chapter VII
The Śuṅga period marks an outburst activity in the field of religion. During the Mauryan period, the Brahmanical religion had a setback due to the Buddhism but after the fall of the Mauryas, the Śuṅga rulers emerged as the upholders of the Brahmanism. It was an era of the revival of Brahmanical religion and customs. The atmosphere was pervaded by the smoke of sacrifices. That is why, Manu refers to Áryavarta as Yajñīdesa, country distinguished for its sacrifices. According to him, a Dvijāti is born for the third time by his initiation to the sacrifice and the meaning of the three Vedas is the accomplishment of the Yajña.

India during the time of the Śuṅgas witnessed the revival of Vedic sacrifices. It is a well-known fact that Asoka had discouraged the sacrifices, but they were revived in the Śuṅga period with great enthusiasm. The Mahābhāṣya clearly points out about the performance of two horse sacrifices by Pushyamitra Śuṅga. This is supported by the Ayodhya inscription of Dhanadeva, and the Mālavikāgnimitram of Kālidāsa. The Mahābhāṣya also refers to different types of sacrifices—Agnishtoma, Rājasuva, Vaiṣaṃpeya and the domestic sacrifices—Pañcjayatā and Pākayaṭā.

The Agnishtoma sacrifice is an ancient one mentioned in the Atharvaveda and in the Sāthapatha Brāhmaṇa. It is the model of all soma sacrifices. The Agnishtoma is so called because in this sacrifice, Agni is praised and the last stotra is addressed to Agni. According to Sāthapatha Brāhmaṇa, it is to be performed in Vasanta every year and on the new moon or full moon day. The Agnishtoma sacrifices
are classified into three categories, those finished in one day are called Ekātha, those celebrated for more than one day upto twelve days are called śāhina and those extended for more than twelve days are called sattra. It was the simplest and most common sacrifice which required the four principal priests, and the chanting of twelve stotras. It required the immolation of single goat to the Agni. The sacrificer and his wife have to observe certain rules. They have to subsist on the milk of two cows during the period of sacrifice. Every day the sacrificer should observe silence from the afternoon till the appearance of stars and in the morning before sunrise till the sun goes up. The Āpastamba gives numerous rules about the dakshinā to be distributed among priests. The dakshinā may consist seven, twenty one, sixty, hundred or thousand cattle or an unlimited number. According to Āśvalāyana, a man may give his own daughter in marriage as fee. The performer of an agnishtoma was supposed to be free from rebirth.

Rājasūya sacrifice was a most complex ceremony extending over a very long period. It was the royal consecration ceremony. The ṢatapathaBrāhmaṇa mentions that by performing the Rājasūya one becomes a king and by the Vājapeya, emperor. According to Āpastamba, this ceremony could be performed only by a Kshatriya. Patanjali does not mention the details of this sacrifice which was certainly performed for the śuṅga ruler. According to Āśvalāyana on the first day of the bright half of Phālguna the sacrificer takes dikshā called pavitra. The Abhishechanīya ceremony which
is the central ceremony in Rājasūya, take place exactly a year after the pavitra. At the time of Abhishechanīya the priest brings water of sixteen kinds in seventeen vessels of udumbara wood and sprinkles the king with the holy water. Brāhmaṇa, kshatriya and Vaiśya all sprinkle him with the holy water. This action was probably symbolic of the consent of all people to the anointing. According to Lāṭayana, after Abhishechanīya the king has to keep certain observances called devavrataś for one year. He should not cut his hair and should sleep in the sacrificial fire-shed. At the end of the year the Keśavapaniya Yite was performed in which hair grown for a year were cut off. This finished the Rājasūya. There is a reference in the Mahābhārata that Yudhishṭīra performed the Rājasūya sacrifice.

