

Life under Guptas and Vakatakas

The Guptas as well as the Vakatakas are important dynasties in the history of ancient India. In this article, you can read about the various facets of life such as the administration, economy, social and religious life, art and literature, among others, during the age of the Guptas and the Vakatakas. This is an important segment of the history part of the [UPSC syllabus](#).

Various Facets of Life under the Guptas & the Vakatakas

The Guptas came to power around the last decade of the 3rd century CE (about 275 CE). The Gupta period in ancient India is referred to as the “Golden Age” because of the numerous achievements in the field of arts, literature, science and technology. It also brought about the political unification of the subcontinent. By the end of the fifth century, their power had declined.

The Vakatakas ruled the Deccan for more than two and a half centuries and were contemporaries of the Guptas.

System of Administration

According to inscriptions, the Gupta kings assumed titles like Paramabharraka, Maharajadhiraja, Parameshwara, Parama-daivata (the foremost worshipper of gods) and Paramabhagavata (foremost worshipper of Vasudeva Krishna).

- The Gupta Empire was decentralised in nature and contained many feudatories like local kings and smaller chiefs, who ruled over large parts of the empire, as opposed to the Mauryan era where the political authority was vested in the hands of the king.
 - These lesser kings adopted titles like Raja and Maharaja.
 - The kinship was hereditary, but there was no practice of primogeniture i.e, only the eldest son occupying the throne.
 - There was the practice of granting gifts to the Brahmanas who in return expressed gratitude by comparing the king to different gods like Vishnu, Indra and Dhanada.
- The king maintained a standing army, however, the numerical strength of the Gupta army is not known.
 - The standing army was supplemented by the feudatories' forces in times of need.
 - The commander-in-chief of the army was known as Mahabaladhikrita.
 - Horse chariots receded into the background and cavalry came to the forefront in this period. The commander of infantry and cavalry was called Bhatashvapati.
 - In the case of the Vakatakas, Chhatras referred to irregular troops and Batas denoted regular troops who were responsible for maintaining law and order and also collected revenue.

- Bureaucracy under the Guptas was not as elaborate as that of the Mauryan administration.
 - The Kumaramatyas were the most important officers in the Gupta empire. The king appointed them and they were probably paid in cash. All the important functionaries like the mantri and senapati were recruited from this cadre.
 - Administrative posts were hereditary and also the same person often held multiple offices. The hereditary nature of the posts led to a weakening of the royal control of the administration.
- During the Gupta period, the empire was divided into provinces called Bhuktis whose heads were called Uparikas.
 - Sometimes, crown princes were also made the viceroys of the provinces.
 - The provinces were divided into districts called Vishayas, which were placed under the control of Vishyapati.
 - In eastern India, the Vishayas were divided into Vithis, which were further divided into villages.
 - The village headman (Gramadhyaksha/Gramika) managed the village affairs with the assistance of village elders. The village headman became more important in Gupta times as no transaction could be affected without his consent.



- Empire division -
 - In the case of the Vakatakas, less information is available regarding their administrative structure. However, it was very similar to the Guptas - the empire was divided into Rashttras or Rajyas which were administered by governors called Rajyadhikritas. The provinces were divided into vishayas which were further divided into aharas and bhogas/bhuktis. The higher official called Sarvadhyaaksha presumably appointed subordinate officers known as Kulaputras.
- The **judicial system** was well developed under the Gupta kings when compared to earlier times. The law books were compiled in this period and it was for the first time that criminal and civil laws were clearly defined and delineated. Theft and adultery came under criminal law and disputes regarding property issues were under civil law. There were also elaborate laws about

inheritance. However, like the previous periods, many laws continued to be based on differences in varnas. The highest judicial power was with the king who tried cases with the Brahmana priests' aid. Mahanadanyala acted as chief justice, Uparikas and Vishyapatis in their respective territorial jurisdiction dispensed the judicial functions. The guilds of artisans and merchants were governed by their own laws.

Economy - Gupta & Vakataka Age

This section briefly describes the situation of the economy under the Guptas and the Vakatakas.

