

Rise and Growth of the Gupta Empire

Background

After the break-up of the Maurya empire, the Satavahanas and Kushans emerged as the two large powers. The Satavahanas acted as a stabilizing factor in the Deccan and the south to which they provided political unity and economic prosperity on the strength of their trade with the Roman empire. The Kushans performed the same role in the north. Both these empires came to an end in the mid-third century.

On the ruins of the Kushan empire arose a new empire that established its sway over a substantial part of the former dominions of the Kushans. This was the empire of the Guptas, who may have been of vaishya origin. Different titles are recommended for the different varnas by the Dharmashastras. The title *sharman* or auspicious is recommended for the brahmana, *varman* or armour for the kshatriya, *gupta* or hidden (also protected) for the vaishya, and *dasa* or servile for the shudra. Although the Gupta empire was not as large as the Maurya empire, it kept north India politically united for over a century from AD 335 to 455. The original kingdom of the Guptas comprised UP and Bihar at the end of the third century. UP appears to have been a more important province for the Guptas than Bihar, because early Gupta coins and inscriptions are largely found in that state. If we exclude some feudatories and private individuals whose inscriptions are largely found in MP, UP stands out as the most important area in relation to finds of Gupta antiquities. UP therefore seems to have been the place from where the Guptas operated and fanned out in different directions. Probably with their centre of power at Prayag, they spread into the neighbouring regions.

The Guptas were possibly feudatories of the Kushans in UP, and seem to have succeeded them without any considerable time-lag. At many places in UP and Bihar, Kushan antiquities are immediately followed by Gupta antiquities. It is likely that the Guptas learnt the use of the saddle, reins, buttoned coats, trousers, and boots from the Kushans. All these gave them mobility and made them excellent horsemen. In the Kushan scheme of things, horse-chariots and elephants had ceased to be important, horsemen playing the central role. This also seems to have been the case with the Guptas on whose coins horsemen are represented. Although some Gupta kings are described as excellent and unrivalled chariot warriors, their basic strength lay in the use of horses.

The Guptas enjoyed certain material advantages. The centre of their operations lay in the fertile land of Madhyadesh covering Bihar and UP. They were able to exploit the iron ores of central India and south Bihar. Also, they took advantage of their proximity to the areas in north India that conducted the silk trade with the eastern Roman empire, also known as the Byzantine empire. Given these favourable factors, the Guptas established their rule over Anuganga (along the Ganges in the mid-Gangetic basin), Prayag (modern Allahabad), Saketa (modern Ayodhya), and Magadha. In the course of time, this kingdom became an all-India empire. The Kushan power in north India came to an end around AD 230, and then a substantial part of central India fell under the rule of the Murundas, who were possibly kinsmen of the Kushans. The Murundas continued to rule till AD 250. Twenty-five years later, in about AD 275, the Gupta dynasty came to power.

Chandragupta I (AD 319–34)

The first important king of the Gupta dynasty was Chandragupta I. He married a Lichchhavi princess, in all probability from Nepal, which strengthened his position. The Guptas were probably vaishyas, and hence marriage into a kshatriya family lent them prestige. Chandragupta I seems to have been a ruler of considerable importance because he started the Gupta era in AD 319–20, which marked the date of his accession. Later many inscriptions of the Gupta era came to be dated in this era.



MAP 10 The Gupta Empire at the Close of the Fourth Century. *Courtesy ASI*

Samudragupta (AD 335–80)

The Gupta kingdom was enlarged enormously by Chandragupta's son and successor Samudragupta (AD 335–80). He was the opposite of Ashoka. Ashoka believed in a policy of peace and non-aggression, but Samudragupta delighted in violence and conquest. His court poet Harishena wrote a glowing account of the military exploits of his patron, and, in a long inscription, the poet enumerates the peoples and countries that were conquered by Samudragupta. The inscription is engraved at Allahabad on the same pillar that carries the inscriptions of the peace-loving Ashoka.

The places and the countries conquered by Samudragupta can be divided into five groups. Group one includes the princes of the Ganga– Yamuna doab who were defeated and whose kingdoms were incorporated into the Gupta empire. Group two includes the rulers of the eastern Himalayan states and of some frontier states such as Nepal, Assam, and Bengal, which were made to feel the weight of Samudragupta's arms. It also covers some republics of Punjab. The republics, which flickered on the ruins of the Maurya empire, were finally crushed by Samudragupta. Group three includes the forest kingdoms situated in the Vindhya region and known as *Atavika rajyas* which Samudragupta brought under his control. Group four includes twelve rulers of the eastern Deccan and south India who were conquered and liberated. Samudragupta's arms reached as far as Kanchi in Tamil Nadu, where the Pallavas were compelled to recognize his suzerainty. Group five includes the names of the Shakas and Kushans, some of them ruling in Afghanistan. It is said that Samudragupta swept them out of power and received the submission of the rulers of distant lands. The prestige and influence of Samudragupta spread even outside India. According to a Chinese source, Meghavarman, the ruler of Sri Lanka, sent a missionary to Samudragupta for permission to build a Buddhist temple at Gaya. This was granted, and the temple was developed into a huge monastic establishment. If we are to believe the eulogistic inscription at Allahabad, it would appear that Samudragupta never knew defeat, and because of his bravery and generalship he is called the Napoleon of India. There is no doubt that Samudragupta forcibly unified the greater part of India under him, and his power was felt in a much larger area than that of his predecessors.

