

Life in the Gupta Age

System of Administration

In contrast to the Maurya rulers, the Gupta kings adopted pompous titles such as *parameshvara*, *maharajadhiraja*, and *paramabhattaraka* which signify that they ruled over many lesser kings in their empire. Kingship was hereditary, but royal power was limited by the want of a firm adherence to primogeniture. The throne did not always go to the eldest son, creating uncertainties of which the chiefs and high officials took advantage. The Guptas made munificent gifts to the brahmanas, who expressed their gratitude by comparing the king to different gods. He was looked upon as Vishnu, the protector and preserver. The goddess Lakshmi is invariably represented on Gupta coins as Vishnu's wife.

The numerical strength of the Gupta army is not known. Evidently the king maintained a standing army, which was supplemented by the forces occasionally supplied by his feudatories. Horse chariots receded into the background, and cavalry came to the fore. Horse archery became an important element in military tactics.

During the Gupta period land taxes increased in number, and those on trade and commerce decreased. Probably the king collected taxes varying from one-fourth to one-sixth of the produce. In addition, whenever the royal army passed through the countryside, the local people had to feed it. The peasants had also to supply animals, food grains, furniture, etc., for the maintenance of royal officers on duty in rural areas. In central and western India, the villagers were also subjected to forced labour called *vishti* by the royal army and officials.

The judicial system was far more developed under the Guptas than in earlier times. Several law-books were compiled during this period, and for the first time

civil and criminal laws were clearly demarcated. Theft and adultery fell under criminal law, disputes regarding various types of property under civil law. Elaborate laws were laid down about inheritance. As in earlier times, many laws continued to be based on varna differentiation. It was the duty of the king to uphold the law, and try cases with the help of brahmana priests. The guilds of artisans, merchants, and others were governed by their own laws. Seals from Vaishali and from Bhita near Allahabad indicate that these guilds flourished during Gupta times.

The Gupta bureaucracy was not as elaborate as that of the Mauryas. The most important officers in the Gupta empire were the *kumaramatyas*. They were appointed by the king in the home provinces and possibly paid in cash. As the Guptas were possibly vaishyas, recruitment was not confined to the upper varnas only, but several offices were combined in the hands of the same person, and posts became hereditary. This naturally weakened royal control.

The Guptas organized a system of provincial and local administration. The empire was divided into divisions called *bhuktis*, and each *bhukti* was placed under the charge of an *uparika*. The *bhuktis* were divided into districts (*vishayas*), which were placed under the charge of a *vishayapati*. In eastern India, the *vishayas* were divided into *vithis*, which again were subdivided into villages.

The village headman gained in importance in Gupta times, managing village affairs with the assistance of elders. With the administration of a village or a small town, leading local elements were associated. No land transactions could be effected without their consent.

In the urban administration, organized professional bodies were given a considerable say. The sealings from Vaishali show that artisans, merchants, and the head of the guild served on the same corporate body, and in this capacity they obviously conducted the affairs of the town. The administrative board of the district of Kotivarsha in north Bengal (Bangladesh) included the chief merchant, the chief trader, and the chief artisan. Their consent to land transactions was considered necessary. Artisans and bankers were organized into their own separate guilds. We hear of numerous guilds of artisans, traders, etc., at Bhita and Vaishali. At Mandasor in Malwa and at Indore, silk weavers maintained their own guilds. In the district of Bulandshahar in western UP, the oil-pressers were organized into guilds. It seems that these guilds, especially those of merchants, enjoyed certain immunities. In any event, they looked after the affairs of their own members and punished those who violated the laws and customs of the guild.

The system of administration described above applied only to north Bengal, Bihar, UP, and some adjoining areas of MP, which were ruled directly by the officers appointed by the Gupta kings. The major part of the empire was held by feudatory chiefs, many of whom had been subjugated by Samudragupta. The vassals who lived on the edge of the empire had three obligations to fulfil. As subordinate princes, they offered homage to the sovereign by personal attendance at his court, paid tribute to him, and presented to him daughters in marriage. It seems that in return they obtained charters to rule their areas, and these, marked with the royal Garuda seal, seem to have been issued to the vassals. The Guptas thus controlled several tributary princes in MP and elsewhere.

