

HELLENISTIC INDIA AND THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

The advent of Chandragupta Maurya marks a new epoch in the history of India. After the return of Alexander with the help of Chanakya he removed the powerful Nandas and laid the foundation of Mauryan dynasty. Under the guidance of Chanakya, he established himself as the first sovereign king of India. Chandragupta also had to face the attack of Greeks, but through his military strategy he not only defeated the foreign invaders but also forced them to settle peace with him. His successors also followed his policy of maintaining cordial relations with the Hellenistic contemporaries.

Key Words: Alliance, Kedos, Epigamia, Sovereignty, Philhellenism, Satrapies, Basileus.

Seleucus I Nicator was a Greek general and one of the Diadochi, the rival generals, relatives and friends of Alexander the Great who fought for control over his empire after his death. He was the infantry general under Alexander the Great, who fought for control over his empire after his death. After the death of Alexander, in the struggle between his generals Seleucus made himself "the master of whole region from Phrygia to Indus".¹ After emerging victorious, he assumed the title of Basileus. Greek writers Justin² and Appian³ inform that after strengthening his position, Seleucus crossed Indus and waged war against Sandrokottas to add to his dominions the lost Indian provinces that Alexander had conquered. The war between Chandragupta and Seleucus received scant attention of the Greek writers but the understanding or the treaty had attracted greater notice.⁴

Greek writer Appian informs that the war continued between Seleucus and Chandragupta, "until he made friends and entered into a

relationship of marriage with him".⁵ Strabo has given the following information regarding the terms of the treaty---

Along the Indus are the Paropamisadae, above whom lies the Paropamisus mountains; then towards the south, the Arachoti; then next, towards the south the Gedroseni, with the other tribes that occupy the sea-board; and the Indus lies latitudinally alongside all these places; and of these places in part, some that lie along the Indus are held by Indians, although they formerly belonged to the Persians; Alexander took these away from Arians and established settlement of his own, but Seleucus Nicator gave them to Sandrocottus, upon terms of intermarriage (epigamia) and of receiving in exchange five hundred elephants.⁶

Greek writer Plutarch has informed regarding the terms of treaty that five hundred elephants were gifted by Chandragupta Maurya to Seleucus.⁷ On the basis of information provided by Classical writers, most scholars are of the view that

probably Seleucus could not make much headway and had to submit a humiliating bargain.⁸ Seleucus had to purchase peace by ceding to Chandragupta Maurya the territories of Aria, Arachosia, Paropanisadae (the capitals of these are the cities of Heart, Kandahar and Kabul) and probably also a part of Gedrosia (Baluchistan).⁹ In return, Chandragupta presented him five hundred war elephants.¹⁰ The invader and the invaded, thus concluded an alliance and sealed it further by a marriage compact, which is mentioned by Appian as “Kedos”¹¹ and Strabo as “Epigamia”.¹² On the basis of the terms of treaty, it has been suggested by scholars that both the terms used by Greek writers, however signify “a connection by marriage”.¹³ R.K. Mookerji is of the view that ‘a marriage alliance was established so that Seleucus became either the father-in-law or the son-in-law of Chandragupta Maurya’.¹⁴ Vincent Smith in beginning was of the opinion that peace was ratified between the rival powers by a matrimonial alliance, which probably means that Seleucus gave his daughter to his Indian rival Chandragupta Maurya.¹⁵ But at another place he changed his opinion and mentioned that “the current notion that the Syrian king gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta is not warranted by the evidence which testifies merely to a matrimonial alliance”.¹⁶

J.Allan is of the view that “If the usual oriental practice was followed and if we regard Chandragupta as victor, then it would mean that a daughter or other female relative of Seleucus was given to the Indian ruler or to one of his sons, so that Ashoka may have had Greek blood in his veins”.¹⁷ Sylvain Levi has opined that Seleucus concluded a matrimonial alliance which no doubt introduced a Greek princess into Mauryan harem.¹⁸ Jaichandra Vidyalkar has referred a verse from Bhavishyottara which indicates that the daughter of Seleucus was married to Chandragupta Maurya.¹⁹

Several scholars, on the basis of terms of treaty are of the opinion that the satrapies of Aria, Arachosia, Parpanisadae and Gedrosia were given by Seleucus to his son-in-law Chandragupta Maurya, on marrying his daughter with him. Hemchandra

