

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

FOREIGN INVASIONS

Greeks • Indo-Greeks • Shakas • Parthians • Post-Mauryan NW India

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 10 (09 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Context — Post-Mauryan Power Vacuum

After the Mauryan decline (185 BCE), northwestern India became vulnerable to successive waves of foreign invasions. The Shunga dynasty controlled the Gangetic heartland but not the northwest. This power vacuum attracted: Greeks (Indo-Greeks/Bactrians), Shakas (Scythians from Central Asia), Parthians (Pahlavas from Iran), and later the Kushans (Day 11 topic). These invasions transformed Indian culture through: Gandhara art (Greco-Buddhist sculpture), new coinage, calendar systems, astronomy, and the concept of 'divine kingship.' Unlike earlier invaders, these groups assimilated into Indian society.

1.2 Alexander's Invasion (326–325 BCE)

Alexander of Macedon invaded India in 326 BCE, crossing the Indus and defeating King Porus (Purushottama) at the Battle of Hydaspes (Jhelum river). Porus fought bravely with elephants; Alexander, impressed, returned his kingdom. Alexander reached the Beas (Hyphasis) but his army refused to march further, deterred by reports of the Nanda army's size (200,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, 3,000 elephants). Alexander retreated via the Indus, reaching Babylon where he died (323 BCE, aged 32).

- **Impact:** (1) Opened direct contact between India and the Hellenistic world; (2) Left Greek governors in the northwest who established Indo-Greek kingdoms; (3) Megasthenes' embassy to Chandragupta was a direct consequence; (4) Stimulated Indian political unification (Chandragupta's empire partly a response to Greek threat); (5) Indian scholars gained knowledge of Greek astronomy, art, and medicine.
- **Limitations:** Alexander's invasion was militarily significant but culturally superficial. He spent only 19 months in India. No Greek administration was established in the heartland. Indian sources barely mention Alexander ('Alikasundara' appears in some texts).

1.3 Indo-Greek Kingdoms (c. 180 BCE – 10 CE)

After Alexander, the Seleucid Empire controlled Bactria (northern Afghanistan). When Bactrian governors became independent, they expanded into India, creating Indo-Greek kingdoms in the Punjab, Sindh, and parts of the Gangetic plain.

1.3.1 Key Indo-Greek Rulers

- **Demetrius I (c. 200–180 BCE):** First Greek king to invade India after Alexander. Conquered Gandhara and Punjab. Extended Greek rule into the Indian subcontinent. Called 'King of the Indians' (Basileus Indion) on his coins.

- **Menander I / Milinda (c. 165–130 BCE):** The most famous Indo-Greek king. Capital: Sagala (Sialkot, Punjab). Extended rule to Pataliputra (briefly). Known for the Milindapanha ('Questions of Milinda') — a Buddhist text recording his philosophical dialogues with the monk Nagasena. Menander is believed to have converted to Buddhism. His coins show the Dharma Chakra. He is the only Indo-Greek ruler mentioned in Indian literary sources.
- **Other Rulers:** Apollodotus, Antialkidas (sent ambassador Heliodorus to Vidisha — Heliodorus Pillar at Besnagar declares him a Bhagavata/Vishnu devotee = evidence of Greek cultural assimilation), Strato II (last Indo-Greek king, overthrown by Shakas c. 10 CE).

1.3.2 Indo-Greek Contributions

- **Coinage:** Introduced the first coins in India with: (a) bilingual legends (Greek + Kharoshthi/Brahmi), (b) realistic portraits of rulers (vs earlier punch-marked coins with symbols only), (c) die-struck technique (standardised weight and design). This revolutionised Indian numismatics.
- **Gandhara Art:** Fusion of Greek artistic traditions with Buddhist subjects. Realistic human portrayal of Buddha (first anthropomorphic Buddha images). Classical drapery, curly hair, Apollo-like features. Gandhara school (NW India) vs Mathura school (indigenous style). This is one of art history's most significant cultural syntheses.
- **Astronomy:** Greek astronomical knowledge (zodiac system, geometric models) influenced Indian astronomy. Romaka Siddhanta (one of 5 Siddhantas compiled by Varahamihira) is Greek-derived.
- **Calendar:** The Kalachakra (wheel of time) concept in later Buddhist tradition and some calendar elements show Greek influence.
- **Cultural Assimilation:** Indo-Greeks adopted Indian religions (Buddhism, Vaishnavism — Heliodorus Pillar), married Indian women, used Indian titles ('Maharaja' + 'Basileus' on coins), and patronised Indian institutions. This was integration, not colonisation.

