Indo-Iranian relationship with special reference to Sassanid era (c.336 A.D. – 646 A.D.)

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(Abstract)

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Introduction

The late Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his book, *Discovery of India*, “Among the many people and races who have come in contact with Indians and influenced India’s life and culture, the oldest and most persistent have been the Iranians”.

The present Doctoral research aims at reviewing and analyzing the Indo-Iranian relationship with special reference to Sassanid era. It is based on many Persian and Indian primary as well as secondary sources.

Iranians and Indians throughout the history, even before settlement of Aryans in the vast plateau of Iran and India, had continuous traffic between them. The Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization, which is the oldest historically known culture in India, was contemporary with the Proto-Elamite civilization in Iran. The Indus people had trade links with parts of Afghanistan, the coastal regions of Iran, and the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia. At Susa in the western part of Iran, decorated pottery has been excavated which appears to be similar to those of the Kulli culture in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent.

Aryans were the people who came from Central Asia. Therefore, they have a common root. At first they had many similarities with ancient Persians in religious beliefs, culture, language and customs.

The emergence of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia saw parts of northwest India come under Persian rule. In 330 B.C., Alexander defeated Darius III. In the decisive battle of Gaugamela, Indian soldiers with fifteen elephants fought for Darius against the Greeks.

Mehrdad I, the king of the Parthians by invading Punjab, advanced the political and cultural relations between India and Iran. The situation of Iran in the line of the Silk Road between China and India with the Mediterranean region was very important. In this period, the Buddhist religion came to Iran from the eastern frontiers and affected the people of Khorasan and central Asia, and Taxila became the biggest center for Buddhism as well as the centre for Gandhara art. On the other hand Christianity came to India from the West and then gradually penetrated the Indian subcontinent.
The Sassanian period in Persia (226-646 A.D.) coincided with the Gupta period (320-509 A.D.) in India. The civilization of the Sassanid, should be named the period of the combination of the neighboring civilizations of Iran, namely India, Rome and Greece. The Indian civilization influenced Iran in some fields such as literature, medical sciences, especially in the period of king Khosru I (Anoshirvan) (531-579 A.D.).

The Sassanian monarchs maintained relations with the Gupta Empire which was based in Pataliputra. Pulakesin II, the ruler of Badami is known to have sent an embassy to Khosrau II (Parviz) in 625 A.D.

**Importance of the study**

Man has realized that he should lead a peaceful life along with one another and the basic requirements for that kind of living are the proper recognition and understanding of one another. And to achieve this, the educated class and the scholars of the world should venture upon uninterrupted dialogues and detailed discussions based upon irrefutable documents and to present their findings to the interested sections at such gatherings.

Iran and India have emerged high in the realms of history, as the two of the culturally richest and the oldest civilizations. The two countries have had relations with one another since a long time. The origins of the two nations have been concurrent and are traced to the Aryans. Based on this, one can find abundance of similarities in customs, traditions, languages and other behavioral forms.

With the advent of social and political changes and the loss of joint geographical borders between the two countries, relations between the two nations reduced drastically. Today at the beginning of the third millennium A.D. and with the endorsement by the U.N.O. of the viewpoints of His Excellency Mr. Sayed Mohammad Khatami, the former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, expressed in his “Dialogue among Civilizations”, the cultural studies in the universal expanse have received added importance.

The chapter-wise synopsis of the thesis is as follows:

**Chapter I: Introduction:** It includes the introduction of the research topic, statement of purpose, scope and importance of the study, research methodology and discussion of the primary sources.
A variety of primary sources are available in archives, museums and libraries. Written spiritual heritage such as, Avesta, the Yasna, the Visparad, the Yasts, the Vendidad, the Khordeh Avesta, and Literature of Pahlavi etc. are available for study. Inscription and ancient works such as, Works of the Achaemenids, Works of Parthian (Arsacides), Works of the Sassanids. Iranian and non-Iranian primary books such as, Shahnameh of Ferdousi, Al-Biruni, Fa-Hien, Ebne Asir, Ebne Nadim, Ebne Gheytabeh, Ebne Vazeh, Tabari, Herodotus, Xenophon are quite useful. Many Indian sources have also been used. But since the researcher is not well conversant with Indian languages, mainly the translated versions of the Indian sources have been used. The Indian sources include the literary sources like Vedas, supplementary literature to Vedas, Epics etc. Some archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic sources have also been used occasionally. Along with these sources, the secondary sources such as related books and articles published in Iran, India and abroad have also been used.

