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HISTORY



◈ Gupta Period

◈ Harsha



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GUPTA PERIOD

- 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.

Gupta Period – Early Days to the Zenith

- 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).

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 rajdharma (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.

Chandragupta II

- 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 Banbhata 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.

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.

HARSHA

- Emperor Harshavardhana, better known as Harsha, lived from 590 to 647 CE and was the last ruler of the Vardhana Empire, the last great empire in ancient India before the Islamic Invasion.
- He ruled from 606 CE to 647 CE. After Harshavardhana's death, however, the Vardhana or Pushyabhuti Dynasty came to an end and its empire dissolved.
- India, the land beyond the Indus River, has seen many rulers who dreamt of conquering the vast country and rule from the Himalayas in the north to Deccan in south, from the mountains of Kandhar in the west to Assam in the east, yet very few have been able to subdue history according to their will.
- Harshavardhana was one such ruler. His empire may not be as large as the great Mauryan's, yet he deserves special mention.
- After the fall of great Gupta Empire in the middle of the 6th century CE, under whom India saw its own golden age, it was Harshavardhana who unified most of northern India and ruled for four decades from his capital Kanyakubja.

Rise to Power & Military Campaigns

- The Pushyabhuti Dynasty's origin is uncertain, but sources become clearer from c. 580 CE when Prabhakaravardhana ruled the kingdom of Thaneshwar, modern-day Haryana.
- Prabhakaravardhana's queen Yasovati gave birth to two sons Rajyavardhana and Harshavardhana and a daughter named Rajyashri who was later married to king Grahvarman of Kanyakubja, modern-day Kannauj.
- This was a period of tension as India had to frequently deal with the invasion of the Huns of Central Asia. Constant fights were so costly that they weakened the empire to the core, and this eventually led to the downfall of the Gupta Empire.
- As the western frontiers of India and areas adjoining the Indus river were under the occupation of Huns, skirmishes between Huns and Thaneshwar were regular.
- While Harsha and his brother were busy dealing with the Huns in the west, Prabhakaravardhana died in Thaneshwar. He was succeeded by his elder son, Rajyavardhana.
- Meanwhile, in the east far greater events were happening which altered the course of history.
- Shashanka of the Gauds Kingdom, modern-day Bengal, marched and killed king Grahvarmana, Rajyashri's husband, and then kidnapped her.
- The kidnapping of his sister forced the elder Vardhana brother to march east and confront Shashanka. Shashanka then invited Rajyavardhana for a meeting and treacherously killed him.
- After his brother's death, at the age of 16, Harshavardhana became the undisputed ruler of Thaneshwar and declared war on Sasaka to avenge his brother and embarked upon a campaign of Digvijay, i.e. to conquer the world (which in this context means conquering whole India).

