

# Influence of Saka Scythian: An Ancient Art of Rajasthan

---

SWATI RAY

Swati Rai, Ph.D., Sr. Lecturer, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta, Kolkatta. India.

---

## ABSTRACT

In this article an attempt is made to highlight the Saka/Scythian influence on the ancient art of Rajasthan. The Śaka/Scythians ruled over portions of the Indo-Iranian borderlands and parts of the Indian subcontinent in the late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries and along with the Parthians, they were continually in power in parts of North-Western India, Gujarat, Rajasthan, parts of central India and upper western Deccan till the latter part of the second century A.D. Literary and archaeological sources attest to the Saka/Śaka/Scythian connection and influence on the ancient art of Rajasthan.

**KEYWORDS** : *Saka/Scythian influence, Nomadic art, Cultural linkages, Vocabulary of stylization.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Persians designated all the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes, including the Scythians, as the Śakas. The term *Scythian* is generally employed to denote numerous groups of nomadic tribes from the borders of China to the Carpathians. They also constituted a subdivision within the larger group of Scytho-Siberian early nomads inhabiting the Eurasian steppes and forest steppe-zones during the first millennium B.C. The Scythian/Śaka power in the annals of the ancient Orient is at least apparent from the numerous widely known sources (both literary and archaeological) alluding to them. In spite of so many years of excavations, archaeologists, historians, and art historians still face a major task in exposing the Saka art forms in the Indian subcontinent vis-a-vis a broader context in the macro level, i.e. Indian art, along with Oriental art and their extensions. Rajasthan is famous for its temples and forts boasts of an amazing antiquity. Occurrences of early, middle and late palaeolithic tools have left their presence along with remnants of the late stone age.<sup>1</sup> Explorations and excavations undertaken along the dried-up beds of Drishadvati – Saraswati in north-western Rajasthan have revealed resource bearing areas such as Ahar, Rairh and Bairat. It had a rich source of metallic minerals, non-metallic minerals and precious and semi-precious stones. The archaeological map of Rajasthan and its adjoining parts in Gujarat and Malwa in proto-historic period is a mosaic of small and large sites, with different forms of cultural adaptations – hunter-gatherers – nomadic-pastoralists, as also settled farming groups and even agriculturalists. Proto-historic Rajasthan (well represented by Ganeshwar – Jodhpura and Ahar/Banas gradually spread its wings and identified itself with the population associated with OCP, PGW and early NBPW centered around the districts of Jaipur, Alwar and Bharatpur and they interacted with the Indus Valley, Gujarat, Malwa and the Indo-Gangetic divide (with their extensions). These significant inter – cultural linkages definitely not a one-way traffic) and the resource bearing faculty of ancient Rajasthan created procurement and consumer zones. The Saka/Scythians who were ruling parts of north-west India and the Indo-Iranian borderlands during the first century BC gradually spread eastwards and to the south.

The archaeological records show the cultural changes, and also indicate an influx of Śaka/Scythian art forms, as apparent from the findings in the early Śaka and Śaka-Parthian strata at Taxila and other sites. In Rajasthan, parts of Kashmir, Haryana, Gujarat and Mathura, various artifacts dated in the first century A.D. onwards reveal the impact of the Śaka/Scythian and Śaka-Pahlava or Scytho-Parthian art styles. The Saka/Scythian nomadic art mainly promoted animal art along with a definite vocabulary of stylizations. This art was also applicable to jewellery, horse and other animal trappings, utility objects and weapons with stylized accessories. Repoussé technique, use of inlays and embossing of various designs were the forte of the nomads. Assemblages from different sites in Central Asia and North-west India have revealed that these techniques and motifs were in transit from the Scythian to the Scythian/Saka/Pahlava territories.

Ornaments of Rajasthan and Maharashtra<sup>2</sup> show the partial continuation of Śaka/Scythian jewellery forms and techniques. These include spiked silver bracelets from Rajasthan and armlets of silver and dyed cotton threads, known as *bājubandh* which are still worn by the women of the Meena and Jat communities of Rajasthan. Boat-shaped earrings transformed into traditional Jaipuri and Punjabi 'Makris', are still a popular type of ear ornaments. Lunate<sup>3</sup> crescent and boat-shaped earrings are still in use in Rajasthan and they all reflect the ancient nomadic forms. Earliest earring types appearing in Scythian burials were boat-shaped or circular in form. This form elaborated and combined with the disc-pendant, resulting in elaborate earrings and temple pendants (worn hanging from a diadem or crown, over the wearer's temples). Most of the earrings reflect an elaborate use of filigree, granulations and enamel. Their techniques continued to be followed at Tillya-Tepe, a site in Afghanistan and belonging to the first century A.D. Hanging gold earrings<sup>4</sup> are still in use in Barmer, Jaisalmer. In modern Rajasthani jewellery, several items continue the nomadic tradition. Stylised elephants and mythical animals are still depicted on Rajasthani bracelets. From Bolshaya Bliznitsa (a major Scythian site) was found a pair of bracelets with doubled twisted ropes and rampant lion-terminals. Other Scythian bracelets are so styled as to show the bronze interior which is visible through a number of breaks in the gold. The same technique is still in use in the fabrication of Indian jewellery.

