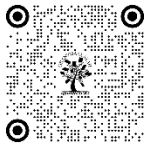


RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE SATAVAHANA EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

The Satavahana Empire, which flourished between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE in the Deccan region of India, was characterized by a diverse and syncretic religious landscape. The empire, with its strategic location as a cultural crossroads, saw the integration of various religious practices, including Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and regional folk traditions. The Satavahana rulers, particularly kings like Gautamiputra Satakarni, were known for their religious tolerance and active patronage of multiple faiths, which played a crucial role in solidifying their political power and maintaining social cohesion. Brahmanism, the precursor to Hinduism, was strongly supported by the Satavahana kings, who performed Vedic rituals and sacrifices to legitimize their rule. Royal patronage extended to the construction of temples, and the worship of deities like Surya (the Sun God) and Siva became prominent. Simultaneously, the Satavahanas were notable patrons of Buddhism, commissioning the construction of stupas, viharas, and chaityas, particularly in centers like Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. These monuments, with their rich carvings and sculptures, not only served religious purposes but also represented the empire's artistic achievements.

The Satavahanas also supported Jainism, reflecting the pluralistic nature of their reign. Jain monks and nuns were provided with the freedom to practice and spread their teachings, contributing to the religious diversity of the empire. Additionally, the royal patronage of religious institutions served to enhance the empire's prestige, with religious rituals and donations often being recorded in inscriptions. The Satavahana Empire's religious practices, blending indigenous traditions with influences from trade and foreign interactions, laid the foundation for the cultural and religious developments of South India, making the empire a significant chapter in the history of Indian religion.

Keywords: Religious, Practices, Satavahana Empire

1. INTRODUCTION

The Satavahana Empire was one of the most prominent dynasties in ancient Indian history, ruling over the Deccan region from approximately the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE. This empire played a crucial role in shaping the political, cultural, and religious landscape of India during its time. Originating in the central Deccan Plateau, the Satavahanas are believed to have been of indigenous Indian origin, with their capital initially at Pratishthana (modern-day Paithan in Maharashtra). Their empire eventually expanded across large parts of present-day Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana. The Satavahanas are known for their efforts to consolidate and strengthen their rule over a vast and diverse region, acting as a bridge between northern and southern India. This period saw the flourishing of trade, art, and religious diversity, which laid the foundation for future cultural developments. The Satavahanas were notable for their religious tolerance, actively supporting Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism. They were instrumental in the patronage of Buddhist monastic centers and helped spread the religion to other regions of India. Politically, the Satavahanas succeeded the Mauryas in the Deccan and helped maintain stability in a region marked by a transition from Mauryan rule. The kings of the Satavahana dynasty, such as Gautamiputra Satakarni and his successors,

are remembered for their military conquests, cultural patronage, and religious contributions. The Satavahana Empire stands as a significant force in early Indian history, influencing the development of both religious traditions and regional politics.

1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the Religious Practices in the Satavahana Empire.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

2.1. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE SATAVAHANA EMPIRE

The Satavahana Empire, which flourished between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE in what is now the Deccan region of India, is one of the most significant and enduring dynasties in early Indian history. The Satavahanas played an essential role in the development of Indian culture, politics, and religion, and their empire became a bridge for the diffusion of cultural and religious practices between the north and the south of India. The religious landscape of the Satavahana Empire was complex and multifaceted, characterized by an eclectic blend of indigenous and foreign religious influences. This religious diversity was an important aspect of their rule, reflecting the empire's interaction with various cultures and its tolerant approach toward different belief systems. One of the central aspects of the religious practices during the Satavahana period was the polytheistic nature of the belief systems followed by both the rulers and their subjects. The Satavahanas themselves were predominantly patrons of Brahmanism (the precursor to Hinduism), but they also showed significant support for Buddhist and Jain communities, which were growing in prominence during this period. This syncretic approach was in part due to the empire's strategic location at the crossroads of major trade routes, which facilitated the exchange of religious ideas from different parts of India and beyond.

Brahmanical religion was an important facet of the Satavahana Empire's religious practices. The Satavahanas are known to have supported and promoted Vedic rituals, including sacrifices, as an important part of their royal legitimacy. The kings often sought the advice of Brahmin priests, and their patronage of Vedic religion is evident from the inscriptions on the Satavahana coins and other epigraphic records. These coins, some of which feature images of deities like Surya, the Sun God, were used not only as currency but also as a means of religious expression. Furthermore, royal inscriptions refer to the performance of Vedic sacrifices and rituals, which were seen as a way to maintain cosmic order and strengthen the king's authority.