Chapter II: Indo-Iranian relationship in Pre–Aryan and Aryan period: This chapter reviews the earliest phase of Indo-Iranian relationship. The Indo-Iranian relationship could be traced back to the tribal phase. The archaeological evidence also indicated the Indo-Iranian connection during the Age of Harappan civilization. The relationship continued in the Vedic phase also. The similarities between Sanskrit and Avesta and Pahlavi languages and interconnections between the Rig-Veda and Avesta are historically significant. The chapter discusses all these aspects.

Chapter III: Indo-Iranian Relationship in Achaemenid Era (559-330 B.C.): This chapter reviews the developments during the Achaemenian Era. By around 1000 B.C., Indians and Persians had established themselves as distinct cultural and racial entities with their boundaries meeting at Kabul and Sistan.

The founder of the Achaemenian dynasty in Persia was Hakhamanis. During the Achaemenian period, some parts of northwest India came under the Persian rule. Indian emissaries were present in the courts of Medes and Emperor Cyrus (550 – 529 B.C.). When Cyrus the Great was invaded by King Croesus of Lydia in Greece, a contemporary Indian king is believed to have rendered military assistance to the Iranian emperor.
Darius, the third ruler of the Achaemenian dynasty, sent an expedition to India. Darius divided the Empire into 20 or 24 provinces (Shahrban) or Satraps and ordered all provinces to pay a definite amount to the royal treasury, a third of which should have been provided from India. Three of his inscriptions refer to his relations with India. The Behistun rock inscription (ancient Bagastana ‘place of Gods’ or Sanskrit ‘Bhagasthana’) dating back to around 518 B.C. includes Gandhar in the list of his subject countries. Here Darius refers to his language as Aryan. The Persepolis inscription mentions the Punjab as a part of the Persian empire. The epigraph of Nagsh-i-Rustam shows India as the 24th state of his empire.

Achaemenian art and architecture had a significant influence on India. Before the Ashokan period of history, there is no frequent evidence of epigraphy in India. It has been suggested that the idea of issuing decrees by Ashoka was borrowed from the Achaemenian emperors, especially from Darius (though the tone and content of Ashoka's edicts are different). The pillars, with their animal capitals (fine examples of Mauryan imperial art), are influenced by Achaemenian pillars. The use of this means of propagating official messages and the individual style of the inscriptions both suggest Persian and Hellenistic influence and India under the Mauryas was certainly more continually in touch with the civilizations to the west than ever before. At Kandahar, Ashoka left instructions in both Greek and Aramaic.

Trade expanded mainly because Achaemenians introduced coinage, which facilitated exchange. India exported spices, black pepper and imported gold and silver coins from Iran. The grape, introduced from Persia with the almond and walnut, was cultivated in the western Himalayas. One of the earliest Indian words for a coin is Karsa (also a small weight), which is of Persian origin.

This phase was very significant due to the cultural interactions. It is a known fact that many constructions in Ashokan period showed the Iranian influence. The chapter discusses at length all these aspects.

Chapter IV : Indo-Iranian Relationship in Parthian Era : (250 B.C. - 226 A.D.): This chapter reviews the developments during the era of Parthian (Ashkanian) (Arsacide) (250 B.C. – 226 A.D.) dynasty in Iran to which belonged the rulers such as Ashk (Arsac) I, Ashk II, Mehrdad I. Parthia (Persian: Ashkâniân) was a civilization developed in the
northeast of modern Iran, but at its height covering all of Iran proper, as well as regions of the modern countries of Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, eastern Turkey, eastern Syria, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Unite Arab Emirates.

Mithradates II was able to reassert some measure of control over the Saka settlers by making the Indo-Parthia into a Parthian subkingdom and turn his attention to consolidating the Parthian empire. It was under Mithradates II that the enduring foundations of Parthian power were laid. He created a period of stability and prosperity based on Portia’s position as the intermediary on the trade routes between the East and West. Direct contact with China was established and treaties to facilitate trade were signed in 115 B.C.