Chandragupta II (AD 380–412)

The reign of Chandragupta II saw the high watermark of the Gupta empire. He extended the limits of the empire by marriage alliance and conquest. Chandragupta married his daughter Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince of the brahmana caste and ruled in central India. The prince died, and was succeeded by his young son. Prabhavati thus became the virtual ruler. As testified to by some of her land charters, which betray the influence of the eastern Gupta writing, she promoted the interests of her father Chandragupta. Thus Chandragupta exercised indirect control over the Vakataka kingdom in central India, and this afforded him great advantage. With his great influence in this area, Chandragupta II conquered Mathura from the Kushans. More importantly, he occupied western Malwa and Gujarat, which had for about four centuries been under the rule of the Shaka Kshatrapas. The conquest gave Chandragupta control over the western sea coast, famous for trade and commerce. This contributed to the prosperity of Malwa, and its chief city Ujjain. Ujjain seems to have been made the second capital by Chandragupta II.

The exploits of a king called Chandra are glorified in an iron pillar inscription fixed near Qutb Minar in Delhi. If Chandra corresponds to Chandragupta II, it would appear that he established Gupta authority in north-western India and in a substantial part of Bengal. However, the epigraphic eulogy seems to be exaggerated.

Chandragupta II adopted the title of Vikramaditya, which had been first used by an Ujjain ruler in 58–57 BC as a mark of victory over the Shaka Kshatrapas of western India. This Ujjain ruler is traditionally called Shakari or the enemy of the Shakas. The Vikrama *samvat* or era was started in 58–57 BC by Shakari. However, Chandragupta II proved to be a greater Shakari and Vikramaditya. The court of Chandragupta II at Ujjain was adorned by numerous scholars including Kalidasa and Amarasingha.

It was during Chandragupta's reign that the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien (AD 399–414) visited India and wrote an elaborate account of the life of its people.

Fall of the Empire

The successors of Chandragupta II had to face an invasion by the Hunas from Central Asia in the second half of AD fifth century. Although initially the Gupta king Skandagupta took effective measures to stem the march of the Hunas into

India, his successors proved to be weak and were unable to cope with the Huna invaders who excelled in horsemanship and possibly used stirrups made of metal. They could move quickly, and being excellent archers they seem to have achieved considerable success not only in Iran but also in India.

By AD 485, the Hunas occupied eastern Malwa and a substantial portion of central India where their inscriptions have been found. The intermediate regions, such as Punjab and Rajasthan, also passed into their hands. This must have drastically reduced the extent of the Gupta empire at the beginning of the sixth century. Although the Huna power was soon overthrown by Yashodharman of Malwa who belonged to the Aulikara feudatory family, the Malwa prince successfully challenged the authority of the Guptas and set up in AD 532 a pillar of victory commemorating his conquest of almost the whole of northern India. Yashodharman's rule was short-lived, but it dealt a severe blow to the Gupta empire.

The Gupta empire was further undermined by the rise of the feudatories. The governors appointed by the Gupta kings in north Bengal and their feudatories in Samatata or south-east Bengal tended to declare themselves independent. The later Guptas of Magadha established their power in Bihar. Alongside them, the Maukharis rose to power in Bihar and UP, and had their capital at Kanauj. It seems that by AD 550, Bihar and UP had passed out of Gupta hands. By the beginning of the sixth century we find independent princes issuing land grants in their own right in northern MP, though they used the Gupta era in dating their charters. The rulers of Valabhi established their authority in Gujarat and western Malwa. After the reign of Skandagupta, that is, AD 467, hardly any Gupta coin or inscription has been found in western Malwa and Saurashtra. The loss of western India, which seems to have been complete by the end of the fifth century, must have deprived the Guptas of the rich revenues from trade and commerce and crippled them economically. In north India, the princes of Thanesar established their power in Haryana and then gradually moved on to Kanauj.

The Gupta state may have found it difficult to maintain a large professional army because of the growing practice of giving land grants for religious and other purposes, which was bound to reduce revenues. Their income may have been also lost by the decline of foreign trade. The migration of a guild of silk-weavers from Gujarat to Malwa in AD 473 and their adoption of non-productive professions show that there was no great demand for the cloth produced by them. The advantages from Gujarat trade gradually disappeared. After the middle of the fifth century, the Gupta kings made desperate attempts to maintain their gold currency by reducing the content of pure gold in it, but this proved to be of no

avail. Although the rule of the imperial Guptas lingered till the sixth century, the imperial glory had vanished a century earlier.

Chronology

(AD)

3 C	The original kingdom of the Guptas comprised UP and Bihar at the end of this century.
230	End of the Kushan power in north India. The Murundas ruled till AD 250.
275	The dynasty of the Guptas gained power.
319–20	The Gupta era started by the first Gupta emperor Chandragupta I.
319–34	Chandragupta I.
335–80	Samudragupta, the son and successor of Chandragupta I.
380–412	Chandragupta II.
399–414	Visit of Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien.
5 C	The Huna invasion in the second half of this century.
467	End of Skandagupta's reign.
473	Migration of a guild of silk weavers from Gujarat to Malwa.
485	The Hunas occupied eastern Malwa and a part of central India.
532	Yashodharman, the Malwa prince, challenged the Guptas and set up a victory pillar claiming his conquest of northern India.
550	The Guptas lost Bihar and UP.