

# Integration of Foreign Communities into Ancient Indian Religions and Culture: An Analytical Study

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**Abstract:** The article explores how ancient Indian culture absorbed multiple foreign groups such as Greeks, Shakas, Kushans, and Huns. Despite their initial invasions, many of these groups gradually adopted Indian religious and cultural practices. Indian religions—particularly Buddhism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism—offered logical, philosophical, and inclusive traditions that appealed to foreigners, especially those from tribal or proto-religious backgrounds. However, from the medieval period onward, such integration declined due to the increasing ritualism in Indian religions and the rise of Islam and Christianity, which discouraged conversion and promoted exclusivity. The article emphasises the early flexibility and philosophical depth of Indian thought, which allowed mutual cultural assimilation. Over time, with growing rigidity and complexity, Indian religious systems lost their appeal to outsiders, ending a rich phase of cultural and religious integration by the medieval era.

**Keywords** - Nasadiya Sukta, polytheism, henotheism, pantheism, monotheism.

**Introduction** - India's cultural fabric has demonstrated remarkable resilience, enduring countless upheavals while retaining its core identity. Scholars often highlight this adaptability as a defining feature of Indian civilisation. Invading forces such as the Greeks, Kushans, Parthians, and Huns, who wreaked havoc across many ancient societies, also entered India. Yet, unlike elsewhere, they did not remain outsiders for long—instead, they gradually assimilated into the Indian way of life. This raises an intriguing question: Does Indian culture possess an innate quality that allows it to absorb and harmonise with foreign elements? While this characteristic is often celebrated, it has not been thoroughly examined from all angles. It is also important to consider whether, over time, Indian society—particularly Hindu society—began to lose its integrative capacity, or whether incoming communities themselves lacked the willingness to merge. One must delve into the broader historical context of ancient global civilisations to explore these questions.

From the dawn of human life, evidence of spiritual or supernatural belief systems begins to surface. These early beliefs likely stemmed from imaginative attempts to explain the mysterious forces of nature, evolving gradually into what scholars call proto-religions. Traces of such early religious thought are present in nearly all ancient cultures, including the Harappan civilisation, though concrete interpretations remain speculative due to limited evidence. Beyond the Indian subcontinent, ancient civilisations like Mesopotamia and Egypt developed structured polytheistic systems

complete with organised priesthoods and elaborate afterlife concepts. Harappa, too, shows signs of religious life, yet the absence of decipherable texts means much remains unknown. Nonetheless, humanity's earliest spiritual impulses were deeply rooted in a desire to understand and coexist with the natural world.

With the advent of the Vedic era, Indian spiritual thought began to transition from rudimentary belief systems to a more organised and philosophical framework. The Vedic texts offer a rich tapestry of ideas, encompassing polytheism, henotheism, pantheism, and even early monotheistic concepts. Among these, the *Nasadiya Sukta* of the *Rigveda* stands out for its profound philosophical inquiry. It dares to question the origins of creation, challenging the simplistic deification of natural forces and marking a significant shift toward abstract, rational contemplation. This hymn can be seen as one of humanity's earliest efforts to seek truth beyond myth and symbolism, laying the foundation for systematic religious thought in India.

This intellectual evolution culminated in the Upanishads, which propelled Indian philosophy to its zenith. These texts explored metaphysical questions with unmatched depth, providing a robust philosophical base that later nourished a wide spectrum of Indian religious traditions and sects.

Following the sixth century BCE, India witnessed a vibrant diversification of religious and philosophical schools. In addition to Buddhism and Jainism, a variety of other sects

emerged, including atheistic, sceptical, and fatalistic movements, each seeking a space in society. Concurrently, devotional traditions such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism also gained prominence. Rooted in the Vedas and epic literature, these sects found further expression through the Puranas, which simplified rituals and practices to resonate with the masses. This democratisation of spiritual access allowed complex philosophies to be experienced through stories, symbols, and practices that were both accessible and emotionally engaging to the common people.

The diverse religious traditions and sects that evolved in India over time shared several defining features. These included distinct philosophical ideas about the nature of God or Brahman and the universe, an articulated ideology, established systems of rituals and worship, specific spiritual texts, and often a central deity or enlightened teacher who interpreted and transmitted core teachings. Over time, devotional practices also emerged as a strong and accessible alternative path to spiritual realisation. Notably, Jainism and Buddhism introduced a remarkable element—egalitarianism. Unlike the rigid varna-based exclusivity seen in mainstream Vedic traditions, these sects allowed individuals of any caste or background to become followers. While Vedic thought theoretically acknowledged such inclusivity, in practice, it was rarely implemented. Though the influence of Jain and Buddhist ideals, along with Upanishadic thought, began to influence Brahmanical traditions before the Common Era, their impact remained limited in scope.

