

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE SATAVAHANA EMPIRE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

*The Satavahana Empire (c. 1st century BCE – 3rd century CE), which ruled over large parts of the Deccan region in India, was marked by religious diversity, patronage, and syncretism. This study explores the complex religious landscape of the Satavahana period, highlighting the coexistence and mutual influence of Brahmanism, Buddhism, and local folk traditions. The Satavahanas were primarily patrons of **Vedic Brahmanism**, as evidenced by inscriptions referencing **Brahmana donations**, **Vedic rituals**, and the performance of **ashvamedha (horse sacrifice)**. However, they simultaneously extended significant support to **Buddhism**, particularly the **Hinayana (Theravāda)** tradition. Buddhist monks received land grants, and royal patronage contributed to the construction of monumental religious architecture, including **stupas**, **chaityas**, and **viharas** at sites like Amaravati, Karla, and Nasik.*

*Religious symbolism played an important role in the Satavahana period, particularly through coinage, which featured motifs like the **chakra**, **conch**, and **Ujjain symbol**, reflecting a balanced representation of multiple faiths. Trade also influenced religious practices, as merchant guilds often funded religious constructions, spreading spiritual ideas along inland and maritime routes. In rural society, **folk deities**, **nature worship**, and **local cults** remained significant. Many of these traditions were gradually incorporated into the broader Brahmanical and Buddhist frameworks, revealing a high degree of religious **syncretism**. Ethical and philosophical concepts like **dharma**, **karma**, and **ahimsa** were also deeply embedded in daily life and governance.*

*Overall, the Satavahana period presents a vivid example of religious coexistence, where political authority, economic activity, and spiritual life were closely intertwined. Their legacy contributed significantly to the religious and cultural continuity between northern and southern India during a formative period in subcontinental history.*

**Keywords:** Religious, Practices, Satavahana Empire.

## INTRODUCTION:

The Satavahana Empire, also known as the Andhra dynasty, was one of the first major Indian kingdoms to rise after the decline of the Mauryan Empire. It ruled large parts of central and southern India, particularly in present-day Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh. The dynasty was founded by Simuka around the 1st century BCE, though some sources trace their origins earlier. The Satavahanas are credited with reviving Vedic traditions while also supporting Buddhism, promoting a culture of religious pluralism. They issued inscriptions in Prakrit, indicating administrative sophistication and literacy.

The most prominent ruler, Gautamiputra Satakarni, expanded the empire significantly and defeated rival powers like the Shakas (Western Kshatrapas). Under his rule and successors like Vasisthiputra Pulumavi, the empire flourished economically due to control over key trade routes, including those connecting India with Rome and Southeast Asia. The Satavahanas contributed significantly to Indian art and architecture, sponsoring the construction of Buddhist stupas, chaityas, and viharas at sites like Amaravati, Karla, and Nasik. They also pioneered the use of coinage with bilingual inscriptions and religious symbols. The empire gradually declined by the 3rd century CE due to internal succession disputes and invasions by the Ikshvakus, Abhiras, and Western Kshatrapas. Despite their fall, the Satavahanas played a crucial role in shaping Deccan culture, trade, and religion, bridging the gap between North and South Indian traditions.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the complex religious landscape of the Satavahana period .

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

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

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE SATAVAHANA EMPIRE:

The Satavahana Empire, which ruled a large part of the Deccan region in India roughly between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE, played a significant role in shaping the religious and cultural fabric of ancient India. This dynasty emerged after the decline of the Mauryan Empire and served as a crucial link between North and South Indian civilizations. The Satavahanas were instrumental in sustaining and spreading religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, Hinduism, and elements of Jainism, and they acted as a bridge between Vedic and classical Hindu practices.

