



Gupta Age As A Golden Age

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ABSTRACT: The **Gupta Empire** was an [ancient Indian](#) empire which existed from the early 4th century CE to late 6th century CE. At its zenith, from approximately 319 to 467 CE, it covered much of the [Indian subcontinent](#).^[3] This period is considered as the [Golden Age of India](#) by historians.^[4] The ruling dynasty of the empire was founded by the king Sri [Gupta](#); the most notable rulers of the dynasty were [Chandragupta I](#), [Samudragupta](#), [Chandragupta II](#) and [Skandagupta](#). The 5th-century CE [Sanskrit](#) poet [Kalidasa](#) credits the Guptas with having conquered about twenty-one kingdoms, both in and outside India, including the kingdoms of [Parasikas](#), the [Hunas](#), the [Kambojas](#), tribes located in the west and east [Oxus valleys](#), the [Kinnaras](#), [Kiratas](#), and others.^{[6][7][8]}

The high points of this period are the great cultural developments which took place primarily during the reigns of Samudragupta, Chandragupta II and Kumaragupta I. Many Hindu epics and literary sources, such as [Mahabharata](#) and [Ramayana](#), were canonised during this period.^[9] The Gupta period produced scholars such as [Kalidasa](#),^[10] [Aryabhata](#), [Varahamihira](#), and [Vatsyayana](#) who made great advancements in many academic fields.^{[11][12][13]} [Science](#) and political administration reached new heights during the Gupta era.^[12] The period gave rise to achievements in architecture, sculpture, and painting that "set standards of form and taste [that] determined the whole subsequent course of art, not only in India but far beyond her borders".^[14] Strong trade ties also made the region an important cultural centre and established the region as a base that would influence nearby kingdoms and regions in India and [Southeast Asia](#).^[15] The [Puranas](#), earlier long poems on a variety of subjects, are also thought to have been committed to written texts around this period.^{[14][16]} Hinduism was followed by the rulers and the Brahmins flourished in the Gupta empire but the Guptas tolerated people of other faiths as well.^[17]

KEYWORDS: gupta empire, golden age, samudragupta, trade, culture, faiths, puranas, epics

I.INTRODUCTION


The homeland of the Guptas is uncertain.^[20] According to one theory, they originated in the present-day lower-Doab region of [Uttar Pradesh](#),^[21] where most of the inscriptions and coin hoards of the early Gupta kings have been discovered.^{[22][23]} This theory is also supported by the [Purana](#), as argued by the proponents, that mention the territory of the early Gupta kings as [Prayaga](#), [Saketa](#), and [Magadha](#) areas in the [Ganges](#) basin.^{[24][25]}

Another prominent theory locates the Gupta homeland in the present-day [Bengal](#) region in Ganges basin, based on the account of the 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk [Yijing](#). According to Yijing, king Che-li-ki-to (identified with the dynasty's founder Shri [Gupta](#)) built a temple for Chinese pilgrims near Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no (apparently a transcription of [Mriga-shikha-vana](#)). Yijing states that this temple was located more than 40 [yojanas](#) east of [Nalanda](#), which would mean it was situated somewhere in the modern Bengal region.^[26] Another proposal is that the early Gupta kingdom extended from Prayaga in the west to northern Bengal in the east.^[27]

The Gupta records do not mention the dynasty's [varna](#) (social class).^[28] Some historians, such as [A.S. Altekar](#), have theorised that they were of [Vaishya](#) origin, as certain ancient Indian texts prescribe the name "Gupta" for the members of the Vaishya varna.^{[29][30]} According to historian [R. S. Sharma](#), the Vaishyas – who were traditionally associated with trade – may have become rulers after resisting oppressive taxation by the previous rulers.^[31] Critics of the Vaishya-origin theory point out that the suffix Gupta features in the names of several non-Vaishyas before as well as during the Gupta period,^[32] and the dynastic name "Gupta" may have simply derived from the name of the family's first king [Gupta](#).^[33] Some scholars, such as S. R. Goyal, theorise that the Guptas were [Brahmanas](#), because they had matrimonial relations with Brahmins, but others reject this evidence as inconclusive.^[34] Based on the Pune and Riddhapur inscriptions of the Gupta



princess [Prabhavati-gupta](#), some scholars believe that the name of her paternal [gotra](#) (clan) was "Dharana", but an alternative reading of these inscriptions suggests that Dharana was the gotra of her mother Kuberanaga.^[35] However, recent excavations in Nepal and Deccan has revealed that Gupta suffix was common among [Abhira](#) kings, and Historian D. R. Regmi, links Imperial Guptas with [Abhira Guptas](#) of Nepal.^[36] In *Bhagavatam*, Gupta dynasty has been called *Abhir*.^[37]

