

The Gupta Empire- A Golden Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

The Gupta period marks the important phase in the history of ancient India. The long and efficient rule of the Guptas made a huge impact on the political, social and cultural sphere. Though the Gupta Empire was not widespread as the Maurya Empire, but it was successful in creating an empire that is significant in the history of India. The Gupta period is also known as the "classical age" because of progress in literature and culture. After the downfall of Kushans, Guptas emerged and kept North India politically united for more than a century. The Gupta Empire, which ruled the Indian subcontinent from 320 to 550 AD, ushered in a golden age of Indian civilization. It will forever be remembered as the period during which literature, science, and the arts flourished in India as never before.

Since the fall of the Mauryan Empire in the second century BC, India had remained divided. For 500 years, India was a patchwork of independent kingdoms. During the late third century, the powerful Gupta family gained control of the local kingship of Magadha (modern-day eastern India and Bengal). The Gupta Empire is generally held to have begun in 320 AD, when Chandragupta I (not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan Empire), the third king of the dynasty, ascended the throne. He soon began conquering neighboring regions. His son, Samudragupta (often called Samudragupta the Great) founded a new capital city, Pataliputra, and began a conquest of the entire subcontinent. Samudragupta conquered most of India, though in the more distant regions he reinstalled local kings in exchange for their loyalty. Samudragupta was also a great patron of the arts. He was a poet and a musician, and he brought great writers, philosophers, and artists to his court. Unlike the Mauryan kings after Ashoka, who were Buddhists, Samudragupta was a devoted worshipper of the Hindu gods. Nonetheless, he did not reject Buddhism, but invited Buddhists to be part of his court and allowed the religion to spread in his realm.

INTRODUCTION

The Guptas enjoyed certain material advantages. The centre of their operations lay in the fertile land of Madhyadesha covering Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They could exploit the iron ores of central India and south Bihar. Further, they took advantage of their proximity to the areas in north India which carried on silk trade with the Byzantine Empire.

On account of these favourable factors, the Guptas set up their rule over Anuganga (the middle Gangetic basin), Prayag (modern Allahabad), Saket (modern Ayodhya) and Magadha. In course of time this kingdom became an all-India empire.(1,2)

According to many historians, the Gupta dynasty was a Vaishya dynasty.[12][13] Historian Ram Sharan Sharma asserts that the Vaishya Guptas "appeared as a reaction against oppressive rulers".[14] A.S. Altekar, a historian and archaeologist, who has written several books on Gupta coinage,[15] also regarded the caste of the Guptas as Vaishya on the basis of the ancient Indian texts on law, which prescribe the name-ending with Gupta for a member of the Vaishya caste. According to historian Michael C. Brannigan, the rise of the Gupta Empire was one of the most prominent violations of the caste system in ancient India.[13]

Furthermore, it is not yet discovered whether the term Gupta indicated a surname of a specific family or referred to a clan. However Gupta Empire records and Chinese records provided by the later I-Tsing, furnished the names of the first three rulers of the Gupta Dynasty, Maharaja Sri Gupta, Maharaja Sri Ghatotkacha and Ghatotkacha's son, Maharajadhiraja Sri Chandragupta, considered the first Gupta emperor. Recently, a historian, Ashvini Agarwal, on the basis of the matrimonial alliances of the Guptas with the Vakataka, assumed that they belong to the Brahman caste.[16] Another modern historian, S. Chattopadhyaya, has put forth a different theory about the ancestry of the Guptas. According to him, in the Panchobh Copper Plate, some kings bearing the title Guptas and related to the imperial Gupta Dynasty, claimed themselves as Vaishyas. Historian D. R. Regmi, says Imperial Guptas were descendants of Abhira-GuPTas (3,4,5)

DISCUSSION

The Gupta Dynasty:

The Gupta empire was founded by Sri Gupta. He was then succeeded by Ghatotkacha. Not much information is available about their rule of these two Maharajas. Thereafter, following significant rulers from Gupta dynasty ruled during this period.

Chandragupta I (320-330 A.D.)

- Chandragupta was a powerful Gupta ruler who had waged many battles to attain his title of 'Maharajadhiraja' (king of kings).
- He married a Licchavi princess Kumaradevi, which began the eminence of the Gupta empire.
- The Mehrauli iron pillar inscriptions has mention of his extensive conquests.
- He is considered as the founder of the Gupta era (began with his accession).