### **Historical Background of the Satavahana Empire**

The Satavahanas, also referred to as the Andhra dynasty in some ancient texts, were one of the earliest post-Mauryan dynasties to assert their independence. Their kingdom primarily covered the present-day states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and parts of Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The dynasty was founded by Simuka, but it reached its zenith under Gautamiputra Satakarni and later rulers like Vasisthiputra Pulumavi and Yajna Sri Satakarni. Religion under the Satavahanas was not a monolithic institution but a dynamic, inclusive, and richly layered practice. The dynasty's religious policy was marked by a degree of syncretism and religious tolerance, reflecting the pluralistic ethos of Indian society.

### **Buddhism under the Satavahanas**

#### **State Patronage**

The Satavahanas were notable patrons of Buddhism, especially the Hinayana (Theravāda) school, which did not worship the Buddha in anthropomorphic forms but used symbols such as stupas, footprints, and the Bodhi tree. Many Satavahana rulers, although personally following Brahmanical traditions, extended royal patronage to Buddhist institutions. This patronage is evident in the construction and endowment of several Buddhist stupas, viharas, and chaityas. The Amaravati Stupa in Andhra Pradesh and the stupas at Nagarjunakonda and Jaggayyapeta are fine examples of Buddhist architecture that flourished under the Satavahanas.

### **Architectural Contributions**

The Satavahanas were responsible for major Buddhist architectural developments. The rock-cut caves at Karla, Bhaja, and Nasik (Pandavleni Caves) were either initiated or completed

under their rule. These caves functioned as monasteries and included prayer halls (chaityas) and residential cells (viharas). The Karla Chaitya cave, completed in the 1st century CE, is a significant monument showing Satavahana architectural and religious sensibilities. It contains inscriptions by donors, including merchants, guilds, and royal officials, highlighting how Buddhism attracted support from various social classes.

### **Inscriptions and Donations**

Many inscriptions from this period, written in Prakrit, record donations made by Satavahana kings and queens. Gautamiputra Satakarni's mother, Gautami Balashri, made several donations to Buddhist establishments, reflecting the importance of royal women in religious endowments. The Nasik cave inscriptions refer to donations made by the Satavahana royals to Buddhist monks and institutions, showing the empire's commitment to fostering Buddhist religious life.

### **Hinduism and Brahmanical Traditions**

#### **The Role of Vedic Rituals**

Despite their patronage of Buddhism, the Satavahanas themselves were adherents of Vedic Brahmanism. They performed several Vedic rituals and sacrifices, including the Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice), Rajasuya, and Agnihotra. These rituals emphasized the king's divine authority and maintained continuity with ancient Indo-Aryan traditions. Gautamiputra Satakarni, for instance, is described in inscriptions as an "Ekabrahmana" (the unique protector of the Brahmanas) and a devout follower of dharma. The use of Vedic epithets like "Agnisthoma Yajna" and "Soma-yajna" for Satavahana kings suggests their alignment with orthodox Hindu practices.

### **Temples and Deities Worshipped**

While most religious edifices from this period are Buddhist, there is growing evidence of Brahmanical temples and icons. Archaeological findings indicate the worship of Vishnu, Shiva, and other Vedic deities during this period. The Satavahanas were instrumental in transitioning from Vedic to Puranic forms of Hinduism, which included the emergence of Bhakti (devotional) traditions. The Naneghat inscription, attributed to Queen Naganika, mentions donations to various Vedic deities such as Indra, Surya, Chandra, and the Ashvins, indicating a pantheon-based religious practice common in Vedic religion.

## **Revival and Rise of Shaivism and Vaishnavism**

Shaivism and Vaishnavism gained prominence during the Satavahana period. The Satavahana coins often depicted symbols like the Nandi bull, which is associated with Lord Shiva, and the conch and chakra, associated with Vishnu. Moreover, the Satavahanas may have facilitated the gradual replacement of abstract Vedic rituals with more accessible devotional practices. This shift laid the foundation for the Bhakti movement that would later sweep across India in the medieval period.

