

# Gupta Empire of Magadha Indian Golden Age

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study the period of the imperial **Guptas** that is generally considered to be the '**golden age**'; of Indian history, bestowed under a strong benevolent central rule. The Gupta Empire stretched across northern, central and parts of southern India between c. 320 and 550 CE. The period is noted for its achievements in the arts, architecture, sciences, religion, and philosophy. Chandragupta I (320 – 335 CE) started a rapid expansion of the Gupta Empire and soon established himself as the first sovereign ruler of the empire. It marked the end of 500 hundred years of domination of the provincial powers and resulting disquiet that began with the fall of the Mauryas. Even more importantly, it began a period of overall prosperity and growth that continued for the next two and half centuries which came to be known as a “Golden Age” in India's history. But the seed of the empire was sown at least two generations earlier than this when Srigupta, then only a regional monarch, set off the glory days of this mighty dynasty in circa 240 CE. Not much is known about the early days of this Gupta dynasty.

The travel diaries and writings of Buddhist monks who frequented this part of the world are the most trustworthy sources of information we have about those days. The travelogues of Fa Hien (Faxian, circa 337 – 422 CE), Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang, 602 – 664 CE) and Yijing (I Tsing, 635 – 713 CE) prove to be invaluable in this respect. The Gupta Empire during the rule of Srigupta (circa 240 – 280 CE) comprised only Magadha and probably a part of Bengal too. Like the Mauryas and other Magadha kings who preceded him, Srigupta ruled from Pataliputra, close to modern day Patna. Srigupta was succeeded to the throne by his son Ghatotkacha (circa 280 – 319 CE). The Gupta Period of India was not just characterized by enormous material wealth or by elaborate trade activity. It was defined by creativity. Flourishing arts, fabulous literature, and stupendous scholars are just a few of the things that marked the period. In 185 B.C.E., the Mauryan empire collapsed when the last of the Mauryan kings was assassinated. In its place, small kingdoms arose throughout India. For nearly 500 years, the various states warred with each other. In the northern territories, a new empire arose when a ruler named Chandragupta I ascended the throne in 320 C.E. He revived many principles of Mauryan government and paved the way for his son, Samudragupta, to develop an extensive empire.

*Key words: imperial Guptas, 'golden age', Indian history, Mauryan, Chandragupta I, Chandragupta II*

## Introduction

The Gupta Empire, founded by Maharaja Sri Gupta, was an ancient Indian realm that covered much of the Indian Subcontinent from approximately 320-550 CE. Gupta rule, while solidified by territorial expansion through war, began a period of peace and prosperity marked by advancements in science, technology, engineering, art, dialectics, literature, logic, mathematics, astronomy, religion, and philosophy. But Samudragupta was more than a fighter; he was also a lover of the arts. Engraved coins and inscribed pillars from the time of his reign provide evidence of both his artistic talent and his patronage. He set the stage for the emergence of classical art, which occurred under the rule of his son and successor Chandragupta II.

Chandragupta II gave great support to the arts. Artists were so highly valued under his rule that they were paid for their work — a rare phenomenon in ancient civilizations. Perhaps it is due to this monetary compensation that such considerable progress was made in literature and science during the period.

Nalanda University was founded during India's Golden Age. This center of Buddhist learning was built in a place that the Buddha himself had visited a number of times, and was patronized by the Gupta kings.

Much of the literature produced during the Gupta dynasty was poetry and drama. Narrative histories, religious and meditative writing, and lyric poetry emerged to enrich, educate, and entertain the people. Formal essays were composed on subjects ranging from grammar and medicine to math and astronomy. The best-known essay of the period is the Kamasutra, which provides rules about the art of love and marriage according to Hindu laws. The Gupta Empire was believed to be a dynasty of the Vaishya caste, the third of the four Hindu castes representing merchants and farmers. Founded by Sri Gupta c. 240-280 CE, there are contradictory theories regarding the original homeland of the Guptas. Historians believe Sri Gupta and his son may have been Kushan vassals, or rulers who swore allegiance to the Kushan Empire. Sri Gupta's son and successor, Ghatotkacha, ruled from c. 280-319 CE, while his son, Chandragupta, ascended the throne around 319 and ruled until 335 CE.

