

The Gupta period marks the important phase in the history of ancient India. The long and efficient rule of the Guptas made a huge impact on the political, social and cultural sphere. Though the Gupta Empire was not widespread as the Maurya Empire, but it was successful in creating an empire that is significant in the history of India. The Gupta period is also known as the “classical age” because of progress in literature and culture. After the downfall of Kushans, Guptas emerged and kept North India politically united for more than a century.

Early Rulers of Gupta Empire:-

- **Srigupta – I (270 – 300 C.E.):**
  - He was the first ruler of Magadha (modern Bihar) who established Gupta dynasty with Pataliputra as its capital.
- **Ghatotkacha Gupta (300 – 319 C.E):**  
Both were not sovereign, they were subordinates of Kushana Rulers

**Chandragupta I (319 C.E. to 335 C.E.),**

- Laid the foundation of Gupta rule in India.
- He assumed the title “Maharajadhiraja”.
- He issued gold coins for the first time.
- One of the important events in his period was his marriage with a Lichchavi (Kshatriyas) Princess.
- The marriage alliance with Kshatriyas gave social prestige to the Guptas who were Vaishyas.

**Calendars in India**

- 58 B.C. Vikram Samvat (Oldest Calendar in India)
- 78 A.D. Kanishka
- 248 A.D. Kalchuri Samvat
- 319 A.D. Gupt Samvat
- 606 A.D. Harsha Samvat
- 622 Hijri (Islamic Calendar)

All calendars mentioned above are Lunar calendars (Based on one cycle of moon)

Gregorian calendar (Pope Gregory XIII, 1582) is solar calendar.

**Samudragupta (C.E. 335 – 375)**

- Referred to as the “Napoleon of India” by historian Vincent. A. Smith.
- He was magnificent empire builder and great administrator and greatest among Guptas.
- His achievements, successes and 39 victories are mentioned by his court poet “Harisena”. He wrote a long inscription engraved in Allahabad in Sanskrit on the Ashoka Pillar known as “Prayag Prashasti”
- Two types of rule were prevalent. Direct rule in Bengal, Bihar, U.P., and parts M.P. and indirect rule. After defeating the kings he returned the kingdom to them on conditions of 1) Tribute, 2) personal appearance in court of Samudragupta and 3) had to marry their daughters with him.
- He performed an Asvamedha, adopted title “Parakramanka”.
- He wrote poems and earned the title “Kaviraja”.
- He minted gold coins with his own image and Laxmi’s image, Garuda, Ashvamedha yagya & playing veena

**Chandragupta II (380 C.E. to 415 C.E.) also known as Chandragupta Vikramaditya**

- The drama —Devichandraguptam” written by Vishakhadutta is about Chandragupta’s succession by displacing his brother Ramagupta.
- He defeated Shaka Rulers
- He made Ujjain his second capital.
- He adopted the titles Vikramaditya.
- He was the first Gupta king who issued silver coins.
- Naratnas adorned his court. The famous poets like Kalidas, Amarasimha, Vishakhadatta and Physician Dhanvantri adored his court.
- Fahien, the Chinese traveler visited India during his time (399 A.D.-410 A.D.)
- The inscriptions engraved on the —Iron Pillar at Mehrauli (near Delhi) give account of his conquest.

**Kumaragupta (415 C.E. to 455 C.E.)**

- 17 Inscriptions mainly in Mandasur M.P. and Mathura written in Sanskrit give evidence of his reign.
- He adopted the title of Mahendraditya.
- First Huna (Central Asian tribe) attack took place
- Introduced the concept of worshipping God Kartikeya.
- According to the Bhitri inscription of Skandagupta, some Pushyamitras invaded the Guptas during his period.
- Nalanda Buddhist Monastery (later became Nalanda University) was built during his period.

**Skandagupta (455 C.E. – 467 C.E.)**

- He was the last greatest Gupta ruler. He assumed the titles Parambhattaraka, Paramdevta, Maharajadhiraj, etc.
- He successfully resisted the Huns invasion.
- The Junagadh inscription mentions the restoration of the embankment of Sudarshana Lake.
- The Bhitari inscription records the career of Skandagupta.
- He erected a pillar of victory surmounted by the statue of God Vishnu.
- He issued the Lion type coins.
- Purugupta ascended the throne after Skandagupta.
- Vishnugupta was the last king.

**POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SET UP OF GUPTAS**

- The Guptas provided a sound system of administration. The king was the head of state as well as that of administration (Centralized Administration).
- Some of officials and ministers were hereditary. Feudalism started emerging as compensations would be in form of land. The ministers were appointed by the king on merit and one of their important qualifications was their capability to lead the army.
- The primary source of income was land revenue (Udranga) and the taxes were 1/6th of their produce which was collected in cash as well as kind.
- Arthashastra written by Kautilya contains chapters belonging to Mauryans, post-Mauryan and Gupta period

### SOCIETY AND RELIGION

- The structure of the society was basically the same as mentioned in the Hindu Dharmashastra. The period marked the revival of Hinduism under the patronage of the Gupta rulers.
- Brahmins started getting donated land known as Agrahagar or brahmadeya which weakened the position of later Gupta rulers.
- Vaish community was most productive but had to pay most taxes.
- Remarkable impact of Ahimsa and vegetarianism on society.
- Shudras were mostly engaged in labor and crafts as well as agriculture.
- Even below shudras there were people who were untouchables and outcasts.
- Rise of a new caste Kayastha (mentioned in Yajnavalkya Smriti), they used to keep the land records.
- Women were subordinate to men and their conditions was deteriorating . Polygamy was widely prevalent.
- Widow remarriage was banned. Basic education was denied to them. Sati system came into light from the “Eran Inscription” in 510 A.D.
- Devadasi system also was vogue in this period.

### ART AND ARCHITECTURE

- Religious Literature:
- The age of Guptas has been regarded as the age of the classic age in India. It is primarily because of its progress in the field of literature.
- Sanskrit language had become virtually the national language of India and so most of the works were prepared in Sanskrit in their age.
- Many Smritis like Manu, Narada, Brahaspati, Gautam, Prashar and different Dharmashastras were also written or completed in this period.
- Oldest Smriti – Manu Smriti (Most comprehensive but biased in favor of upper castes and males)
- Some of Puranas like Vishnu, Shiv, Agni, Matasya were written during this period.
- Puranas are tales of Gods and Goddesses. They give chronology of ancient Indian rulers and dynasties. Good source to know about prevalent culture and society. Style of Puranas was future tense.
- The epics, Ramayana (12,000 shlokas added to already 12000 shlokas) and Mahabharata (longest epic 1,00,000 shalokas, Shat Sahastra Samhita) received present shape during this age.

### Kalidasa

- He has been regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist of ancient India. Probably he was a contemporary of Chandragupta II.
- Kalidasa wrote the Ritusamhara, the Meghadutta, the Kumarasambava, the Raghuvansa, the Viramavamsiya, the Malavikagnimitra and Abhijnana Sakuntalam have been regarded as the best ones of Kalidasa during this time.

#### **Other important Indian literature (Not related to Gupta Period only)**

- Daridra Charudatta (By Bhasa)
- Mrichchakatikam (By Charudatta)
- Devi Chandraguptam m Mudra Rakhshasa (Both by Vishakha Datta)
- Kadambri (Banabhatta in 7th century A.D.)
- Jambavati Kalyanam (16th Century by Krishnadev Raya)
- Amarakosha (by Amar Simha dictionary in Sanskrit)

- Panchatantra (by Vishnu Shastri)
- Kamasutra (by Vatsayana)

**Science, Grammar, Astrology, Medicine, etc., also made tremendous progress during this age.**

- Aryabhata has been accepted as the greatest scientist and mathematician of this age.
- His text Aryabhatiyam contains solutions for many problems of algebra, geometry and trigonometry.
- He was the first Indian astronomer to discover that the earth rotates on its axis.
- It is also believed that decimal system was discovered by the Hindus during this period.
- Panch Diddhhanitika was written by Varahamihira was the greatest astrologer of this age.
- Nagarjuna, the famous Buddhist scholar was also a great student of medicine, chemistry and metallurgy.
- Dhanavantri was the most renowned physician of Ayurvedic medicine during this age.