## **Religious Tolerance and Syncretism**

One of the hallmarks of Satavahana religious policy was its broad-minded inclusivity. Despite being personally devoted to Brahmanical religion, Satavahana rulers patronized Buddhist institutions and, to a lesser extent, Jain centers. This pluralistic approach was partly pragmatic—it allowed rulers to garner legitimacy and support across diverse communities. Trade routes, such as the ones from the Deccan to the West coast and inland towards the Ganges valley, were managed by multicultural merchant guilds who often followed different faiths. Supporting multiple religions helped the Satavahanas consolidate power and promote social harmony. Moreover, religious symbols and practices often intersected. The adoption of motifs like the lotus, triratna (three jewels of Buddhism), and auspicious symbols like the swastika show that religious symbolism in Satavahana art was shared and overlapping.

## **Jainism in the Satavahana Era**

While Jainism was not as prominently patronized as Buddhism or Brahmanism during the Satavahana rule, there is evidence of Jain communities and shrines in the Deccan region. Jain caves at Ellora and scattered inscriptions in western India point to the existence of Jain religious practices. Merchants, who were vital to the economic success of the empire, often followed Jainism. Some minor rulers and local elites under Satavahana suzerainty may have provided support to Jain shrines and monastic communities.

## **Art and Iconography**

The Satavahanas made significant contributions to religious art and iconography, which served both didactic and devotional purposes. Their art style is characterized by:

- **Narrative reliefs:** Especially in Buddhist stupas, where scenes from the Jataka tales (previous lives of the Buddha) and events from the Buddha's life were depicted in sculptural form.
- **Symbolic representation:** Particularly in Buddhist monuments where anthropomorphic images of the Buddha were avoided in favor of symbols such as the wheel (dharmachakra), the Bodhi tree, or the stupa.
- **Mythological scenes:** In Brahmanical art, early depictions of deities and mythological themes began to appear, indicating the rise of temple-based worship.

Sanchi, Amaravati, and Nagarjunakonda art styles show the influence of the Satavahana aesthetic, with intricately carved railings, toranas (gateways), and pillars.

### Role of Women in Religious Life

Royal women in the Satavahana Empire played a notable role in religious patronage. Inscriptions refer to queens donating to both Buddhist and Brahmanical establishments. Queen Naganika's inscription at Naneghat is a prime example—she mentions her involvement in sacrificial rites and religious ceremonies. Gautami Balashri, the mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni, also figures prominently in inscriptions related to Buddhist donations, reflecting the active role of elite women in shaping the religious landscape. This involvement was not just symbolic but practical—women provided economic resources, commissioned religious structures, and influenced religious trends.

### Religion and Society

Religion during the Satavahana era was not confined to elite rituals or monastic practices. It permeated society at all levels:

- **Merchants and Guilds:** Traders funded monasteries, sponsored festivals, and built resting places for pilgrims. Their role was crucial in the dissemination of religious practices along trade routes.
- **Peasants and Artisans:** Participated in local festivals, processions, and temple rituals. They often contributed labor for the construction of religious monuments.



- **Religious Festivals:** Celebrations tied to agricultural cycles, solar and lunar events, and religious lore were common and often supported by the state.

The interaction between religion and everyday life created a vibrant public sphere where beliefs were performed, debated, and evolved continuously.

### Education and Religious Literature

The Satavahana period witnessed a blossoming of religious scholarship. Monasteries became centers of learning, particularly for Buddhist philosophy, logic, and ethics. Texts in Prakrit flourished, including religious treatises, commentaries, and poetic works. While Sanskrit had not yet become the dominant liturgical language, early Sanskrit compositions began to emerge alongside Prakrit inscriptions. The Gatha Saptashati, a collection of Prakrit poems attributed to King Hala, reflects the fusion of literary, religious, and cultural themes. Brahmanical texts, including Dharmaśāstra and ritual manuals, were likely transmitted orally and written in limited manuscript form. The oral traditions were maintained by Brahmin priests and teachers who were often supported by state grants.