Towards the end of 1st century B.C., a line of kings with Iranian names, usually known as Pahlavas, gained the brief suzerainty of North West India. According to legend, St. Thomas (Christian tradition) brought Christianity to the kingdom of one of these rulers – Gondophares.

The Pahlavas are a people mentioned in ancient Indian texts like the Manu Smriti, various Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. They are referred to in the Mahabharata and the Puranic literature as Pahlavas as well as Pallavas.

Around 20 A.D., Gondophares, one of the Parthian conquerors, declared his independence from the Parthian empire and established the Indo-Parthian Kingdom in the conquered territories. in an area covering today's Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Northern India. The Kingdom's capital was Taxila (Pakistan) and during the last few years of its decline it was centered around Kabul (Afghanistan).

The Parthians of east Iran and Central Asian Iranians translated Sanskrit texts into Chinese. An- Shih-Kao was a Parthian prince who became a Buddhist monk. He came to China in 148 A.D. and translated 95 Sanskrit works on Buddhism into Chinese. 55 of them are still available in Chinese Tripitaka. Another Parthian prince An- Huen translated two Sanskrit works into Chinese in A.D. 181.

This phase, contemporary to Mauryan and post-Mauryan / Kushan periods in India, is culturally very significant. It witnessed the fusion of Hellenic, Iranian and
Buddhist arts. There was also the exchange of religious ideas as indicated by Kanishka’s coins. The chapter analyzes all these aspects.

Chapter V: Indo–Iranian relationship in Sassanid Era (336 A.D to 646 A.D.): This chapter reviews the developments during a very important phase known as Era of Sassanid dynasty. The political, commercial and cultural relationship between India and Iran continued and was strengthened during this phase. The history of Sassanid Empire covered the period from 226A.D. to 646 A.D. But the relationship of Sassanid empire with contemporary India began in the year 336 A.D. and continued upto 646 A.D.

The Sassanian period in Persia coincided with the Gupta period (320-509A.D.) in India. The Sassanian monarchs maintained relations with the Patliputra based Gupta empire. The name of Pulakesin, the ruler of the Deccan, was known in Persia. It was usual to exchange Embassies between Persia and India. Iranian traders acted as commission agents to deliver Indian goods to European ports. One of the murals in Ajanta caves in Maharashtra near Aurangabad depicts a Persian king with men in Sassanian dress.

The political relation of Ardashir I with India can be illustrated from a tale in Shahname of Ferdowsi. This story was based on Ardashir Babakan’s Karnamak, one of the Pahlavi’s books. Ferdousi stated that Ardashir Babakan, the founder of Sassanian dynasty, was born in India. The story followed that Dara (Achaemenids third Darius) was cheated by his officers and finally was killed by Alexander during his invasion to Persia. Then, Sassan escaped to India and stayed there. His successors after four generations were called Sassan. The last Sassan, that is to say, the fifth Sassan was a shepherd and emigrated from India to Fars. He served the king Babak. When the king became aware of his background he married his daughter to him. The result of this marriage was the birth of Ardashir, the founder of Sassanian dynasty.

Although it seems a legend, it represents a long relation between the two nations. It is true that after the decline of Achaemenids, and Alexander’s invasion to Iran, a lot of people along with Persian princes and princesses fled to India. It is worth mentioning that after the decline of Arsacides dynasty a lot of people fled to India too. It seems true that India became the second home of Iranians. During the history whenever the life of Persian people was endangered they took shelter in India and this process still continues.
During the reign of Shahpur (310-379 A.D.) in Persia, Indian physicians were invited to practice medicine along with Greek and Iranian physicians in Jundishpur Hospital in southern Khuzestan province of Iran.

In Kushana and Gandhara art, Parthian and east Iranian elements are visible. Sassanian motifs are abundant in Gupta art. Also Indian peacock, dragons, cocks and spiral creeper adorn Sassanian monuments. The borderland areas of Kabul, Kandhar and Seistan, which were often politically parts of India, were the meeting place of Indians and Iranians. In later Parthian times they were called ‘white India’. Referring to these areas the French scholar, James Darmesteler says, “Hindu civilization prevailed in those parts, which in fact in the two centuries before and after Christ was known as white India”.

