

The Śuṅga dynasty

- According to the *Harshacharita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Pushyamitra, the *senāpati* of the Maurya ruler, Bṛihadratha, assassinated his emperor, when the latter was reviewing his army.
- The *Divyāvadāna* informs us that Pushyamitra was related to the Mauryas, but this is not acceptable in view of the fact that he attained kingship by assassinating the last Maurya ruler.
- In the *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa, Agnimitra, the son of Pushyamitra, is called a scion of the Baimbika family.
- The *Harshacharita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, which does not refer to Pushyamitra as a Śuṅga, uses the dynastic appellation for the last ruler of his line, namely Devabhūmi.
- However, in the purāṇas, Pushyamitra is called a Śuṅga.
- H C Raychaudhuri expresses the possibility that the purāṇas might have, inadvertently, placed the Baimbika and Śuṅga rulers under the common dynastic name of Śuṅga.

- Pushyamitra, and most of his successors, have *mitra*-ending names.
- On this basis, H P Sastri suggested that the Śuṅgas might have been of Iranian origin, as the worship of the sun god, Mithra, was quite popular in Iran.
- But a number of Indian rulers, of indigenous origin, with *mitra*-ending names are known, and even H P Sastri later gave up this view.
- The Śuṅgas are generally regarded as brāhmaṇas of Indian origin. The *Vaiśabrāhmaṇa* mentions a teacher named Śauṅgāyani, and the *Bṛihadāranyakopanishad* refers to another teacher named Śauṅgīputra.
- In the *Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra*, too, Śuṅgas are referred to as *āchāryas*.
- Since, in the vedic period, teaching as a profession was generally associated with the brāhmaṇa *varṇa*, there is a great likelihood of the Śuṅgas being brāhmaṇas.
- This is supported by Pāṇini, who refers to the Śuṅgas as brāhmaṇas, of the Bhāradvāja *gotra*.
- Curiously, according to the *Harivaiśa*, the brāhmaṇa commander, who restored the *aśvamedha* in the Kaliyuga, that is Pushyamitra according to K P Jayaswal, belonged to the Kāśyapa *gotra*.
- The *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra* refers the Baimbikas to the Kāśyapa *gotra*, and Baimbika is the name of the family of Agnimitra in the *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa.

- From the *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa, it appears that during the reign of Bṛihadratha, there were two rival factions in the Maurya court, with his commander, Pushyamitra, leading one faction, and a minister leading the other.
- The minister seems to have used his influence to get Yajñasena, the husband of his sister, the governor of Vidarbha.
- When Pushyamitra occupied the throne, and imprisoned the minister, Yajñasena declared himself independent in Vidarbha.
- Agnimitra, the son of Pushyamitra and his viceroy at Vidiśā, was on friendly terms with Mādhasena, the cousin of Yajñasena.
- Once, when Mādhasena was going to meet his friend at Vidiśā, he was arrested by the governor of the frontier of the kingdom of Yajñasena.
- When the ruler of Vidarbha was asked by Agnimitra to set Mādhasena free, Yajñasena demanded the release of his brother-in-law in return.

- Agnimitra retaliated by ordering Vīrasena, the brother of his wife and in charge of a fortress situated on the southern borders of Vidiśā, to invade Vidarbha.
- The recently established kingdom was, according to Kālidāsa, weak like a newly planted sapling, and Yajñasena was defeated.
- Vidarbha was divided between Yajñasena and Mādhavasena, with the river Varadā (modern Wardha) acting as the dividing line.
- Thus, the Vidarbha region came within the sphere of political influence of the Śuṅgas.

- Pushyamitra also had conflicts with the Indo-Greeks.
- Patañjali, a senior contemporary of Pushyamitra, in his *Mahābhāshya*, states that the Yavanas had besieged Sāketa (Ayodhyā) and Mādhyamikā (modern Nagari, near Chittor in Rajasthan).
- It seems that, moving from the northwest, the Indo-Greeks had crossed Rajasthan and the intervening territories, and reached as far east as Ayodhyā.
- But Pushyamitra seems to have succeeded in repulsing their invasion.
- The Indo-Greeks seem to have been led by Demetrios.

- Some conflict of Pushyamitra with the Indo-Greeks is also referred to in the *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa.
- Pushyamitra performed the *aśvamedha*, during which Vasumitra, the son of Agnimitra, was made responsible for the safety of the sacrificial horse.
- This horse was caught by the Indo-Greeks, whom Vasumitra defeated on the banks of the river Sindhu (Indus ?).
- This conflict between the Śuṅgas and the Indo-Greeks seems to have taken place quite late in the reign of Pushyamitra, when his grandson was old enough to be entrusted with the task of safeguarding the sacrificial horse, and was different from the one referred to by Patañjali, the senior contemporary of Pushyamitra.
- This Indo-Greek invasion might have been led by Menander, as king.