### Religious Symbolism on Coinage

One of the unique and often overlooked aspects of the Satavahana religious landscape is the use of religious symbolism in coinage, which provides rich insights into the spiritual leanings and religious diplomacy of the time. Coins not only served economic functions but also acted as political and religious instruments, broadcasting the ruler's faith, values, and legitimacy across vast regions.

### Design and Symbolism

Satavahana coins often featured religious motifs that reflected both Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. For instance, many coins depicted the Ujjain symbol, which resembles a cross with dots at each arm's end. This symbol, while primarily regional, carried cosmological and ritualistic meanings tied to both Vedic and folk traditions. Some coins included the "chakra" (wheel), an important Buddhist symbol associated with dharma (moral law), indicating the king's commitment to righteous rule. The presence of the conch shell and lotus on coins further connected them to Vishnu and the divine order, affirming a Vaishnavite inclination.

## Religious Neutrality through Symbolism

The use of symbols, rather than anthropomorphic deities, allowed the Satavahana rulers to appeal to multiple religious communities simultaneously. This was especially useful in a religiously diverse empire, enabling the state to maintain equidistance and political legitimacy without alienating specific sects. Such coinage practices were instrumental in propagating state-sanctioned dharma across commercial networks, as these coins circulated from urban centers to rural peripheries, embedding religious imagery into daily economic life.

## Role of Trade and Religion

The Satavahana Empire's strategic geographic location and control over key trade routes played a vital role in shaping its religious dynamics. The interconnection between commerce and spirituality during this period highlights the way trade functioned as a conduit for religious exchange and growth.

## Maritime and Overland Trade Routes

The Satavahanas were deeply embedded in the Indo-Roman trade networks, exporting spices, textiles, gemstones, and ivory. Their ports, particularly Kalyana and Sopara, served as major nodes in maritime trade with Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean world. Along these routes, Buddhist monks traveled freely, establishing monasteries that doubled as resting places for merchants and pilgrims. The inland trade routes connected the Deccan with Gujarat, Bengal, and the Ganges valley, and it was along these arteries that religious ideas, scriptures, and architectural styles flowed. Guilds and merchant associations, which were often religious in orientation, played a crucial role in sponsoring stupas, chaityas, and temples.

## Religious Patronage by Traders

Many Buddhist inscriptions from the Satavahana period mention **donations made by traders**, including goldsmiths, potters, and caravan leaders. These donations were not merely acts of piety—they were strategic investments in social capital and karmic merit. By sponsoring viharas or stupas, merchants ensured **spiritual protection** and enhanced their reputations. Hindu temples and Brahmanical shrines also received support from traders. This



dual support reveals that economic actors were **religiously eclectic**, often contributing to multiple traditions as a form of religious insurance or broad-based patronage.

### **Cults, Local Deities, and Folk Religion**

While major religions like Buddhism and Brahmanism received formal recognition and support, folk religion and local deities remained vibrant under the Satavahanas. These cults were crucial to the spiritual lives of rural populations and served as bridges between organized religion and indigenous traditions.

### **Nature Worship and Village Deities**

Many communities in the Deccan continued to worship trees, rivers, serpents (nagas), and guardian spirits (yakshas and yakshinis). These local cults, often associated with fertility, health, and protection, were integrated into larger religious frameworks through a process of Sanskritization—wherein local deities were reinterpreted as forms of Hindu gods or celestial beings in Buddhism. For instance, yakshas like Kubera and Manibhadra, originally local tutelary spirits, were absorbed into both Buddhist and Hindu pantheons. The presence of nagakalas (snake stones) and sacred groves in archaeological sites from the Satavahana era affirms the popularity of animistic and agrarian deities.