In the 1st century B.C., Kanishka, the ruler of northwest India, became a great patron of Buddhist faith. Buddhism began to spread to Central Asia and the Far East. Kanishka patronized the Gandhara school of Buddhist art, which introduced Greek and Persian elements into Buddhist iconography. By the end of 3rd century A.D., Vasudeva, one of Kanishka’s successors was defeated by the Sassanian king Shahpur I and northwest India came under Persian influence.

In North West India, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism came into close contact. The Zoroastrian doctrine of the Saviour (Saosyant) probably influenced the idea of the future Buddha, which later became part of the orthodox belief.

According to Shahname of Ferdousi (11th century A.D.), the 5th century A.D. Sassanian king Vahram [Bahram] Gur requested Indian king Shangol to select 12,000 gypsies - expert Indian musicians – and introduced them into Persia from India. These gypsies are believed to be the ancestors of the Persian gypsies. They propagated Indian music and dancing in Persia and travelled to all parts of the world from there. There are remarkable similarities in the language of European gypsies (Romani) and Indo-Aryan languages. It is also believed that Vahram Gur visited India in 5th century A.D. Persian poet Hakim Nizami Ganjavi has alluded to the Indian wife of king Vahram in his famous work Haft Paikar (seven figures) indicating instances of inter-marriage.

During the reign of Sassanian king Noshirvan (531-576 A.D.), scientists and other scholars were exchanged between Persia and India. During the same period, the game of chess (Chaturang in India) is believed to have been introduced in Persia from India.
(known as Shatranj). Under Noshirwan, Jundishpur was developed as a leading centre of Persian medicine, in which Indian Ayurvedic system was syncretized with the Greek system propagated there by the Nestorian Christians. Burzuya, the physician to Noshirwan, was sent to India to bring back works on medicine and searched for elixir of life. Burzuya on his return brought stories of Panchatantra with him. The Jundishpur School of medicine continued its active existence and after the Arab conquest of Persia, exerted a great deal of influence on the development of Arabian medicine.

Panchatantra, the collection of Indian fables – instructions about conduct of one’s affairs, was translated from Sanskrit to Pehalvi by Burzoy-e-Tabib who called it Kalila va Demna. In the 6th century, sandalwood, magenta, shells, corals, pearls, gold and silver were traded. Several Indian translators are believed to have been present in the Sassanian royal courts. Bam, in south-east Iran, was a major commercial and trading town on the famous Spice Road, a major tributary of the Silk Road that connected trade routes from India through Iran to Central Asia and China.

After the suppression of Sassanian dynasty that is to say the end of the government of Yazdgerd III the last king of this dynasty, the formal religion which was Zoroastrian was replaced with Islam. Some Zoroastrians immigrated to India after the domination of Arabs on Persia were princes and well to do members of high class families.

India is a comprehensive museum of the world historical religions. Because of its vast land and geographical locations, India has been the place for philosophical debates and opinion clashes. Therefore it includes the followers of all religions. National ideology of Indian society and mental approaches and Indian tolerance against foreign elements were based on Ahimsa. This provided a good background for immigration. Furthermore the advancement in sciences and development of scientific centers attracted the scholars from different areas particularly Middle East and Persia. Astrology, medicine, mathematics were among the disciplines which increasingly developed in India.

