

Ancient Indian History UPSC CSE

(Prelims + Mains)
Supplementary Study Material

Module 10: Gupta empire

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Rise and Growth of the Gupta Empire

Background

- 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.
- 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.
- The Guptas established their rule over Anuganga (along the Ganges in the mid-Gangetic basin), Prayag (modern Allahabad), Saketa (modern Ayodhya), and Magadha.
- 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.

Samudragupta (AD 335–80)

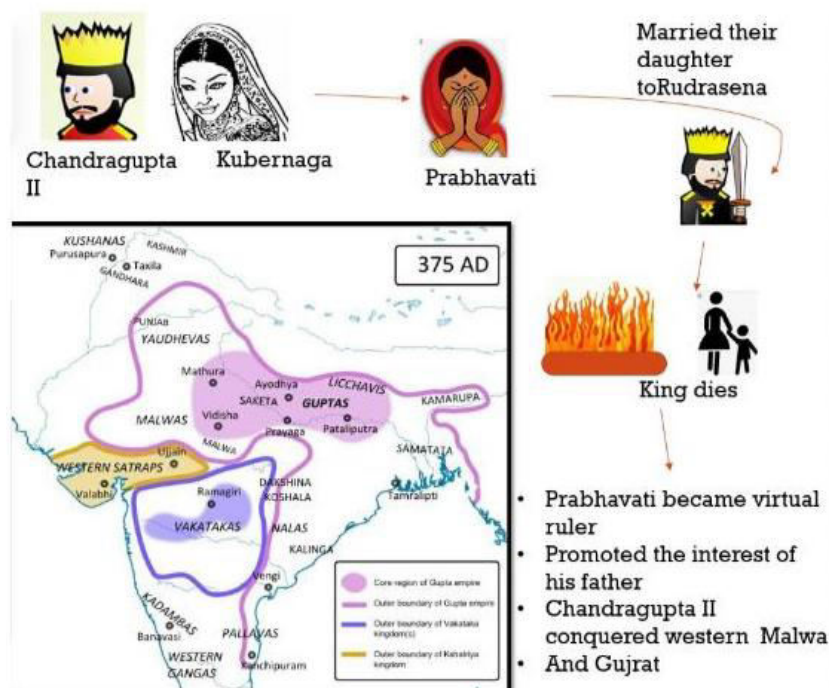
- The Gupta kingdom was enlarged enormously by Chandragupta's son and successor Samudragupta (AD 335–80). He was the opposite of Ashoka. Ashoka believed in a policy of peace and non-aggression, but Samudragupta delighted in violence and conquest.



- 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 rajas* 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.

Chandragupta II (AD 380–412)

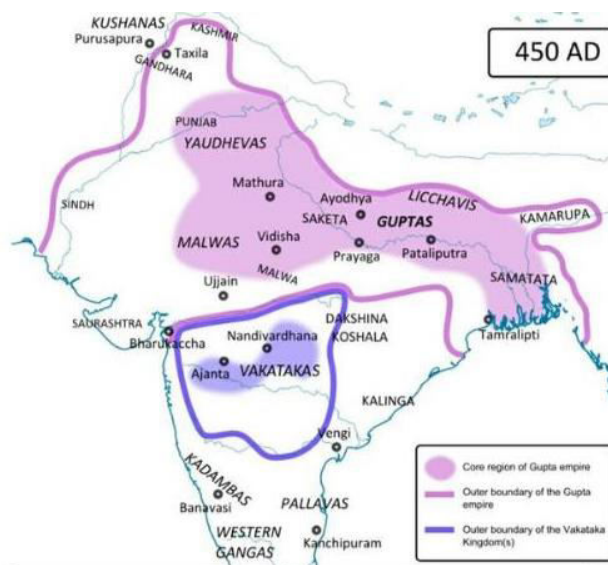
- The reign of Chandragupta II saw the high watermark of the Gupta empire. He extended the limits of the empire by marriage alliance and conquest.
- Chandragupta married his daughter Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince of the brahmana caste and ruled in central India.



- 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. 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.



- The inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, historians. Some feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages to extend agriculture to new areas. Others suggest that land grants were indicative of weakening political power: as kings were losing control over their *samantas*, they tried to win allies.
- An *agrahara* was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well.
- Successful merchants, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthis* and *sattavahas* in Prakrit, coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (c. sixth century BCE onwards) “*Periplus*” is a Greek word meaning sailing around and “*Erythraean*” was the Greek name for the Red Sea.



