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 *Vaiśṇavabrāhmaṇa* mentions a teacher named Śauṅgayani, and the *Brihadāraṇyakopanishad* refers to another teacher named Śauṅgiputra.
- 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 varpa, 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 *Harivaṃśa*, the brāhmaṇa commander, who restored the asvamedha 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 Yajñaśena, the husband of his sister, the governor of Vidarbha.
- When Pushyamitra occupied the throne, and imprisoned the minister, Yajñaśena declared himself independent in Vidarbha.
- Agnimitra, the son of Pushyamitra and his viceroy at Vidiśā, was on friendly terms with Mādhavasena, the cousin of Yajñaśena.
- Once, when Mādhavasena was going meet his friend at Vidiśā, he was arrested by the governor of the frontier of the kingdom of Yajñaśena.
- When the ruler of Vidarbha was asked by Agnimitra to set Mādhavasena free, Yajñaśena demanded the release of his brother-in-law in return.
Agnimitra retaliated by ordering Vîrasena, the brother of his wife and in charge of a fortress situated on the southern borders of Vidiœ¹, to invade Vidarbha.
The recently established kingdom was, according to Kâlidâsa, weak like a newly planted sapling, and Yajñasena was defeated.
Vidarbha was divided between Yajñasena and Mâdhavasena, with the river Varadâ (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 Mahâbhâshya, states that the Yavanas had besieged Sâketa (Ayodhyâ) and Mâdhyanikâ (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 Ayodhyâ.
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 Mâlavikâgnimitram of Kâlidâsa.
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 Mâlavikâgnimitram of Kâlidâsa make a clear reference to the aśvamedha of Pushyamitra.
However, the Ayodhyâ stone inscription of Dhana[deva] describes Pushyamitra as dvirâvâmedhayâjin, ‘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 Kâlidâsa.
These performances of the sacrificial 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 Divyâvadâna, after three unsuccessful attempts to destroy the famous Kukkuṭârâma vihâra at Pâtaliputra, he destroyed several sacred places of the Buddhists.
At Śākala, he promised to pay a hundred dināras 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 is 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 puran lists is Vasujyeshṭha or Sujyeshṭha (called simply Jyesṭha, 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.

H 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 of 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 garudā 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, Kāṇva.
- This would show that the Kāṇvas were brāhmaṇas.
- Vasideva ruled for nine years, as per the evidence of the purūṇas.
- His rule seems to have been confined to Magadha and its surrounding areas, as the Vidiṣā 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 purūṇas mention only three successors of Vasudeva, namely Bhūmimitra, Nārāyaṇa, and Suṣārman, who ruled in that order.
- The same texts also inform us that Bhūmimitra ruled for a period of 14 years, Nārāraṇa for 12 years, and Suṣārman, 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 purūṇas 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 purūṇas, seems to refer to his vanquishing the later Śuṅgas of Vidiṣā.