Each of these sects developed unique spiritual paths. Jainism emphasised strict discipline, asceticism, and non-violence; Buddhism offered a practical and balanced Middle Way (*The Madhyam Marg*); the Upanishads and Vedanta promoted the pursuit of knowledge; while Vedic religion emphasised ritual sacrifices. Mythological narratives provided a devotional route, and all of these traditions shared profound philosophical inquiries into life, death, and the afterlife. A distinctive feature of Indian religions, rarely found in contemporary world religions, was their deep-rooted logical and philosophical foundation. Furthermore, a vibrant tradition of debate and discourse flourished, helping to shape and refine religious thought.

Importantly, these Indian sects did not actively pursue conversion. Religious transformation occurs either through the intellectual appeal of scriptural truths or through an individual's awakened inner faith. As a result, the spread of these religions was often organic and based on personal conviction rather than coercion.

Some religions gained popularity more swiftly than others, depending on their accessibility and doctrinal appeal. Jainism, despite its vast philosophical framework, faced limitations due to the late compilation of its scriptures and the rigid nature of its principles, which often deterred foreigners. In contrast, Buddhism was unburdened by complex rituals and offered a clear, inclusive path, making

it more approachable for both Indians and foreigners. Similarly, the *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva* traditions that emerged from the epics offered a rich blend of philosophical depth and simplified devotional practices. This made them appealing to the wider public and helped them attract followers, including those from outside India.

Based on the preceding analysis, we can assess how foreign communities accepted Indian religions and assimilated into Indian culture over time.

The Iranians or Persians were among the earliest foreign groups to arrive in India during the historical period. Although they failed to establish a lasting empire, their cultural interactions with India are notable. Due to the striking similarities between ancient Iranian and Vedic traditions, clear evidence of cultural or religious assimilation is scarce. In a later period, the Parsis migrated to India from Iran and successfully maintained their distinct religious identity, demonstrating selective integration without the full cultural merger.

The arrival of the Greeks began with Alexander's invasion and continued until the first century BCE. Greek religion at the time was proto-theistic, combining mythological gods with an emerging tradition of philosophical reasoning, influenced by thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. Initially, Greek visitors and settlers in India were primarily influenced by Indian philosophy, as noted by classical Greek writers accompanying Alexander. However, subsequent evidence points to deeper religious integration. The Besnagar pillar inscription records the Greek ambassador Heliodorus's devotion to the *Bhagavata* tradition.<sup>1</sup> His reference to *Vaishnava* principles, sacrificial rites, and the concept of *Dama*, *Tyag* and *Apramada* (Self-restraint, Renunciation, and Consciousness) indicates sincere reverence. Similarly, coins issued by Agathocles depicting Vasudeva Krishna and Sankarshana Balarama<sup>2</sup> suggest his dedication to the *Bhagavata* faith.

The text *Milind-Panho* narrates philosophical dialogues between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the Buddhist sage Nagasena, reflecting Menander's deep engagement with Buddhism. Although sources differ on whether he formally converted, his coins bear the title "*Dhramikas*" and feature the *Dharma-Chakra*, indicating at least a symbolic affiliation with Buddhist values.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, widespread conversion among Greeks was limited, perhaps due to their strong cultural pride and attachment to their heritage.

Other foreign groups, such as the Sakas, Yuezhi (Kushans), and Huns, arrived in India between the first and seventh centuries CE. Unlike the Greeks or Iranians, these groups did not possess well-developed religions; instead, they adhered to tribal or primitive belief systems. These systems often revolved around mythic interpretations of nature and supernatural forces and lacked philosophical depth. Such belief systems remain strong until confronted with a more structured, rational, and philosophically

coherent religious tradition.

By the first century CE, Indian religious thought had reached a golden age. A rich tapestry of sects and philosophies flourished in India, sustained by a vibrant culture of dialogue, critical inquiry, and continuous refinement. When foreign communities encountered these intellectually profound and spiritually sophisticated traditions, they were deeply captivated and naturally drawn to them. The richness of Indian spiritual and philosophical discourse offered a compelling alternative to their earlier, less structured beliefs, facilitating their gradual integration into the Indian religious landscape.