The second important feudal development that surfaced under the Guptas was the grant of fiscal and administrative concessions to priests and administrators. Started in the Deccan by the Satavahanas, the practice became a regular affair in Gupta times, particularly in MP. Religious functionaries were granted land, free of tax, for posterity, and they were authorized to collect from the peasants all the taxes that once went directly to the emperor. The villages granted to the beneficiaries could not be entered by royal agents, retainers, and others, and the beneficiaries were also empowered to punish criminals.

Whether state officials were paid by grants of land in Gupta times is not clear. The abundance of gold coins would suggest that higher officials continued to be paid in cash, but some of them may have been remunerated by land grants.

As much of the imperial administration was managed by feudatories and beneficiaries, the Gupta rulers did not require as many officials as did the Mauryas, and also because, in contrast to the Maurya state, the Gupta state did not regulate economic activities on any substantial scale. The participation of leading artisans, merchants, elders, and others in the rural and urban administration also lessened the need to maintain a large retinue of officers. The Guptas neither needed nor had the elaborate administrative machinery of Maurya times, and in some ways their political system appears to have been feudal.

Trends in Trade and the Agrarian Economy

We get some idea of the economic life of the people of Gupta times from Fa-hsien, who visited different parts of the Gupta empire. The Chinese traveller informs us that Magadha was full of cities and its rich people believed in and supported it with charitable offerings.

In ancient India, the Guptas issued the largest number of gold coins, which were called *dinaras* in their inscriptions. Regular in size and weight, they appear in many types and sub-types. They vividly portray Gupta kings, indicating the latter's love for war and art. Although in gold content the Gupta coins are not as pure as the Kushan ones, they not only served to pay the officers in the army and administration but also to meet the needs of the sale and purchase of land. After the conquest of Gujarat, the Guptas issued a large number of silver coins mainly for local exchange, in which silver occupied an important position under the Western Kshatrapas. In contrast to those of the Kushans, the Gupta copper coins are very few in number. This would suggest that the use of money did not touch the common people as much as it did under the Kushans.

In comparison to the earlier period we notice a decline in long-distance trade. Till AD 550 India carried on some trade with the eastern Roman or Byzantine empire, to which it exported silk. Around AD 550, the people of the eastern Roman empire learnt from the Chinese the art of growing silk, which adversely affected India's export trade. Even before the mid-sixth century, the demand for Indian silk abroad had slackened. In the mid-fifth century, a guild of silk weavers left their original home in western India in the state of Lata in Gujarat and migrated to Mandasor in Malwa where they abandoned their original occupation and adopted other professions.

The striking development of the Gupta period, especially in eastern and central MP, was the emergence of priestly landlords at the cost of local peasants. Land grants made to the priests certainly brought many virgin areas under cultivation, but these beneficiaries were imposed from above on local tribal peasants who were reduced to a lower status. In central and western India, the peasants were also subjected to forced labour. However, a substantial amount of virgin soil was brought under cultivation, and better knowledge applied to agriculture in the tribal areas of central India by the brahmana beneficiaries.

Social Developments

Large-scale land grants to the brahmanas suggest that the brahmana supremacy increased in Gupta times. The Guptas, who probably were originally vaishyas, came to be looked upon as kshatriyas by the brahmanas. The brahmanas presented the Gupta kings as possessing god-like attributes. All this helped to legitimize the position of the Gupta princes, who became great supporters of the brahmanical order. The brahmanas accumulated wealth on account of the

numerous land grants made to them and therefore claimed many privileges, which are listed in the *Narada Smriti*, the lawbook of Narada, a work of about the fifth century.

