

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

THE SUNGAS

185–73 BCE | Brahmanical Revival • Patanjali • Bharhut • Post-Mauryan Magadha

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 14 (14 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Rise of the Sungas

Pushyamitra Sunga (185–149 BCE), a Brahmin general (Senapati) of the last Mauryan king Brihadratha, assassinated his sovereign during a military parade and established the Sunga dynasty. This was a Brahmanical reaction to the perceived Buddhist dominance under Ashoka and his successors. The Sungas ruled from Pataliputra and later Vidisha (Besnagar, MP) for ~112 years until overthrown by the Kanvas (73 BCE).

- **Pushyamitra Sunga:** Performed 2 Ashvamedha yajnas (reviving Vedic ritual after Mauryan-Buddhist period). Fought Greek invasions (Demetrius/Menander campaigns). Patron of Brahmanical learning. Debated whether he persecuted Buddhists — some texts claim he destroyed stupas; others (like Bharhut's flourishing) suggest co-existence continued.
- **Agnimitra:** Pushyamitra's son. Governor of Vidisha. Subject of Kalidasa's play *Malavikagnimitram* (earliest known Kalidasa work). Fought the Vidarbha kingdom.
- **Vasudeva:** Last Sunga king. Overthrown by his minister Vasudeva Kanva, founding the Kanva dynasty (73–28 BCE). Kanvas were also Brahmanical but short-lived.

1.2 Sunga Contributions

- **Brahmanical Revival:** Ashvamedha yajnas. Sanskrit replacing Prakrit in court usage (beginning of Sanskrit's dominance). Manusmriti's early compilation attributed to this period. Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* (commentary on Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*) was written under Pushyamitra's patronage. Caste system strengthened.
- **Art & Architecture:** Despite Brahmanical orientation, Buddhist art FLOURISHED: Bharhut Stupa (MP) expanded with elaborate sculptural railings (Jataka tales, lotus motifs, yaksha-yakshi). Sanchi Stupa (Stupa 2) embellished. Bodhi Gaya's Mahabodhi temple site developed. This suggests the anti-Buddhist claim is overstated — or that Sunga rule permitted continued Buddhist patronage by merchants and guilds.
- **Literature:** Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* (Sanskrit grammar). Heliiodorus Pillar (Besnagar) — Greek ambassador's Vaishnavite dedication during Sunga period = evidence of cultural exchanges.
- **Terracotta Art:** Sunga period famous for fine terracotta figurines: mother goddesses, animals, toys. Found at sites across the Gangetic plain. Indigenous artistic tradition.

1.3 Sunga Administration

Maintained the Mauryan administrative framework but in a decentralised mode. Local governors (like Agnimitra at Vidisha) had significant autonomy. Land grants to Brahmins (*agrahara*) expanded. Trade

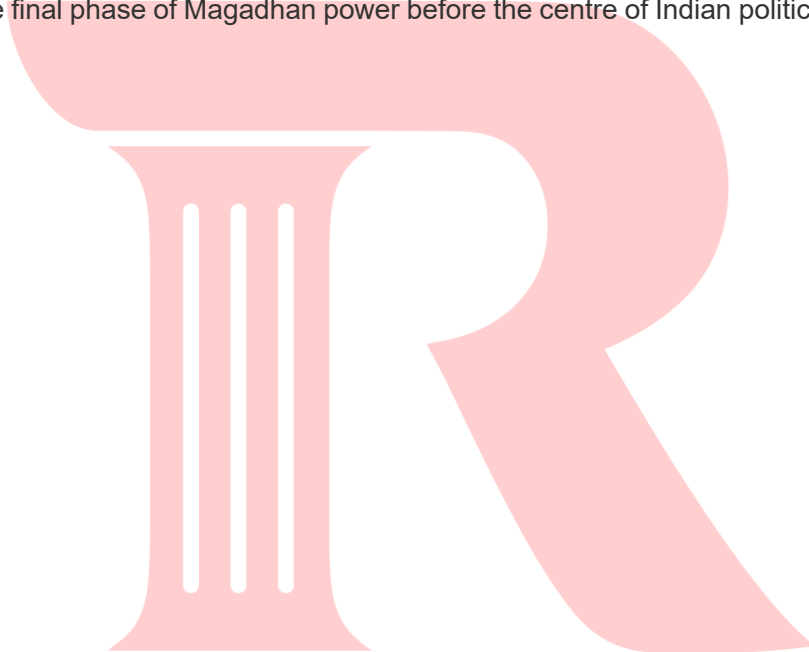
guilds continued to function. Coinage was primarily copper and bronze (Sunga coins are less impressive than Indo-Greek). Defence against Greek incursions from the northwest was a priority.