- In the Gupta period, there was a rise in land taxes but a depreciation in trade and commerce taxes (shulka or tolls).
 - The land grants to the Brahmanas led to the conversion of vast areas of virgin land into cultivable land.
 - The king collected taxes varying from 1/4th to 1/6th of the produce.
 - According to the Gupta inscriptions, two taxes appeared in this period - uparikara (probably it was a tax on temporary tenants) and udranga (probably water tax or some police tax).
 - There is also mention of vata-bhuta tax, which presumably refers to cesses for maintenance of rites performed for wind and spirits, and halirakara tax (probably plough tax).
 - In central and western India, the villagers were subjected to forced labour called vishti for serving the royal army and officials.
 - Vakataka inscriptions mention klipta (purchase tax or sales tax) and upaklipta (additional minor tax).
- The Gupta and post-Gupta period witnessed a decline in the country's trade and commerce.
 - Till 550 CE, India carried out its trade with the Eastern Roman Empire, exporting silk and spices.
 - Around the sixth century, the people of the Eastern Roman Empire learnt the art of making silk from the Chinese. This adversely affected the export trade of India.
 - The Mandisor inscription mentions that a guild of silk weavers left their original home at Lata in western India (Gujarat) and migrated to Mandisor, where they gave up their original occupation and took to other professions.
 - The disturbance of the north-western trade route by the Hunas was another factor responsible for the diminishing trade in the country.
 - This directly affected the inflow of gold into the country which is indicated by a general paucity of gold coins after the Guptas.
 - There is frequent mention of artisans, merchants and guilds in different inscriptions and seals of both Guptas and Vakatakas which point towards flourishing urban crafts and trade. There is also mention of philanthropic activities of guilds.

Society under Guptas and Vakatakas

- The large number of land grants to the Brahmanas suggest that the Brahmana supremacy continued and even increased during the Gupta period. The Brahmanas expressed their gratitude by comparing the king to different gods and as possessing attributes of gods. The Guptas, who were basically Vaishyas, came to be seen as Kshatriyas by the Brahmanas. The Brahmanas were exempted from the land taxes and these land grants made them rich & prosperous. They claimed many privileges which are listed in the law book of Narada. The castes proliferated into numerous sub-castes as a result of two factors:
 - A large number of foreigners had been assimilated into Indian society and each group of foreigners was assigned a sub-caste. For example, various foreign ruling families of the pre-Gupta period (e.g, Scythian origin) were given semi-Kshatriya status. The Huns, who invaded India during the early 5th century, came to be recognised as one of the 36 clans of the Rajputs.
 - With the expansion of brahminical culture in distant and different areas, a large number of tribal communities were assimilated into the Brahmanical social structure of the varna system. The foreign rulers and tribal heads were treated as Kshatriyas and the ordinary tribals were given the Shudra status.
- During the Gupta times, the status of Shudras improved. They were now allowed to listen to the epics (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) and the Puranas. They could now even worship a new god called Krishna. From the 7th century onwards, the Shudras were generally represented as agriculturists; in the earlier times, they always appeared as slaves, servants and agricultural labourers working for the 3 higher varnas.
- The practice of untouchability intensified, especially for chandalas. The Chinese traveller Fa-Hien says in his memoirs that the chandalas lived outside the villages and handled meat and flesh. Whenever they entered the town or market places, they would strike a piece of wood to declare their arrival, so that the others might avoid touching them and getting polluted. In south India, it seems that the practice of untouchability came about in the late Sangam age.
- The position of women had become miserable during the Gupta period. For instance, women had no right over property, there are evidences of sati. The first evidence of sati around c. 510 CE is found in an inscription at Eran in Madhya Pradesh. In the Harshacharita (composed by Banabhatta), when King Prabhakaravardhana dies, his Queen performs sati.

Religion during Gupta and Vakataka Age

- Brahmanism reigned supreme during the Gupta period. It had two branches - Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Vishnu emerged as the god of devotion and he came to be represented as the saviour of the varna system. A whole Purana called Vishnupurana was compiled in his honour and a law book named Vishnumriti was named after Vishnu. Sanskrit was firmly established as the language of royal inscriptions.

