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TO THE OXUS ON THE TRAIL  
OF KĀLIDĀSA AND KING CANDRA

I

Afghanistan, during the age of the imperial Guptas in Indian history, was passing through a critical political phase, much like the present day turmoil, created by barbarian foreigners. The age of the Indo-Greeks was a thing of the past and even the great Kuṣāṇa Empire was on the verge of collapse. After having lost their possessions in the northern and north-western India they were now confined to a small territory around Kabul and Peshawar and may be identified with the Kidāra Kuṣāṇas of the numismatic sources and the Daivaputra Ṣāhis of the Allahabad Stone-Pillar inscription of Samudragupta<sup>1</sup>. In either case they were only a second rate power in the fourth century of the Christian era and had acknowledged the supremacy of the imperial Guptas by entering into subordinate treaties with Samudragupta. In the west the Sassanians were making extensive conquests of the eastern region and had occupied Khorasan, Merv, Seistan and Balkh forcing the Kuṣāṇas to accept their supremacy as their title *Kuṣāṇaśāhanuśāha* indicates<sup>2</sup>. At this time the barbarian Hūṇas<sup>3</sup>, who were instrumental in

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<sup>1</sup> Gold coins belonging to the Śīladas, Śākas and Gaḍharas having the name of Samudra on them indicate that they had acknowledged the supremacy of the Guptas. Cf. A. S. Altekar, *The Coinage of the Gupta Empire*, Varanasi, 1957, pp. 36-37, 52; Ashvini Agrawal, *Rise and Fall of the Imperial Guptas*, Delhi, 1989, p. 48; S.R.Goyal, *A History of the Imperial Guptas*, Allahabad, 1967, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> For details see Ashvini Agrawal, *op.cit.*, pp. 46-49; R.C. Majumdar, *The Classical Age*, Bombay, 1970, pp. 52-53; William Montgomery McGovern, *The Early Empires of Central Asia*, New York, 1939, pp. 399 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Various known as the White Hūṇas, Ephthalites, Juan Juan, Chionites they were a

pushing the Yueh-chis (the Kuṣāṇas) westward from their original homeland and had advanced on their foot-steps, appeared in the Trans-Oxiana region and occupied the territory in Bactria on the banks of the river Oxus. They brought about the downfall of the Sassanian Empire and had become a menace for India. It was here that Candragupta II Vikramāditya inflicted a crushing defeat upon them as mentioned in his Mehrauli Iron-Pillar inscription. The celebrated Sanskrit poet-dramatist Kālidāsa, who seems to have had the first hand knowledge of Afghanistan, gives a lucid account of this campaign in the garb of the *digvijaya* of the legendry king Raghu.

## II

The Mehrauli Iron-Pillar inscription records the achievements of king Candra identified with Candragupta II Vikramāditya<sup>4</sup> including his conquest of Vaṅga and Southern India. However, the most important statement in the first verse of the epigraph refers to Candra crossing the seven mouths of the Indus and conquering the Vāhlikas<sup>5</sup>. Different opinions have been expressed regarding the interpretation of *saptamukhāni* and the identification of Vāhlikas<sup>6</sup>. The *saptamukhāni* of this inscription has been taken to stand for the seven tributaries of the river Indus by some scholars<sup>7</sup>. If we take *saptamukhāni* to mean seven tributaries of the Indus it would mean that Candra overran the Punjab to reach Vāhlika, but in that case too Candra had to cross only five rivers and not seven. Moreover, the word *mukha* does not mean a tributary. There is no instance of its use in that sense. In Sanskrit the word *mukha* with reference to a river means the

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branch of the Hunnish people but carefully distinguished from them by the Chinese as well as Indian writers.