[Gupta](#) ([Gupta script](#):  gu-pta, fl. late 3rd century CE) is the earliest known king of the dynasty: different historians variously date the beginning of his reign from mid-to-late 3rd century CE.^{[39][40]} Sri Gupta founded the Gupta Empire c. 240-280 CE, and was succeeded by his son, Ghatotkacha, c. 280-319 CE, followed by Ghatotkacha's son, Chandragupta, c. 319-335 CE.^[41] "Che-li-ki-to", the name of a king mentioned by the 7th century Chinese Buddhist monk [Yijing](#), is believed to be a transcription of "[Shri-Gupta](#)" ([IAST](#): Śrīgupta), "Shri" being an honorific prefix.^[42] According to Yijing, this king built a temple for Chinese Buddhist pilgrims near "Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no" (believed to be a transcription of [Mrgasikhāvana](#)).^[43]

In the [Allahabad Pillar](#) inscription, Gupta and his successor [Ghatotkacha](#) are described as [Maharaja](#) ("great king"), while the next king [Chandragupta I](#) is called a [Maharajadhiraja](#) ("king of great kings"). In the later period, the title Maharaja was used by feudatory rulers, which has led to suggestions that Gupta and Ghatotkacha were vassals (possibly of [Kushan Empire](#)).^[44] However, there are several instances of paramount sovereigns using the title Maharaja, in both pre-Gupta and post-Gupta periods, so this cannot be said with certainty. That said, there is no doubt that Gupta and Ghatotkacha held a lower status and were less powerful than Chandragupta I.^[45]

Chandragupta I married the [Licchavi](#) princess Kumaradevi, which may have helped him extend his political power and dominions, enabling him to adopt the imperial title Maharajadhiraja.^[46] According to the dynasty's official records, he was succeeded by his son [Samudragupta](#). However, the discovery of the coins issued by a Gupta ruler named [Kacha](#) have led to some debate on this topic: according to one theory, Kacha was another name for Samudragupta; another possibility is that Kacha was a rival claimant to the throne.^[47]

II.DISCUSSION

[Samudragupta](#) succeeded his father around 335 or 350 CE, and ruled until c. 375 CE.^[48] The [Allahabad Pillar](#) inscription, composed by his courtier [Harishena](#), credits him with extensive conquests.^[49] The inscription asserts that Samudragupta uprooted 8 kings of [Āryāvarta](#), the northern region, including the [Nagas](#).^[50] It further claims that he subjugated all the kings of the forest region, which was most probably located in central India.^[51] It also credits him with defeating 12 rulers of [Dakshinapatha](#), the southern region: the exact identification of several of these kings is debated among modern scholars,^[52] but it is clear that these kings ruled areas located on the eastern coast of India.^[53] The inscription suggests that Samudragupta advanced as far as the [Pallava](#) kingdom in the south, and defeated Vishnugopa, the Pallava regent of [Kanchi](#).^[54] During this southern campaign, Samudragupta most probably passed through the forest tract of central India, reached the eastern coast in present-day [Odisha](#), and then marched south along the coast of the [Bay of Bengal](#).^[55] Finally, the inscription mentions that several foreign kings tried to please Samudragupta by personal attendance; offered him their daughters in marriage (or according to another interpretation, gifted him maidens^[58]); and sought the use of the [Garuda](#)-depicting Gupta seal for administering their own territories.^[59] This is an exaggeration: for example, the inscription lists the king of [Simhala](#) among these kings. It is known that from Chinese sources that the Simhala king [Meghavarna](#) sent rich presents to the Gupta king requesting his permission to build a Buddhist monastery at [Bodh Gaya](#): Samudragupta's panegyrist appears to have described this act of diplomacy as an act of subservience.^[60]

Samudragupta appears to have been [Vaishnavite](#), as attested by his Eran inscription,^{[61][62]} and performed several [Brahmanical](#) ceremonies.^[63] The Gupta records credit him with making generous donations of cows and gold.^[61] He performed the [Ashvamedha](#) ritual (horse sacrifice), which was used by the ancient Indian kings to prove their imperial sovereignty, and issued gold coins (see [Coinage](#) below) to mark this performance.^[64]