**Chapter VI: Conclusions:** It gives the summary and research findings. The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. The common cultural and historical root, geographical adjacency and connectional situation, are factors which have facilitated the cultural relations between Iran and India
throughout history.
2. From the third millennium B.C., there was a great civilization in the Indus valley. It had contacts with the contemporaneous civilizations of Iran and Mesopotamia.
3. There was trade between the coast of southern Iran and India through the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Some Indus seals have been excavated at Kish, Susa and Ur in Iran.
4. It is believed that Indians and Iranians belonged to one single family before the beginning of the Indo-Aryan civilisation and lived together with a common language for many centuries in pasturelands of Oxus valley in Central Asia.
5. The name of India (\textit{Hapta Hendu}) (\textit{Sapta Sindhu} - Land of seven rivers) is mentioned in Avesta and there is some description of north India in it. In the Rig Veda there are references to Persia – the Persians who were called ‘Parshavas’ and later ‘Parasikas’, from which the modern word ‘Parsi’ is derived. The Parthians were referred to as ‘Parthavas’.
6. Avesta and Sanskrit have a common basic vocabulary and grammar. There is also much in common between the Vedic religion and Zoroastrianism.
7. The culture and civilization of the Achamenids influenced the Indian subcontinent in the field of literature, architecture and state management.
8. The Behistun rock inscription and the epigraph of Nagsh – I – Rustam of Darius the Great refer to his relations with India.
9. It is believed that after the decline of Achamenids, and Alexander’s invasion on Iran, a lot of people along with Persian princes and princesses fled to India.
10. The Parthian empire was actively involved in cultural and commercial interactions with India. Parthians played a key role in connecting various cultures and civilizations that existed along the Silk Road.
11. The Parthian emperor Mehrdad II signed the first trade agreement with China, which was under the rule of the Huns.
12. The Sassanian territory included an important part of India from the Panjab to Delhi, and near the Malo and Sakastan and Baluchestan, Kabul, and a large area of Koshan up to Bishavar.
13. Sassanian Empire played the role of intermediary between the east and the west. Some documents show that in Sassanian period commercial activities in Persian Gulf
were greater than in any other eras. The discovery of Sassanian coins in China proved that Persia and China had commercial relations in Sassanian era via the Silk Road.

14. In the governing period of Khusro I relations between Persia and India developed greatly. The Sassanians played a pioneering role in propagating and preserving Indian culture, sciences and philosophy by translating a number of Indian works into their languages, Pahlavi and Farsi – e – Dari. This venture began on a large scale with the translation of Panchatantra into Pahlavi by Burzuya (Borzoe) in the 6th century A.D. It was this rendering of Panchatantara which was later translated into a number of world languages. Thus, it introduced Indian culture to a large part of our globe.

15. The Indian culture and civilization influenced the Iranians in the period of Sassanian in the fields of literature, music, dance, medicine, science, philosophy and religion.

16. With regard the great influence of Buddhism in east of Persia, Buddhist religion dominated the Zoroastrian religion. Buddhist art influenced Sassanian art in east of Persia. Both arts impressed each other and this led to the perfection of Persian- Buddhist styles.

17. There is an evidence of some degree of syncretism between Buddhism and Manichaeism, an Iranian dualistic religion that was founded in the 3rd century A.D.

18. Indian Christians had embraced the Nestorian heresy, which was then widespread in Persia. The Nestorians were active missionaries and their monks had crossed Central Asia to found Churches in China. These missionaries, following the Persian merchants, were believed to be chiefly responsible for establishing Christian community in south India.

19. Persians played a significant role in developing Christianity especially Nestorian at Sassanian period. Nestorians directed their attention towards India and traders controlled the foreign trade in the east part and India. According to Christian Topography of Cosmos Indicopleustes of 6th century A.D., there were Churches in Keral and Ceylon in the hands of Persian priests, supervised by a Persian bishop at Kalliana (perhaps modern Cochin).

20. In the wake of the spread of Islam in Iran, a great number of Zoroastrians migrated to India. They not only introduced the Iranians and their culture and religion in this land in a
big way, but also distinguished themselves by preserving their religion which was on the decline in Iran.

21. India is a comprehensive museum of the world’s historical religions. Because of its vast land and geographical locations, India has been the place for philosophical debates and opinion clashes. Therefore it includes the followers of all religions. National ideology of Indian society, mental approaches and Indian tolerance against foreign elements were based on Ahimsa (non-violence). This provided a good background for immigration. India became the second home of Iranians. During the history whenever the life of Persian people was endangered, they took shelter in India and this process still continues.

The bibliography is given at the end of the thesis. It gives the details of the primary as well as the secondary sources.

This thesis is an attempt to bring to light a neglected aspect of Indo-Iranian relationship in ancient era. The present research could be considered as a small academic attempt to strengthen and expand the relationship between the two great nations India and Iran.

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