

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Gupta dynasty is regarded as an important event in Indian history. Under the Gupta kings, India made such a progress in almost every field that it is regarded as the 'Golden Age'.

PRASHASHTIS AND THEIR HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE: SAMUDRAGUPTA'S PRASHASHTI

As already said, Prashashtis or inscriptions engraved on rocks pillars, copper plates, stone tablets and caves etc. form a very important source of history. This is true in case of the Gupta rulers especially Samudragupta. In common language 'Prahashti', a Sanskrit word, means in praise of somebody. The 'prashashti' engraved on Iron Pillar of Chandragupta II at Mehrauli and the other 'prashashti' engraved on the Allahabad Pillar are quite well known. They provide a glimpse of the two Gupta rulers but also many events of their regimes like the prashashti of Gautamiputra Shri Satakarni's rule has great historical value of its own. These Prashashtis supplement what we learn from literature and other sources. About Samudragupta's Prashashti we shall read a little below.

The Gupta dynasty ruled for a little more than two hundred years (from 320 A.D. to 540 A.D.).

CHANDRAGUPTA I, 320 - 335 A.D.

Chandragupta I was the first important ruler of this dynasty. When he came to the throne, his influence was confined to Magadha but he greatly raised the power and prestige of his dynasty by matrimonial alliances and conquests. He extended the boundaries of his kingdom and adopted the title of 'Maharajadhiraja' or 'Ule 'King of Kings.' He entered into matrimonial alliance with the famous Lichchhavi tribe and married Kumaradevi. With the help of Lichchavis, Chandragupta was able to conquer the neighbouring states. His empire now included modern Oudh, Bihar, Tirhut and Allahabad, besides Magadha.

SAMUDRAGUPTA, 335 - 375 A.D.

Chandragupta I was succeeded by his illustrious son and one of the ablest kings of ancient India, Samudragupta. In the north, he extended his empire up to the Chambal river by defeating the Naga Kings of Mathura, Gwalior and Ahichhatra. But his most important military exploit was the Deccan campaign. However, he did not annex any portion of the Deccan. He felt content to make the southern kings accept his suzerainty.

Samudragupta is also said to have subjugated the forest tribes dwelling in Central India and defeated nine republican tribes of Rajasthan. The five frontier states - (1) Samtata or modern Bengal, (2) Devaka or modern North Assam, (3) Kamrup or Assam, (4) Nepal and (5) Kartarpur or modern Tarai region - accepted his suzerainty and paid him heavy tributes. He maintained friendly relations with neighbouring states like those of the Sakas, the Kushanas, the Shahis of the Punjab and the king of Sri Lanka, namely, Megha Verman. Some of these rulers also paid him tributes. It is because of his great military exploits that Samudragupta is generally compared with Napoleon.

His empire extended from river Brahmaputra in the east to rivers Yamuna and Chambal in the west and from Himalayas in the north to the river Narmada in the south.

Samudragupta's Prashashti or the Allahabad Pillar Inscription: The most authentic source of information about Samudragupta is the Allahabad Pillar in the Allahabad Fort. It has an inscription composed by poet Harisena. Before the discovery of this inscription not much was known about Samudragupta. This inscription, written in the Sanskrit language, has thirtythree lines. These give a vivid account of Samudragupta's conquests and military exploits. Harisena was a famous court poet of Samudragupta. Therefore, his testimony must be taken at its face-value. It has rightly been said that "Upon this single record rests the name and fame of the real founder of the Gupta Empire."



An Estimate of Samudragupta:

Samudragupta was a great conqueror and he rightly deserves to be called the Indian Napoleon, He was also a great patron and lover of art and literature as well. He himself was a great musician and an expert Veena player. Many of his coins show him playing the Veena. He was an accomplished scholar and a poet of high order. Samudragupta was a follower of Hinduism but his greatness lies in the fact that he was equally tolerant towards other religions. In short, we can say that he was a versatile genius and possessed exceptional qualities of head and heart.



CHANDRAGUPTA II (380 - 414 A.D.)

Chandragupta II, son and successor of Samudragupta, was another powerful ruler of the Gupta dynasty. He is popularly known as Vikramaditya (or Sun of Power) and is often identified with Vikramaditya of Ujjain who patronised the famous Navaratnas.