Samudragupta (330-380 A.D.)

- He is also known as "Indian Napoleon". He was the greatest of the rulers of Gupta dynasty.
- The Allahabad Pillar inscription contains details of his military conquest in stages:- Against rulers of North India, Samudragupta's Dakshinapatha expedition against South India, Another campaign against other rulers of North India.
- It is little ironical that these military achievements are engraved on the same pillar which contains the inscriptions of the peace-loving Ashoka.

- He also performed Ashwamedha sacrifices after his military victories. This is known by the coins issued by him commemorating him as the “restorer of ashwamedha”.
- His greatest achievement was political unification of India as a formidable force.
- Also, a Chinese source tells that, the ruler of Sri Lanka, Meghvarman sought permission of Samudragupta to build a Buddhist temple at Bodhi Gaya.
- Samudragupta was called by different names, one of them was 'Kaviraja' because of his ability to compose verses. Certain coins show him with a Veena.
- He patronised poets and scholars like Harisena, and hence played a part in promoting Sanskrit literature (which is a characteristic feature of Gupta dynasty).
- Samudragupta was a follower of Vaishnavism. However, he also patronised the great Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu. (6,7)

Chandragupta II Vikramaditya of Gupta Dynasty (380-415 A.D.)

- He is also known as Vikramaditya.
- Chandragupta II extended the limits of this empire by conquest and matrimonial alliances. His capital city was Pataliputra.
- He married his daughter Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince, who ruled the strategic lands of Deccan. This later was highly useful to him when he proceeded towards his campaign against the Saka rulers of western India.
- Chandragupta II conquered the western Malwa and Gujarat by defeating the Saka rulers who had ruled for about 4 centuries in the region. This earned him the title of 'Sakari' and 'Vikramaditya'.
- As a result the Gupta empire gained access to the Arabian sea and opened trade with the western countries. Ujjain became the commercial capital of the kingdom thereafter.
- In his reign, the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien visited India. His accounts tell of a flourishing Buddhist religion in Chandragupta II's Reign. However, the Gangetic valley was a 'land of Brahmanism'.
- Chandragupta II also patronised art and literature. He has poets like Kalidasa in his court.
- He also issued silver coins, first Gupta ruler to do so.

Kumaragupta (415-455 A.D.)

- He succeeded Chandragupta II.
- Kumargupta I was a worshipper of Kartikeya.
- The coins of his time tell that he took titles like: Mahendraditya, Ashwamedha Mahendra.
- ☒ He laid the foundation of **Nalanda University** which later grew to become an international

centre of learning.

Skandagupta (455-467 AD)

- He was last great ruler of Gupta dynasty.
- He saved the empire from Hun invasion coming from Central Asia. But these invasions weakened the empire.
- Details about him are mentioned on the Bhitari Pillar inscription, proclaiming him the title of 'Vikramaditya'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Later Guptas:

After the death of Skandagupta, there were other ruler of the Gupta dynasty like Purugupta, Narasimhagupta, Buddhagupta. They were not able to save the empire from Hun invasions. With the rise of Malwa and continuous Hun invasion, the Gupta dynasty totally disappeared.

The Gupta period is generally regarded as a classic peak of North Indian art for all the major religious groups. Although painting was evidently widespread, the surviving works are almost all religious sculpture. The period saw the emergence of the iconic carved stone deity in Hindu art, as well as the Buddha figure and Jain tirthankara figures, these last often on a very large scale. The two great centres of sculpture were Mathura and Gandhara, the latter the centre of Greco-Buddhist art. Both exported sculpture to other parts of northern India. Unlike the preceding Kushan Empire there was no artistic depiction of the monarchs, even in the very fine Gupta coinage,[48] with the exception of some coins of the Western Satraps, or influenced by them.(8,9)

The most famous remaining monuments in a broadly Gupta style, the caves at Ajanta, Elephanta, and Ellora (respectively Buddhist, Hindu, and mixed including Jain) were in fact produced under later dynasties, but primarily reflect the monumentality and balance of Gupta style. Ajanta contains by far the most significant survivals of painting from this and the surrounding periods, showing a mature form which had probably had a long development, mainly in painting palaces.[49] The Hindu Udayagiri Caves actually record connections with the dynasty and its ministers,[50] and the Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh is a major temple, one of the earliest to survive, with important sculpture(10)

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