Chandragupta married princess Kumaradevi from the Kingdom of Magadha, which was one of the Mahajanapadas (or great countries) of ancient India during the 4th century CE. With a dowry and political alliance from the marriage, Chandragupta conquered or assimilated the kingdoms of Magadha, Prayaga, and Saketa. By 321 CE, he established a realm stretching along the Ganges River to Prayag, the modern-day city of Allahabad, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Hindus believe the god Brahma offered his first sacrifice after creating the world at Prayag.

Two of the most famous scholars of the era were Kalidasa and Aryabhatta. Kalidasa, the greatest writer of the empire, brought plays to new heights by filling them with humor and epic heroism. Aryabhatta, a scientist ahead of his time, went out on a limb and proposed that earth was a rotating sphere centuries before Columbus made his famous voyage. Aryabhatta also calculated the length of the solar year as 365.358 days — only three hours over the figure calculated by modern scientists.

Alongside these scholarly achievements, magnificent architecture, sculpture, and painting also developed. Among the greatest paintings of this period are those that were found on the walls of the Ajanta Caves in the plains of southern India. The paintings illustrate the various lives of the Buddha. An 18-foot statue of the Hindu god Shiva was also found within a Gupta-dynasty rock temple near Bombay. Samudragupta was a great warrior and conquest was his passion. He sought to unite all of India under his rule and quickly set out to achieve this goal by waging wars across much of the Indian subcontinent.

Hoping for mercy, many potential victims offered tribute and presents to Samudragupta as he swept through the territories. But little mercy was granted. One by one, he defeated nine kings in the north and twelve in the south. In addition to the human devastation countless horses were slaughtered to celebrate his victories.

The Gupta territories expanded so greatly under Samudragupta's reign that he has often been compared to great conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon. But of course he did not achieve military success singlehandedly. Local squads — which each consisted of one elephant, one chariot, three armed cavalymen, and five foot soldiers — protected Gupta villages from raids and revolts. In times of war, the squads joined together to form a powerful royal army.

### **Objective:**

This paper intends to explore and analyze the extent of **Gupta** Empire initiated a period known as the **Golden** Age of India with Prosperity in zenith. During the **rule** of the **Gupta** Empire, India had made lots of contribution in various sectors like mathematics, science, astronomy, religion etc

### **Gupta Empire Expansion**

The territorial heads ruling over various parts of India could not counter the superior armed forces of Chandragupta I and had to surrender before him.

### **Chandragupta I**

From the Kushans, the Gupta kings learned the benefit of maintaining a cavalry and Chandragupta I, son of Ghatotkacha, made effective use of his strong army. Through his marriage with Licchhavi Princess Kumaradevi, Chandragupta I received the ownership of rich mines full of iron ore adjacent to his kingdom. Metallurgy was

already at an advanced stage and forged iron was not only used to meet the internal demands, but also became a valuable trade commodity. The territorial heads ruling over various parts of India could not counter the superior armed forces of Chandragupta I and had to surrender before him. It is conjectured that at the end of his reign, the boundary of the Gupta Empire already extended to Allahabad.

### **Samudragupta**

Samudragupta (circa 335 – 375 CE), Chandragupta I's son who ascended the throne next, was a military genius and he continued the growth of the kingdom. After conquering the remainder of North India, Samudragupta turned his eyes to South India and added a portion of it to his empire by the end of his Southern Campaign. It is generally believed that during his time the Gupta Empire spanned from the Himalayas in north to the mouth of Krishna and Godavari rivers in the South, from Balkh, Afghanistan in the west to the Brahmaputra River in the east.

Samudragupta was very attentive to *rajdharm*a (duties of a king) and took special care to follow Kautilya's (350 – 275 BCE) Arthashastra (an economic, social and political treatise that has clear instructions about how a monarchy should be governed) closely. He donated large sums of money for various philanthropic purposes, including the promotion of education. Besides being a courageous king and able administrator, he was a poet and musician. The large number of gold coins circulated by him showcases his multifaceted talent. An inscription, probably commissioned by subsequent Gupta kings, known as the Allahabad Pillar is most eloquent about his humane qualities. Samudragupta also believed in promoting goodwill among various religious communities. He gave, for example, Meghavarna, king of Ceylon, permission and support for the construction of a monastery in Bodh Gaya.