The castes proliferated into numerous sub-castes as a result of two factors. A large number of foreigners had been assimilated into Indian society, and each group of foreigners was considered a kind of caste. As the foreigners largely came as conquerors they were given the status of kshatriya in society. The Hunas, who came to India towards the close of the fifth century, eventually came to be recognized as one of the thirty-six clans of the Rajputs. Even now some Rajputs bear the title Hun. The other reason for the increase in the number of castes was the absorption of many tribal people into brahmanical society through the process of land grants. The tribal chiefs were assigned a respectable origin, but most of their ordinary kinsmen were assigned a low origin, and every tribe became a kind of caste in its new incarnation. This process continued in some ways up to the present.

The position of shudras improved during this period. They were now permitted to listen to recitations of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the Puranas. The epics and the Puranas represented the kshatriya tradition, whose myths and legends won loyalty to the social order. The shudras could also worship a new god called Krishna and were also permitted to perform certain domestic rites which naturally meant fees for the priests. This can all be linked to some improvement in the economic status of the shudras. From the seventh century onwards, they were mainly represented as agriculturists; in the earlier period, they generally figured as servants, slaves, and agricultural labourers working for the three higher varnas.

However, during this period, the number of untouchables increased, especially the chandalas. The chandalas entered the society as early as the fifth century BC. By the fifth century AD, their number had become so enormous and their disabilities so glaring that these attracted the attention of the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien. He informs us that the chandalas live outside the village and deal in meat and flesh. Whenever they enter the town, they strike a piece of wood to announce their arrival so that others may avoid them. In the Gupta period, like the shudras, women were also allowed to listen to the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the Puranas, and were advised to worship Krishna. However, women of the higher orders did not have access to independent sources of livelihood in pre-Gupta and Gupta times. The fact that women of the two lower varnas were free to earn their livelihood, which gave them considerable freedom, but this was denied to women of the upper varnas. It was argued that the vaishya

and shudra women take to agricultural operations and domestic services and are therefore outside the control of their husbands. In contrast, by Gupta times, members of the higher orders came to acquire more and more land which made them more polygamous and more property-minded. In a patriarchal setup, they began to treat women as items of property, to such a degree that a woman was expected to follow her husband to the next world. The first example of the immolation of a widow after the death of her husband occurred during the Gupta period in AD 510. However, some post-Gupta law-books held that a woman could remarry if her husband was dead, destroyed, impotent, had become a renouncer, or had been excommunicated.

The principal reason for the subordination of women of the upper varnas was their complete dependence on men for their livelihood, and lack of proprietary rights. However, the oldest Smritis or law-books state that gifts of jewellery, ornaments, garments, and similar other presents made to the bride on the occasion of her marriage were considered her property. Gupta and post-Gupta law-books substantially enlarged the scope of these gifts. According to them, presents received by the bride not only from her parents' side but also from her parents-in-law at marriage and on other occasions formed the *stridhana*. Katyayana, a lawmaker of the sixth century, held that a woman could sell and mortgage her immovable property along with her *stridhana*. This clearly implies that women received shares in landed property according to this lawmaker, but generally a daughter was not allowed to inherit landed property in the patriarchal communities of India.

Niyoga, according to which a younger brother or kinsman could marry the wife of the elder brother after the latter's death, was practised by the brahmanas and kshatriyas in Vedic times, but was not allowed to them by the law-books of Gupta and earlier times. Similarly, widow remarriage was not allowed to members of the higher orders, but the shudras could practise both *niyoga* or levirate and widow remarriage.

The State of Buddhism

Buddhism ceased to receive royal patronage during the Gupta period. Fahsien gives the impression that this religion was flourishing, but in reality it was not as important during the Gupta period as it had been in the days of Ashoka and Kanishka. However, some stupas and *viharas* were constructed, and Nalanda became a centre of Buddhist education.