1.4 Historical Debate — Buddhist Persecution?

Divyavadana (Buddhist text) claims Pushyamitra destroyed 84,000 stupas and killed monks. However, archaeological evidence contradicts this: Bharhut, Sanchi, and Bodh Gaya saw CONSTRUCTION during the Sunga period. Historians like R.S. Sharma suggest that while Pushyamitra was a Brahmanical revivalist, he didn't systematically persecute Buddhists. The Divyavadana's account may be sectarian exaggeration. The truth likely lies in: state patronage shifted from Buddhist to Brahmanical, but Buddhist institutions survived through merchant and guild support.

1.5 Kanva Dynasty (73–28 BCE)

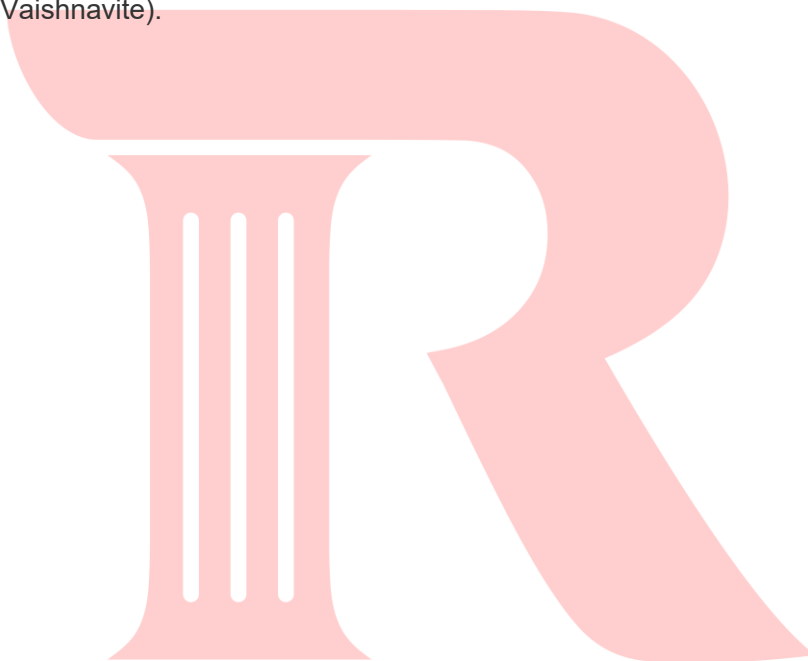
Vasudeva Kanva overthrew the last Sunga. The Kanvas ruled Magadha for ~45 years. 4 rulers: Vasudeva, Bhumimitra, Narayana, Susarman. Brahmanical orientation continued. Overthrown by the Satavahanas (Simuka), who absorbed Magadha into the Deccan-based Satavahana empire. The Kanvas represent the final phase of Magadhan power before the centre of Indian politics shifted to the Deccan.



SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

1. **Rise:** Pushyamitra killed Brihadratha (185 BCE). Brahmin general. Brahmanical reaction to Buddhist dominance. 2 Ashvamedha yajnas. Fought Greeks.
2. **Brahmanical Revival:** Ashvamedha. Sanskrit rising. Manusmriti compilation. Patanjali's Mahabhashya. Caste strengthened. Key historiographical theme.
3. **Art Paradox:** Brahmanical dynasty BUT Buddhist art flourished: Bharhut, Sanchi (Stupa 2), Bodh Gaya. Merchant/guild patronage continued. Anti-Buddhist claim debated.
4. **Persecution Debate:** Divyavadana claims destruction. Archaeology shows construction. R.S. Sharma: state patronage shifted, not systematic persecution. Balanced view needed.
5. **Kanvas:** 73–28 BCE. 4 rulers. Overthrown by Satavahana Simuka. End of Magadhan power. Centre shifts to Deccan.
6. **Literature:** Patanjali (Mahabhashya), Kalidasa's Malavikagnimitram (Agnimitra), Heliodorus Pillar (Greek-Vaishnavite).



SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp.

