

Guptas Empire

Introduction:

The disappearance of the Mauryas from the political map of India saw the emergence of many indigenous and foreign rulers who literally divided the north and south India and ruled over them for nearly five centuries. Of these Kushanas dominated the north whereas the Satavahanas the Deccan and Andhra. The eclipse of the Kushanas in North India and of the Satavahanas in the Deccan in the 3rd century CE ushered in a period of political disintegration. It paved the way for the emergence of several minor powers and new ruling families. It was against this background the Guptas laid the foundation of the empire. After the Mauryas, Guptas realized the political unification of North India and covered much of the Indian subcontinent. The Gupta age was considered to be the second glorious epoch in the annals of ancient India. This age is marked by the startling developments.

The Gupta period was acclaimed by historians as the period of 'Efflorescence' or the 'Classical age' or the 'Golden age'. Civilizations were described as a Golden age when virtually every manifestation of life reached a peak of excellence. Normally, these concepts were utilized by the nationalist historians.

Sources:

There are plenty of source materials to reconstruct the history of the Gupta period. They include literary works, Inscriptions, Coins and Monuments.

Literary sources: The Puranas like *Vayu*, *Vishnu*, *Matsya*, *Bhagavata*, *Skanda* and *Markandeya* throw light on the royal genealogy of Gupta kings.

The contemporary literary works like *Devichandraguptam* and *Mudrarakshasa* written by Visakhadatta provide information regarding the rise of the Guptas.

Kalidasa's works *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Meghadootam*, *Raghuvamsam*, *Malvikangimitram*, *Ritusamhara* and *Kumarasambhava* provide reliable information about the government, society and religion of the Gupta period.

Sudraka's *Mrichchakatika* describes the unstable political conditions of the Gupta period. The Chinese Traveler Fahien, who visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II has left a valuable account of the social, economic and religious conditions of the Gupta empire. The accounts of other Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to India like, Hiuen Tsang and I-tsing also gave us information about the popularity of Buddhism during the Gupta period.

Inscriptions:

The inscriptions are much important sources for the reliable history of the Guptas. They are incised mostly on stone, and some on metal [copper plates]. Gupta epigraphs may broadly be divided into two groups – Official records and Private records.

Official records:

The Royal land grant inscriptions represent social and economic process of the period and provide information about the administrative structures and agrarian relations. Some inscriptions of the period were in the nature of Prasastis or describing the chronicles of events. The Prasasti of royal grants mention details on royal genealogy and political events. The epithets and descriptions of kings reflect prevailing hierarchies of power and ideals of kingship. Allahabad stone pillar inscription of Samudragupta, Mehrauli iron pillar inscription of Chandragupta II and Junagarh rock inscription of Skandagupta fall under the category. The most important source for the reign of Samudragupta is the Allahabad pillar inscription. It describes Samudragupta's accession, military campaign, relationship with other contemporary rulers and accomplishments as a poet and scholar. This inscription engraved on an Ashokan pillar, written in Sanskrit language, using Nagari script was composed by Harisena. These inscriptions furnish valuable information about the polity religion, society and economy of the Gupta period.

Private records:

The inscriptions of private individuals also offered glimpses into social history and patronage to religious establishments of the period.

Numismatic evidence:

The Gupta kings issued a large number of gold and silver coins. Majority of the Gupta coins contain legends and symbols. In design, execution and in artistic composition they closely resemble the Greek and Kushan coins. The Kumaradevi type coins of Chandragupta I are the earliest coins of the Guptas, The coins issued by Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, Kumaragupta, Skandagupta and Budhagupta were of inestimable value for the reconstruction of the social, economic, political, religious and artistic achievements of the Guptas.

Monuments are also a source of both artistic and religious history. They illustrate (different schools of) Art and Architecture of the age.

Origin:

The origin of Gupta dynasty is shrouded in mystery and often controversial. There are no specific details about the origin or social background of the Guptas. It is probable that the Guptas belonged to a family of wealthy land owners who gradually gained political control over the region of Magadha. It is mostly believed that the Guptas were of Vaisya origin. The assertion that they were Vaisyas is based on the recommendations in the contemporary literary texts such as *Manusmriti* and *Vishnupurana* that the name suffix 'Gupta' was appropriate for members of this varna.