The Allahabad Pillar inscription presents Samudragupta as a wise king and strict administrator, who was also compassionate enough to help the poor and the helpless.^[65] It also alludes to the king's talents as a musician and a poet, and



calls him the "king of poets".^[66] Such claims are corroborated by Samudragupta's gold coins, which depict him playing a [veena](#).^[67]

Samudragupta appears to have directly controlled a large part of the [Indo-Gangetic Plain](#) in present-day India, as well as a substantial part of central India.^[68] Besides, his empire comprised a number of monarchical and tribal tributary states of northern India, and of the south-eastern coastal region of India.^{[69][53]}

According to the Gupta records, amongst his sons, Samudragupta nominated prince Chandragupta II, born of queen [Dattadevi](#), as his successor. Chandragupta II, Vikramaditya (Victory of the Sun), ruled from 375 until 415. He married a Kadamba princess of Kuntala and of Naga lineage (Nāgakulotpannā), Kuberanaga. His daughter [Prabhavati](#) from this Naga queen was married to [Rudrasena II](#), the [Vakataka](#) ruler of [Deccan](#).^[73] His son Kumaragupta I was married to a Kadamba princess of the Karnataka region. Chandragupta II expanded his realm westwards, defeating the [Saka Western Kshatrapas](#) of [Malwa](#), [Gujarat](#) and [Saurashtra](#) in a campaign lasting until 409. His main opponent [Rudrasimha III](#) was defeated by 395, and he crushed the Bengal chiefdoms. This extended his control from coast to coast, established a second capital at [Ujjain](#) and was the high point of the empire. Kuntala inscriptions indicate rule of Chandragupta in [Kuntala region](#) of Indian state of [Karnataka](#).^[74] [Hunza inscription](#) also indicate that Chandragupta was able to rule north western Indian subcontinent and proceeded to conquer [Balkh](#), although some scholars have also disputed the identity of gupta king.^{[75][76]} Chalukyan ruler [Vikramaditya VI](#) (r. 1076 – 1126 CE) mentions Chandragupta with his title and states 'why should the glory of the Kings Vikramaditya and Nanda be a hindrance any longer ? he with a loud command abolished that (era), which has the name of Saka, and made that (era) which has the Chalukya counting " ^[77] The 4th century [Sanskrit](#) poet [Kalidasa](#) credits Chandragupta Vikramaditya with conquering about twenty-one kingdoms, both in and outside India. After finishing his campaign in East and West India, Vikramaditya (Chandragupta II) proceeded northwards, subjugated the [Parasikas](#), then the [Hunas](#) and the [Kambojas](#) tribes located in the west and east [Oxus](#) valleys respectively. Thereafter, the king proceeded into the [Himalaya](#) mountains to reduce the mountain tribes of the [Kinnaras](#), [Kiratas](#), as well as India proper.^[61] In one of his works Kalidasa also credits him with the removal of the [Sakas](#) from the country. He wrote 'Wasn't it Vikramaditya who drove the Sakas out from the lovely city of Ujjain?'.^[78]

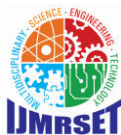
III.RESULTS

Following Skandagupta's death, the empire was clearly in decline,^[93] and the later Gupta coinage indicates their loss of control over much of western India after 467–469.^[3] Skandagupta was followed by [Purugupta](#) (467–473), [Kumaragupta II](#) (473–476), [Budhagupta](#) (476–495), [Narasimhagupta](#) (495–530), [Kumaragupta III](#) (530–540), [Vishnugupta](#) (540–550), two lesser known kings namely, [Vainyagupta](#) and [Bhanugupta](#).

In the 480's the [Alchon Huns](#) under [Toramana](#) and [Mihirakula](#) broke through the Gupta defences in the northwest, and much of the empire in the northwest was overrun by the Huns by 500. According to some scholars the empire disintegrated under the attacks of [Toramana](#) and his successor [Mihirakula](#).^{[94][95]} It appears from inscriptions that the Guptas, although their power was much diminished, continued to resist the Huns. The Hun invader Toramana was defeated by [Bhanugupta](#) in 510.^{[96][97]} The Huns were defeated and driven out of India in 528 by King [Yashodharman](#) from [Malwa](#), and possibly Gupta emperor [Narasimhagupta](#).^[98]