<sup>4</sup> For various theories regarding the identification of Candra see M.C. Joshi & S. K. Gupta (ed.), *King Chandra and the Mehrauli Iron Pillar*, Meerut, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *Tīrtvā sapta mukhāni yena [sa]ma[re] Sindhor-jjitā Vāhlikā*, D.R. Bhandarkar (B.Ch. Chhabra & G.S. Gai ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Inscriptions of Early Gupta Kings*, Vol. III, New Delhi, 1981 (revised Edition), p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> For various theories see M.C. Joshi & S. K. Gupta, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P.L. Gupta, *Gupta Samarajya*, Varanasi, 1970, p. 289; Udayavira Shastri, *Paropakari*, February 1987, pp. 25-31. Their equation of *saptamukhāni* with *Saptasindhu* is equally futile and without any basis what so ever.

point where the river falls into the ocean. The Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakośa* assigns the meaning of exit, as it equates the word *mukha* with *nihsarana*. Kālidāsa has twice spoken of entering the ocean through the mouth of a river<sup>8</sup>. In English and Persian also we have the word mouth and *dāhanāh* for the place where a river falls into the sea. We have definite evidence of the existence of the seven mouths of the Indus. The *Periplus* and the *Geography* of Ptolemy actually mention these mouths of the Indus along with their names. Ptolemy gives the following names of the seven mouths of the Indus: the most western is called *Sagapa*, the next is *Sinthan*, the third is *Khrysoun*, the fourth is called *Kariphron*, the fifth is *Sapara*, the sixth *Sabalaessa* and the seventh is called *Lonibare*<sup>9</sup>. This sets the stamp of authenticity on the statement of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription.

Vāhlika has been identified by some with Vāhika of the *Mahābhārata*<sup>10</sup>, which denoted the region of central Punjab between the rivers Ravi and the Chenab. Central Punjab, however, was under the Madrakas who had already submitted to Samudragupta according to the Allahabad Pillar inscription. Vāhlika in the Mehrauli inscription definitely stands for Bactria, ancient Persian Vagdhi and modern region of Balkh in north-eastern Afghanistan. Candragupta probably crossed the seven mouths of the Indus after his conquest of the Western Kṣatrapas of Surāṣṭra to reach southern Afghanistan from the trans-Indus region and then headed northwards up to Bactria where he defeated the Hūṇas on the banks of the Oxus. This is fully corroborated by some important epigraphical evidence. In the Udaygiri Cave inscription of Vīrasena Śāba, the foreign minister of Candragupta II, it is specifically mentioned that he visited this place in the company of the emperor, when the latter was intent upon conquering the whole earth (*Kṛtasna-prthvī-jay-artthēna rājñ=aiv=eha sah=agataḥ*)<sup>11</sup>. It is now accepted by all that Candragupta visited this region of central India along with his ministers and army during his campaign against the Śākas of

<sup>8</sup> *Raghuvamśa*, III, 28; XVII, 53.

<sup>9</sup> J.W. McCrindle (ed. & tr.), *Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Karnaparva*, 44, 7, 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> J.F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, Calcutta, 1888, p. 35.

Western India. But one campaign certainly cannot be equated with the conquest of the entire world. The statement has a much deeper meaning and can only be appreciated in the light of the above discussion leading us to conclude that Candragupta after defeating the Western Kṣatrapas crossed the Indus delta and marched through Afghanistan right up to the Oxus to deal with the menace of the Hūṇas. This is further attested by some recently discovered graffiti inscriptions, written in the Gupta Brāhmi characters, from the Hunza region of Kashmir bearing the names of Candragupta Vikramāditya, Deva Śrī Candra and Hariṣeṇa. A. H. Dani<sup>12</sup> who discovered these inscriptions is not much inclined to attribute them to the Guptas. Recently S. R. Goyal has argued in favour of Dani's view and has identified Deva Śrī Candra Vikramāditya with some unknown king of this name belonging to the Paṭola Śāhi dynasty of Gilgit<sup>13</sup> but not ruling out the possibility of his being a local ruler of the Gilgit region. However, it is difficult to agree with this view as the complete name Deva Śrī Candra with epithet Vikramāditya is known for only one ruler in the entire Indian history. The date 143 of these inscriptions may pose some problem. Applied to the Gupta era, as rightly done by S. R. Goyal it provides 462 AD, a date almost in the middle of Skandagupta's reign. It is quite possible that the inscriptions were engraved at a later date referring to the acknowledgement of Candragupta Vikramāditya suzerainty by the local rulers of the Hunza region like Sihavarmā. Competent authorities like B. N. Mukherjee<sup>14</sup> and V. S. Pathak<sup>15</sup> have definitely assigned them to the imperial Guptas. It appears that Candragupta II Vikramāditya being the only Gupta ruler to have led a campaign of conquest to these far off Himalayan regions, was remembered by the local people even half a century after his time as the Gupta suzerainty continued to prevail in the region. We may draw attention to a passage in the Bhitari Stone Pillar inscription of Skandagupta where it has been