Like his father, Chandragupta II was also a great conqueror. His greatest achievement was to destroy the power of the Sakas of Malva, Gujarat and Saurashtra. He assumed the title of Shakari or the conqueror of the Sakas. His empire now touched the Arabian Sea and included the important ports of Broach, Cambay and Sopara. In this way, Chandragupta II laid the foundation of a vast empire which extended from the Brahmaputra river in the east to the Chenab river and the Arabian Sea in the west. His empire touched the Himalayas in the north and the Narmada river in the south.

Chandragupta II was succeeded by Kumargupta. It was during his reign that the Hunas, a barbaric nomadic tribe of Central Asia, invaded India. They were defeated by the crown prince Skandgupta who succeeded Kumargupta.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE: THE GOLDEN AGE

The Gupta kings were great generals. They were also patrons of art and culture. Under their protection and wise administration, the country prospered in all fields. As such it is regarded as the 'Golden Age' of ancient India.

Our greatest source of information about the greatness of this period is the vivid account left by the Chinese traveller, Fa-Hien, who came here during the reign of Chandragupta II.

Fa-Hien and His Account of India

Fa-Hien was a great scholar. He left China in 399 A.D. His purpose was to visit the holy place of the Buddha. He reached India after crossing the Gobi Desert in Central Asia in 405 A.D. and returned to China in 414 A.D. In India, he visited places like Peshawar, Taxila, Mathura and Pataliputra. At Pataliputra, he stayed for three years.

He left a vivid account of India during the Gupta period. A brief description of his account is as follows.

THE GUPTA ADMINISTRATION: AN IDEAL TYPE OF GOVERNMENT

Fa-Hien has highly praised the Gupta administration which was mild and liberal and never interfered in the day-to-day life of the people. The punishments were also mild, yet there were no crimes. Roads were safe. Land revenue, which was 1/4 of the produce, was the main source of income. The government officials were honest.

The empire was divided into provinces ruled by the governors, who were advised and assisted by members chosen from all districts.

The Gupta king was assisted by an official "Mahadandanayaka" to maintain law and order in the empire. Manusmriti was followed to give justice.

Division of Gupta Empire and its Officers

Divisions		Officers
Empire	→	King
		↓
↓		Amatyas
Provinces	→	Uparikas
Districts	→	Ayukas
Villages	→	Gramapati

GUPTA ADMINISTRATION COMPARED WITH THE MAURYAN ADMINISTRATION

A comparison of the Gupta Administration with the Mauryan Administration would be quite interesting :

- (1) The Gupta administration was not so complex as was the administrative set-up of the Mauryas.
- (2) The Gupta kings had smaller areas under their direct control and they depended mostly on feudal chiefs. On the other hand, the Mauryan kings had vast areas under their direct rule.
- (3) The governors of the Gupta provinces had greater freedom to carry out the provincial administration than the Mauryan governors.
- (4) The officers of the Gupta kings were not always paid salaries in cash as was the case with the Mauryan rulers; rather they were given the right to collect the revenue from the land.
- (5) Under the Guptas, the laws were simple and punishments were lenient while the Mauryan laws were strict and punishments severe.

Society: A Highly Ideal and Moral Society

Fa-Hien tells us that people were rich and prosperous and vied with one another in giving donations for setting up rest-houses and hospitals. They were honest and law-abiding. Mostly, people were vegetarian except for the Chandalas who lived outside the towns and were treated as untouchables. All the other castes lived in harmony.

From Fa-Hien's account we come to know that Buddhism was still flourishing in Punjab, Bengal and Mathura. Buddhists and Hindus lived in peace.

Higher education was given importance during the Gupta period. Nalanda was an important centre for Buddhist learning. Taxila was famous for medicine. Indian as well as foreign students flocked to these centres for advanced studies.

Religion: Full Religious Toleration

The Gupta kings practised Hinduism and so under them Hinduism made great progress. The Guptas worshipped Lord Vishnu. They also performed religious sacrifices. The Gupta kings gave liberal donations for building temples. The Brahmins were held in high esteem. They laid emphasis on the devotion of Vishnu through prayers and hymns. Image of gods and goddesses like Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu began to be worshipped. For their worship, special rooms, called *Oiva grihas* began to be constructed in temples. The avatars cult also became popular.

Though the Gupta rulers practised Hinduism, it goes to their credit that they showed wonderful religious tolerance by giving money for building places of worship for other religions.