The Origin and Growth of Bhagavatism

Bhagavatism originated in post-Maurya times and centred around the worship of Vishnu or Bhagavata. Vishnu was a minor god in Vedic times. He represented the sun and also the fertility cult. By the second century BC he was merged with a god called Narayana, and came to be known as Narayana–Vishnu. Originally Narayana was a non-Vedic tribal god called *bhagavata*, and his worshippers were called *bhagavatas*. This god was conceived as a divine counterpart of the tribal chief. Just as a tribal chief received presents from his kinsmen and distributed shares among them, Narayana also was supposed to bestow shares or good fortune (*bhaga*) on his *bhakta* or worshippers. In return the worshippers or *bhaktas* offered their loving devotion or *bhakti* to him. The worshippers of Vishnu and those of Narayana were brought under a single umbrella by merging Vishnu with Narayana. The former was a Vedic god and the latter emerged subsequently with non-Vedic associations, but the two cultures, the two types of peoples, and the two gods mingled and merged.

Besides, Vishnu came to be identified with a legendary hero of the Vrishni tribe living in western India who was known as Krishna–Vasudeva. The great epic *Mahabharata* was recast to show that Krishna and Vishnu were one. Thus, by 200 BC the three streams of gods and their worshippers merged into one and resulted in the creation of Bhagavatism or Vaishnavism.

Bhagavatism was marked by *bhakti* and *ahimsa*. *Bhakti* meant the offer of loving devotion. It was a kind of loyalty offered by a tribal to his chief or by a subject to his king. *Ahimsa*, or the doctrine of non-killing of animals, suited the agricultural society and was in keeping with the old cult of lifegiving fertility associated with Vishnu. People worshipped the image of Vishnu, and offered it rice, sesamum, etc. Out of their aversion to killing animals, some of them took to an entirely vegetarian diet.

The new religion was sufficiently liberal to attract foreigners. It also appealed to artisans and merchants who became important under the Satavahanas and Kushans. Krishna taught in the *Bhagavadgita* that even women, *vaishyas*, and *shudras* who were born of sin could seek refuge in him. This religious text dealt with the Vaishnava teachings, as did the *Vishnu Purana*, and also to an extent the *Vishnu Smriti*.

Bhagavatism or Vaishnavism overshadowed Mahayana Buddhism by Gupta times. It preached the doctrine of incarnation, or *avatar*. History was presented as a cycle of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. It was believed that whenever the social order faced a crisis, Vishnu appeared in human form to save it. Each

incarnation of Vishnu was considered necessary for the salvation of dharma which coincided with the varna divided society and the institution of the patriarchal family protected by the state.

By the sixth century Vishnu became a member of the trinity of gods along with Shiva and Brahma, but was a dominant god in his own right. After the sixth century, several texts were written to popularize the virtues of worshipping him, but the most important was the *Bhagavata Purana*. The story in that text was recited by priests for several days. In medieval times *bhagavatagharas* or places meant for Vishnu worship and recitation of the legends associated with him began to be established in eastern India. Several religious recitations, including the *Vishnusahasranama*, were composed for the benefit of Vishnu worshippers.

A few Gupta kings were worshippers of Shiva, the god of destruction, but he came to the fore at a later stage, and does not seem to have been as important as Vishnu in the early phase of the Gupta rule.

Idol worship in the temples became a common feature of Hinduism from the Gupta period onwards and many festivals also began to be celebrated. Agricultural festivals observed by different classes of people were lent a religious garb and colour, and turned into useful sources of income for the priests.

The Gupta kings followed a policy of tolerance towards different religious sects. We find no example of the persecution of the followers of Buddhism and Jainism. This was also due to the change in the character of Buddhism which had come to acquire many features of Brahmanism or Hinduism.

Art

The Gupta period is called the Golden Age of ancient India. This may not be true in the economic field because several towns in north India declined during this period. However, the Guptas possessed a large quantity of gold, whatever its source, and they issued the largest number of gold coins. Princes and the rich could divert a part of their income to support those who were engaged in art and literature. Both Samudragupta and Chandragupta II were patrons of art and literature. Samudragupta is represented on his coins playing the lute (vina), and Chandragupta II is credited with maintaining in his court nine luminaries.