In addition to the Vedic religious practices, the Satavahanas were also known for their involvement in the promotion of Buddhist traditions. Buddhism had a significant presence in the Deccan region by the time the Satavahanas rose to power, and the dynasty's rulers were keen patrons of Buddhist institutions. Many of the most prominent Buddhist monuments in India, including stupas and viharas (monastic complexes), were built during the Satavahana period. The most famous example is the stupa at Amaravati, which is one of the finest examples of early Buddhist art. The Satavahana kings not only sponsored the construction of these monumental structures but also supported the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Some of the Satavahana kings even considered themselves as protectors of the Buddhist faith, which was seen as a powerful tool to legitimize their rule. The association of the Satavahanas with Buddhism is also evidenced by the fact that the Buddha's image appears on many Satavahana coins, further emphasizing the rulers' support for the Buddhist cause.

In terms of religious practices, the Satavahana rulers and their subjects were involved in the veneration of a wide range of deities. In addition to the major Vedic gods, such as Indra, Varuna, and Agni, there was a growing devotion to regional deities that had a more localized following. For example, deities like the goddess Prithvi (Earth) and the god Siva began to emerge as important figures in religious life. The rise of Siva worship during the Satavahana period is significant as it laid the foundation for the later widespread popularity of Saivism in southern India. The Satavahanas also participated in the worship of celestial bodies, with the Sun God, Surya, being a key figure in royal symbolism. The king's association with the Sun God reinforced the divine right of kingship, as rulers often portrayed themselves as being divinely ordained and favored by the gods.

The role of religion in the Satavahana Empire extended beyond mere patronage of rituals and deities. Religion was intricately linked to the social and political life of the empire. The religious practices of the Satavahana kings were closely tied to their political ambitions, as religious sponsorship was a way for rulers to enhance their prestige and establish their legitimacy. The royal patronage of religion helped solidify the unity of the empire, as religious institutions played an important role in maintaining social cohesion and providing a sense of shared identity among the people. The Satavahanas were also known to have followed a policy of religious tolerance, supporting not only Brahmanism and Buddhism but also Jainism, which was another significant religious tradition in the region. Jainism, with its emphasis on non-violence and asceticism, had a notable presence in the Deccan and received royal patronage during this period. The Satavahana rulers themselves were not strictly adherent to any one religion, and their support for various religious traditions demonstrates their pragmatic approach to governance.

The Satavahana Empire was also influenced by the rise of new religious movements, particularly those that advocated for social and philosophical reforms. The period saw the emergence of the Bhakti movement, a devotional and personal form of worship that emphasized the relationship between the devotee and the god, independent of priests and ritualistic practices. While the Bhakti movement was not fully developed during the Satavahana period, its early roots can be traced to this era, as the emphasis on personal devotion to gods like Vishnu and Siva gained prominence. The religious diversity of the Satavahana Empire thus laid the groundwork for the later religious developments in India, including the spread of Bhakti and the rise of sectarian religious movements.

The religious landscape of the Satavahana Empire was further shaped by the empire's interaction with foreign cultures. The Satavahanas were actively involved in trade, and their strategic location along the Western Deccan and along the trade routes connecting India with Central Asia, the Mediterranean world, and Southeast Asia facilitated the exchange of religious ideas. This exposure to foreign cultures and religions had a profound impact on the Satavahana rulers and their subjects. The presence of Greek and Roman merchants, who brought with them Hellenistic and Roman religious beliefs, had an influence on the religious practices of the Deccan. While the Satavahanas did not adopt foreign religions wholesale, they were open to incorporating foreign religious elements into their own practices. This is evident in the art and architecture of the Satavahana period, which shows a blending of indigenous Indian styles with influences from Greek and Roman traditions. The Buddhist art of the Satavahana period, in particular, reflects a synthesis of Indian, Greek, and Persian artistic traditions, as seen in the depiction of the Buddha and other figures in a more naturalistic style.