Political History:

Srigupta and Ghatokacha :

The genealogical accounts of the Guptas mention maharaja Srigupta and Maharaja Ghatokacha as the first two rulers of the line. It is not clear whether they were independent rulers or subordinates of some other king. It is known from the account left by I-Tsing (673-95), a Chinese pilgrim, Srigupta gave permission for the Chinese to construct a Buddhist Stupa at Mrigasikhavana, located in Bengal. This was built for the use of Chinese monks and endowed with land and revenues of twenty villages. At the time of I-Tsing's itinerary its dilapidated remnants were known as the 'Temple of China'. It is thus evident that the Guptas started their rule from a small province in Bengal, probably as subordinates of the Kushanas. He was succeeded by Ghatokhacha.

Chandragupta I (320 – 335 CE.):

Chandragupta I was the son of *Ghatokacha*, the first independent king of the Gupta dynasty. He was a more powerful ruler than his two predecessors. While his two ancestors were given one each the title Maharaja, Chandragupta I, is described in the inscriptions as 'Maharajadhiraja' emperor. He is thus taken to be the founder of the Gupta empire. The foundation of the Gupta Era commenced on 26th February 320 CE, an era which continued in parts of India for several centuries.

The important event of his reign was marriage with Kumaradevi, a Lichchavi princess which enhanced his power and prestige. The marriage was commemorated on coins issued during his reign. Numismatists styled these coins as 'Chandragupta-Kumaradevi' type of coins. They have the figures and names of king and queen on the obverse, the reverse has a goddess seated on lion and the legend 'Lichchavayah'. Chandragupta was the first king to issue coins in gold.

The importance of this alliance had been a matter of controversy among historians. V.A. Smith held that 'Kumaradevi evidently brought to her husband as her dowry valuable influence, which in course of a few years secured him a paramount position in Magadha and the neighbouring countries'. The political influence of this marriage lied in the fact that this resulted in the amalgamation of the two states enabling Chandragupta to assume the imperial title of Maharajadhiraja. Since the father of Kumaradevi did not have a male issue and died before the demise of Chandragupta, the latter might have acquired the actual control of the Lichchavi state long before the accession of Samudragupta. The acquisition of Magadha provided the rulers and the merchant class with the control over the precious mines of the present Jharkhand. A passage in the Vishnupurana refers to the Guptas enjoying all territories along the Ganga upto Prayaga [Allahabad] as well as Saketa and Magadha. It is evident from the above that the empire of Chandragupta I may have included the areas of modern Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bengal.

Samudragupta (335 to 370 CE):

Chandragupta I was succeeded by his son Samudragupta. He became the ruler after subduing his rival Kacha, an obscure prince of the dynasty. Samudragupta was the greatest of all the kings and his reign witnessed expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription [Prasasti] composed by his court poet

Harisena, eulogizes the achievements, conquests and personality of Samudragupta. The Prasasti contains a long list of states, kings and tribes which were conquered and brought under various stages of subjugation.

The places and countries conquered by Samudragupta can be divided into four groups.

The first one includes the names of the eight kings of Aryavarta who were defeated and whose kingdoms were incorporated into the Gupta empire. In this campaign he defeated Achyuta, Nagasena and Ganapatideva (generally regarded as the rulers of Ahichchatra, Padmavati and Mathura respectively). After the annexation of the Gangetic basin, he thought that there was every possibility for the vanquished Naga rulers to go for retaliation. Sensing this danger, Samudragupta contracted a diplomatic matrimonial alliance with Ganapatinaga the most powerful Naga ruler. Kuberanaga, the daughter of Ganapatinaga was given in marriage to Chandragupta II, the son of Samudragupta. This is the second matrimonial alliance contracted by the Guptas. This gave an opportunity for the Guptas to occupy the most fertile region which became the nucleus of the Gupta empire.

The second group includes the rulers of the eastern Himalayan states and some frontier states who were made to feel the weight of Samudragupta's arms. It covers five prathyantas or border states and also nine tribal republics that were forced to pay all kinds of taxes and obey his orders. The five Border States were Samatata (East Bengal), Davaka (Assam), Kamarupa (Assam), Nepala and Kartipura (Kashmir). The nine tribal republics were the Malavas, Arjunayanas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Abhiras, Prarjunas, Sarakinakas, Kavas and Kharaparikas.

The third group includes 12 rulers of the eastern Deccan and South India who were conquered and reinstated. The twelve kings of the South were Mahendra of Kosala, Mahendra of Pisthapura, Hastivarman of Vengi (Salankayana ruler), Ugrasena of Palaka (Nellore region of Andhra Pradesh), Vishnu Gopa of Kanchi (Pallava ruler), and the rulers of Erandapalli, Devarashtra, Avamuktha, Dusthalapura, Mahakantara, Kurala and kothura.