1.4 Shakas (Indo-Scythians) (c. 80 BCE – 400 CE)

The Shakas were Central Asian nomads (Scythians) displaced by the Yuezhi (who later became the Kushans). They entered India through Bactria and established kingdoms across northwestern India, Malwa, Gujarat, and Maharashtra.

- **Maues/Moga (c. 80–65 BCE):** First Shaka king in India. Established power in Gandhara. Coins bilingual (Greek + Kharoshthi).
- **Azes I (c. 57 BCE):** Defeated the last Indo-Greek king in the northwest. The Vikrama Samvat calendar (58 BCE) is traditionally linked to his defeat by King Vikramaditya of Ujjain — though this attribution is debated. This calendar is still used in India.
- **Rudradaman I (c. 130–150 CE):** The most famous Shaka ruler. Western Kshatrapa (Shaka governor) ruling from Ujjain. His Junagadh Rock Inscription (Gujarat) is: (a) the first long inscription in Sanskrit (vs Prakrit used by Ashoka and earlier rulers), (b) records repair of Sudarshana Lake (originally built by Chandragupta Maurya, repaired by Ashoka's governor), (c) demonstrates cultural Indianisation — describes Rudradaman as a patron of Sanskrit poetry, music, and Dharma.
- **Western Kshatrapas:** Shaka governors of western India (Gujarat, Malwa, Konkan). Continued for centuries. Fought frequently with the Satavahanas of the Deccan (AP connection — Gautamiputra Satakarni defeated the Shakas). Eventually defeated by Chandragupta II Vikramaditya (Gupta dynasty, c. 400 CE).

1.5 Parthians/Pahlavas (c. 19 BCE – 100 CE)

The Parthians (Pahlavas) came from Iran/Persia. They established a small but significant presence in northwestern India, ruling parts of the Indus region and Gandhara.

- **Gondophernes (c. 19–46 CE):** The most important Parthian king in India. Ruled from Taxila. According to Christian tradition, the Apostle St. Thomas visited Gondophernes' court — the earliest connection between India and Christianity. Gondophernes' coins show both Greek and Kharoshthi legends.
- **Decline:** Parthian rule was short-lived. They were overthrown by the Kushans (Kujula Kadphises, c. 50–80 CE) who established a far more powerful and enduring empire.

1.6 Significance of Foreign Invasions — Synthesis

The post-Mauryan foreign invasions were NOT merely destructive — they were transformative. Key contributions:

- **Art:** Gandhara school (Greco-Buddhist). First realistic Buddha images. Classical influence in sculpture. This art tradition spread to Central Asia, China, and Japan via the Silk Road.
- **Coinage:** Bilingual coins, die-struck technique, realistic portraits. Indian numismatics permanently transformed. Gold coins introduced (later perfected by Kushans).
- **Assimilation:** All three groups (Greeks, Shakas, Parthians) assimilated into Indian society. They adopted Indian religions (Buddhism, Vaishnavism), married locally, used Indian titles, and patronised Indian culture. Manu Smriti classifies them as 'degraded Kshatriyas' — effectively accepting them into the varna system.
- **Trade:** Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian rule strengthened India's connections with Central Asia, Persia, and the Roman Empire. The Silk Road trade flourished. Gold flowed into India for spices, textiles, and precious stones. Pliny complained that Rome was being 'drained' of gold by India.
- **Language:** Sanskrit revived as a language of royal inscriptions (Rudradaman's Junagadh inscription) and administration. Kharoshthi script (derived from Aramaic) used in NW India alongside Brahmi.
- **Calendar:** Vikrama Samvat (58 BCE, linked to Shaka defeat) and Shaka Era (78 CE, started by Kanishka) both originate from this period. The Shaka Era is the Indian national calendar's basis.

SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

1. **Alexander:** 326 BCE. Battle of Hydaspes (Porus). Army refused at Beas (Nanda fear). Impact: opened India-Greece contact, led to Indo-Greek kingdoms, Megasthenes. Limited cultural impact.
2. **Indo-Greeks:** Demetrius (first invasion), Menander/Milinda (most famous, Milindapanha, Buddhist), Heliodorus Pillar (Greek Vaishnavite), last king Strato II. Bilingual coins, Gandhara art.
3. **Shakas:** Central Asian Scythians. Maues (first), Azes I (Vikrama Samvat link), Rudradaman I (Junagadh inscription — first Sanskrit, Sudarshana Lake repair). Western Kshatrapas (fought Satavahanas).
4. **Parthians:** Gondopernes (Taxila, St. Thomas tradition). Short-lived. Overthrown by Kushans.
5. **Gandhara Art:** Greco-Buddhist fusion. First anthropomorphic Buddha. Classical drapery. vs Mathura school (indigenous). Both critical for Art & Culture questions.
6. **Coinage Revolution:** Die-struck, bilingual (Greek+Kharoshthi), realistic portraits. Transformed Indian numismatics permanently.
7. **Cultural Assimilation:** Invaders adopted Hinduism/Buddhism. Manu classifies as 'degraded Kshatriyas.' Integration, not colonisation.
8. **Calendars:** Vikrama Samvat (58 BCE) + Shaka Era (78 CE). Shaka Era = India's national calendar. Both originate from this period.

SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp.

1. Alexander: 326 BCE. Battle of Hydaspes (Jhelum). Defeated Porus. Army refused at Beas. Nanda strength deterred. Died 323 BCE, Babylon, age 32.
2. Alexander's impact: Opened Indo-Greek contact. Left Greek governors. Led to Chandragupta's empire (partly response to Greek threat). Megasthenes.
3. Demetrius I: First Indo-Greek to invade India (~200–180 BCE). 'King of the Indians.' Conquered Gandhara + Punjab.
4. Menander I / Milinda: c. 165–130 BCE. Capital: Sagala (Sialkot). Milindapanha (dialogue with Nagasena). Buddhist. Dharma Chakra on coins. Most famous Indo-Greek.
5. Heliodorus Pillar (Besnagar, Vidisha): Greek ambassador Heliodorus declared himself 'Bhagavata' (Vishnu devotee). Evidence of Greek cultural assimilation into Vaishnavism.
6. Indo-Greek coins: First in India with bilingual legends (Greek + Kharoshthi/Brahmi), realistic portraits, die-struck technique. Revolutionised Indian numismatics.
7. Gandhara Art: Greco-Buddhist fusion. NW India (Peshawar/Taxila region). First anthropomorphic Buddha images. Greek drapery + Indian subjects. vs Mathura school (indigenous).
8. Shakas (Indo-Scythians): Central Asian nomads. Displaced by Yuezhi. Entered India via Bactria.
9. Maues/Moga: c. 80–65 BCE. First Shaka king in India. Gandhara. Bilingual coins.
10. Azes I: c. 57 BCE. Defeated last Indo-Greek in NW. Vikrama Samvat (58 BCE) linked to his defeat by Vikramaditya (debated).
11. Rudradaman I: c. 130–150 CE. Western Kshatrapa (Ujjain). Junagadh Rock Inscription = FIRST long inscription in SANSKRIT. Repaired Sudarshana Lake (Chandragupta's).
12. Western Kshatrapas: Shaka governors of Gujarat/Malwa. Fought Satavahanas. Defeated by Chandragupta II Vikramaditya (Gupta, c. 400 CE).
13. Gautamiputra Satakarni: Satavahana king who defeated Shakas. Called 'destroyer of Shakas, Yavanas, Pahlavas.' AP connection = Satavahana-Shaka rivalry.
14. Gondophernes: c. 19–46 CE. Parthian king. Taxila. St. Thomas tradition (earliest India-Christianity connection). Overthrown by Kushans.
15. Vikrama Samvat: 58 BCE. Linked to Shaka defeat. Still used in India. Shaka Era: 78 CE (Kanishka). = India's national calendar (Saka calendar).
16. Manu Smriti: Classified Greeks (Yavanas), Shakas, Pahlavas as 'degraded Kshatriyas' = accepted into varna system. Assimilation.
17. Silk Road trade: Indo-Greek/Shaka rule connected India to Central Asia, Persia, Rome. Pliny: Rome drained of gold by India (spices, textiles, gems).

SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each = paragraph.

- 1. Assimilation, Not Colonisation:** The most significant aspect of Greek, Shaka, and Parthian invasions is that all three groups ASSIMILATED into Indian civilisation. Menander became a Buddhist. Heliodorus became a Vaishnavite. Rudradaman patronised Sanskrit. Manu Smriti classified them as 'degraded Kshatriyas' — effectively admitting them into the caste system. This absorptive capacity of Indian civilisation — its ability to integrate foreign groups while maintaining cultural continuity — is one of its most remarkable historical features. Unlike China (which built walls to keep nomads out) or Rome (which defined sharp civilisational boundaries), India absorbed its invaders.
- 2. Gandhara Art — When Greece Met Buddha:** The Gandhara school of art is one of history's most remarkable cultural fusions. Greek sculptors applied classical techniques (realistic anatomy, flowing drapery, contrapposto pose) to Buddhist subjects, creating the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. Before Gandhara, Buddha was represented only through symbols (Bodhi tree, footprints, wheel, empty throne). The Gandhara innovation — depicting Buddha as a human figure with Apollo-like features — transformed Buddhist art worldwide. This tradition spread via the Silk Road to Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. The giant Bamiyan Buddhas (destroyed by Taliban, 2001) were Gandhara school descendants.
- 3. The Coinage Revolution:** Indo-Greek kings introduced India's first sophisticated coinage: die-struck (standardised), bilingual (Greek + Kharoshthi), with realistic royal portraits. Before this, India used punch-marked coins with abstract symbols. The new coinage served as: a medium of exchange (trade), a political statement (king's image = sovereignty), and a historical record (coins are often the only evidence of certain rulers). This numismatic revolution continued through Shakas, Parthians, and Kushans, culminating in the gold coins of the Gupta period.
- 4. Rudradaman's Junagadh Inscription — Sanskrit's Revival:** Rudradaman I's Junagadh Rock Inscription (c. 150 CE) is a landmark in Indian epigraphy: it is the FIRST long inscription in Sanskrit (Ashoka's edicts were in Prakrit; Satavahana inscriptions were in Prakrit). A Shaka (foreign) king choosing Sanskrit — the language of Vedic tradition — demonstrates complete cultural Indianisation. The inscription also records the repair of Sudarshana Lake, built by Chandragupta Maurya's governor 450 years earlier — showing continuity of infrastructure across dynasties. From Rudradaman onwards, Sanskrit became the language of Indian royal inscriptions, culminating in Gupta-era Sanskrit literature.
- 5. Satavahana-Shaka Rivalry — AP Connection:** The Satavahanas of the Deccan (AP's most significant early dynasty) fought prolonged wars against the Western Kshatrapas (Shakas). Gautamiputra Satakarni (106–130 CE) is described as the 'destroyer of Shakas, Yavanas, and Pahlavas' in the Nasik inscription — asserting Deccan dominance over northwestern invaders. This rivalry shaped the political geography of western and southern India for centuries. The Satavahana victory preserved the Deccan (including AP) from Shaka rule and enabled the flourishing of Buddhist centres at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda.

SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

4 dimensions.