**Authors and Books During The Gupta Age**

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|-----------------|---|---------------------|
| ○ Iswarakrishna | - | Sankhyakarika       |
| ○ Vatsayana's   | - | Kamasutra           |
| ○ Panini's      | - | Astadyayi           |
| ○ Patanjali's   | - | Gita Govinda        |
| ○ Vajikas       | - | Kaumudimahotsava    |
| ○ Somadeva's    | - | Kathasaritsagara    |
| ○ Bhasa         | - | Swapnavasadatta     |
| ○ Suband        | - | Vasavadatta         |
| ○ Bhattin       | - | Ravanavadha         |
| ○ Visakadatta   | - | Mudrarakshas        |
| ○ Sudarak       | - | The Mrichchakatikam |
| ○ Dandi         | - | Dasakumaracharita   |
| ○ Bharavi       | - | Kiratarjuniyam      |

**Sources**

- The writings of foreign travelers like Fahien, Huan-Tzang and It-Sing along with sources like literature, coins, inscriptions, monuments, constitute major sources of Guptas History.
- The Allahabad Pillar inscription.
- The Sanskrit Drama —Kaumudumahotsava, written by Kisorika.
- The Mehrauli inscription.
- The Bilsand inscription.
- The Bhitari inscription etc. throws lights on imperial Gupta kingdoms.

**Literary Sources:**

1. Vayu Purana
  2. Madhya Purana
  3. Vishnu Purana
  4. Brahma Purana and
  5. Bhagvat Purana
- Dharmashastras such as —Narada Smriti and —Brahhaspati Smriti.

- Kamadaka Nitisara and Kavya Nataka.
- The Kamudi Mahotsava is a drama in five sets which lays down the political condition of Magadha on the eve of ascending of Guptas.
- Fahien, the Chinese traveler during Chandragupta II tells about the social, religious, political conditions of Guptas.
- Seals: A large number of seals have been found in Vaishali.
- The seal of —Mahadevi Dhruvaswami, the Queen of Chandragupta II and
- The Variety of seals gives us an insight of provincial and local administration.
- Monuments: The monuments of the Gupta period also are a reliable source of the artistic and religious history of Gupta period.
- Schools like Mathura, Banaras and Nalanda depict and illustrate the different Art and Architecture of the Guptas.

Numismatic: A lot of useful and authentic information has been found in the coins of Guptas Empire.

- Various types of coins of Gupta Dynasty have been unearthed. Some of the types are: Tiger Type, Lyrist Type, Archer Type, Houseman Type, Landlord Type, Elephant Rider Type, Asvamedha Type
- The Archer type coins of Skandagupta are mainly of Gold.
- Samudragupta and Chandragupta issued as many as six types of gold coins.

Remarkable progress was made in the field of Art and Architecture during the Gupta age.

- Different coins of gold and silver of artistic taste were issued, with queen Kumaradevi standing face to face with Chandragupta I on one side and Durga seated on the Lion on the other side.
- Samudragupta has been shown in different poses with his Queen Dattadevi, with battle axe or slaying a tiger.
- Kumaragupta I issued a variety of coins like peacock type, elephant rider type and archer type.
- Music, dance and drama were patronized by the Gupta emperors and women were trained in fine arts.
- Terracotta (pottery, images, etc. of clay) were most popular during the Gupta age. It was considered a poor man's art.
- Iron and stone pillars near the Qutab Minar were constructed; probably by Chandragupta II. They were the lone example of its own kind.
- They constructed pillars at different places which were used for engraving their inscriptions.
- The construction of Stupas, Chaitya Halls, Monasteries, Cave temples and Cave dwellings were prominent during the Gupta age. Buddhist buildings, the Stupas at Rajagiri and the Dhamekha stupa at Saranath are most prominent.
- The frescos of Ellora caves, the Bagh caves, the Sittana Vasal Temple in Tamil Nadu and Rocket chambers at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka are examples of Gupta paintings.
- The period also produced magnificent Brhamainical temples, Dasavatara temple of Devgarh, Vishnu temple of Tigawa, Shiva temple at Bhumarah and Khohand, two Buddhist shrines at Sanchi & Bodh Gaya.
- Greek influence resulting into Gandhara cult and late Mathura art and Saranath schools are fully Indianized.
- The Ekamukhi (one faced) and Chaturmukh (four faced) Sivalinga and the Ardhanarisvara form of Siva representing the synthesis between male and female deity represent a few fine specimen of the art of sculpture the Gupta age.

**Important inscriptions of Gupta period**

- Mathura inscriptions of Chandragupta II
- Eran stone inscription of Samudragupta.
- Gadhwa inscription of Chandragupta II
- Gadhwa stone inscription of Kumaragupta
- Indore Copper Plate inscription of Skandagupta.

**Different styles of architecture in the Gupta period**

- Dravida Style - a second storey (Vimana - South Indian style )
- Nagara Style - Shikara (North Indian style)
- Besara Style - Mixed North and South Indian style.