In ancient India, art was largely inspired by religion. Survivals of nonreligious art from ancient India are few. Buddhism gave great impetus to art in Maurya and post-Maurya times and led to the creation of massive stone

pillars, the hewing of beautiful caves, and the raising of high stupas or relic towers. The stupas appeared as dome-like structures on round bases, principally of stone. Innumerable images of the Buddha were sculptured.

During the Gupta period a life-size copper image of the Buddha of more than 6 feet was made. It was discovered at Sultanganj near Bhagalpur, and is now displayed in Birmingham. During the Gupta period beautiful images of the Buddha were fashioned at Sarnath and Mathura, but the finest specimens of Buddhist art in Gupta times are the Ajanta paintings. Although these paintings covered the period from the first century BC to the seventh century AD, most of them relate to Gupta times. They depict various events in the life of Gautama Buddha and the previous Buddhas whose birth stories are related in the Jatakas. These paintings are lifelike and natural, and the brilliance of their colours has not faded even after fourteen centuries. However, there is nothing to show that the Guptas were the patrons of the Ajanta paintings.

As the Guptas supported Brahmanism, images of Vishnu, Shiva, and some other Hindu gods were fashioned for the first time during their period. At many places, the entire pantheon is portrayed with the chief god at the centre surrounded by his retainers and subordinates. The leading god is represented as large in size, with his retainers and subordinate gods drawn on a smaller scale. This reflects clear social hierarchy and discrimination.

The Gupta period was poor in terms of architecture. All that we find are a few temples made of brick in UP and a stone temple. The brick temples of Bhitargaon in Kanpur, Bhitari in Ghazipur, and Deogarh in Jhansi may be mentioned. The Buddhist university at Nalanda was set up in the fifth century, and its earliest structure, made of brick, relates to this period.

Literature

The Gupta period is remarkable for the production of secular literature, which consisted of a fair degree of ornate court poetry. Bhasa was an important poet in the early phase of the Gupta period and wrote thirteen plays. He wrote in Sanskrit, but his dramas also contain a substantial amount of Prakrit. He was the author of a drama called *Dradira-charudatta*, which was later refashioned as *Mrichchhakatika* or the *Little Clay Cart* by Shudraka. The play deals with the love affair of a poor brahmana trader with a beautiful courtesan, and is considered one of the best works of ancient drama. In his plays Bhasa uses the term *yavanika* for the curtain, which suggests Greek contact. However, what has

made the Gupta period particularly famous is the work of Kalidasa who lived in the second half of the fourth and the first half of the fifth century. He was the greatest poet of classical Sanskrit literature and wrote *Abhijnanashakuntalam* which is very highly regarded in world literature. It relates the love story of King Dushyanta and Shakuntala, whose son Bharata appears as a famous ruler. *Shakuntalam* was one of the earliest Indian works to be translated into European languages, the other work being the *Bhagavadgita*. The plays produced in India during the Gupta period have two common features. First, they are all comedies; no tragedies are found. Secondly, characters of the higher and lower classes do not speak the same language; women and shudras featuring in these plays use Prakrit whereas the higher classes use Sanskrit. We may recall that Ashoka and the Satavahanas used Prakrit as the state language.

This period also shows an increase in the production of religious literature. Most works of the period had a strong religious bias. The two great epics, namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were almost completed by the fourth century AD. Although the epics and Puranas seem to have been compiled by the brahmanas, they represent the kshatriya tradition. They are replete with myths, legends, and exaggerations. They may reflect social developments but are not dependable for political history. The *Ramayana* relates the story of Rama, who was banished by his father Dasharatha from the kingdom of Ayodhya for fourteen years on account of the machinations of his stepmother Kaikeyi. He faithfully carried out his father's orders and went to live in a forest, from where his wife Sita was abducted by Ravana, the king of Lanka. Eventually Rama with the help of Sugriva succeeded in rescuing Sita. The story has two important moral strands. First, it idealizes the institution of family in which a son must obey his father, the younger brother must obey his elder brother, and the wife must be faithful to her husband under all circumstances. Second, Ravana symbolizes the force of evil, and Rama the force of righteousness. In the end, righteousness triumphs over the forces of evil, and a good order over a bad order. The story of Rama had a much wider social and religious appeal than the main narrative of the *Mahabharata*. There are many versions of the *Ramayana* in all the important Indian languages and also in those of Southeast Asia.