- The Gupta rulers patronised Bhagvatism - worship of Bhagvat or Vishnu and his incarnations. Later Vishnu came to be identified with Krishna Vasudeva, a legendary hero of the Vishni tribe who gave the historic sermon of Bhagavad Gita in the Mahabharata. So Bhagvatism was identified with Vaishnavism. According to Bhagavad Gita, the most important text of Bhagvatism, whenever there occurred a social crisis, Vishnu would incarnate on earth and protect the people. There were ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu that were envisioned. The progress of Brahmanism led to the neglect of Buddhism and Jainism.
- Idol worship became a common feature and the idols of different incarnations of Vishnu were housed in the temples constructed in the Gupta period. Agricultural festivals observed by different classes of people were given religious garb and colour and turned into good sources of income for the priests.
- The Gupta kings were devout Hindus. They also were tolerant of other religious sects. Although Buddhists didn't receive any royal patronage as it was during the glorious days of Ashoka and Kanishka, some stupas and viharas were built and the Nalanda University developed as a great centre of learning for Mahayana Buddhism during this time.

Literature - Gupta Period

The best of Sanskrit literature belongs to the Gupta age. The Golden Age of art and literature in the history of India is the Gupta period. A great many secular and religious literature were compiled during this era. The epics of Ramayana and the Mahabharata were finally compiled in the 4th century CE. Both these epics represent the victory of righteousness over the forces of evil. Rama and Krishna were considered incarnations of Vishnu. The Bhagavadgita forms an important part of the Mahabharata.

The Puranas in their present form were composed during this period - the Vishnu Purana, Matsya Purana and the Vayu Purana. Shiva Purana was composed for the worship of Shiva. The period also witnessed the compilation of various Smritis or law books e.g, Narada Smriti which gives an account of the social, economic rules and regulations of the period.

The secular literature pieces of this period have great emphasis on verse than on prose. The Gupta literature includes the classic works of the following:

- **Kalidasa** - The literary work of Kalidasa, one of the navaratnas of Chandragupta II, has made the Gupta period very famous. The plays were all comedies and characters of the higher classes speak Sanskrit while those of lower castes and women use Prakrit language. In his early works, Kalidasa invokes Shiva and calls him Triloknath. Some of his important works are-
 - **Abhijnanashakuntalam** - It is a masterpiece and considered one of the best 100 literary works of the world. It is also the earliest Indian work to be translated to European languages.
 - **Malavikagnimitram** - It is the first dramatic work of Kalidasa and is about the celebrations of Vasant Utsav (spring festival).

- **Kumarasambhavam** - It is the story about the birth of Kumara (son of Shiva and Parvati) and also contains references to sati.
- **Raghuvamsha** - It portrays Lord Vishnu as the origin and the end of the universe.
- **Ritusamhara and Meghaduta are his two lyrics.**
- **Shudraka** - was a renowned poet of this age and his book Mrichchhakatikam (little clay cart) is rich in humour and pathos.
- **Bharavi** - Author of a Sanskrit kavya Kiratarjuniya - the story of conflict between Arjuna and Shiva.
- **Dandin** - Wrote Dasakumaracharita and Kavyadarshana.
- **Amarasimha** - The Buddhist author who compiled a Sanskrit lexicon Amarakosha. Amarasimha was a luminary in the court of Chandragupta II.
- **Bhasa** - Writer of thirteen plays including Balacharita, Charudatta and Dutavakya.
- **Bhatti** - Author of Ravanavadha, which illustrates the rules of grammar while telling the story of Rama's life.
- **Mentha** - Author of Hayagrivavadha.
- **Vishnu Sharman** - Author of Panchatantra possibly composed in the Vakataka empire and contains satirical tales in which animals play a vital role.