Between the 1st century BCE and the 4th century CE, the Shakas (or Scythians) ruled over various regions of India through five distinct branches. Chinese sources refer to them as "Sai" or "Sai Wang."<sup>4</sup> Originally nomadic tribes from the region around the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), the Shakas were seen as fierce and uncivilised. However, soon after establishing dominion in India, they began to absorb local cultural and religious influences. One of the earliest signs of their assimilation is the adoption of Indian names and participation in religious acts. A cave inscription from Nashik records a donation made by Rishabhadduta (Ushavdata), son-in-law of the Kshaharata ruler Nahapana, to the Sarvadeshi Sangha.<sup>5</sup> The Junagarh inscription of Mahakshatrapa Rudradamana, written in refined Sanskrit and beginning with the auspicious word "*Siddham*", reflects his embrace of Indian traditions.<sup>6</sup> The use of epithets such as "ruler holding *Rajalakshmi*" further suggests deep cultural integration. Rudradaman's descendants also bore names rooted in Indian tradition, implying continued religious affiliation.

The Pahlavas or Parthians, who entered India around the same period, have left behind limited records of their religious beliefs. However, coins issued by them bearing the title "*Dharmiya*" (religious) suggest a degree of influence from Indian spiritual traditions, possibly Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> The Yuezhi—later known as the Kushans—were another Central Asian tribe of nomadic origin who gradually became Indianized. The second Kushan ruler, Vima Kadphises, adopted Shaivism and took on the title "*Maheshwar*", a reference inscribed on his coins. His successor, the great emperor Kanishka, became a major patron of Buddhism. Under his reign, the Fourth Buddhist Council was convened, and extensive Buddhist literature was compiled. Kanishka's coins often featured images of the Buddha and inscriptions such as *Boddo*,<sup>8</sup> indicating his religious devotion. Although his successors—Vashishka, Huvishka, and others—displayed religious eclecticism, their coins still featured Indian inscriptions alongside depictions of Greek, Iranian, and Roman deities, reflecting a culturally diverse yet increasingly Indianized worldview.<sup>9</sup>

The Huns, considered among the most brutal and culturally distant of all invaders, emerged as a major force during the Gupta era. Chinese texts refer to them as "Hung-

Nu." Yet even among them, signs of Indianization appeared. Mihirkula, a prominent Hun ruler, showed a clear inclination towards Shaivism. His devotion is evidenced by Yashodharman's Mandsaur inscription and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*,<sup>10</sup> as well as coins bearing the images of *Nandi* and *Trishul* and inscriptions like "*Jayati Vrishabha*".<sup>11</sup> Over time, through prolonged interaction and intermarriage—some Indian kings even took Hun women as consorts—the Huns, too, began to assimilate. Historian Col. James Tod even suggested that many Rajput clans trace their lineage to these Indo-Hun unions, gradually merging into the Kshatriya varna.<sup>12</sup>

With the rise of the Rajput era, however, evidence of foreign assimilation into Indian religious culture becomes scarcer. Many scholars argue that Rajput lineages themselves emerged from the integration of earlier foreign tribes, and elevated into the Kshatriya class through the ideological framework of *Yagya*-based origin stories.<sup>13</sup> While this theory remains debated, it highlights how the Indian varna system could accommodate outsiders based on martial valour and cultural adoption.

Beyond this period, the pattern of assimilation largely ceased. Subsequent arrivals—Arab and Turkish Muslims, Afghans, Mughals, and European Christians—rarely integrated into Indian religious or cultural frameworks in the same manner. Two broad categories of reasons help explain this shift: internal (Indian) and external (non-Indian). Internally, the simplicity and inclusivity of earlier Indian religions had begun to wane. Over time, religious practices became increasingly rigid, and caste-based restrictions grew more pronounced. Dogma and ritualism gradually overshadowed the philosophical underpinnings that once defined Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. Puranic Hinduism emphasised belief over inquiry, reducing its intellectual appeal. Similarly, both Buddhism and Jainism moved away from their original rational and ethical ideals, becoming more ritualistic and esoteric through the influence of Tantra, often appearing complex and intimidating to outsiders.

Despite the continued presence of great philosophers such as Vasubandhu, Dignaga, Shankaracharya, Acharya Kundakunda, and Ramanujacharya, their contributions remained largely confined to scholarly circles. Their works, often composed in Sanskrit and laden with abstract thought, failed to reach the general populace or establish mass philosophical movements like those of the Buddha or Mahavira.

Externally, the emergence of Islam and Christianity brought with them strong doctrinal frameworks and structured theological principles. Both religions emphasised monotheism, scriptural authority, and prophetic teachings. Their firm opposition to polytheism and idol worship stood in stark contrast to Indian religious norms. Additionally, unlike earlier faiths that respected spiritual autonomy, Islam and Christianity promoted active conversion, often viewing it as a religious duty. Voluntary conversion to other religions

was discouraged, if not condemned. These theological and ideological differences effectively ended the era of organic assimilation, marking a new phase in India's religious and cultural history by the medieval period.

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