The fourth group includes foreign kings such as Daivaputrashahi Sahanushahi, Shaka Murundas and the dwellers of Simhala and all the other islands who pleased the Gupta Emperor by offering their own persons for service to him, bringing presents of maidens and applying for charters bearing the Garuda seal for the enjoyment of their own territories.

According to a Chinese source, Meghavarna the ruler of Srilanka (375 – 415 C.E) sent presents to the emperor Samudragupta and sought his permission to build a Buddhist monastery at Gaya. This was granted and the temple was developed into a huge monastic establishment.

Extent of the Empire:

The states that are said to have succumbed to the power of Samudragupta make a fairly long list and would cover a large part of the subcontinent. It is clear from the above conquests that Samudragupta's empire seems to have comprised much of Northern India, viz., the Upper Gangetic valley, Central India and South western part of Bengal.

These territories were directly administered by him. The Saka and Kushana principalities on the west and northwest were within the sphere of his influence. The kings of Deccan and south paid him homage. Still farther south, the Srilankan king, also said to have acknowledged Gupta suzerainty. Thus Samudragupta through his successful military campaigns, political relationships of paramount and subordination covered a large part of the subcontinent.

Estimate of Samudragupta:

Samudragupta's military achievements remain remarkable in the annals of History. Samudragupta emerges from the Allahabad Prasasti as a restless conqueror. He is described as an able and compassionate ruler, concerned about the welfare of his subjects. He performed Asvamedha sacrifice to proclaim his conquests and power. He also issued in that connection a special gold coin, styled by the numismatists as Asvamedha type of coin.

It appears from the Allahabad Prasasti that Samudragupta was not only a conqueror but also a poet, musician and patron of learning. He is described as Kaviraja (king among poets), whose poetry surpassed the glory of the genius of poets. He wrote Krishnacharita, a work in Sanskrit. His court was adorned by a great Sanskrit scholar Harisena. Thus he must have credited with a share in the promotion of Sanskrit literature and learning. His love of music is attested by his lyrist type gold coin which represents him as playing the Vina. He was an ardent follower of Vaishnavism but was tolerant of other creeds too. He evinced keen interest in Buddha and was the patron of the great Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu.

Chandragupta-II (375 – 414 CE):

The peak of the territorial expansion of the Gupta empire reached its heights during the reign of Chandragupta-II, the son of Samudragupta and Dattadevi. His long reign of about forty years (375-415 CE) had a rather mysterious beginning. The Devi Chandraguptam of Visakhadatta tells us that Ramagupta succeeded Samudragupta and ruled five years from 370 – 375 C.E. It mentions the events on the death of Samudragupta and introduces Ramagupta as the son who succeeded Samudragupta. The story goes that Ramagupta was defeated in the battle by the Sakas to whom he agreed to surrender his wife Dhruvadevi. His younger brother Chandragupta was incensed by this, disguised himself as the queen got into the apartment of the Saka king and killed him. This secured him the affection of the people but created enmity between him and his brother Ramagupta. Finally Chandragupta killed his elder brother and married his widow, Dhruvadevi, and occupied the throne. The discovery of the coins of Ramagupta and inscriptions mentioning Dhruvadevi as Chandragupta's wife gave some authenticity to this story. This story with slight variation is referred to in Bana's Harshacharita and Rajasekhara's Kavyamimamsa.

War against the Sakas:

The most important military achievement of Chandragupta-II was his war against Saka Kshatras of western India. Rudrasimha-III, the last ruler of the Saka Kshatrapa was defeated, dethroned and killed. His territories in Western Malwa and Kathiawar were annexed into the Gupta empire. After this victory, he performed the horse sacrifice and

assumed the title 'Sakari' meaning destroyer of Sakas. Chandragupta-II adopted the title of Vikramaditya as a mark of victory over the Sakas.

As a result of the conquest of Western India, the Western boundaries of the empire became secure for some time and Guptas gained control over Broach, Sopara, Cambay and other sea ports. This enabled the Guptas to control trade with the Western Countries. Ujjain became an important commercial city and soon became the alternative capital of the Guptas. Thus the conquest of Gujarat and Malwa got both political and economic significance.

Diplomatic matrimonial alliance with Vakatakas:

Chandragupta-II entered into matrimonial alliances with a number of Royal dynasties. He married Kuberanaga, a Naga princess of central India. Samudragupta gave his daughter Prabhavatigupta in marriage to Rudrasena-II of the Vakataka dynasty. The political importance of this marriage lies in the fact that the Vakatakas occupied geographically strategic position, and emerged dominant power in Deccan. This alliance secured the subordinate alliance of the Vakataka king, and also provided a secure southern frontier to the Gupta empire. Rudrasena-II died five years after coming to the throne and at that time his son was a minor. Prabhavatigupta became a regent and ruled the Vakataka kingdom from 390-410 CE. She managed the affairs of her kingdom with the help of an official sent by her father, Chandragupta II. Thus Chandragupta-II exercised indirect control over the Vakataka kingdom. He made Ujjain as the second capital of the Empire.

Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription:

The exploits of a king called Chandra are glorified in an iron Pillar inscription fixed near Qutb Minar in Delhi. The Chandra of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription has been identified with Chandragupta-II. It is evident from the inscription that Chandragupta-II fought against confederacy of enemies of Bengal (Vanga) and also crossed the Sindhu region of seven rivers and defeated Valhikas (Bactria). With these conquests, the Gupta empire extended in West as far as Malwa, Gujarat and Kathiawar, in the North-West beyond the Hindukush upto Bactria, in the east Bengal, and in the south the Narmada River.

Fahien's visit:

The famous Chinese pilgrim, Fahien visited India, as a Buddhist missionary. Out of his nine year stay in India; he spent six years during the reign of Chandragupta II. The main object of Fahien's mission was to secure copies of Buddhist manuscripts. In his memoirs he gave a vivid description of the places he visited. In India he visited Peshawar, Mathura, Kanauj, Sravasti, Kapilavastu, Kusinagara, Vaisali, Pataliputra, Kasi, Gaya, Bodh Gaya and other places. He spent three years at Pataliputra. However, he does not mention the name of the king in his accounts. But he speaks highly of the king of Madhyadesa, the region ruled by the Gupta monarch, under whom the people were peace and prosperous.

Estimate of Chandragupta-II:

The reign of Chandragupta-II witnessed pinnacle of power and prosperity. He enjoyed the titles 'Vikramaditya (the sun of prowess) and 'Sakari'. His reign is often remembered not for wars but for his patronage of Art and Literature. The Court of Chandragupta was adorned by celebrated scholars collectively known as 'Navaratnas'. Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit poet and play Wright, flourished in his court.

Kumaragupta I (415 – 454 CE.):

Chandragupta-II was succeeded by his son Kumaragupta who enjoyed a long reign of forty years. He maintained intact the Empire which he bequeathed from his father. He issued number of coins. His inscriptions are found all over the Gupta empire. He also performed Asvamedha sacrifice. He laid the foundation of the Nalanda University which emerged as an institution of international importance. But towards the close of his reign the empire was seriously threatened by the attacks of Pushyamitras and Huns. But the danger was averted by the crown prince, Skandagutpa who repelled the invaders. On the whole the reign of Kumaragupta remained peaceful.

Skandagupta (455 – 467 CE.):

He was the last great ruler of the Gupta dynasty. He was an able and energetic ruler. An inscription at Girnar hill, near Junagarh in Kathiawar, refers to the restoration of the ancient embankment of the great Sudarsana Lake which had burst owing to heavy rains in the first year of Skandagupta's reign. The Saurashtra governor and his son promptly repaired the breach and saved the country from a great calamity.

The Huns invaded the Gupta empire during the reign of Skandagupta. He fought them bravely but the situation became complicated owing to several domestic problems. It appears that these wars adversely affected the economy of the empire and the Gold coinage of Skandagupta bear testimony to that. His gold coins were not only few in number but also showed depreciation in the purity of gold. With the death of Skandagupta the political unity and stability of the Gupta Empire was reduced to dust. The last known date of Skandagupta is 467 CE.

Other Successors: History of the imperial Guptas after the death of Skandagupta is shrouded in mystery. Skandagupta was succeeded by Purugupta, Kumaragupta II, Budhagupta, Narasimhagupta, Vinayagupta, Baladitya, etc. A number of rulers are known in some cases with dates but they can't be arranged in any genealogical and chronological order. With the accession of Budhagupta in 476 – 77 CE the history of the imperial Guptas stands again on a firm ground. The records of his reign prove beyond doubt that he ruled over extensive regions. But it was during his reign that the Gupta empire showed signs of visible decay. A major blow to Gupta power came towards the end of the 5th Century, when the Huns entered North India in large numbers. Excellent archers and skillful horsemen familiar with metal stirrups, the Huns hastened the disintegration of the empire, and within the next half century it gave way to a number of kingdoms. The Guptas continued to rule till about 550 C.E., but by then their power had already become very insignificant. Vishnugupta was the last ruler of this dynasty. Thus the Guptas who came to lime light in the first quarter of the 4th century dominated the

destinies of the North India, for more than a century and finally lapsed into oblivion by the dawn of the 6th century.