These invasions, although only spanning a few decades, had long term effects on India, and in a sense brought an end to [Classical Indian civilisation](#).^[99] Soon after the invasions, the Gupta Empire, already weakened by these invasions and the rise of local rulers such as [Yashodharman](#), ended as well.^[100] Following the invasions, northern India was left in disarray, with numerous smaller Indian powers emerging after the crumbling of the Guptas.^[101] The Huna invasions are said to have seriously damaged India's trade with [Europe](#) and [Central Asia](#).^[99] In particular, [Indo-Roman trade relations](#), which the Gupta Empire had greatly benefited from. The Guptas had been exporting numerous luxury products such as [silk](#), leather goods, fur, iron products, [ivory](#), [pearl](#), and pepper from centres such as [Nasik](#), [Paithan](#), [Pataliputra](#), and [Benares](#). The Huna invasion probably disrupted these trade relations and the tax revenues that came with them.^[102]

Furthermore, Indian urban culture was left in decline, and [Buddhism](#), gravely weakened by the destruction of monasteries and the killing of monks by the hand of the vehemently anti-Buddhist [Shaivist](#) Mihirakula, started to collapse.^[99] Great



centres of learning were destroyed, such as the city of [Taxila](#), bringing cultural regression.^[99] During their rule of 60 years, the Alchons are said to have altered the hierarchy of ruling families and the Indian [caste system](#). For example, the Hunas are often said to have become the precursors of the [Rajputs](#).^[99]

The succession of the 6th-century Guptas is not entirely clear, but the tail end recognised ruler of the dynasty's main line was king [Vishnugupta](#), reigning from 540 to 550. In addition to the Hun invasion, the factors, which contribute to the decline of the empire include competition from the [Vakatakas](#) and the rise of [Yashodharman](#) in [Malwa](#).^[104]

The last known inscription by a Gupta emperor is from the reign of Vishnugupta (the Damodarpur copper-plate inscription),^[105] in which he makes a land grant in the area of [Kotivarsha \(Bangarh in West Bengal\)](#) in 542/543 CE.^[106] This follows the occupation of most of northern and central India by the [Aulikara](#) ruler [Yashodharman](#) circa 532 CE.^[106] A 2019 study by archaeologist Shanker Sharma has concluded that the cause of the Gupta empire's downfall was a devastating flood which happened around the middle of the 6th century in [Uttar Pradesh](#) and [Bihar](#).^[107]

A study of the epigraphical records of the Gupta empire shows that there was a hierarchy of administrative divisions from top to bottom. The empire was called by various names such as Rajya, Rashtra, Desha, Mandala, Prithvi and Avani. It was divided into 26 provinces, which were styled as Bhukti, Pradesha and Bhoga. Provinces were also divided into [Vishayas](#) and put under the control of the Vishayapatis. A Vishayapati administered the Vishaya with the help of the Adhikarana (council of representatives), which comprised four representatives: Nagarasreshethi, Sarthavaha, Prathamakulika and Prathama Kayastha. A part of the Vishaya was called Vithi.^[127] The Gupta also had trading links with the Sassanid and Byzantine Empire. The four-fold varna system was observed under the Gupta period but caste system was fluid. Brahmins followed non-Brahmanical profession as well. Khasatriyas were involved in trade and commerce. The society largely coexisted among themselves.^[128]

IV.CONCLUSIONS

The Gupta period is generally regarded as a classic peak of North [Indian art](#) for all the major religious groups. Although painting was evidently widespread, the surviving works are almost all religious sculpture. The period saw the emergence of the iconic carved stone deity in Hindu art, as well as the Buddha-figure and [Jain tirthankara](#) figures, the latter often on a very large scale. The two great centres of sculpture were [Mathura](#) and [Gandhara](#), the latter the centre of [Greco-Buddhist art](#). Both exported sculpture to other parts of northern India.

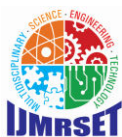
The most famous remaining monuments in a broadly Gupta style, the caves at [Ajanta](#), [Elephanta](#), and [Ellora](#) (respectively Buddhist, Hindu, and mixed including Jain) were in fact produced under later dynasties, but primarily reflect the monumentality and balance of Guptan style. Ajanta contains by far the most significant survivals of painting from this and the surrounding periods, showing a mature form which had probably had a long development, mainly in painting palaces.^[131] The Hindu [Udayagiri Caves](#) actually record connections with the dynasty and its ministers,^[132] and the [Dashavatara Temple](#) at [Deogarh](#) is a major temple, one of the earliest to survive, with important sculpture.

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