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<sup>12</sup> The Sacred Rock of Hunza, *Journal of Central Asia*, VIII, No. 2, pp. 34 ff.; *Human Records on Karakoram Highway*, Islamabad, 1983, pp. 76-91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ancient Indian Inscriptions, Recent Finds and New Interpretations*, Jodhpur, 2005, pp. 137-141.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, XLVII-XVIII, Pts. I-IV.

<sup>15</sup> M.C. Joshi & S.K. Gupta (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 190-196.

stated that the praise of Skandagupta's valour for his victory over the Hūṇas (?) was sung in far off lands of his enemies by the old and the young alike<sup>16</sup>. This is apparently a reference to the land of the Hūṇas in Vāhlika and Skandagupta's victory over these barbarians might have revived the memories of the grand victory in that very region by the latter's grandfather Candragupta II Vikramāditya. We think these inscriptions positively indicate the presence of Candragupta II in this part of Kashmir.

### III

Kālidāsa, in the fourth canto of the *Raghuvamśa*, gives a beautiful account of the conquests of the legendary king Raghu in the course of his *digvijaya*. The description deserves some detailed treatment before we turn to discuss its historical content. After giving a minute description of Raghu's conquest of the East and the South, Kālidāsa takes his hero to the Western coast where the princes paid tributes to him. From there Raghu marched through the land route against the Pārasikas (Sassanians) and defeated them. Kālidāsa gives a very realistic description of the Sassanian soldiers with their bearded heads and wearing helmets<sup>17</sup>. He also talks of the red flush imparted by wine to the faces of the Yavana (Persian) ladies, comparable to the glow of morning sun falling upon the lotuses, and the sudden appearance of Raghu covered them like the untimely appearance of clouds<sup>18</sup>. Kālidāsa also talks of the bowers of grape vines (*drākṣāvalaya*) where his troops relaxed after the toils of war on soft deerskins<sup>19</sup>. The poet also talks of the fine cavalry of Raghu (*aśvasādhanah*)<sup>20</sup> that reminds one of the horseman type coins of Candragupta II<sup>21</sup> and the twang of his bowstring. The Sassanians after suffering a severe defeat submitted to him. Now Raghu turned towards the North (lit. the quarter presided over by Kubera) to extirpate with his arrows the

<sup>16</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, III, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

<sup>17</sup> *Raghuvamśa*, IV, 60-65.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 62.

<sup>21</sup> For details see my article 'Horseman Type Coins of the Imperial Guptas' in Devendra Handa (ed.), *Oriental Numismatic Studies*, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1996.