ADVANCEMENT IN THE FIELD LITERATURE

This period is particularly renowned for advancement in literature. Sanskrit once again became popular. The Guptas made it their court language and even the Buddhist scholars preferred Sanskrit to Pali. Distinguished scholars produced immortal works of literary excellence. Kalidasa, the greatest poet-dramatist, enriched the Sanskrit language. His plays *Abhijnanashkuntalam*, *Vikramorvashi* and *Malvikagnimitra* are the gems of Sanskrit literature. *Abhijnanashkuntalam* has been translated into several languages of the world. He also wrote an epic *Ragjvamsa* and lyrics *Ritusamhara* and *Meghaduta*.

Other important authors of this period were Visakhadatta who wrote *Mudra Rakshasa*, Amar Singh who composed *Amarkosha*, and Shudraka who wrote *Mrichhkatikam*. *Panchtantra*, a wonderful collection of animal fables, was also written during this period.

ADVANCEMENT IN THE FIELD OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Great progress was also made in the fields of astronomy, mathematics and astrology. Aryabhatta, the famous astronomer and mathematician of this period, wrote in detail about the solar and lunar eclipses and discovered that the earth moves on its axis round the sun. Varahamihira was another astronomer who has thrown light on various aspects of botany, geography, etc. in his book *Srihat Samhita*. Great physicians like Srahmagupta, Vagbhatta and Dhanvantari also adorned this era. Indian mathematicians during this period used the decimal system of numerals. The Iron Pillar at Mehrauli testifies the advancement in the field of metallurgy during the Gupta period.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

In Sculpture, India made great progress under the Guptas. The Gupta sculptures show a11 exquisite beauty of execution and a high degree of skill. Both the art and the subjects chosen became completely Indian in their character. The discovery of a large number of Images and sculptures at Sarnath and various other places shows that, while depicting scenes from Buddha's life, new subjects from Puranic mythology had also begun to be treated with remarkable freshness.

The Gupta period also saw great advancement in the field of architecture. A large number of beautiful temples with the Shikhara Symbol were built during this period.

The stone temple at Deogarh (District Lalitpur) and the brick temple at Bhitrigaon (District Kanpur) are two fine specimens of the period. The first contains some fine pieces of sculpture on the panels of its walls and the second is known for its well designed figures in terracotta.

Notonly this, three of the first-janta Caves, assigned by the historians to the Gupta period, further illustrate the great advancement that the Guptas had made in the field of architecture. They have been cut out of solid rocks and display a high skill. The walls of the Ajanta Caves are covered with beautiful fresco-paintings which till this date look fresh, as if they have been painted recently.

GROWTH OF TRADE AND COMMERCE

Inland trade and commerce greatly flourished under the Guptas because the roads were safe. Inland trade was carried on by land-routes and waterways. Ujjain, Pataliputra, Benaras, Mathura, Tamralipti, etc. were the famous trade-centres. Trade centres and markets were connected by roads. India's foreign trade greatly increased. Trade with the countries of South-East Asia, such as Burma, Java, Cambodia, etc., was carried through Tamralipti and other sea-ports on the east coast of India. India had also established trade relations with the countries of the west, specially the Roman empire. Sea-ports on the west coast, such as Broach, Cambay and Sopara, handled trade with the western countries. Ships to South-East Asian countries also sailed from these ports. Indian goods were taken to Africa, Arabia, Iran and Mediterranean lands from the ports of the Malabar coast, such as Calicut and Cochin. Caravans of traders also travelled overland to Central Asia and China. The Gupta rulers introduced standard gold and silver coins which further helped trade. As a result of the flourishing condition of trade and industry, people became rich and prosperous.

After the decline of the Satavahanas, many small states arose in the Deccan and South India. The two most important states were those of the Chalukyas and the Pallavas that flourished in the Deccan and South India between the fourth and the seventh centuries.

THE CHALUKYAS

The Chalukya kings were the most powerful during this period. They ruled over the Karnataka area of the Deccan. In about 543 AD. Pulakesin I (543-567 AD.) established his own sovereign state with Vatapi (or modern Badami in Bijapur district) as his capital. But the greatest ruler of this dynasty was Pulakesin II (608-642 AD.) who was a contemporary of King Harsha. It is said that he even defeated Harsha. Harsha could not extend his empire beyond the Narmada which was the northern limit of the Chalukya kingdom.

Do You Know?

Pulakesin's Prashasti : This prashasti, written by Pulakesin's court-poet Ravikirti, tells us much about his ancestors, his conquests both on the east and the west coasts and his encounter with Harsha, the well known Vardhana ruler of the north.

