

The Age of the Guptas

The Gupta Empire

The Gupta Empire ruled the country from AD 320 to AD 540. It was not as large as the Mauryan Empire, but it politically united the North Indian territories for more than hundred years. The period of the Gupta Empire is known as the '**Classical Age**' or the '**Golden Age**' of Indian history.

Sources

We get information about the Gupta Empire mainly from literary and archaeological sources.

Literary Accounts

Dharmashastras, *Puranas*, *Smritis*, religious texts and travel accounts of Fa-hien, I-tsing and Hiuen Tsang form important literary sources of the period.

Accounts of Fa-hien

- Fa-hien was a Chinese pilgrim who visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II on a religious mission.
- During his stay in India, he went on pilgrimages to Mathura, Kannauj, Kapilavastu, Kushinagar, Vaishali, Patliputra, Kashi and Rajagriha.
- According to Fa-hien, Magadha was a prosperous country with large towns and wealthy people. Although people were wealthy, they led simple lives and observed the Buddhist rules of conduct.
- Fa-hien writes that Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Buddhism and Jainism peacefully coexisted in society. According to him, the penal code was mild and offences were ordinarily punished by mild fines only.

Accounts of Hiuen Tsang

- Hiuen Tsang was a Chinese Buddhist who visited India in AD 630 during the reign of king Harsha.
- According to Hiuen Tsang, king Harsha personally supervised every department of administration and introduced several measures for the welfare of the people.
- Land revenue was the main source of income and taxes were moderate.
- Hiuen Tsang says that the caste system was very rigid. Apart from four main castes, several sub-castes also existed. The people followed simple habits and led a pure and chaste life.
- Women were free to move in society, and there was no purdah system. Child marriage was very common.

Kalidasa

- Kalidasa is regarded as the greatest poet. He lived during the Gupta Period. His four poetic works are *Ritusamhara*, *Raghuvamsa*, *Meghaduta* and *Kumarasambhava*. His works have been translated into major languages of the world.
- Kalidasa's works contain traces of political history and provide us with reliable information about government, society and religion.

Archaeological Sources

Many archaeological sources such as the Allahabad Pillar inscription, Mathura stone inscription, Udayagiri cave inscription, temples, forts, stupas and coins give us important insights into the conditions prevailing during the Gupta Period.

The Allahabad Pillar Inscription

- The Allahabad Pillar Inscription contains a *prashasti* which is written in praise of Samudragupta. It is written by Harishena. It mentions the names of the kingdoms and tribal republics which were conquered by Samudragupta.
- The inscription also gives us the list of the kings which were ruling India in the first half of the 4th century AD.

The Vishnu Temple at Deogarh

- The Vishnu Temple at Deogarh is located about 112 km away from Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh. The temple is completely made of stone.
- While the outer walls of the temple are decorated with scenes from Ramayana, the entrance and the pillars are adorned with many paintings and carvings. This temple gives us a glimpse of the craftsmanship of the people belonging to the Gupta dynasty.

Nalanda University

- Located at Rajagriha in Bihar, the Nalanda University was a famous educational institution in India. It was founded by Sakraditya in the 5th century AD during the reign of Kumaragupta-I.
- Students from countries such as Korea, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Japan, Mongolia, China and Tibet obtained education from the Nalanda University. Logic, grammar, medicine, samkya, yoga, Vedas, sciences and mathematics were some subjects which were offered in the university.
- This university was destroyed by Ikhtiyar Khalji in the 12th century AD. The university was a testament of the high educational level of India during the Gupta Period.

Gupta Kings

The Gupta dynasty was founded by **Srigupta** in circa AD 240. He was succeeded by his son **Ghatotkacha**. We do not have enough and reliable sources to construct the history of the period.

Chandragupta I: He is regarded as one of the greatest Gupta rulers. He adopted the title of *maharajadhiraja* or *the king of the kings*. He extended the boundaries of his empire through matrimonial alliances by marrying the Lichchavi princess, Kumaradevi. He was an able conqueror and extended the limits of his empire by annexing many territories.