- The statement of Patañjali, ‘Here we perform the sacrifices for Pushyamitra’, has been taken to refer to the performance of the *aśvamedha* by the Śuṅga ruler.
- But the *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa make a clear reference to the *aśvamedha* of Pushyamitra.
- However, the Ayodhyā stone inscription of Dhana[deva] describes Pushyamitra as *dviraśvamedhayājīn*, ‘performer of two horse sacrifices’.
- It seems that the first *aśvamedha* was performed by Pushyamitra in the initial years of his reign, and it is the one mentioned by his senior contemporary, Patañjali.
- The second horse sacrifice was performed by him towards the close of his reign, and it is the one mentioned by Kālidāsa.
- These performances of the sacrifices might have had something to do with his successes against the Indo-Greeks.

- The performance of the *aśvamedha* by Pushyamitra marks the revival of Brahmanism during the rule of the Śuṅgas.
- Buddhist tradition regards Pushyamitra as intolerant of Buddhism.
- According to the *Divyāvadāna*, after three unsuccessful attempts to destroy the famous Kukkuṭārāma *vihāra* at Pāṭaliputra, he destroyed several sacred places of the Buddhists.

- At Śākala, he promised to pay a hundred *dīnāras* to the person who brought to him the head of a monk.
- But, in view of the Buddhist building activities in the Śuṅga period—the reconstruction of the great *stūpa* at Sanchi, the construction of the railing of the *stūpa* at Bharhut, it seems difficult to regard this information of the Buddhist sources as reliable.
- Pushyamitra ruled for 36 years, and was succeeded by his son, Agnimitra, who had earlier served him as his viceroy at Vidiśā.
- According to the purāṇas, he ruled for eight years.
- The next Śuṅga ruler in the puranic lists is Vasujyeshṭha or Sujyeshṭha (called simply Jyeshṭha, in a manuscript of the *Matsyapurāṇa*), who is said to have ruled for seven years.
- Attempts have been made to identify the Śuṅga ruler, Agnimitra, with the homonym, known from some Pañchāla coins, and the Śuṅga ruler, Jyeshṭhamitra, with the homonym, known from the coins of Kauśāmbī, but without much success.
- The fourth Śuṅga ruler was Vasumitra, the son of Agnimitra.
- The *Harshacharita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa portrays him as a prince, given to the pleasures of the senses.
- He was killed by one Mūladeva/Mitradeva, while he was enjoying some theatrical performance.
- The next three rulers in the puranic lists are Āndhraka, Pulindaka, and Ghosha, who ruled for a total period of eight years.
- Nothing much is known about these three rulers, and there is even some doubt regarding their Śuṅga affiliations.
- According to the purāṇas, the Śuṅgas ruled for a total period of 112 years.
- If the eight years of the rule of Āndhraka, Pulindaka, and Ghosha is counted together with the reign periods of the other seven Śuṅga rulers, the total comes to 120 years.
- It seems more likely that Āndhraka, Pulindaka, and Ghosha were not Śuṅga rulers at all.
- The fortunes of the Śuṅga family seem to have been restored by Vajramitra, who is known to have reigned, for nine years, after Ghosha.
- The next in line was Bhāgavata, who seems to be identical with Bhāgabhadra of the Besnagar *garuḍa* pillar inscription.
- The last Śuṅga king was Devabhūti or Devabhūmi, who ruled for 10 years.
- According to the purāṇas, and the *Harshacharita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, he was a worthless prince, and was dethroned by one of his ministers, Vasudeva.
- Thus, the reign of the main branch of the Śuṅga dynasty came to an end around 75 BC.
- They seem to have maintained their hold, perhaps in the Vidiśā region, for almost half a century, till their power was ultimately destroyed by Simuka.

The Kāṇva dynasty

- Vasudeva, the minister of Devabhūti or Devabhūmi, who got his master assassinated by a slave girl, founded a new dynasty, called the Kāṇva or Kāṇvāyana dynasty.
- In the *Rigveda*, Kāṇvāyanas are described as the descendants of the sage, Kaṇva.
- This would show that the Kāṇvas were brāhmaṇas.
- Vasudeva ruled for nine years, as per the evidence of the purāṇas.
- His rule seems to have been confined to Magadha and its surrounding areas, as the Vidiśā region was under the later Śuṅgas, the Indo-Greeks were masters of northwestern India, and the western Ganga valley was being ruled by the so-called Mitra rulers.

- The purāṇas mention only three successors of Vasudeva, namely Bhūmimitra, Nārāyaṇa, and Suśarman, who ruled in that order.
- The same texts also inform us that Bhūmimitra ruled for a period of 14 years, Nārāyaṇa for 12 years, and Suśarman, for 10 years.
- Attempts have been made to identify Bhūmimitra with the homonym of the coins of Pañchāla, though without much success.
- The Kāṇvas enjoyed sovereignty for a total period of 45 years, before their rule was brought to an end by Simuka, who established the rule of the Sātavāhana dynasty.

- The purāṇas state that Simuka not only overthrew the Kāṇvas, but also destroyed the remnants of the power of the Śuṅgas.
- The destruction of the remnants of the Śuṅga power by Simuka, mentioned in the purāṇas, seems to refer to his vanquishing the later Śuṅgas of Vidiśā.