Interlinkages

- **Mauryan Decline (Day 6/9) → Invasions:** Pushyamitra Shunga's Brahmanical restoration (185 BCE) weakened central control over NW. Indo-Greeks filled the vacuum. Magadha's loss was Punjab/Gandhara's transformation.
- **Ashoka (Day 9) → Buddhist Art:** Ashoka's symbolic representation of Buddha (empty throne, footprints) → Gandhara's anthropomorphic Buddha. The artistic evolution from Ashokan aniconism to Gandhara iconism is a key Art & Culture question.
- **Foreign Invasions → Kushans (Day 11):** Shakas were displaced by Yuezhi/Kushans. Kanishka (Kushan) = next topic. Continuity: Greek coins → Shaka coins → Kushan gold coins. Art: Gandhara continues under Kushans.
- **Shakas ↔ Satavahanas (Day 12):** Western Kshatrapas vs Satavahanas = AP's history. Gautamiputra Satakarni's victory. Shapes Deccan political landscape. Directly connects to AP's state formation.

Comparative

- **India's Absorption vs China's Resistance:** India absorbed invaders (Greeks became Buddhists/Vaishnavites); China built the Great Wall and resisted nomadic assimilation. Different civilisational responses to the same Central Asian steppe pressure.
- **Hellenistic Influence:** India, Egypt (Ptolemaic), and Persia (Seleucid) all received Hellenistic cultural influence. But only in India did it fuse with a local religion (Buddhism) to create a new art form (Gandhara).

Current Affairs

- **Gandhara Heritage:** Pakistan's Gandhara region (Peshawar, Taxila, Swat) contains major Buddhist sites. India-Pakistan archaeological cooperation (limited) and UNESCO conservation efforts are ongoing.
- **Shaka Era in Use:** India's official national calendar (adopted 1957) is based on the Shaka Era (78 CE). It runs parallel to the Gregorian calendar in government publications.

Lessons

- **Cultural Soft Power:** Indian civilisation conquered its conquerors culturally. Buddhism, Sanskrit, and Hindu philosophy transformed Greek, Scythian, and Parthian rulers into Indian patrons. India's modern soft power (Yoga, Buddhism, cuisine, cinema) continues this tradition.
- **Trade-Driven Assimilation:** Integration happened through trade routes (Silk Road), not just conquest. Economic interdependence drove cultural exchange. Modern globalisation follows the same pattern.

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Glance.

▶ Alexander: 326 BCE; Hydaspes; Porus; refused at Beas	▶ Demetrius: 1st Indo-Greek invader; 'King of Indians'
▶ Menander/Milinda: Sagala; Milindapanha; Buddhist	▶ Heliodorus Pillar: Greek = Bhagavata (Vaishnavite); Besnagar
▶ Gandhara: Greco-Buddhist; 1st anthropomorphic Buddha	▶ Indo-Greek coins: bilingual, die-struck, portraits
▶ Shakas: Scythians; Maues (1st); Azes I (Vikrama Samvat 58 BCE)	▶ Rudradaman I: Junagadh = 1st Sanskrit inscription; Sudarshana Lake
▶ Western Kshatrapas: Gujarat/Malwa; fought Satavahanas	▶ Gautamiputra Satakarni: 'destroyer of Shakas, Yavanas, Pahlavas'
▶ Gondophernes: Parthian; Taxila; St. Thomas tradition	▶ Kushans overthrew Parthians (Kujula Kadphises ~50 CE)
▶ Vikrama Samvat: 58 BCE; Shaka Era: 78 CE (national calendar)	▶ Manu: Greeks/Shakas/Pahlavas = 'degraded Kshatriyas'
▶ Silk Road trade flourished; Pliny: Rome drained by India	▶ Sanskrit revival via Rudradaman → Gupta golden age

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer.

Source	What to Read	Why
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 22–25: Post-Mauryan, Indo-Greeks, Shakas	Exam-oriented; ruler lists, coins, art schools
NCERT Class XII — Themes in Indian History	Ch. 2 and 4: Kings and trade; Cultural developments	Gandhara art, coinage, trade context
Upinder Singh — Ancient & Early Medieval India	Ch. 13–15: Post-Mauryan polities	Academic depth; numismatic + archaeological evidence
NCERT Class XI — An Introduction to Indian Art	Gandhara and Mathura schools chapter	Comparative art analysis for Art & Culture questions