- Yet, his foremost enemy was now Shashanka who had to face an angry brother's wrath. Harsha issued a proclamation to all kings known to either declare allegiance to him or face him on the battlefield.
- As Shashanka's enemies responded to Harsha's call, he marched on to Kannauj.
- Although there is no evidence, a story in Harshacharitra claims that Rajyashri, when released from prison, took refuge in the forest of Vindhya. Hearing this, Harsha hurriedly went into the forest to save her and found her just when she was about to commit suicide by throwing herself in a fire. Rescuing his sister, he rejoined his army at the bank of Ganges.
- After this, Harsha easily conquered Kanyakubja as Shashanka went back to Bengal, and thus began a long enmity.
- It was only after Shashanka's death that Harsha was able to control entire eastern India including Magadha, Bengal, and Kalinga.
- Harsha's Digvijay, or the conquest of the world had now begun. After Kannauj, he turned his attention towards Gujarat.
- He defeated the local Valabhi kingdom and expanded his empire. Yet, this rapid expansion led to tensions between him and the Chalukya king Pulakeshin II (r. 609-642 CE).
- It was now that the most powerful kingdoms of northern and southern India came face-to-face on the battlefield on the banks of river Narmada.
- In the end, the southerners under the able leadership of Pulakeshin II prevailed leaving the ambitious northern ruler, Harsha, defeated.
- They say Harsha lost his cheer when he saw his elephants dying in the battle.
- Harsha entered a peace treaty with the Chalukya king, which established Narmada river as the southern boundary of his empire and after that he never advanced south again. Yet, this did not halt his conquest of the north.
- He took the title of sakal utara patha natha (lord of northern India).
- The Vardhana Empire consisted of two distinctive types of territories: areas directly under Harsha's rule such as Central Provinces, Gujarat, Bengal, Kalinga, Rajputana, and the states and kingdoms which had become feudatories under him including Jalandhar, Kashmir, Nepal, Sind, Kamarupa (modern-day Assam).
- Thus, many historians do not find the title justified as he was never able to bring the entire north under a single command.
- Yet, this does not mean his power was not felt beyond the limits of his direct rule. His writ ran across entire north India.
- Under his command, King of Jalandhar escorted the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang to the frontiers of India. Another time, king of Kashmir had to submit a tooth relic of Buddha to Harsha.
- The Chinese source suggests that the King of Kamarupa could not dare to detain a Chinese pilgrim in his capital against the wishes of Harsha.

ART & Education

- Harsha was a patron of both art and education. He himself was an author and wrote three Sanskrit plays, Nagananda, Ratnavali, Priyadarshika.
- One-fourth of his revenue went for patronizing scholars.
- Hiuen Tsang gives a quite vivid description of the famous Nalanda University which was at its zenith during Harsha's reign.
- He described how the regularly laid-out towers, forests of pavilions, temples seemed to "soar above the mists in the sky" so that from their cells the monks "might witness the birth of the winds and clouds".
- In its heyday, Nalanda had around 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. The admission process was very strict.

- Records say there was a rigorous oral examination conducted by gatekeepers, and many used to be rejected.
- The curriculum included Vedas, Buddhism, philosophy, logic, urban planning, medicine, law, astronomy, etc

Society & religion

- Caste system was prevalent among Hindus.
- They were divided into four castes or varna: Brahmana, Vaishya, Kshariya and Shudra, which among them had their own subcastes.
- The untouchables, who came at the lowest in the hierarchy, led a miserable life.
- The status of women declined as compared to the liberal era of earlier times.
- Satipratha (widow immolation) was common, and widow remarriage was not allowed in higher castes.
- Harsha was a worshiper of Shiva in the beginning but later became a Mahayana Buddhist. Yet, he was tolerant of other faiths.
- With a view to popularize and propagate the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, Harsha arranged at Kanyakubja a great assembly which was presided over by Hiuen Tsang.
- Hiuen Tsang took a lot of manuscripts to China and translated more than 600 of them from Sanskrit.
- Another great ceremony was held for 75 days at Prayag (Allahabad).
- The images of Buddha, Sun and Siva were worshiped, and gifts of valuable articles and clothing were distributed in charity.
- Every five years religious ceremonies were celebrated at the ancient city of Allahabad.
- Here, he held the ceremony of Dana, or giving, which lasted for three months.
- During this, most of the wealth accumulated in the last five years was exhausted.
- Once, he even gave his clothes and jewellery and begged his sister for an ordinary garment to wear.

Death & Legacy

- Harsha's empire marked the beginning of feudalism in India. Land was granted in villages, which made the local landlords powerful.
- This led to the weakening of the empire and gave rise to local feuds. Harsha had to be in constant movement to keep things in order.
- Harsha died in 647 AD, and the empire with him. The death of Harshavardhana is not well documented.
- It is said that he was married to Durgavati and had two sons named Vagyavardhana and Kalyanvardhana.
- The story goes that they were killed by a minister in his court, even before the death of Harsha himself.
- Therefore, Harsha died without any heir.
- As a result, Arjuna, one of the chief ministers took up the thrones.
- Later in 648 CE, Arjuna was captured and held prisoner in an attack by the Tibetians.