The *Mahabharata* is essentially the story of conflict between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It shows that kingship knows no kinship. Although the Pandavas were entitled to their share in the kingdom ruled by Dhritarashtra, the Kauravas refused to give them even a single inch of territory. This led to a prolonged fratricidal war between the Pandavas, patronized by Krishna, and the Kauravas fighting on their own. Eventually the

Kauravas were worsted in the battle, and the Pandavas emerged victorious. This story too symbolizes the victory of righteousness over the forces of evil. The *Bhagavadgita* forms an important part of the *Mahabharata*. It teaches that a person must carry out the duties assigned to him by his caste and rank under all circumstances without any desire for reward.

The Puranas follow the lines of the epics, and the earlier ones were finally compiled in Gupta times. They are full of myths, legends, sermons, etc., which were meant for the education and edification of the common people. The period also saw the compilation of various Smritis or the lawbooks in which social and religious norms were written in verse. The phase of writing commentaries on the Smritis begins after the Gupta period.

The Gupta period also saw the development of Sanskrit grammar based on the work of Panini and Patanjali. This period is particularly memorable for the compilation of *Amarakosha* by Amarasimha, who was a luminary in the court of Chandragupta II. This lexicon is learnt by heart by students learning Sanskrit in the traditional way. Overall, the Gupta period was a bright phase in the history of classical literature and one that developed an ornate style that was different from the old simple Sanskrit. From this period onwards we find a greater emphasis on verse than on prose, and also a few commentaries. Sanskrit was undoubtedly the court language of the Guptas, and although the period produced much brahmanical religious literature, it also gave birth to some of the earliest pieces of secular literature.

Science and Technology

In mathematics, the period saw, in the fifth century, a work called *Aryabhatiya* written by Aryabhata who belonged to Pataliputra. It appears that this mathematician was well versed in various kinds of calculations. Aryabhata displays an awareness of both the zero system and the decimal system. A Gupta inscription of AD 448 from Allahabad district suggests that the decimal system was known in India at the beginning of the fifth century. In the field of astronomy, a book called *Romaka Sidhanta* was compiled, its title indicating that it was influenced by Greek and Roman ideas.

The Gupta craftsmen distinguished themselves by their work in iron and bronze. Bronze images of the Buddha began to be produced on a considerable scale because of the knowledge the smiths had of advanced metal technology. With regard to iron objects, the best example is the iron pillar found at Mehrauli

in Delhi. Manufactured in the fourth century AD, the pillar has not gathered any rust over the subsequent fifteen centuries which is a great tribute to the technological skill of the craftsmen, although the arid conditions in Delhi may also have contributed to its preservation. It was impossible to produce such a pillar in any iron foundry in the West until about a century ago. It is a pity that the later Indian craftsmen could not develop this knowledge further.

Chronology

(BC)

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 5 C | The chandalas appeared in Indian society. |
| 200 | Emergence of Bhagavatism or the Krishna cult. |
| 2 C | Krishna merged with Narayana and came to be known as Narayana–Vishnu. |

(AD)

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 1–5 C | Period of the Ajanta paintings. |
| 4 C | The iron pillar was set-up at Mehrauli in Delhi. |
| 5 C | The date of the <i>Narada Smriti</i> and Aryabhata's <i>Aryabhatiya</i> . Awareness of the zero and decimal systems. Fa-hsien states that the chandalas lived outside the village and dealt in meat and flesh. |
| 448 | A Gupta inscription of 448 from Allahabad district suggests the knowledge of the decimal system. |
| 510 | The first inscriptional evidence of sati. |
| 550 | Around this year, the people of the eastern Roman empire learnt from the Chinese the art of growing silk which adversely affected the Indian trade. |