



The Guptas

The period of the Guptas is also referred to as the 'Classical Age' of ancient India. The Gupta Empire kept northern India politically united for more than 200 years (320 - 540CE). There are a number of achievements to credit of this dynasty-art, literature and the sciences received royal patronage.

Sources of Information

There are several sources to help narrate the story of the Guptas.

Literary Sources- Both plays and travelogues give a portrayal of the period. Works by writers like Vishakhadatta and Shudraka give us insight into life in the Gupta Age. Faxian, the Chinese Buddhist traveler, described in his writing the social and religious conditions of India during these times.

Inscriptions-There is a wealth of inscription belonging to the Gupta period, in a variety of places that reveal the achievements of the rulers.

Seals and Coins- Several seals and coins belonging to this period have been found, which offer us a glimpse into the age of the Guptas.

Art and Monuments- The Gupta Age produced masterpieces in arts, the most notable being the beautiful image of Buddha at Mathura. For the first time, we see the emergence of temples and also images of Vishnu and other deities.

Prashastis and what they tell us:

Inscription on the Ashokan pillar at Allahabad is of a special kind known as a prashasti, a Sanskrit word, meaning 'in praise of'. While Prashastis were composed for some of the rulers. Such as Gautamiputra Shri Satakarni, they became far more important from the time of the Guptas.

Chandra Gupta I (320 - 335CE): The Gupta were vassals of the Kushanas. Chandra Gupta I ascended the throne of Magadha sometime around 320CE. He cemented his position by marrying a Lichchavi princess from present-day Nepal. Chandra Gupta laid a strong foundation for the kingdom. He was succeeded by his son Samudra Gupta.

Samudra Gupta (335-375 CE): Samudra Gupta conquered and occupied vast territories including present-day Delhi, western Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, Assam and Bengal. Even parts of Punjab and Afghanistan came under his rule. Samudra Gupta was not only a great conqueror, he was also an accomplished veena player and a poet.

Samudragupta's prashasti: The poet praised the king in glowing terms- as a warrior, as a king who won victories in battle, who was learned and the best of poets. He is also described as equal to the gods. The prashasti was composed in very long sentences. Harishena describes four different kinds of rulers, and tells us about Samudragupta's policies towards them.

1. The rulers of Aryavarta, the area shaded in green on the map. Here there were nine rulers who were uprooted, and their kingdoms were made a part of Samudragupta's empire.

2. The rulers of Dakshinapatha. Here there were twelve rulers, some of whose capitals are marked with red dots on the map. They surrendered to Samudragupta after being defeated and then allowed them to rule again.

3. The inner circle of neighboring states, including Assam, coastal Bengal, Nepal and a number of Gana Sanghas (remember chapter 6) in the north- west, marked



6th – New Empires and Kingdoms I



in purple on the map. They brought tribute, followed his orders, and attended his court.

4. The rulers of the outlying areas, marked in blue of the map, perhaps the descendants of the Kushanas and Shakas, and the ruler of Sri Lanka, who submitted to him and offered daughters in marriage. Ujjain and Pataliputra (Patna) were important centres of the Gupta rulers.

Chandra Gupta II (375 - 415 CE): The reign of the Guptas reached its peak during the rule of Chandra Gupta II or Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya. He conquered the Saka kingdom in the west and made Ujjain his second capital. He also occupied Malwa (in Madhya Pradesh) and Kathiawar (in Gujarat). The inscriptions on the iron pillar near the Qutub Minar in Delhi are believed to refer to Chandra Gupta II.

Kumara Gupta (415-454 CE): Kumara Gupta, who succeeded Chandra Gupta, ruled for 40 years, and was a powerful king. Kumara Gupta was followed by Skanda Gupta (454-468 CE). Through powerful, Skanda Gupta had to contend with the invading Huns from Central Asia. Through he managed to defeat them, the power of the Guptas started declining after his death. By 550 CE, almost all of what was the Gupta Empire vanished.

Life Under the Guptas

Administration: The empire was divided into a number of provinces or bhuktis. They were placed under governors or uparikas. The provinces were further subdivided into districts or vishayas which were headed by vishayapatis. Bigger cities were administered by ayuktas, who were appointed by the governor. These ayuktas were assisted by town clerks. Many taxes were levied on lands—one-fourth to one-sixth of the land revenue was collected as tax. High-ranking officials were probably paid in cash but over period of time, land grants replaced cash payments. This practice of 'feudalism' in India.

Society

The caste system had by now made deep inroads in society. More and more sub-castes emerged as the foreigners who came into India were fitted in one caste or the other. Untouchability continued to be practised.

Trade

The Gupta Empire had long-distance trade with the Eastern Roman Empire, West Asia. Contacts through trade also led to a more long-lasting impact on the cultures of South-East Asia. Sanskrit, Buddhism and Hinduism spread from India.

Religion

Religion gained importance in the Gupta period. Though the rulers were Hindu, they were tolerant towards other faiths. A great transformation or change provided the base for modern Hinduism. Idols were sculpted of gods and goddesses and worshipped in temples. The concept of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva gained popularity, as did the worship of Shakti. The university at Nalanda, the most famous centre of Buddhist learning, was founded by Kumara Gupta Mahendraditya.

