

# UNIT 149 – UPSC - SUNGAS

The Sunga rule, extending a little over a century, is in interlude in the history of India. There is nothing extraordinary about the political events associated with the Sungas. The significance of their history, on the other hand, primarily consists in the place they occupy in the social and cultural history of India.

The founder of the dynasty, Pushyamitra Sunga, overthrew the Mauryas; either in 187 B.C. or 184 B.C. After him there were nine other rulers. Among them, Agnimitra, Vasumitra, Bhagvata and Devabhumi were the prominent ones. The names of the first two were associated with some events in political history, whereas the latter two were known for their long rule, they being 32 and 10 years respectively.

There is some controversy about the identity of Pushyamitra Sunga. It was stated in a Sutra that he belonged to a family of teachers. Patanjali claims that he was a brahmin of the Bhardwaja gotra. Iyavardana stated that the Sungas were related to the Mauryas. A Malavikagnimitram refers to them as brahmins belonging to Kashyap gotra.

After the overthrow of Brihadrata, Pushyamitra Sunga waged a few wars to consolidate his position. Evidence shows that Pushyamitra Sunga defeated the Yavanas. This is confirmed by Patanjali's Mahabhashya. And the claim made in the Hathigumpha inscription that Kharavela of Kalinga defeated Pushyamitra Sunga cannot be sustained because Kharavela ruled in the second half of the first century B.C. Later, Vasumitra, the grandson of Pushyamitra Sunga, defeated the Yavanas. This is confirmed by the Malavikagnimitram and Gargi Samhita. Both Agnimitra and Veerasena fought against Vidarbha rule of the Sungas ended c. 75 B.C.

Some scholars regard that the establishment of Sunga dynasty was symbolic of the brahminical reaction to the Mauryan bias towards Buddhism. Pushyamitra Sunga performed the vedic sacrifices of asvamedha, and the others like Agnistoma, Rajasuya and Vajpeya. But some facts of his reign clearly show that he did not persecute Buddhists. The claim of Divyavardana, that Pushyamitra Sunga destroyed 84,000 Buddhist stupas and slaughtered Brahmins, has no corroborative evidence. Interestingly, the sculptured stone gateway and the massive stone railing around Sanchi stupa were executed during the time of Pushyamitra Sunga. Also the Bharhut stupa and the sculpture relating to Jataka stories around it came into existence during the same period. One of the donors of Bharhut stupa was Champadevi wife of the Idisha King, who was a worshipper of Vishnu. This fact bears testimony to the high degree of tolerance prevailing during the period. (And some minor works of Sunga art are to be found at Mathura, Kausambi and Sarnath).

It is at all there was anything like persecution of Buddhists during the days of Pushyamitra Sunga, it could be in the context of Menander's invasion. Maybe, the Buddhists of India welcomed the invasion of Menander and this might have resulted

in Pushyamitra Sunga wrath falling on the Buddhists. Or, may be withdrawal of royal patronage with the coming of the Sungas apparently enraged the Buddhists and thus the Buddhists writers present an exaggerated account of their troubles.

The importance of the Sungas, therefore, was primarily in the context of cultural and social development. In the social field, the emergence of Hinduism had a wide impact. The Sungas attempted to revive the caste system with the social supremacy of the brahmins. This is more than evident in the work of Manu (Manusmriti) wherein he reassures the position of the brahmins in the fourfold society. Even then, the most significant development of the Sunga era was marked by various adjustment and adaptations leading to the emergence of mixed castes and the assimilation of the foreigners in India society. Thus we notice that Brahminism gradually transformed itself in a direction towards Hinduism.

In the field of literature Sanskrit gradually gained ascendancy and became the language of the court. Patanjali was patronized by Pushyamitra Sunga and he was the second great grammarian of Sanskrit. Patanjali refers to a Sanskrit poet, Varauchi, who wrote in the Kavya style and which was later perfected by Kalidasa. Some Buddhist works of this age were written in Sanskrit.

In the field of art, there was immediate reaction against the Buddhist era of the Mauryas. Nevertheless, there were certain differences. The Sunga art reflects more of the mind, culture, tradition and ideology than what the Mauryan art did. During the Sunga period, stone replaced wood in the railings and the gateways of the Buddhist stupas as noticed at Bharhut and Sanchi. Bharhut stupa is replete with sculptures - apart from floral designs, animal, figures, Yakshas and human figures. Even the stone railing around the Sanchi Stupa is in rich relief work. This age definitely witnessed the increasing use of symbols and human figures in architecture. Besides, the Sungas art is a manifestation of popular artistic genius - the artistic activity was because of the initiative of individuals, corporation or villages. A part of the gateway of Sanchi was constructed by the artisans of Vidisha. Even temple building began in this period. A Vishnu temple was built near Vidisha. There was an increase in the construction of rock-cut temple as noticed in the Chaitya Hall. In the temples and household worship we find the idols of Shiva and Vishnu.

All told the importance of the Sunga dynasty lies in the restoration of Real politik while abandoning the Asokan approach. In the cultural field the beginnings as well as accomplishments in sculpture and architecture are of tremendous significance. In the field of religion too they not only revived the earlier tradition but also gave an impetus to new approaches combative towards the heterodox sects the cult of Katakana the god of war the resurgence of Bhagvata cult and the supremacy of Vasudeva in the Hindu pantheon.