The Vajapeya sacrifice has been mentioned by Patanjali several times. It was a complicated yite which was undertaken by one who desired overlordship or prosperity. According to the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, this originated with Indra and Brahaspati, who with the aid of Savitri won Prajāpāti. The Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa mentions that it was performed in the autumn. According to Āpastamba it has many special features and one characteristic feature is that the number seventeen is predominant in this sacrifice. There are seventeen strotas and sāstras, seventeen animals sacrificed for Prajāpāti, seventeen objects distributed as fee and it lasted for seventeen days. Another peculiarity was that there were seventeen chariots which run a race. The Āpastamba mentions that after the performance of Vajapeya the sacrificer
should act like a kshatriya. He may study and make gifts but should not teach or accept gifts. The Áśvamedha sacrifice is one of the most ancient sacrifices. The Rigveda mentions that it was in vogue long before. The Áśvamedha is described in the Áśvamedhika parvan of the Mahābhārata. Vyāsa tells Yudhishthira that the Áśvamedha purifies a person of all sins. There is a reference in the Rāmāyana that Rāma with the golden image of sītā, performed the Áśvamedha sacrifice. Pushyamitra śuṅga performed the two horse sacrifices after the victorious wars with yavanas. Patañjali mentions it separately several times. It looks probable, that Patañjali may have been one of the priests in one of the two horse-sacrifices. The Áśvalāyana states that one who desires to secure all objects, to win all wars and to attain all prosperity, may perform Áśvamedha. It was generally performed on the eighth or ninth of the bright half of Phālguna or on the same days of Jyesṭha or Āśādha. In Áśvamedha sacrifice there used to be twenty-one vūpas all being twenty-one aratnis high. The large numbers of animals were tied with all stakes and slaughtered. In the last, the horse to be sacrificed is cut with golden, silver and iron needles by the queens of the king. They take out the fat of the dead horse which was cooked in a pot called Ukha and offered in the fire. It was believed that the sacrificial horse goes to the heaven. These sacrifices could be performed only by kings, nobles and rich people. Manu says that the above sacrifices were sometimes managed by common funds on behalf of corporations, villages and the Gansas. The sixteen priests and the five
fires were required for the large variety of Yajñas. It looks probable that, there used to be four principal priests and others were their assistants. Patanjali mentions four principal priests—Hota²⁸, Udgāta²⁹, Adhvaryu³⁰ and Rtvīj³¹. The Hota, who was to praise the gods and invoke them to the sacrifice, has to be conversant only with the Rgveda. The Udgāta who sings chants, was supposed to be well versed in Sāmaveda saṁhitā. The adhvaryu priest has to perform all the sacrificial acts like building the altar, fetching wood and water and finally bringing the animal to the sacrificial post. While engaged in his duties, he has to mutter the prose prayers and the sacrificial formulae from the Yajurveda. The Rtvīj or the high priest was for supervision who used to be well versed in all the vedas. Patanjali mentions other priests also which are Potē, neshta, prasāstā and pratihartā. They were probably attached to the principal priests as we find in the saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas³². The priests worked on the principle of partnership. Manu says that the duties of the priests were an example of corporate action³³. He further adds, if a priest defaults in the middle of sacrifice, his remuneration will be determined by the quantity of his finished work³⁴.

From early vedic times, five daily observances called mahāyajñas were prescribed for the householders. In fact, these five sacrifices were intended to expiate the sins committed by a grhaṣṭha at the five slaughter houses which are hearth, the grinding stone,
the broom, the pestle and mortar. According to Manu, the five
great sacrifices are, Brahmayajña, the Pitri-Yajña, the Deva-
yajña, the Bhūtayajña and the Nri-yajña. These sacrifices are
performed in terms of the execution of certain social and human
duties. The Brahmayajña is one’s own daily study of the veda. The
offering of water known as tarpana and the food offered at the
śrāddha ceremony to the ancestors forms the pitri-yajña. The Deva-
yajña is performed by offering fuel-sticks into the sacred fire
(homa). The offering of food to the spirits which are supposed to
influence the human being, constitutes the bhūtayajña. The offerings
of food and shelter to the guests and strangers is the Nri-Yajña.
They are of great importance, Patanjali says that every householder
should perform these five sacrifices. The same view is of Manu and
Yājñavalkya. Manu says that a person, who does not perform
these sacrifices lives not, though he breathes. In these five
sacrifices, the chief man is the householder himself, he does not
need the help of a professional priest nor he requires much
money to perform them.