In terms of religious institutions, the Satavahanas were instrumental in supporting the establishment and development of monastic communities. Buddhist monasticism, with its focus on renunciation, meditation, and the pursuit of enlightenment, received significant royal support during the Satavahana period. The construction of stupas, viharas, and chaityas (prayer halls) became an integral part of the religious landscape, and the Satavahanas are credited with the establishment of several prominent Buddhist sites. The support of these monastic institutions was also a means for the Satavahana rulers to enhance their legitimacy, as the sponsorship of religious institutions was often linked to the welfare of the empire. These institutions played a key role in the spread of Buddhism, not only in the Deccan but also in other parts of India, and they facilitated the exchange of religious and philosophical ideas.

The Satavahana period also witnessed the flourishing of religious literature. While the Satavahanas themselves did not produce large volumes of religious texts, the period saw the compilation of important religious works in various traditions. Buddhist texts, including the scriptures of the Theravada and Mahayana schools, were being written and translated during this period, and Jain literature also began to grow. Vedic and Upanishadic texts continued to be important sources of religious and philosophical thought, and the religious life of the Satavahana Empire was deeply intertwined with the intellectual and literary developments of the time.

3. ROLE OF ROYAL PATRONAGE IN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Satavahana rulers, particularly the more prominent kings like Simuka and Gautamiputra Satakarni, played an instrumental role in patronizing religious institutions and practices, which significantly shaped the cultural and religious life of the region. Their support for Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions was not merely symbolic but actively engaged with the establishment of religious institutions and the sponsorship of rituals, temples, and educational centers. This patronage helped consolidate their power and built a sense of legitimacy, as religion was an important tool for royal propaganda and governance.

Kings who patronized Vedic rituals and the performance of yajnas (sacrificial rites) sought to reinforce their image as the divine rulers of their territory. Similarly, the royal support for Buddhism allowed the rulers to gain favor with the monastic community, which was growing in influence during this period. The dedication of religious buildings, such as the Buddhist stupas and viharas at important centers like Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, reflects the Satavahana rulers' deep commitment to promoting these institutions. The encouragement of these institutions not only served religious and cultural purposes but also helped in the establishment of centers of learning and the spread of ideas that transcended local communities. Additionally, the construction of temples for regional deities, such as the development of Siva temples and the association with the Sun God Surya, shows how royal patronage was used to consolidate religious and political power. The kings also played an important role in ensuring that these religious activities were documented, as evidenced by the epigraphic records that outline royal donations and inscriptions describing the king's role in religious affairs.

4. INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

While the Satavahana period was largely patriarchal, the role of women in religious practices and their connection to religious institutions cannot be understated. Women were actively involved in the performance of religious rituals, whether in royal families or among the general populace. The wives of kings, particularly those who were queens or consorts, often took part in religious ceremonies that were seen as essential for the prosperity and well-being of the empire. In addition to royal women, there were women from the broader society who were engaged in religious observances. Female devotees played key roles in the growth of sectarian religious movements, particularly in the cults of regional deities and in practices related to fertility and the Earth. Women were often the recipients of religious benefactions and gifts, and many inscriptions from this period indicate that women were involved in the donation of land, wealth, and resources to religious institutions. Buddhism, which was patronized by the Satavahanas, also had an open space for female practitioners. The presence of nuns (Bhikkhunis) in Buddhist communities is attested in both literary and archaeological records from the Satavahana period. The participation of women in Buddhist monastic life reflects the inclusive nature of Buddhism during this time, where women were allowed to take on the monastic vows and contribute to the preservation and spread of Buddhist teachings.

5. THE CONSTRUCTION AND PATRONAGE OF RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS

The construction of religious monuments was a defining feature of the Satavahana Empire's religious landscape. These monuments were not only architectural wonders but also symbols of the religious identity of the empire. The Satavahanas were instrumental in the construction of stupas, chaityas (prayer halls), and viharas (monastic complexes), which became key sites for religious pilgrimage and learning. The stupa at Amaravati is one of the most famous examples of Satavahana architectural and artistic achievement. It was constructed as a major Buddhist monument and served as a focal point for both the religious and cultural life of the empire. The stupa is adorned with elaborate carvings and sculptures that depict scenes from the life of the Buddha, as well as symbolic representations of Buddhist teachings. This not only served the religious community but also acted as a showcase of the Satavahana Empire's artistic and architectural capabilities. Similarly, other Buddhist monuments, like the viharas and chaityas, were built across the region, providing places for monks to live, study, and meditate. The architectural styles seen in these religious monuments also reflect a blend of local traditions and influences from foreign cultures. As the Satavahanas were involved in trade with the Mediterranean world, there is evidence of Greco-Roman artistic styles being incorporated into the Buddhist art of the region. This cross-cultural interaction resulted in a distinctive religious architecture that appealed to diverse communities and further solidified the religious practices of the empire.

6. RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS AND INFLUENCE THROUGH TRADE

The Satavahana Empire's strategic position along the Deccan Plateau placed it at the crossroads of important trade routes, which facilitated extensive cultural and religious exchanges. The Deccan was an active zone of trade with regions as far as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Roman Empire. This trade not only brought material wealth but also helped in the diffusion of religious ideas. The influence of foreign religions on the religious practices of the Satavahana Empire is evident in the adoption and adaptation of foreign artistic styles, as previously mentioned. Additionally, the presence of Roman merchants and their interactions with the local population brought in not just goods but religious ideas. There is evidence of the introduction of Mithraism (a Persian religious tradition) and other Hellenistic religious elements into

the region, although these influences were largely absorbed into the broader religious environment rather than replacing local practices. The interaction with Southeast Asia and Central Asia also helped in the spread of Buddhism, as the Satavahana Empire became a center for Buddhist teachings. It is believed that the Satavahanas helped facilitate the spread of Buddhism southward, while also interacting with Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia and promoting the movement across the Indian Ocean trade routes. Furthermore, the religious tolerance practiced by the Satavahanas may have been a strategic choice influenced by their interactions with various foreign cultures. This tolerant approach allowed the dynasty to accommodate the growing presence of foreign merchants and their beliefs while maintaining the empire's internal stability.

7. THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHICAL MOVEMENTS

The religious practices during the Satavahana Empire did not remain static; they evolved in response to the changing social and political conditions. The growing prominence of Buddhism, along with Jainism and Brahmanism, encouraged the development of new religious ideas that would later shape the course of Indian religious thought. Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana tradition, began to evolve during the Satavahana period, moving away from the monastic and ascetic ideals of early Buddhism to a more inclusive and devotional form. The emphasis on compassion, the veneration of bodhisattvas (enlightened beings who help others achieve enlightenment), and the development of a more elaborate cosmology marked the early stages of Mahayana Buddhism. The Satavahana kings' patronage of Buddhist art and the construction of elaborate Buddhist structures such as stupas and viharas played a critical role in the propagation of these new ideas. At the same time, Brahmanical religious thought also experienced a shift, as new philosophies and practices, such as those seen in the Upanishads, gained prominence. The concepts of karma, dharma, and moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death) became more refined, influencing the religious practices of the time. The Satavahanas' support for these philosophical movements was crucial in helping these ideas take root across India, setting the stage for the later development of the Hindu religious tradition. Moreover, the early seeds of Bhakti—the devotional worship of personal gods—can be traced back to this period. The growing devotion to regional deities like Siva and Vishnu, particularly in the South, reflects the beginning of a more personal, emotional connection with the divine, which would later become a hallmark of the Bhakti movement.

8. CONCLUSION

The religious practices of the Satavahana Empire were marked by a remarkable diversity and syncretism, reflecting the empire's inclusive approach to governance and its strategic position as a cultural crossroads. The Satavahana rulers, while primarily patrons of Brahmanism, exhibited a deep respect for other religious traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism. This religious pluralism was not only a reflection of the empire's political tolerance but also a means of consolidating power and fostering unity within the empire's diverse populace. The royal patronage of religious institutions, such as temples, stupas, and monastic complexes, helped solidify the Satavahanas' legitimacy and provided a platform for the growth of these religious traditions. The contributions of the Satavahana kings to religious architecture and their involvement in religious rituals were pivotal in shaping the cultural landscape of the Deccan region. Moreover, the empire's interaction with foreign cultures, through trade and diplomatic relations, further enriched its religious environment. The religious practices of the Satavahana Empire had a lasting impact on the spiritual and cultural evolution of South India, laying the groundwork for future religious developments in the region. Their legacy is one of religious tolerance, cultural integration, and a vibrant fusion of indigenous and foreign religious ideas.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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