Fall of the Empire

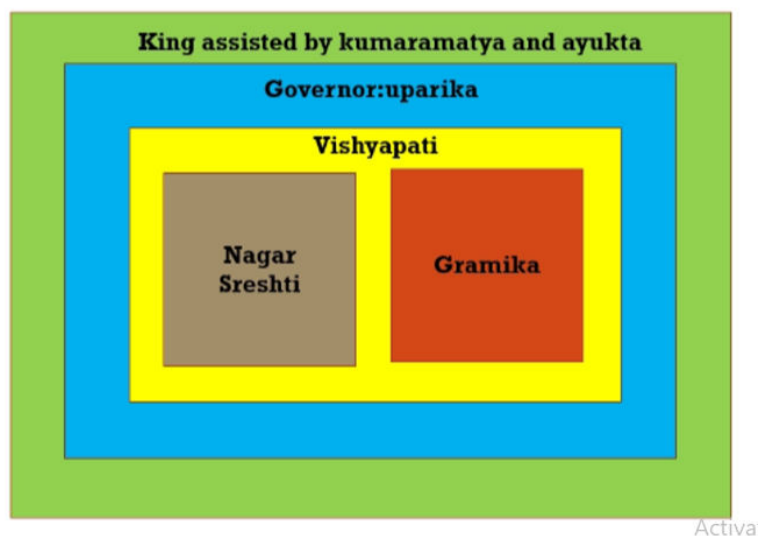
- The successors of Chandragupta II had to face an invasion by the Hunas from Central Asia in the second half of AD fifth century. Although initially the Gupta king Skandagupta took effective measures to stem the march of the Hunas into India, his successors proved to be weak and were unable to cope with the Huna invaders who excelled in horsemanship and possibly used stirrups made of metal.
- 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.
- 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 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. 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.

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.

- 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 central and western India, the villagers were also subjected to forced labour called *vishti* by the royal army and officials. 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. 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 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.

■ Bureaucracy



- 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.
- 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.
- 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. 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.

Trends in Trade and the Agrarian Economy

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Social Developments

- 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 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 first example of the immolation of a widow after the death of her husband occurred during the Gupta period in AD 510.
- The Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian (c. fifth century CE) wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them. Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang (c. seventh century), observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.

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 iron pillar at Mehrauli, Delhi, is a remarkable example of the skill of Indian crafts persons. It is made of iron, 7.2. m high, and weighs over 3 tonnes. It was made about 1500 years ago. The word *stupa* means a mound. While there are several kinds of *stupas*, round and tall, big and small, these have certain common features. Generally, there is a small box placed at the centre or heart of the *stupa*. This may contain bodily remains (such as teeth, bone or ashes) of the Buddha or his followers, or things they used, as well as precious stones, and coins. This box, known as a relic casket, was covered with earth.
- Often, a path, known as the *pradakshina patha*, was laid around the *stupa*. This was surrounded with railings. Entrance to the path was through gateways. Devotees walked around the *stupa*, in a clockwise direction, as a mark of devotion. Both railings and gateways were often decorated with sculpture.
- The most important part of the temple was the room known as the *garbhagriha*, where the image of the chief deity was placed. At Bhitargaon, a tower, known as the *shikhara*, was built on top of the *garbhagriha*, to mark this out as a sacred place. Building *shikharas* required careful planning. Most temples also had a space known as the *mandapa*. It was a hall where people could assemble. Monolithic temples at Mahabalipuram. Each of these was carved out of a huge, single piece of stone (that is why they are known as monoliths). While brick structures are built up by adding layers of bricks from the bottom upwards, in this case the stone cutters had to work from top downwards. Ajanta- Most of these were monasteries for Buddhist monks, and some of them were decorated with paintings. Here are some examples. As the caves are dark inside, most of these paintings were done in the light of torches. The colours, which are vivid even after 1500 years, were made of plants and minerals.

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*. Vishnu came to be identified with a legendary hero of the Vrishni tribe living in western India who was known as Krishna–Vasudeva.
- 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 life giving fertility associated with Vishnu.
- 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.

Art

- The Gupta period is called the Golden Age of ancient India. 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.
- 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. 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. The Gupta period was poor in terms of architecture. All that 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 *Dradiracharudatta*, which was later refashioned as *Mrichchhakatika* or the *Little Clay Cart* by Shudraka.
- 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*.
- 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.
- 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.

Science and Technology

- In mathematics, the period saw, in the fifth century, a work called *Aryabhatiya* written by Aryabhata who belonged to Pataliputra. 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. 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.