There is also reference to pākayajña in the Mahābhāṣya. According
to grhya sūtras pāka symbolized in the pākayajña. According
to Āśvalāyana grhya sūtra, there were three kinds of pāka-yajñas,
the hutas, parhutas and the feeding of the Brāhmaṇas while
Gautama mention seven kinds of pākayajñas—the ashtaka, parvana, the
funeral oblations, śrāvani, āgraḥāyanī, chaitri and āsvayaji. Manu mention four forms of this domestic sacrifice.
There were several other sacrifices which had been mentioned by Patañjali as well as by Manu. The Darśa and Paunamāśa were performed on the amāvasyā and the paurnamāśī respectively. The Chāturmaavā were the seasonal sacrifices, which were celebrated thrice in a year. They were performed on the full moon days of Phālguna, of Āshādha and of Kārtika. They indicate the advent of three seasons—vasant, varsha and hemanta. There is a reference of Turāvāna sacrifice in the Mahābhāshya.

According to Śaṅkhyāyaṇa Brāhmaṇa, it was performed for the attainment of heaven. Manu says that some performed the paśusoma yāga but the sacrificial animal was made of ghee and flour. There was also a minor sacrifice called navayajña. According to Gobhila, it was an offering of the first fruits of the harvest to Indra and Agni.

The vedic sects believed in many gods and goddesses, whom they gave offerings in sacrifices. The principal gods mentioned in the Mahābhāshya are Agni, Vāyu, Sūrya, Rudra, Prajāpati, Marut and Varuṇa. According to Manu the gods of vedic pantheon are Indra, yama (Antaka) Varuṇa (Appati), Indu (Soma), Marutaḥ, Agni, Visvadeva, prajāpāti and others. Manu does not mention Rudra and Vishnu who later on became very popular. Rudra was the Great-God who had been mentioned by different names in the Atharvaveda such as Bhava, Śarva, Mahādeva, Vishnu who was identified with the all-important sacrifices enjoyed the highest position amongst the devotees of the Bhāgavata cult. The female divinities mentioned by Patañjali are Lakshmi and Suparnī.
In the Śuṅga period, people also worshipped the lower order of divine beings the yakshas and the Nāgas. The Yaksha cult is proved by yaksha and yakshini figures on the blustrade of the Bhojpur stupa. They probably worshipped Nāgas for fear of their destructive powers. Patañjali says that the conception of heaven and hell was known to the people.\(^59\) The naraka-loka was supposed to be a place of utter darkness. The attainment of the company of the gods in the heaven was the aim of the practice of good works in this life. The idea of reward and punishment, after death, for the good and bad deeds of a person in this life, has gained a firm hold in this period. People laid emphasis on charity, which entitled them to a place in heaven.\(^60\) This is the reason that in Śuṅga period people made rich endowments for the charity works.

Image worship was prevalent in the Śuṅga period, but it is extremely doubtful whether images were worshipped in the ancient vedic times. Though, it can not be derived that here and there occur a few passages that suggest images as objects of worship but one can say without much fear of contradiction that the vedic Aryans did not worship the images in the house or in the temples. Probably it is couple of centuries before the christ that the worship of images had become widespread in India. Gautama\(^61\) forbids a man from answering calls of nature in front of images and requires a man to circumambulate a temple (devatāyatana). In Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra\(^62\) it is mentioned that in the centre of capital, shrines of Aparājita, Apratihata and temples of Siva,
Asvins, and Lakshmi should be erected. Patanjali mentions that the Mauryas established or manufactured the images of gods. There are many references of image worship in the Manusmrti. Manu directs the Brahmacharins to worship images and ordains that witnesses be sworn in the presence of the images of gods and Brahmanas. It looks probable that, when Vedic sacrifices became less and less prevalent, there arose the cult of image worship. Manu says that the king himself took care to construct new temples. Damaging of an idol or a temple was a serious offence. The Brahmanas maintained themselves by attending on the images of gods in the temple. But Manu says that a Devalaka Brahmana employed in the worship of gods in the temples should not be invited at a Śrāddha.