Geometrical motifs, such as triangles, dotted lines, dots and circular bands (frequently used in the Scythian/Saka repertoire) continue to decorate bangles and head jewellery from Rajasthan.<sup>5</sup> Rajasthani pendants enamelled with stylised birds<sup>6</sup> and necklets with flower, almond, leaf, and lemon-shaped designs<sup>7</sup> reveal the Śaka/Scythian influence. Individual units of motifs<sup>8</sup> of the Jaipur enamelled jewellery again are reminiscent of the nomadic style. Gold enamelled *phalas*<sup>9</sup> or ornaments worn on the side of the head, from Jaipur show the Śaka/Scythian influence. A head of Śiva from Kalyanpur, Udaipur District, Rajasthan, preserved in the Pratap Museum, Udaipur, has an interesting ear ornament. The sculpture is of black schist and belongs to the sixth century A.D. On the right ear the obverse face of the earring depicts a young woman, probably a princess with attendant figures. One of them includes a dwarfish man with a bent staff and peaked cap<sup>10</sup> recalling the typical Scythian/Saka pointed cap.

Explorations along the Banganga River, district Bharatpur, Rajasthan have exposed about thirty sites.<sup>1</sup> Sites like Santruk, Rarh, Awar, Sogar, Bori, Bhandor, Nagla Tuhiram, Sewar, Bagdhari, Jheelra, Par, Dharsnoi (Tehsil Wer), Rahingarh, Halena, Sarsena and Bachhrain have yielded Kushan artifacts. We are already well acquainted with the so-called 'dynastic art' and its prototypes as defining and classifying the art of the Kushan period but Kushan art is unthinkable without its preceding Scythian/Saka/Scythian/ Saka-Pahlava art forms. One has to be cautious in defining an art object as 'Kushana' doubly more as Bharatpur is geographically close to that great centre of 'Kushan art', Mathura. I suppose the magnitude of 'Kushanness' should be clearly explained by scholars of the Kushan idiom. I am sure the above sites should expose the Scythian/Saka/Scythian/ Saka-Pahlava art styles and their

assimilation in Indian art. In this context, it is worth mentioning that archaeologically the region i.e. Bharatpur, shows numerous settlement remains since the arrival of Black-and Red Ware (BRW) using people. The site of Noh not only has the bearing of early settlement but it could also be treated as a nucleus area for the spread of metal bearing settlements. In all probability, the region played an important role for the growth of village farming communities along the Ganga valley. All these sites reveal the cultural continuity till the Saka-Parthian period and the economic factor was important for the assimilation of non-Indian art tradition and its continuity. Subsequent assimilations involving the indigenous and the extraneous created for Rajasthan its own identity. In the Shekhawati region in Rajasthan, and in some parts of Gujrat, wooden brackets (similar to the wooden reliefs of the Scytho-Siberian sites of Pazyryk and Kuturguntas) are still used as architectural elements, and are strikingly similar to those found from Tibet (fragments of wooden doorways dated in the eleventh to twelfth centuries A.D.)

One may recall the close fitting tunic still worn by the rural inhabitants of Rajasthan. These colourful tunics are similar to the nomadic short tunic with full sleeves. Ancient Rajasthan therefore made a spontaneous overture to the nomadic art of Central Asia and the legacy persists.

### REFERENCE

- K N. Dikshit (1964): 'Rajasthan's Early Cultures', *The Researcher, Bulletin of the Rajasthan's Archaeology and Museums*, Vol. V – VI, 65, Jaipur, p.53.
- Ilay Cooper, John Gillow (2001): *Arts and Crafts of India*, Thames and Hudson, , Pl. 65-68. p. 84,
- M. Postel (1989): *Ear Ornaments of Ancient India*, Bombay, p. 311.
- Ibid.*, p. 316.
- E. Bhavnani (1974): *Folk and Tribal Designs of India*, Bombay, Pl. 54.
- Ibid.*, Pl. 55.
- Ibid.*, Pl. 58.
- J. B. Bhushan (1957): *Indian Jewellery, Ornaments and Decorative Designs*, Bombay, p. 92, 98
- Ibid.*, p. 101.
- M. Postel (1989): *Ear Ornaments of Ancient India*, Bombay, p. 118-119.
- Baldev Singh Negi (1986-87): "Explorations along the Banganga River, District Bharatpur, Rajasthan", *Puratattva*, No. 17, p.5.