Samudragupta

- Chandragupta I was succeeded by his son Samudragupta. The Allahabad Pillar inscription gives us insight into his annexations and abilities. He ruled from AD 335 to AD 375. His empire extended from River Brahmaputra in the east to rivers Yamuna and Chambal in the west. Himalayas formed the boundary of his kingdom in the north, and River Narmada marked the southern frontiers.
- Because of his bravery and leadership skills, he is also known as 'Napoleon of India'. He defeated the Naga kings of Mathura, Gwalior and Ahichhatra. He defeated many southern states but allowed them to rule after asking them to accept his sovereignty.
- The Allahabad Pillar inscription describes four types of kingdoms which existed during this period. The Pillar also mentions the policies of Samudragupta. These were
 - Samudragupta defeated nine rulers of *Aryavrata* and made their territories part of his empire.
 - He also defeated twelve kings of *Dakshinpatha*, but they were allowed to rule their states.
 - Kingdoms in Assam, coastal Bengal, Nepal and many republic states in the northwest paid annual tribute to him, followed his orders and attended his court.



Coin of Samudragupta, with Garuda pillar, British Museum

- According to Harishena, who was Samudragupta's court poet, he performed ashvamedha yajna or horse sacrifice.
- Samudragupta was not only an able conqueror and an administrator but was also a musician and a poet. He also issued eight types of gold coins.

Chandragupta II or Vikramaditya

- Chandragupta II was known as Vikramaditya. He continued the policy of expansion of his father. He defeated the Sakas and took over the ports of Cambay (Khambhat), Bharuch and Sopara. He was thus given the title of Sakari or the conqueror of the Sakas.
- He also occupied Saurashtra and Malwa. This gave him access to the ports of western India and gave him direct access to seaborne commerce with Europe through Egypt.
- He entered into matrimonial alliance with the Naga family which further helped him to extend the influence of his empire. The marriage of Chandragupta's daughter Prabhavati with the Vakataka ruler helped him to establish his political influence in the Deccan.
- He was also a great patron of art and literature. His court at Ujjain had numerous scholars such as Kalidasa and Amarasingha. It was during his reign that the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien visited India and left a detailed account of the condition of society during this time.
- He issued gold coins of wide varieties. His court was adorned by 'nine gems' including Kalidasa, Varahamihira and Amarasingha.



Gold coins of Samudragupta II

Kumaragupta

- Chandragupta II was succeeded by Kumaragupta in AD 414. It was during his reign that the Huns, a barbarian tribe of Central Asia, invaded India for the first time.
- The Huns later attacked India during the rule of Skandgupta and were defeated by him.

Administration under the Guptas

The *gana sanghas* or the republican kingdoms gradually waned away during the Gupta Period. Following were the main features of administration under the Gupta rule:

Strong Monarchy

- The theory of divinity of the kings became popular during the Gupta Period as the Gupta kings were compared to gods such as Yama, Varuna, Indra and Kubera.
- The administration was highly centralised as all political, economic, military and judicial powers were centred in the hands of the Gupta emperor.
- All the appointments of important administrative and military officers and governors were made by the king, and they worked under his supervision.
- Brahmins occupied an important position in the court of the Guptas. Although the kings had unlimited powers, the Brahmins were the custodian and interpreter of the laws. They also kept a check on the royal powers.

The Council of Ministers

- The Gupta rulers had a council of ministers. It consisted of royal princes, high officers and feudatories.
- Kumaramatyas and sandhivigrahika were some high officials. The sandhivigrahika was the minister of war and peace. He maintained relations with various feudatories of the empire.
- Shaulkika was an officer who was concerned with the collection of tolls on commodities.
- Revenues were collected mostly in kind but rich peasants paid them in cash.

Provincial and Local Administration

- The Gupta Empire was divided into several provinces called Bhuktis. Bhuktis were looked after by the Governor called Uparika.
- The provinces were further subdivided into districts called Vishayas which were looked after by the Vishyapati. Prominent cities were looked after by Ayukats.
- The villages were managed by a headman who looked after its administration with the help of the elderly people of the village.
- Vithis were the local elements who looked after land transactions.
- The towns were administered by a committee of five members and were managed by an officer known as Purpala.
- Various artisans and craftsmen organised themselves into guilds known as Kulika. Merchants were organised into Shreshthi.

Feudalism during the Gupta Period

- With the passage of time, high officers of the Gupta Empire began to be paid not in cash but in the form of land grants. This marked the beginning of feudalism in India.
- There was a process of devolution of the state authority during the reign of the Guptas. Earlier the functions of maintaining law and order, collection of taxes, defence and regulation of mines which were earlier performed by the state officials was later shifted to warriors and then the local authorities.