The terracotta religious figures played an important part in the life of the common people in the Sunga period. It looks that terracotta art provided the objects for religious worship as well as for secular purposes in this period. The most important religious figurines are of goddess Śrī Pādmā or Gajālakshmi with two elephants holding inverted gārs and standing on upriging stalks of lotuses. The terracotta of this period also illustrate different types of yakshas and Yakshinis.

The Bhāgavata-cult was prevalent in the Sunga period as evidence from many sources. It was not new to this period. There is a reference of Vishnu in the Rgveda. The Vishnu Dharma Sūtra speaks of the worship of Bhāgavata vāsudeva. Pāṇini mentions that vāsudeva is a person who is a votary of vāsudeva.
But Patanjali says that vāsudeva was not a mere kshatriya, he was an incarnation of God. He quotes a quarter of a verse which speaks of kaṁsa being killed by vāsudeva. The life and activities of the supreme Lord were objects of exhibition to the people. The God was worshipped under various names and in various avatāras. In the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyāna it is stated that God comes down to earth often for punishing the wicked, for the protection of the good and the establishment of dharma. The great God Vishṇu has been deemed to have descended to earth ten times to preserve the world and its culture. Patanjali speaks of Ugarsena, Baladeva, Satyabhāmā and Akrūra who were also respected alongwith vāsudeva. He has also referred to the festive gatherings in the temples of Keśava and Rāma.

It is true that in the early vedic period vishṇu was frequently invoked but it is only in the post vedic period that he assumed the supreme place. Therefore, it looks probable that one stream of religious thought emanated from vishṇu, the vedic god, the other from vāsudeva, the historical personality, mingled and merged with Nārāyaṇa which gave rise to the cult of vishṇu-Vāsudeva Bhaktism. Thus the Bhāgavata religion which was propounded by vāsudeva, was the parent of later vaishṇavism, and Vishṇu, the vedic god, was identified with vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa and Krṣṇa.

There are many epigraphic and archaeological sources which tell the prevalence of this cult. The Besnagar pillar inscription mentions the setting up of the Garuḍa column (garuḍadhvaja) of Vāsudeva by Helidorous who was a worshipper of Bhāgavata. Another
Inscription from Besnagar speaks of the erection of the Garudasa column of the excellent temple of the Bhagavataba Gau tamiputra. These two records are vaishnavita in character as Garuda was conceived the vahana of vishnu.

