

Study Material for Semester- II

Paper – Mauryan and Gupta Empire (Core-3)

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Shunga rule after the downfall of Mauryans

After the death of Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire steadily disintegrated as his successors were not able to keep the vast empire from fracturing away. Independent kingdoms arose out of the provinces. Foreign invasions were occurring in the northwest. Kalinga declared its independence. In the South, the Satavahanas rose to power and in the Gangetic plains, Sunga or Shunga dynasty replaced the Mauryas. The Shunga dynasty (185 – 71 BC) was a Brahmin dynasty, established in 185 BCE, about 50 years after Ashoka's death, when the emperor Brihadratha Maurya, the last ruler of the Maurya Empire, was assassinated by his Senānī or commander-in-chief, Pushyamitra Shunga. Pushyamitra Sunga was the founder of Shunga dynasty.

Pushyamitra Shunga

Pushyamitra was not a great king like any one of the first three Maurya emperors. Compared with them, he appears as an insignificant ruler. His kingdom was too small in size. His capital Pataliputra was also not a strong seat of government as in the days of Chandragupta, Bindusara and Asoka.

In spite of all such weaknesses, Pushyamitra deserves some credit that in an age of decay and dissolution, he could at least keep a larger part of the Gangetic valley in unity under his rule. In the wider context of historical continuity, thus, the Sunga rule is noteworthy for maintaining law and order in the Magadhan kingdom, even though for a brief period.

Some accounts about the rule of Pushyamitra Sunga are available from the Buddhist literature. Divyabadana describes him as a king who was hostile towards the religion of the Buddha. It is said that he attempted to destroy the famous Buddhist monastery at Kukkutarama built by Emperor Asoka near the capital Pataliputra.

But he failed to do so, because some supernatural forces intervened to protect that sacred place. It is also mentioned that the King wanted to take the life of some Buddhist monks of Eastern Punjab, but here, too, he could not succeed. Taranatha, the renowned Tibetan Author, also described about some of the activities of Pushyamitra against Buddhism.

Some historians presume that the Buddhists were perhaps unhappy with the Sunga king for his pro-Brahmanic policies, and therefore painted him in a dark colour. On the other hand, evidences are there to show that Pushyamitra showed equal respect to the sentiments of both the Brahmins and the Buddhists.

For example, it is known from a small inscription found at Ayodhya that the King performed an ASHWAMEDHA YAJNA or the ceremony of Horse-Sacrifice in accordance with the ancient monarchical tradition. This would have certainly pleased the Brahmins who saw no such religious rites during Asoka's days when the Buddhists opposed the practice of animal-sacrifice.

At the same time, however, when that Brahmin King Pushyamirra ruled, the Buddhists could construct huge Buddhist Stupas at places like Sanchi and Barhut. Evidences are also available to show that during the Sunga rule, the people made big donations to Buddhist monasteries without any fear. It can be said that though the Sungas ruled their kingdom as Brahmins, they allowed the Buddhists to freely carry on their religious activities in the country. That speaks of the spirit of tolerance which prevailed in India in ancient times in matters of religion.

Political Achievements:

The former glory of Magadha was no longer there when Pushyamitra Sunga occupied the throne of Pataliputra. The size of the kingdom stood much reduced. Even that reduced territory was not secured. Exactly at the time when Pushyamitra killed the last Maurya Emperor, the territory of Vidarbha proclaimed independence and separated itself from the Magadhan territory. The new king, therefore, declared war against Vidarbha. At a much later time, the great poet Kalidasa of the Gupta Age described in his historical drama 'Malavika- Agnimitram' about the heroic deeds of Prince Agnimitra, son of Pushyamitra Sunga, and of his victory over Vidarbha.

There was a historical controversy over an important issue in connection with the rule of Pushyamitra. In the famous Hatigumpha Inscription of Emperor Kharavela of Kalinga it is mentioned that Kharavela invaded Pataliputra and defeated the ruling King of Magadha named Brihaspati Mitra. At first, some historians identified this Brihaspati Mitra with Pushyamitra Sunga.

