sects of Buddhism were active during that era.

From a political perspective, the inscription establishes that Mathura was under the dominion of the Shakas, with Rajula serving as its principal ruler. He was succeeded by Shodasa. Furthermore, the inscription reveals that various princes held distinct titles within the administrative hierarchy—such as Kshatrapa, Yuvaraja (Crown Prince), and Kumara—and that they actively participated in the affairs of governance.^{4.1}

Thus, this inscription provides significant information regarding the religious situation, Buddhist sects, and the administrative system of the Shakas.



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The Mathura Stone Slab Inscription of the Shodasa Era

This inscription is a Jain-related record discovered in Mathura; its original text is engraved in the Prakrit language using the Brahmi script. The inscription features terms such as "Mahakshatrapa Shodasa," "Aryika," "Pratima" (image/idol), and "Puja" (worship), thereby clearly indicating that it dates back to the reign of the Saka ruler Shodasa. Based on paleographic analysis, it is generally dated to approximately the 1st century CE.

The original text records the installation of an image of a Jain Tirthankara by a Jain Shrivika. This serves as evidence that, during that period, Jainism also enjoyed widespread prevalence in Mathura. The inscription demonstrates that, during the era of the Saka rulers, patronage was extended not only to Buddhism but also to Jainism.

From a religious perspective, this inscription holds immense significance, as it provides evidence regarding the tradition of idol worship, the installation of Jain images, and the religious activities of both male and female Jain lay devotees (*Shravakas* and *Shravikas*). It leads to the conclusion that, during the Saka period, Mathura served as a major center for all three major Indian religions: Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism.⁶

The Mora Inscription

Information regarding the Shakas is derived from an inscription discovered at the village of Mora in Mathura. This inscription is tentatively attributed to Sodasa. It describes the construction of a temple by a woman named Tosha and the installation therein of images of the five Vrishni heroes

(Krishna, Balarama, Samba, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha). This inscription is considered to be the earliest known example of the practice of incorporating a eulogy within records of donations.⁷

In the Context of Numismatics

The coinage issued by the Saka Satraps in the Mathura region serves as an extremely important source for understanding the political structure, religious trends, and cultural synthesis of that era. In particular, a study of these coins clearly demonstrates that the Saka rulers—who were of foreign origin—adopted local religious symbols, scripts, and cultural traditions in order to consolidate their position within Indian society. At that time, Mathura was a prominent religious and cultural hub in North India, where the traditions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism were flourishing simultaneously. Consequently, the influence of symbols associated with all these religious traditions is clearly visible on the coinage issued in this region.

In the Mathura region, joint coinage belonging to the early Saka rulers Hagana and Hagamasha has been discovered; this suggests that they were likely governing under a system of shared authority. The coins issued by Hagana and Hagamasha were primarily made of copper and feature a variety of inscribed symbols. Their earliest coinage utilized the Greek script.

Subsequently, Rajuvula emerged in the Mathura region as a powerful Saka Satrap. Rajuvula's coins have been recovered in large numbers throughout the Mathura region and are considered to be of immense significance for the study of the region's history. Most of his coins were made of copper, although some silver coins have also been found. The most significant feature of Rajuvula's coinage is the use of the Brahmi script. The coins bear the inscription "Mahakshatrapasa Shah Rajubulasha," accompanied by symbols of the Goddess Lakshmi and a tree; the reverse side of the coin depicts the *abhisheka* (ritual anointing) of Lakshmi. This fact indicates that, by that time, Indian scripts and languages had been widely adopted at both administrative and official state levels.⁸

The symbols inscribed on Rajuvula's coinage clearly reflect Indian religious influences. These coins feature depictions of the Chakra, Lakshmi, and various other sacred emblems. The Chakra is generally associated with Vaishnavism and serves as a symbol of Dharma and power. The Nandipada is regarded as a significant symbol linked to Shaivism. Furthermore, some coins bear symbols such as pillars or railings, which are believed to be associated with Buddhist architecture. The use of these symbols makes it evident that Rajuvula respected local religious traditions and incorporated them into his official state iconography.⁹



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At that time, Mathura was a significant center of Buddhism, and numerous stupas and viharas were established there. Consequently, it was only natural for local rulers to incorporate symbols into their coinage that held significance for the Buddhist community. Similarly, Jainism also exerted a widespread influence in the Mathura region, leading to the association of certain symbols with the Jain tradition as well. Thus, the coinage of Mathura serves as clear evidence of the religious coexistence and cultural synthesis of that era.¹²



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A study of these coins also reveals that the Saka co-rulers of Mathura adopted local artistic and craft traditions. At that time, Mathura sculpture was evolving into a significant style within the broader spectrum of Indian art. The influence of this very artistic tradition is evident in the style and composition of the symbols depicted on the coins. These symbols are rendered in a simple yet striking manner, reflecting the local artistic sensibilities prevalent during that era.

The coinage of the Saka rulers of Mathura also possessed a significant political dimension. For these rulers—who were of foreign origin—it was imperative to establish harmony with the local society. By incorporating Indian religious symbols and the Brahmi script, they endeavored to render their authority more legitimate and acceptable. The utilization of symbols that were both familiar and sacred to the local populace fostered greater trust in, and acceptance of, the rulers.

Conclusion

Thus, the coinage issued by the Saka rulers of Mathura—such as Hagana, Hagamasha, Rajuvula, and Sodasa—presents clear evidence of the influence of Indian religion and culture. The symbols, script, and inscriptions engraved on these coins demonstrate that the Saka rulers gradually assimilated into Indian society and cultural traditions. Consequently, these coins from the Mathura region serve as invaluable sources—not merely for the study of economic history, but also for understanding its religious, cultural, and political dimensions. Through them, it becomes clearly evident how rulers of foreign origin, by adopting Indian religious and cultural traditions, fostered a process of broad cultural synthesis. A study of the establishment of Saka rule in Mathura clarifies how rulers of foreign origin established their legitimacy by assimilating Indian political traditions. The *Kshatrapa* system, the use of indigenous titles, the adoption of the Brahmi script, and adherence to epigraphic traditions—all serve as evidence of this process of assimilation. This

analysis of the political background provides the foundation for understanding the religious policies and cultural impact of the Saka rulers in the subsequent chapters.

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