1. Pushyamitra Sunga: 185–149 BCE. Brahmin general. Assassinated Brihadratha (last Maurya). Founded Sunga dynasty. 2 Ashvamedha yajnas.
2. Capital: Pataliputra → Vidisha (Besnagar, MP). Fought Greek invasions (Demetrius/Menander). Brahmanical revival.
3. Patanjali: Mahabhashya (commentary on Panini's Ashtadhyayi). Sanskrit grammar codification. Under Pushyamitra's patronage.
4. Agnimitra: Pushyamitra's son. Governor of Vidisha. Subject of Kalidasa's Malavikagnimitram (earliest Kalidasa play).
5. Bharhut Stupa: Expanded under Sungas. Sculptural railings: Jataka tales, lotus, yaksha-yakshi. MP. Key Sunga-period art.
6. Sanchi Stupa 2: Embellished under Sungas. Stupas 1 and 3 also continued. Buddhist art flourished DESPITE Brahmanical state.
7. Buddhist persecution debate: Divyavadana claims Pushyamitra destroyed 84,000 stupas. But Bharhut/Sanchi/Bodh Gaya = CONSTRUCTION. Debated.
8. Manusmriti: Early compilation attributed to Sunga period. Codified varna system, social hierarchy, duties. Brahmanical text.
9. Sunga terracotta art: Mother goddesses, animals, toys. Fine quality. Indigenous tradition. Gangetic plain sites.
10. Kanva dynasty: 73–28 BCE. 4 rulers. Vasudeva Kanva overthrew last Sunga. Brahmanical. Overthrown by Satavahana Simuka.
11. Heliodoros Pillar: Greek ambassador at Besnagar (Vidisha). Declared Bhagavata (Vaishnavite). Sunga period. Cultural exchange evidence.
12. Sunga period = transition: Mauryan centralised state → decentralised feudatory model. State patronage Brahmanical but Buddhist private patronage continued.

SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each = paragraph.

1. **The Brahmanical Restoration:** Pushyamitra's usurpation (185 BCE) marks a civilisational turning point: the shift from Mauryan Buddhist patronage to Brahmanical assertion. The Ashvamedha yajnas, Sanskrit's rise as a court language, Patanjali's grammatical codification, and the early compilation of Manusmriti together represent a deliberate revival of Vedic-Brahmanical culture. This was not merely political succession but ideological transformation: from Ashoka's universal Dhamma to Pushyamitra's varna-based social order. The Sunga period laid the groundwork for the Sanskrit 'Golden Age' of the Guptas two centuries later.
2. **The Art Paradox — Buddhist Art Under a Hindu King:** The most intriguing aspect of the Sunga period is that Buddhist art FLOURISHED under a Brahmanical dynasty. Bharhut's elaborate sculptural railings, Sanchi's Stupa 2, and Bodh Gaya's development all date to the Sunga period. This paradox suggests: state patronage shifted to Brahmanical institutions, but Buddhist art was sustained by merchants, guilds, and lay devotees who were economically powerful. It demonstrates that Indian civilisation's plural patronage model — where state and society could support different religious traditions simultaneously — predated the Satavahanas' dual patronage by a century.
3. **Magadha's Decline — From Centre to Periphery:** The Sunga-Kanva period marks the end of Magadha's 500-year political centrality (from Bimbisara to the last Kanva). After the Kanvas were overthrown by the Satavahanas (28 BCE), the centre of Indian political power shifted to the Deccan (Satavahanas) and NW India (Indo-Greeks, Kushans). Magadha would not regain political importance until the Guptas (4th century CE). This shift demonstrates the cyclical nature of Indian political geography — power has moved between north, south, west, and east throughout Indian history.

SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

3 dimensions.

Interlinkages

- **Maurya (Day 6-9) → Sunga:** Pushyamitra's coup ended the Mauryan dynasty. Brahmanical reaction to Ashoka's Buddhist Dhamma. Administrative framework continued but decentralised.
- **Sunga → Kanva → Satavahana (Day 12):** Political succession: Maurya → Sunga → Kanva → Satavahana. Simuka's overthrow of the last Kanva = start of Deccan-centred polity.
- **Sunga → Indo-Greeks (Day 10):** Sunga weakness in NW India allowed Indo-Greek expansion. Menander's invasion reached Pataliputra. Pushyamitra fought Greeks.

Contemporary Relevance

- **State Patronage & Religion:** Sunga's shift from Buddhist to Brahmanical patronage raises the question: should a secular state patronise any religion? India's Constitution (Art. 27) prohibits using tax revenue for religious promotion — a lesson from pre-modern religious-political entanglement.

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Glance.

▶ Pushyamitra: 185 BCE; killed Brihadratha; 2 Ashvamedha	▶ Brahmanical revival: Sanskrit + Manusmriti + Patanjali
▶ Art paradox: Bharhut/Sanchi/Bodh Gaya = Buddhist, under Hindu king	▶ Persecution debate: Divyavadana vs archaeology
▶ Agnimitra: Kalidasa's Malavikagnimitram; Vidisha	▶ Patanjali: Mahabhashya (Sanskrit grammar)
▶ Kanva: 73–28 BCE; 4 rulers; overthrown by Satavahana Simuka	▶ Terracotta art: Mother goddesses, toys; indigenous
▶ Heliodorus Pillar: Greek = Vaishnavite; Besnagar	▶ Magadha's centrality ends; power shifts to Deccan/NW

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer.

Source	What to Read	Why
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 22: Post-Mauryan (Sungas/Kanvas)	Exam-oriented; debate coverage
Upinder Singh — Ancient & Early Medieval India	Ch. 13: Post-Mauryan polities	Academic depth; art + religion analysis