A short struggle for power appears to have ensued after the reign of Samudragupta. His eldest son Ramagupta became the next Gupta king. This was noted by 7th century CE Sanskrit author Banbhattacha in his biographical work, *Harshacharita*. What followed next forms a part of Sanskrit poet and playwright Visakh Dutta's drama Devi Chandra Guptam. As the story goes, Ramagupta was soon overcome by a Scythian king of Mathura. But the Scythian king, besides the kingdom itself, was interested in Queen Dhruvadevi who was also a renowned scholar. To maintain peace Ramagupta gave up Dhruvadevi to his opponent. It is then Ramagupta's younger brother Chandragupta II with a few of his close aides went to meet the enemy in disguise. He rescued Dhruvadevi and assassinated the Scythian king. Dhruvadevi publicly condemned her husband for his behaviour. Eventually, Ramagupta was killed by Chandragupta II who also married Dhruvadevi sometime later.

Like Samudragupta, Chandragupta II (circa 380 – 414 CE) was a benevolent king, able leader and skilled administrator. By defeating the satrap of Saurashtra, he further expanded his kingdom to the coastline of the Arabian Sea. His courageous pursuits earned him the title of Vikramaditya. To rule the vast empire more efficiently, Chandragupta II founded his second capital in Ujjain. He also took care to strengthen the navy. The seaports of Tamralipta and Sopara consequently became busy hubs of maritime trade. He was a great patron of

art and culture too. Some of the greatest scholars of the day including the *navaratna* (nine gems) graced his court. Numerous charitable institutions, orphanages and hospitals benefitted from his generosity. Rest houses for travellers were set up by the road side. The Gupta Empire reached its pinnacle during this time and unprecedented progress marked all areas of life.

### Politics & Administration

Great tact and foresight were shown in the governance of the vast empire. The efficiency of their martial system was well known. The large kingdom was divided into smaller *pradesha* (provinces) and administrative heads were appointed to take care of them. The kings maintained discipline and transparency in the bureaucratic process. Criminal law was mild, capital punishment was unheard of and judicial torture was not practised. Fa Hien called the cities of Mathura and Pataliputra as picturesque with the latter being described as a city of flowers. People could move around freely. Law and order reigned and, according to Fa Hien, incidents of theft and burglary were rare.

The following also speaks volumes about the prudence of the Gupta kings. Samudragupta acquired a far greater part of southern India than he cared to incorporate into his empire. Therefore, in quite a few cases, he returned the kingdom to the original kings and was satisfied only with collecting taxes from them. He reckoned that the great distance between that part of the country and his capital Pataliputra would hinder the process of good governance.

### Socio-economic Conditions

People led a simple life. Commodities were affordable and all round prosperity ensured that their requirements were met easily. They preferred vegetarianism and shunned alcoholic beverages. Gold and silver coins were issued in great numbers which is a general indicative of the health of the economy. Trade and commerce flourished both within the country and outside. Silk, cotton, spices, medicine, priceless gemstones, pearl, precious metal and steel were exported by sea. Highly evolved steelcraft led everyone to a belief that Indian iron was not subject to corrosion. The 7 m (23 ft) high Iron Pillar in Qutub complex, Delhi, built around 402 CE, is a testimony to this fact. Trade relations with Middle East improved. Ivory, tortoise shell etc. from Africa, silk and some medicinal plants from China and the Far East were high on the list of imports. Food, grain, spices, salt, gems and gold bullion were primary commodities of inland trade.

### Religion

Gupta kings knew that the well-being of the empire lie in maintaining a cordial relationship between the various communities. They were devout Vaishnava (Hindus who worship the Supreme Creator as Vishnu) themselves, yet that did not prevent them from being tolerant towards the believers of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhist monasteries received liberal donations. Yijing observed how the Gupta kings erected inns and rest houses for Buddhist monks and other pilgrims. As a pre-eminent site of education and cultural exchange Nalanda prospered

under their patronage. Jainism flourished in northern Bengal, Gorakhpur, Udayagiri and Gujarat. Several Jain establishments existed across the empire and Jain councils were a regular occurrence.

### **Literature, Sciences & Education**

Sanskrit once again attained the status of a *lingua franca* and managed to scale even greater heights than before. Poet and playwright Kalidasa created such epics as *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Raghuvansha* and *Kumarsambhaba*. Harishena, a renowned poet, panegyrist and flutist, composed *Allahabad Prasasti*, Sudraka wrote *Mricchakatika*, Vishakhadatta created *Mudrarakshasa* and Vishnusharma penned *Panchatantra*. Vararuchi, Baudhayana, Ishwar Krishna and Bhartrihari contributed to both Sanskrit and Prakrit linguistics, philosophy and science.