The Ghasundi stone slab inscription found in the Udaipur state is engraved in Brhami characters of the second century B.C. It records the erection of a stone enclosure of worship for Bhagavata sankarshaña and vasudeva within the enclosure of Narayana by Bhagavata Gajayana. Regarding the relation of Sankarshaña with vasudeva, the Nanaghata cave inscription mentions them as descendants of the moon (chanda) alongwith Dhamma (dharma), Indra (Ida) and the four lokapalas—Yama, Kubera, Varuna and Vasava (Vasudeva). Though Vasudeva Krishna alone figures as the founder of the new religious movement but along with him the members of his family also shared the honours of deification. The five vrishni heroes which have been mentioned in an inscription of the first century A.D. at Mora near Mathura, are enumerated in the Vayu purana as Sankarshaña, Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Samba and Aniruddha. All of whom are known to have been deified and worshipped. Now it looks probable that in those days the worship of Sankarshaña and Vasudeva as mentioned in the Ghasundi and Nanaghata inscriptions was more popular. Quoting the Nārāyaṇīya section of the Mahābhārata, Chanda has suggested that these two forms were worshipped by the Pañcharatras or Bhagavatas. Now it is presumed that in those days Saṅkarshaña was popularly
recognized as a divinity equal to vāsudeva in rank as He is mentioned first in Ghasundi inscription. Kauṭilya also mentions this god and speaks of a class of ascetics with shaved head who adored him as their devatā. The association of Vāsudeva with Baladeva and Vrishnis is also noted by Patañjali. It shows that the Vyūhas of Vāsudeva found a place in the divine pantheon in the śuṅga period, Śiva worship appears to be the most ancient worship that is still prevalent. It was also a popular cult during the time of the Śuṅgas. Megasthenes, the Greek envoy at Pātaliputra describes two Indian deities under the names of Dionysus and Herakles generally identified with Śiva and Kṛṣṇa respectively. Patañjali in his Mahābhāṣya refers to a separate cult of Saivas. He has mentioned two classes of Śiva devtees 'Śiva-bhāgavata' and Śiva-Vaiśravaṇa. Śiva-Bhāgavatas were those who carried on iron trident and practised penance for seeking their end but there were ordinary worshippers also who tried to please the Lord through their offerings. Patañjali refers to images of Śiva, skanda and Viśakha who were a source of living to their keepers. Patañjali gives an interesting information that the Mauryas sold these images to raise money. It shows that the image worship had not come into the existence by that period. The worshippers of Śiva had been using icons for religious purposes. One of the earliest Śiva sculpture which is dated second century B.C. is a Śiva-linga in Madras. The five feet high phallic emblem bears upon it a two-armed figure of Śiva. It looks that the worship of human as well as
phallic forms of the god was in practice which was continued with some modifications in subsequent periods. Afterwards it became the general custom to place the sīva-liṅgas only and use them as the principal object of worship, which is prevalent till today.

The Sixth century B.C. was a period of an upheaval of new ideas leading to the rise of new religious sects, Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism reached its climax during the time of Aśoka. But it was not also inactive during the śuṅga period. The image worship of Buddha had not come into existence but the relic worship had acquired an important place in the Buddhist form of worship. The Buddha's presence is indicated by means of various symbols such as foot-prints, the Bodhi tree with Vajrāsana beneath it, a parasol and a stūpa. The parts of the body of the Lord served to create a feeling of personal devotion in the mind of the devotees. The Mahāparinibbāna-sutta enjoins the laity not only to worship at the stūpas with garlands but also to make pilgrimages to the four important places of Buddha's life. In the early Buddhism the emphasis was on the monastic life, but later on, the Buddhist monks changed their angle of vision and devised ways and means for providing a place in the religion for the laity. One of the Aśoka's edicts reveal that he wanted good citizens and not recluses. So the new Bodhisattva ideal was incorporated which implied that any one whether a house holder or recluse was entitled to perform certain meritorious acts in order to attain Buddhahood. The lay devotees offered gifts to the Saṅgha and worshipped the relics
of Buddha. Besides the Buddha, some of his important disciples also claimed the privilege of their relics being enshrined in stupas. This stage probably reached in the Śuṅga period.

The Stūpas, enshrining the relics of Buddha, were the centres of devotion and adoration of the Buddhist in the Śuṅga period. Among the masses the gift of a stūpa was reckoned very meritorious. The great stūpa of Bharhut and Sāñchī were erected during the sovereignty of the Śuṅgas. The gateways and railings of Bharhut and Sāñchī stūpa are enriched with the scenes of Buddha's life and Jātaka scenes.

The Divyāvadana and Taranath are alleged to represent Pushyāmitra as a cruel persecutor of the religion of Sākyamuni. However, the probative value of the Divyāvadāna on which some modern writers place their chief reliance in regard to this matter, is seriously impaired by its own statement that the prime motive which is said to have inclined the king to a vicious policy is personal glory and not religious fanaticism. The fact is that from Aśoka downwards, kings and the civil powers always extended a generous tolerance to all sects. The Mālavikāgnimitra mentions that Pushyāmitra did not even dispense with the services of pro-buddhist ministers and the court of his son Agnimitra was graced by Paṇḍitā-Kausīki. The Mahāvīrāṇa mentions the presence of numerous monasteries with thousands of monks in Bihar, Oudh, Malwa and adjacent provinces in the age of Duṭṭha-gāmaṇi which is partly synchronous with the Śuṅga period. Moreover the Buddhist monuments at Bharhut and Sāñchī were erected during the sovereignty of the Śuṅgas. In an inscription on the railing of the Sāñchī stūpa,
there is a reference to अचार्यकुला meaning a Buddhist school. Though it cannot be said that there was no religious persecution whatever at any time in India, but it is difficult to say that the Sungas were the persecutors of Buddhism.