### **Syncretic Practices**

Religious syncretism was not limited to the elite or monastic traditions. In popular worship, people combined Vedic rituals, Buddhist ethics, and local animistic practices. A single village might simultaneously host a stupa, a Shiva shrine, and a grove for a local goddess. Offerings, festivals, and processions often involved participants from multiple castes and sects. This layered religious environment indicates that the Satavahana Empire was not a theocracy but a multi-religious civil society where folk traditions were not marginalized but adapted and preserved.

### **Philosophical and Ethical Underpinnings of Religious Practice**

Beyond rituals and temples, religion in the Satavahana Empire also had deep philosophical and ethical dimensions. These were expressed through dharma (righteous duty), ahimsa (non-violence), and karmic action, which influenced governance, law, and daily life.

### **Dharma as a Guiding Principle**

The concept of dharma was central to both Brahmanical and Buddhist thought. For Brahmanism, dharma was hierarchical and prescribed based on varna (social order) and ashrama (life stage). Satavahana rulers portrayed themselves as protectors of dharma, upholding social stability, justice, and cosmic order through rituals, patronage, and law.

In the Buddhist context, dharma referred to the teachings of the Buddha and the path to nirvana (liberation). Monasteries became centers for moral instruction, meditation, and the propagation of ethical living. Inscriptions often refer to rulers donating land or resources for the propagation of the Buddha's dharma.

### **Ahimsa and Social Ethics**

Ahimsa, or non-violence, was a widely respected virtue during the Satavahana period. Although not all Satavahana kings followed this principle strictly in political affairs (wars were still fought), non-violence was promoted in domestic and personal life, especially through Buddhist teachings. Vegetarianism, compassion for animals, and care for the environment were widely encouraged. Religious festivals and rituals often included donations to the poor, feeding of Brahmins or monks, and animal protection rituals, reflecting ethical dimensions of both Hindu and Buddhist worldviews.

### **Education and Moral Instruction**

Educational institutions—primarily Buddhist monasteries—served as centers for ethical instruction. Young boys, and sometimes girls, were educated in moral precepts, philosophical discourse, and languages like Prakrit and Sanskrit. These institutions cultivated not only religious scholars but also administrators, scribes, and lay followers who embodied the ethical norms of their respective religions.

### **Decline and Legacy**

The decline of the Satavahanas around the 3rd century CE saw the fragmentation of their empire into smaller states like the Ikshvakus, Abhiras, and Vakatakas. However, the religious foundations laid during their rule continued to flourish. Buddhism saw a revival under the Ikshvakus, and Brahmanical temples became more prominent under the Vakatakas. The syncretic religious culture of the Satavahanas influenced later dynasties in both northern and southern India. Moreover, the emphasis on religious tolerance, the fusion of ritual and

devotional elements, and the support for art and education became enduring features of Indian religious practice.

## CONCLUSION:

The Satavahana Empire stands out as a remarkable example of religious pluralism and cultural synthesis in ancient India. Their reign, spanning from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE, fostered an environment where **Brahmanism, Buddhism, and local folk traditions** coexisted and influenced one another. The Satavahanas adeptly balanced patronage among these faiths, supporting elaborate Vedic rituals alongside Buddhist monasteries and stupas, reflecting both political pragmatism and genuine religious tolerance. The empire's strategic location along key trade routes amplified the spread of religious ideas, with merchants and monks facilitating the exchange of cultural and spiritual knowledge. The incorporation of religious symbols on coinage and inscriptions further illustrates how religion was intertwined with statecraft and everyday life.

Moreover, the survival and integration of local cults and animistic practices into larger religious frameworks underscore the dynamism and inclusivity of Satavahana religious life. Philosophical concepts such as **dharma, karma, and ahimsa** shaped not only individual spirituality but also governance and social ethics. The Satavahana Empire played a pivotal role in shaping the religious landscape of the Deccan and southern India, bridging northern and southern traditions. Their legacy of religious tolerance, patronage, and cultural integration laid the groundwork for the diverse spiritual fabric that characterizes the Indian subcontinent to this day.

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