The Chalukyas had to face other enemies as well. They were the Pallavas and the Rashtrakutas. Pulakesin II defeated the Pallava king Mahendra Varman as well. After Mahendra Varman, his son Narasimha Varman came to the throne. Under him, the Pallavas defeated the Chalukyas very badly. They also destroyed the Chalukyan capital Vatapi or Badami and killed Pulakesin II. It happened in 642 A.D.

The Chalukyas again built their kingdom under Pulakesin's son, Vikramaditya I, who became so strong that he defeated the Pallavas in 655 AD. and avenged his father's defeat. However, the Chalukya rule came to an end in 757 AD. when their last king, Kirti Varman II, was routed by the Rashtrakutas.

The Vakatakas, Rashtrakutas, Palas and Pratiharas were also some important dynasties to have ruled the Deccan for some time.

Life and Society under the Chalukyas

Hieun Tsang, the great Chinese traveller, who came to India, also visited the court of Pulakesin II. He praises both the king and the people.

Trade and Commerce: The Chalukyas had trade relations with several kingdoms in South-East Asia, Iran and Arabia. Their capital, Vatapi, was very prosperous. Pulakesin II ruled over areas between the rivers Narmada and Kaveri. He exchanged ambassadors with King Khosrau of Iran.

Religious Tolerance: The Chalukya kings had faith in the Hindu religion. But they tolerated other religions equally well.

It was during the Chalukya rule that a large number of Iranian followers of Zoroaster (who is also called Zarathustra) came here to escape from the Muslim invaders of their country. They settled along the west coast of the Deccan and are called Parsees, the Indian name for the Persians.

In India, they were allowed by the Chalukya kings to follow their religion freely.

This proves the tolerant nature of the Chalukya kings.

Art and Architecture: The Chalukya rulers were not only great conquerors but also great builders. They were mostly Hindu by faith; so they build large number of temples in honour of the Hindu deities like Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, etc. The Vishnu Temple at Badami, the Shiva Temple at Pattadakal and the Vishnu Temple at Aihole are famous for their architectural designs and beautiful sculptures. These temples are richly decorated with sculptures and scenes from the Hindu mythology. Most of the Ajanta and Ellora frescoes or paintings were made during their period and under their patronage.

- Narasimha Varman founded the town of Mahabalipuram. He constructed the Ratha temples. Each of these temples is carved out of a single rock:
- The Shore Temple is unique. The entrance door of the temple faces the east so that the first rays of the sun reach the idol of Vishnu kept inside.

THE PALLAVAS

The Pallavas started as the vassals of the Satavahanas. But when the Satavahana empire declined they became independent and slowly built a strong kingdom of their own. Their capital city, Kanchi (near Chennai), was both beautiful and prosperous.

The Pallavas were constantly at war with the Chalukyas. As we have already read, their king, Mahendra Varman, was defeated by Pulakesin II but his son and successor Narasimha Varman not only defeated but also killed Pulakesin II some years later and captured the Chalukyan capital.

Life and Society under the Pallavas

Hieun Tsang visited the Pallava kingdom also. He says that the people were honest and followed Hinduism and Buddhism. There were also Jains. Mahendra Varman himself was a Jain before he started worshipping Lord Shiva. Thereafter, all the Pallava kings worshipped either Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu and believed in Hinduism. But they practised tolerance towards other religions.

The Pallava rulers were great patrons of art and learning. Sanskrit was an important language and most of their inscriptions are in Sanskrit. Temples in Kanchi became the centre of Sanskrit and Tamil studies. Dandin was a famous author of many Sanskrit works.

Art and Sculpture: The Pallava kings were also great patrons of art and sculpture. They built beautiful rockcut temples at Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram) near Chennai (Madras). These temples are shaped like rathas or chariots. Therefore, they are also called the Ratha-temples. Rock-temples were also built at Kanchipuram. These temples have a tall tower known as shikhara over the place where the image of the deity is placed.

Temples as Centres of Community Life: The temples of South India were not the places of worship alone. Soon they became the centres of cultural, spiritual, social and economic life of the community as well. Along with the religious functions, all social ceremonies from birth till death were performed in the temples by the priests. Schools and colleges were also attached to them. The Village Mahasabha also held its meetings in the temples. Music-recitals and dance festivals were also held in these temples.

After the fall of the Gupta empire chaos and disorder prevailed everywhere. The Huna invasions created more confusion. It allied to the emergence of small kingdoms. Thanesar, near Kurukshetra, was one of them. It made great progress under Prabhakarvardhana and his son Harsha. Harshavardhana is regarded as the last great ruler of ancient India.