But further researches led to the conclusion that the aforesaid identification was not correct. It was established that Emperor Kharavela belonged to the First Century B.C. and was not a contemporary of Pushyamitra. So, when he invaded Pataliputra, the ruling King of Magadha was a different person and his name was Brihaspati Mitra whom the Inscription wrote as 'Bahasatimitam'.

In brief, Pushyamitra Sunga maintained his authority over the territory which he inherited from the last Maurya monarch. Even though he was not an aggressive King to extend his Kingdom, yet he ruled over a large portion of the Gangetic valley and Northern India.

Foreign Invasions:

The time of Pushyamitra saw some foreign invasions which endangered northern India. These invaders were usually termed in Indian literature as the Yavanas'. But, it is ascertained from historical evidences that they were, in fact, the Bactrian Greeks. From Patanjali's writings it is understood that these foreigners from the North-West penetrated into the Gangetic Valley and advanced as far as Ayodhya. In the writings of Kalidasa also are seen references to battles between the invading Yavanas and the Sunga armies.

It is not clear who was the leader or king of the foreign invaders during the Sunga period. While some historians tried to identify that invader as King Demetrius, some others think of him as Menandar. Whosoever might have been the king of the invading forces, he was not able to conquer the Sunga territory. Evidences suggest that a grandson of King Pushyamitra led the royal army against the enemies, defeated the Indo-Greek forces, and drove them out from the Sunga Kingdom.

Death of Pushyamitra:

For achieving victory over Vidarbha and for his successes in driving out the foreign invaders, Pushyamitra demonstrated his glory as a powerful king by performing two Horse-Sacrifice ceremonies. According to ancient Brahmanical traditions, it was only 'a victorious king who was entitled to the privilege of performing the Ashwamedha Yajna, and not the kings of ordinary stature. In other words, Pushyamitra might not have been a great king, but yet, he was not too weak as a ruler.

The Puranas mention that Pushyamitra ruled in Pataliputra for 36 years. According to historical calculations, his death took place in 149 B.C., after which his son Agnimitra succeeded to the throne.

Agnimitra Sunga:

The founder of the Sunga Dynasty Pushyamitra was after all a regicide. He might have saved the dying kingdom of Magadha for some time, but his kingship suffered from

criticisms. He was described as a pro-Brahmanic and anti-Buddhist king by some critics. His son and successor Agnimitra, however, came to the throne as a legitimate king. Furthermore, he proved himself as an able and benevolent ruler.

When Agnimitra was the Crown Prince, he showed his administrative capability as the governor of the Vidisha region. When Magadha had to fight against Vidarbha, it was Agnimitra who led the Sunga army as its supreme commander against the enemies. By virtue of his courage and heroism, he won the battles. It was for him that Vidarbha became a part of the Sunga Kingdom.

His heroic deeds seem to have made him a legendary figure, so much so that the celebrated poet of the Gupta golden Age, Kalidasa, wrote his famous historical drama 'Malavika-Agnimitram', depicting therein Prince Agnimitra as the hero of the drama.

Some coins of Agnimitra's reign have come to light. But they do not provide any indication about his personality or rule, unlike the Gupta coins of the later times. It is rather tragic that this King ruled only for eight years, as is ascertained from some historical evidences.

Fall of the Sungas:

Darkness descended on the reigns of the successors of Agnimitra Sunga. It is presumed that his son Vasumitra came to the throne after the death of his father. About this king, only this much is known that as a grandson of Pushyamitra, while a very young prince, he led the Sunga armies against the foreign Yavana invaders and defeated them in battles.

Nothing is known about the successors of Vasumitra. But one fact is certain that there was a King named Brihaspati Mitra who ruled over Magadha when Kharavela led his armies to invade the north. According to the Puranic sources, the Sunga rule in Pataliputra lasted for a period of 112 years. The last king of that Dynasty Devabhuti was driven out from the throne by his minister Basudeva who established a new ruling dynasty known as the Kanva Dynasty.