Varahamihira wrote *Brihatsamhita* and also contributed to the fields of astronomy and astrology. Genius mathematician and astronomer Aryabhata wrote *Surya Siddhanta* which covered several aspects of geometry, trigonometry and cosmology. Shanku devoted himself to creating texts about Geography. Dhanvantri's discoveries helped the Indian medicinal system of *ayurveda* become more refined and efficient. Doctors were skilled in surgical practices and inoculation against contagious diseases was performed. Even today, Dhanvantri's birth anniversary is celebrated on *Dhanteras*, two days before Diwali. This intellectual surge was not confined to the courts or among the royalty. People were encouraged to learn the nuances of Sanskrit literature, oratory, intellectual debate, music and painting. Several educational institutions were set up and the existing ones received continuous support.

### **Art, Architecture & Culture**

What philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy said in *The Arts & Crafts of India & Ceylone*, about the art of the region must be remembered here,

The Hindus do not regard the religious, aesthetic, and scientific standpoints as necessarily conflicting, and in all their finest work, whether musical, literary, or plastic, these points of view, nowadays so sharply distinguished, are inseparably united.

The finest examples of painting, sculpture and architecture of the period can be found in *Ajanta*, Ellora, Sarnath, Mathura, Anuradhapura and Sigiriya. The basic tenets of *Shilpa Shasrta* (Treatise on Art) were followed everywhere including in town planning. Stone studded golden stairways, iron pillars (The iron pillar of Dhar is twice the size of Delhi's Iron Pillar), intricately designed gold coins, jewellery and metal sculptures speak volumes about the skills of the metalsmiths. Carved ivories, wood and lac-work, brocades and embroidered textile also thrived. Practicing vocal music, dance and seven types of musical instruments including *veena* (an Indian musical stringed instrument), flute and *mridangam* (drum) were a norm rather than exception. These were regularly performed in temples as a token of devotion. In classic Indian style, artists and litterateurs were encouraged to meditate on the imagery within and capture its essence in their creations.



As *Agni Purana* suggests, “O thou Lord of all gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out all the work I have in my mind.”

## Decline of the Empire

After the demise of his father Chandragupta II, Kumaragupta I (circa 415 – 455 CE) ruled over the vast empire with skill and ability. He was able to maintain peace and even fend off strong challenges from a tribe known as Pushyamitra. He was helped by his able son Skandagupta (455 – 467 CE) who was the last of the sovereign rulers of the Gupta Dynasty. He also succeeded in preventing the invasion of the Huns (Hephthalites). Skandagupta was a great scholar and wise ruler. For the well being of the denizens he carried out several construction works including the rebuilding of a dam on Sudarshan Lake, Gujarat. But these were the last of the glory days of the empire.

After Skandagupta's death the dynasty became embroiled with domestic conflicts. The rulers lacked the capabilities of the earlier emperors to rule over such a large kingdom. This resulted in a decline in law and order. They were continuously plagued by the attacks of the Huns and other foreign powers. This put a dent in the economic well-being of the empire. On top of this, the kings remained more occupied with self-indulgence than in preparing to meet with the challenges of their enemies. The inept ministers and administrative heads also followed suit. Notably, after the defeat and capture of Mihirakula, one of the most important Hephthalite emperors of the time, Gupta King Baladitya set him free on the advice of his ministers. The Huns came back to haunt the empire later and finally drew the curtains on this illustrious empire in circa 550. The following lines of King Sudraka's *Mricchakatika* (The Little Clay Cart) aptly sum up the rise and fall in the fortune of the Gupta Dynasty.

## Conclusion

Although the Gupta rulers practiced Hindu rituals and traditions, it is clear from these discoveries that the empire was characterized by religious freedom. Evidence of a Buddhist university within the region is further proof of the peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Buddhists.

The Gupta dynasty flourished immensely under Chandragupta II, but rapidly weakened during the reign of his two successors. A wave of invasions launched by the Huns, a nomadic group from central Asia, started in 480 C.E. Two decades later, Gupta kings had little territory left under their control. Around 550 C.E., the empire perished completely.

Though India was not truly unified again until the coming of the Muslims, the classical culture of the Guptas did not disappear. The flourishing arts of the region, which were unrivaled in their time, left more than a legacy. They left descendants of the Guptas with continuous inspiration to create.

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