Progress in Science and Authority during the Gupta Period

Gupta Period is known for contributions made in the fields of science and technology.

- **Aryabhatta**, a mathematician and an astronomer, wrote *Aryabhattachiyam* and *Surya Sidhanta*. In his books, he stressed that it is the Earth which revolves around the Sun. He also laid down the rule for calculating the circumference of a circle. He gave a scientific explanation for the occurring of the eclipses.
- **Varahamihira** wrote two famous books *Panch Sidhantika* and *Brihat Samhita*. In his books, he proved that the Moon rotates round the Earth and the Earth rotates round the Sun. He also studied the movements of the planets.
- **Brahamagupta** wrote *Brahma Sphutic Siddhanta* in which he described the law of gravitation several centuries before Newton.
- Indian numerals from 1 to 9 were learned by the Arabs and then were spread to Europe. The Indian numerals are used throughout the world today. The concept and use of zero was invented in India which later spread to other countries.
- Knowledge of medicine improved largely because of the efforts of **Charaka** and **Sushruta**. They were famous scholars who worked on Ayurvedic medicines. Charaka wrote the *Charaka Samhita* and Sushruta, a physician and a specialist in cosmetic surgery, wrote the *Susruta Samhita*. **Dhanvantari** was a general physician.
- Metallurgy had reached an advanced stage during the Gupta Period. The Iron Pillar at Mehrauli near Qutub Minar shows the high level of metal casting skills of the Gupta artists. It has not rusted to date.
- The minting of gold and silver coins are other examples of the proficiency of the metal caster during the period.

Art and Architecture

Architecture

- Temples during the Gupta Period were built on a raised platform. They were built with brick and stone.
- In temples, sanctum sanatoriums were built with a flat roof. In some temples, a second storey above the shrine chamber was also built.
- The outer walls of the temples were richly carved. The temples were square in shape with a low shikara.
- The Brick Temple at Bhitargaon in Kanpur, Deogarh Temple in Jhansi and Bhitari Temple in Gazipur are some important specimens of the Gupta architecture.
- Many stupas, viharas and chaityas were constructed during this period.



The Vishnu Temple at Deogarh near Jhansi

Sculpture

- The sculpture during the Gupta Period evolved out of the Mathura school of art and the Sarnath School of sculpture. Later, Patliputra also emerged as the third school of sculpture.
- The Indian artists paid attention towards plain and folded drapery.
- During the Gupta Period, the halo surrounding the head of a deity began to be ornamented and decorated.
- Contrary to the Gandhara artists, Buddha was now shown with curly hair.



A painting in Ajanta Caves

Paintings

- The art of painting reached a high level of excellence during the Gupta Period. The best example of the Gupta painting can be found at Ajanta, Ellora and Bagh caves.
- We find the use of vegetable dye in the paintings. The paintings in the caves depict various scenes from the life of Buddha and Jataka Tales.
- Natural colours such as white, green, yellow, blue and black were used in these paintings.

Literary Arts

The Guptas made Sanskrit an official language. All the inscriptions and official documents were written in Sanskrit. As a result, classical Sanskrit literature flourished during the Gupta Period. Many literary works were composed during this period. They were

- **Kalidasa** wrote plays such as *Abhijnan Shakuntalam* and *Meghdootam*.
- **Vishakhadatta** wrote *Mudrarakshasa* which described Chandragupta as a great king.
- **Bhasa** and **Harisena**: Harishena was the court poet of Samudragupta. He wrote prashasti in praise of Samudragupta. Bhasa wrote 13 plays with themes drawn from Ramayana and Mahabharat.
- **Dandin and Subandhu**: Dandin wrote *Kavyadarsha* and *Dasakumaracharita*. Subandhu wrote *Vasavadutta*.
- **Bhairavi** composed *Kiratarjuniya* which describes the battle between Kirat and Arjuna.
- **Vishnusharma** wrote *Panchtantra*. It is a compilation of various stories with themes or messages.
- **Fa-hien**, the Chinese traveller, visited India and wrote a glowing account of the Gupta kingdom.

- **Banabhatta** was the court poet of Harshavardhana who ruled after the Gupta Period. Harshacharita was a famous book written by him.
- **Manusmriti** was written during this period. Puranas including the Bhagvata Purana were written during this period. They contain philosophical doctrines.

Because of the political unity of the states, advancements made in sciences, art and literature, the Gupta Period is known as 'The Golden Age' or 'The Classical Age'.