Raychaudhuri has remarked “The cession of territory, in consequence of epigamia, should rightly be regarded as the dowry given to a bridegroom”.²⁰ Seleucus acquiesced in the sovereignty of his son-in-law, Chandragupta, all the country beyond the Indus”.²¹ Chandragupta Maurya received a large part of Iranian tableland besides the riparian province situated along the Indus. K.A.N.Sastri has said that “the cession of territories upon terms of intermarriage (epigamia) implies that the marriage did take place, the land in question being possibly treated as the dowry of the Seleucid princess, like the Kashi village in the Buddhist story of Kosaladevi and Bombay in the case of Catherine of Braganza”.²² E.B Havell remarks, “Seleucus gave Chandragupta the districts situated on the west of river Indus, extending up to modern cities of Kabul and Heart, in dowry for a daughter being sent to Chandragupta’s zanana”.²³

However this alliance proved extremely advantageous for Chandragupta, as it extended the north-western boundary of the Mauryan kingdom. According to Macdonald, “the frontiers of the Mauryan empire were extended so as to embrace the southern half of Afghanistan and perhaps the whole of British Balucistan”.²⁴ Vincent Smith said on the significance of this alliance, as “the range of Hindukush mountains, known to Greeks as Paropanisor or the Indian Caucasus, in this way became the frontier between Chandragupta’s provinces of Herat and Kabul on the south and the Seleukidan province of Bactria on the north. The first Indian emperor, more than two thousand years ago, thus entered into possession of that scientific frontier, sighed for in vain by his English successor and never held in its entirety even by the Mogul monarchs of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”.²⁵

According to the terms of treaty Chandragupta had gifted five hundred war elephants to Seleucus. These elephants proved to be of great help to Seleucus in turning the scale of victory against Antigonos in c. 301 B.C.²⁶ After this war alliance diplomatic relations were maintained between Seleucus and Chandragupta Maurya. An envoy named Megasthenese, sent by Seleucus,

adorned the Mauryan court at Pataliputra.²⁷ Athanaeus informs on the authority of Phylarchus that Chandragupta had send presents, including certain powerful aphrodisiacs to the Syrian monarch, Seleucus.²⁸ This peace alliance also opened the doors for a large number of foreigners, especially Greeks visiting the Mauryan kingdom, which is also proved by the fact that a special board of municipal officers was formed to look after the safety, welfare and care of foreigners. Greek writers Diodorous and Strabo inform that the Mauryan government took special care of foreigners.²⁹ Special arrangements were done to fulfill the judicial needs of foreigners coming to Mauryan Empire.³⁰ This alliance also contributed to the economic prosperity of India, as trade links were established between India and the west. Probably in third century B.C, under the Mauryas, there must have been a regular export trade to the Greek west.³¹

The Chandragupta –Seleucus treaty had its positive impact on the politics of successive generations also. Chandragupta’s son and successor Bindusara also maintained friendly relations and pursued a pacific alliance with Hellenistic powers of the West. This treaty ushered in a policy of philhellenism, which bore fruit in the successive reigns. There was not only an exchange of embassies but the services of Greek philosophers and administrators were eagerly sought by the imperial government.³² Strabo in his writings informs that Syrian king Antiochus I sent his ambassador Diemachus to the court of ‘Allitrochades, the son of Sandrocottus’.³³ Pliny informs that Ptolmey II Philadelphous, the king of Egypt had sent his envoy Dionysius to the court of Mauryan king.³⁴ Diodorous provides the information that a Greek writer named lamboulous, who was ship wrecked on the shores of India, writes that the king of Pataliputra (Palibothra) had great love for Graecians.³⁵ Another Greek writer, Athanaeus, informs on the authority of Hegasander that Amitrochates (Bindusara) the king of Indians wrote to Antiochus I Soter, the king of Syria, asking him to send sweet wine, dried figs and sophist. Antiochus I Soter in his letter replied that “we shall send you figs and wine but in Greece the law forbids

a sophist to be sold’.³⁶ Greek writer Dion Chrysostom has informed in his writings that the poetry of Homer was translated and sung by Indians.³⁷ According to Aristoxenus and Eusibius, in early fourth century B.C. some Indians discussed philosophy with Socrates in Athens.³⁸

The successor and son of Bindusara, Ashoka also maintained friendly relations with his Hellenistic frontagers.³⁹ In his rock edict XIII, he declares of his friendly relations with AntiochusII Theos, the king of Syria and western Asia. He also maintained relations with the powers residing in his neighbourhood like Ptolmey II Philadelphos the Greek king of Egypt; Antigonos Gontas, the king of Mecedonia; Maga, the king of Ceyrene in North Africa; and Alexander, the king of Epirus or Corinth.⁴⁰ The Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman informs of Yavanaraj Tusaspa, being appointed as the governor of Saurashtra in Ashoka’s reign.⁴¹ Some historians are of the view that the relations with the Hellenistic contemporaries was responsible for the eclecticism of Ashoka.⁴²

Thus, the cordial relations between Mauryan and Greek and the cultural interexchange shows a glimpse of pacific intercourse between India and the West, diplomatic, social and commercial, that was ushered in by the treaty between Chandragupta and Seleucus.

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