All the 5 Mahakavyas produced by Sanskrit Literature belong to the Gupta Age:

- Raghuvamsham by Kalidasa
- Kumarasambhavam by Kalidasa
- Kiratarjuniyam by Bharavi
- Shishupalavadha by Magha - talks about the slaying of Shishupala by Krishna
- Naisadhiyacharitam by Sri Harsha - based on the life of king Nala and queen Damayanti

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Gupta & Vakataka Art and Architecture

In ancient India, art was mostly inspired by religion. [Buddhism](#) gave a great boost to art in Maurya and post-Mauryan times. The craftsmen were efficient in the art of casting metal statues and pillars. A life-sized bronze image of Buddha (about two m high) belonging to the Mathura school of art has been found at Sultanganj in Bihar.

- In the Gupta age, good-looking images of the Buddha were made at Sarnath and Mathura.
 - The greatest specimen of Buddhist art in Gupta times is provided by the paintings of Ajanta caves, which are included in the list of [World Heritage Sites by UNESCO](#).
 - Out of the 28 Ajanta caves, 23 are from the Vakataka period, while five caves were from the Satavahana period.

- These paintings mostly depict various events in the life of Gautama Buddha, the bodhisattva and the Jatakas.
- The paintings are life-like, natural and marked by the brilliance of their colours, which haven't faded even after 14 centuries or so.
- The paintings of the Gupta times are also seen at Bagh caves near Gwalior.
- The paintings at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka were highly influenced by the Ajanta style.
- The temple found at Bhitargaon in Kanpur is made up of bricks and the Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh, Jhansi belongs to the Gupta period.
 - The Vishnu temple of Tigawa (M.P) and the Parwati temple of Nachna-Kuthara (M.P) are stone temples of the Gupta era but in a ruined state.
 - The temples built during the Gupta period had Nagara architecture style, in which generally, flat-roofed square temples were built.
- The Gupta coinage was also remarkable and Gupta rulers issued the largest number of gold coins.
 - Samudragupta issued eight types of gold coins.
 - The legends on them throw light on the achievements of the king.
 - The figures inscribed on them are illustrative of the skill and greatness of Gupta numismatic art.
 - Chandragupta II and his successors also issued gold, silver and copper coins of different varieties.

Science & Technology - Guptas and Vakatakas

The achievements in the field of science and technology in the age of the Guptas are exceptional. Some of the great science scholars belonging to this era are:

Aryabhatta

- He was a great mathematician and astronomer of Pataliputra. He wrote the book Aryabhatiya (around 499 CE) which deals with mathematics and astronomy.
- Aryabhatta was the first to declare that the earth was spherical in shape and it rotates about its own axis. He also gave an accurate estimate of the length of a year - 365.2586805 days.
- He gave the scientific reasons for the occurrences of solar and lunar eclipses.
- He invented zero and recommended the use of the decimal system.
- The properties of a circle and the accurate value of pi, correct to four decimal places at 3.1416 are attributed to him.
- He also laid the foundation of trigonometry.

Varahamihira

- One of the gems of Chandragupta II's court.

- Composed Pancha Siddhantika - the five astronomical systems.
- His work Brihadsamhita is a great work in the Sanskrit language. It deals with a variety of subjects like astronomy, astrology, geography, architecture, weather, animals, marriage and omens.
- His Brihat Jataka is considered to be a standard work on astrology.

Brahmagupta

- He made significant contributions to geometry.

Bhaskara II

- Author of Lilavati that espouses major ideas of calculus.

Dhanvantri

- He is famous for his work in the field of Ayurveda.

Vagbhata

- A successful physician of the Ayurvedic system of medicine.
- A disciple of Charaka.
- Author of the Astangahridaya (Heart of Medicine) and the Astanga Samgraha (Tome on Medicine).

Kashyapa

- A 7th-century physician who compiled his ayurvedic knowledge in a compendium that dealt with the diseases of women and children.

Sushruta

- Author of Sushruta Samhita which deals with surgery.

The Gupta period also witnessed technological advancements in the field of metallurgy. The several bronze images of Buddha are examples of advanced technology. The iron pillar at Delhi, near Mehrauli, has not rusted even after 15 centuries, which reflects the technological skills of the craftsmen.