Causes for the decline of the Gupta empire:

The mighty Gupta empire declined and came to an end by the middle of the 6th century.

The following are the important causes for the fall of the empire :

- The Pushyamitras, a war like tribe, gave the first staggering blow to the Gupta empire during the last days of Skandagupta.
- One of Huns were the fierce nomadic tribes who originally lived in Central Asia. The Huns under the leadership of Toramana and Mihiragula attacked and broke the back of the Gupta empire. It accelerated the fall of the Empire.
- The weakness of the central authority made the feudatories like the Maitrakas of Vallabhi, the Vardhanas of Sthaneswar, the Maukharis of Kanauj, the Gaudas of Bengal and Yasovarman of Mandasor asserted their independence. This gave a death blow to the political unity of the Gupta empire.
- The successors of Skandagupta were weak and incompetent. They failed to maintain their hold firmly over the empire.
- The dissensions among the royal princes ultimately weakened the Guptas.
- Trade with the Roman Empire declined due to the Hun attack on the Roman empire.
- Granting land assignments to the officers in lieu of their salaries resulted in the loss of income to the state.
- Much of the income was spent in suppressing the uprisings of the Pushyamitras and repelling the invasions of Huns.

Gupta's Contribution to Indian Culture

The Gupta period was considered as one of the glorious chapters in the history of ancient India. It witnessed changes in the social structure, religion, learning and education, architecture, art, painting and also developments in pure sciences.

The Gupta age witnessed remarkable development in the field of literature .Education and learning witnessed matchless development. Sanskrit language became prominent during the Gupta period. Nagari script had evolved from the Brahmi script. Numerous works in classical Sanskrit came to be written in the forms of epic, lyrics, drama, prose and poetry. Samudragupta himself was a great poet and patronized Harisena, scholar in Sanskrit. The court of Chandragupta II was adorned by the celebrated personalities, collectively known as Navaratnas. Kalidasa remained the foremost among them. His master piece *Abhijnanasakunthalam* [Sanskrit drama] is considered one among the 'hundred best books of the world'. His other works are *Malavikagnimitra* and *Vikramorvasiya* [plays], *Raghuvamsa* and *Kumarasambhava* [epics] Ritusamhara and Megadhuta [lyrics].

Amarasimha and Vatsayana wrote *Amarakosam* and *Kamasutra* respectively. The *Mrichchakatika* of Sudraka was the product of this age.

The Puranas in their present form were composed during this period. The epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were given final touches.

There was a tremendous progress in the field of Mathematics, astronomy, astrology and Medicine. Mathematical Numerals and notations were known to the Indian since Pagan past.

The decimal system was in vogue in India from the fifth century.

Aryabhatta was a great Mathematician and first Astronomer to pose more fundamental problems of Astronomy in 499 C.E. He wrote the book *Aryabhatiya*. Aryabhatta, who first held the view that the earth was a sphere and it rotated on its own axis and that the eclipses were not result of the Rahu, but were caused by the shadow of earth falling on the Moon.

Varahamihira, a great Mathematician, Astronomer and Astrologer lived in this age. He wrote *Brihatsamhita*, *Yogasastra*, *Panchasiddhantika* etc. Of all this works the most important one is the *Panchasiddhantika* (five systems of astronomy) a concise account of the currently used schools, of which too reflect a close knowledge of Greek astronomy. His *Brihatsamhita* is a great work in Sanskrit literature that deals with a variety of subjects like astronomy, astrology, geography, architecture, weather, animals, marriage and omens.

Brahmagupta was the other Mathematician and physicist of the age. He was the author of *Surya Siddhanta*.

In the field of medicine the great medical trio of ancient India; Vagbhata, Charaka and Susruta belonged to this period.

The Nalanda University founded by Kumaragupta I became the most celebrated Buddhist educational centre in North India.

The Gupta emperors followed the policy of religious toleration, though they strove hard for the Brahmanical revival. Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism flourished during this period. The advent of the Guptas heralded the classical phase in the history of art. The art of casting metal images reached its climax during this period. The art of painting reached its height of glory and splendor. The fresco paintings noticed in the caves at Bagh and the paintings found in the Ajanta caves are the products of the Gupta period. The Ajanta paintings are considered to be one of the best paintings in the World. The most important temples of the Gupta period are found at Tigwa, Sanchi, Bumra, Nachanakuthara, Deogarh and a group of rock cut caves at Udayagiri near Bhopal. Thus the Gupta age is a classical age or an age of efflorescence where there is an all-round development.