HARSHA'S ACCESSION

Harsha ascended the throne in 606 AD. when he was hardly sixteen years of age. It was the time when the rulers of Gaur (or Bengal) and Vallabhi (or Gujarat) had treacherously murdered first his brother-in-law, Grihavarman, the ruler of Kannauj, and then his elder brother, Rajyavardhana. So, when Harsha ascended the throne, his kingdom was being threatened by his ancestral enemies, the rulers of Gujarat and Bengal.

The first task that Harsha accomplished after his accession to the throne of Thanesar was to march towards Kannauj, where first of all he saved his sister Rajyashri and then united the two kingdoms of Thanesar and Kannauj.

Thereafter, he made Kannauj his capital.

Harsha's Conquests: After strengthening his position, Harsha's first task was to defeat Shashank, the king of Bengal, and to take revenge for the deaths of his brother and brother-in-law.

According to Hieun Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim, Harsha spent six years of his reign (606 AD. to 612 AD.) in conquering the Five Indies, i.e., Eastern Punjab, Kannauj, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and many other states.

After consolidating his empire in the north, he turned towards the Deccan but his advance was checked by Pulakesin II of the Chalukya dynasty. He was the king of Badami or Vatapi.

Harsha, a Great Scholar and Patron of Learning: Harsha was also a scholar himself and wrote three plays in Sanskrit, namely Ratnavali, Priyadarshika and the Nagananda. Banabhatta, the biographer of Harsha, wrote Harsha Charita. He attributes many qualities of head, heart and generalship to Harsha. Harsha was also a patron of literature and education. He extended liberal patronage to the great scholars of the day. Great educational centres, like Nalanda, were given liberal grants by him.

Thus, Narmada became the southern limit of his empire which included Eastern Punjab, the whole of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, and parts of Sindh and Kashmir.

Harsha, a patron of Buddhism: Like Ashoka and Kanishka, Harsha was a great patron of Buddhism. He took several steps to popularise Buddhism. He built new monasteries and repaired the old ones. He was a follower of the Mahayana creed. He called a confluence of the Buddhist scholars at Kannauj, as Ashoka and Kanishka had done in the past. He gave special grant of land and money to the Buddhist monks. Every year, Harsha would call a meeting of the Buddhist Sangha in Prayag to encourage the propagation of Buddhism.

HIEUN TSANG ACCOUNT

Hieun Tsang was the most celebrated Chinese traveller. He spent 15 years (630 to 645 A.D.) in India. He visited several important places and collected religious books on Buddhism. He also visited the court of Harsha several times. After reaching China, he wrote a book Si-yu-ki or the Records of the Western World which is a valuable source of information regarding Harsha and his times.

Harsha's Administration: Hieun Tsang praises Harsha's administration as organised and generous. Taxes were reasonable, Harsha's penal code was more severe than that of the Guptas. For some crimes, death sentence was also awarded. Harsha kept a powerful army.

Society and Life of People: The people wore untailored garments and walked bare-foot. The food was simple and pure. The rich lived in big houses made of bricks while the poor lived in thatched houses made of mud. There was a high sense of cleanliness and the people were honest and fair. The caste-system had become quite rigid. The custom of Saty was practised but there was no purdah system. Trade and commerce prospered both inside the country and with foreign lands.

About Harsha's Assemblies: Hieun Tsang has given a vivid description of Harsha's assemblies. He had called a special assembly of the Buddhist monks and scholars to honour Hieun Tsang and to give publicity to the doctrines of the Mahayana faith. He also held an assembly or a religious festival after every five years at Prayag. One such assembly was held in 643 A.D. and was attended by Hieun Tsang. Harsha died in 647 A.D. and with his death the glory of ancient India was set forever.

NALANDA UNIVERSITY

Nalanda University, in Bihar, was the most renowned university during Harsha's reign. Though this university was established in the Gupta period, it was under Harsha that it became an international university and students from various parts of the world came to study here. About 10,000 students received higher education here and 1510 professors imparted education. It had a six-storeyed building. It had several colleges and three great libraries. The conditions for admission were very hard. No fees were charged from the students. They were also given free boarding and lodging. Besides the Brahmanical and Buddhist literatures, grammar, logic, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, metaphysics, etc. were the main subjects of study. Sanskrit was the medium of instruction. Famous Shilabhadra was the head of the university. He was a Buddhist scholar of rare ability. The expenditure of this university was derived from the gifts and endowments from the king and the rich, and from the revenue of 100 villages.

Hieun Tsang also studied for five years in this university.