princes of that region<sup>22</sup>. On reaching the banks of the Vaṅkṣu<sup>23</sup> (the Oxus) the horses of Raghu's cavalry removed their fatigue of the journey by rolling on the riverbanks. Kālidāsa gives here a rare but very accurate reference to the saffron of the region when he poetically tells us that saffron-laments had clung to the manes of Raghu's horses when they passed through the saffron-fields<sup>24</sup>. The hero of Kālidāsa inflicted a crushing defeat on the Hūṅas here<sup>25</sup> on the banks of the Oxus in Bactria and proceeded on to the neighboring region of Kamboja in northern Afghanistan. The Kambojas were unable to bear his might in battle and submitted to him. Kālidāsa specially refers to the walnut trees (*akṣoṭa*) of this region<sup>26</sup>. Here huge heaps of wealth, mostly consisting of fine horses for which the region of Kamboja is famous<sup>27</sup> was presented to Raghu. Laden with the gifts and glory but without any conceit entering him Raghu returned to his capital by the route of the Himalayas defeating some hill tribes on the way<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Most of the scholars of Sanskrit literature like C.R. Davadhar (*Works of Kālidāsa*, vol. II, Delhi, 1986, p.72; Narayan Ram Acharya (*The Raghuvamśa*, Bombay, 1948, p.101) prefers the reading Sindhu (Indus) in place of Vaṅkṣu given in the manuscripts of the writers like Vallabha and Caritravardhana. But the reading Sindhu is absolutely out of context and does not fit with the description here. Raghu, here, is described as heading north after defeating the Pārasikas apparently somewhere on the borders of Iran, which is not possible with the reading Sindhu. Further there were no Hūṅas on the Indus in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. much less in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the date attributed to Kālidāsa by these scholars.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 67. Many writers are ignorant of the fact that Afghanistan produces some very good quality of saffron and associate it with Kashmir alone. However, Kālidāsa seems to have had accurate and first hand knowledge of the flora and fauna of Afghanistan besides its geography and political conditions.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 69.

<sup>27</sup> There are several references to the fine quality of horses of Kamboja region in Sanskrit literature. They are mentioned in the *Brhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira and the Jain author Hemacandrācārya refers to them in his *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi*. It is interesting to note that the Pehowa stone inscription of A.D. 882 (Harṣa Saṃvat 276) of the time of Bhoja Pratihāra refers to traders of horses from Kamboja who participated in the annual horse trade fair at Pṛthūdaka (Pehowa, Distt. Kurukshetra, Haryana).

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 70-80.

## IV

This description brings to fore two things at once. First that Kālidāsa was fully familiar with the geography, flora and fauna of the entire Afghanistan and the neighboring regions. His description of the bearded Persian soldiers wearing helmets, the Persian wine, the fine horses of the region especially of Kamboja, the saffron grown in the area and other features indicate that the account is not a mere flight of poetic fancy but is based on some true historical event. Secondly, the route of Raghu's march described by Kālidāsa exactly tallies with the epigraphic evidence discussed above.

The Allahabad Pillar inscription talks of the Śāhānuśāhis (identified with Sassanians) entering into a treaty with Samudragupta along with the Śaka Muruṇḍas and the Daivaputra Śāhis. It is quite possible that like the Śakas, Candragupta II decided to bring Persians also under his control and defeated them during his march to curb the growing menace of the Hūṇas. The latter were barbarians who had carried fire and sword right from China to Europe bringing utter destruction with them wherever they went. Candragupta Vikramāditya being a seasoned statesman realized the danger of the advancing Hūṇas and wanted to nip the evil in the bud by bringing a halt to their advance beyond the borders of India that he accomplished through this campaign. It is now accepted by all the scholars of the Gupta history that there is historical kernel in the description of Kālidāsa and he has portrayed the achievements of either Samudragupta or Candragupta II Vikramāditya in the guise of Raghu<sup>29</sup>. After defeating the Hūṇas Candragupta must have returned through the Himalayan route as enumerated by Kālidāsa, a fact that is corroborated by the discovery of graffiti inscriptions from the Hunza region bearing his name and epithets along with that of Hariṣeṇa, the author of the Allahabad Pillar inscription. As a result of this campaign both Afghanistan and India were saved from the wrath of Hūṇa invasions at least for another half a century till Skandagupta had to defeat them again in c. 454 A.D. thus bringing home the true meaning of the expression *kritsna-pṛthvī-jaya* of the Udaygiri Cave inscription.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Buddha Prakash, *Studies in Indian History and Civilization*, Agra, 1962, 326 and *JRASB.L.*, 1947, 31-39; R.G. Basak, *PAIOC*, 1922, 325-34; S.R. Goyal, *Op.cit.* and others.