Buddhism was originally a moral code rather than a metaphysical or religious system. But a philosophical background gradually became necessary not only for its propagation but for its very existence. Buddhism had to adopt a policy of give and take to compete with the acute Brahmanical thinkers of the day. The first sign of this development and adaptation appears in the schism what has been called Hinayāna and Mahāyāna.

The Hinayāna 'Little vehicle' was called because it teaches the attainment of salvation for oneself alone. Its spiritual ideal is embodied in the quoter figure of the arhat, a person in whom all craving is extinct and who will no more be reborn. They insisted upon the necessity of the monastic life. The most widespread and influential Hinayana school in earlier times was that of Sarvāstivādins who were greatly devoted to the study and propagation of the Abhidharma. They choose Prākrit as the language of its exposition.

The Mahāyāna "Great Vehicle" is called because it teaches the salvation of all. Probably Mahāyāna Buddhism originated about the first century B.C. in the Andhra region where the Mahāsaṃghikas had their centre. The main deviation made by this sect was to deify Buddha. It maintained that every individual should aspire for
Buddhahood and not arhathood. They introduced the ideal of Bodhisattva and the six pāramitās. The Bharhut and sāñchī sculptures testify to the popularity of the Jātakas and Avadānas, the main theme of which is the fulfilment of pāramitā. It must, therefore, be some time in the third or second century B.C. that the doctrine of pāramitā was evolved, which shows that in the Śuṅga period Mahāyānism was prevalent. It would appear from the account of Kamashka's council as given by Paramārtha and Jñānavātha that Mahāyānism was already a living force. It became a recognised form of Buddhism at the time of Kanishka and blossomed into its full glory under the care of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

Jainism, the twin sister of Buddhism, was also a living faith in the Śuṅga period. Mathurā appears to be an important centre of jainism during this period. We have here the ruins of a Jain shrine dating back to the pre-Christian era. There are a large number of inscriptions engraved on the images of the Jinas, votive-tablets and arches dating from the first two centuries of the pre-Christian era. One of the inscriptions which has been assigned by Bühler to the middle of the second century B.C., records dedication for an ornamental arch for the temple. It enjoyed the royal patronage. Khārvela, the cheti king of Orissa showed a great inclination towards Jainism as it is clear from the inscription of his chief queen dedicating a cave for the use of Jain monks.

During the reign of Khārvela numerous caves on the Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills were excavated for Jains residing there. The Hāthigumpha inscription also records dedication for Jainism.
Though the Jains denied the existence of a supreme being, there was a whole galaxy of deified men whom they worshipped. The custom of image-worship among the Jains may be traced back to the Maurya-Śuṅga period. One of the earliest stone images of Jains discovered in India is the torso of a nude figure which probably belong to the Maurya or early Sunga period. Epigraphic evidences also prove that the practice of image worship was prevalent among the Jains. There is a reference in the Ṣaṁghasūparā inscription to the removal of Jina image from Kaliṅga to Pāṭaliputra by the Magadhā king Nanda and its recovery by the Chedi king Khāravela who invaded Magadha in the first century B.C. It shows that the Jains worshipped the images. Jainism still a living faith in some parts of India. The religious instincts inculcated by Jainsim have left an abiding impression on many aspects of hindu life. The great aspects of Mahatāma Gandhi's life such as to manage with the minimum necessities of life, to bear no ill will towards anyone, to take recourse to fasting for self-purification remind us of Jaina monks and their teachings.
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