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THE GUPTA KINGDOM*

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Origin and political history of the Guptas

The political disintegration which followed the dissolution of the Kushan Empire continued up to the beginning of the fourth century. The Kushans still ruled over western Panjab, but they had ceased to exercise any authority further east. The Sakas ruled over Gujarat and a part of Malwa, but their power was also on the decline. The rest of northern India was divided into a number of small kingdoms and autonomous states.

The origin of the Guptas is somewhat obscure. Many authorities on Gupta history believe that they came from Magadha or northern Bengal, which was the original nucleus of their empire. On the basis of the provenance of early Gupta coin hoards and the distribution of the important Gupta inscriptions, historians have now come to accept the lower Doab region as the original home of the Guptas.

* See Map 4.

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From the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta we learn that while the first two kings of the Gupta dynasty were merely *mahārāja*s, Chandragupta I (*c.* 319/320–*c.* 335 or *c.* 350), the son and successor of the second king, Ghatotkaca (*c.* 280–*c.* 319), assumed the title of *mahārājadhirāja*. This has led some historians to believe that the ancestors of Chandragupta I were petty landholders under the Later Kushans, the Bharashivas or the Murundas.

The Gupta era dates from the accession of Chandragupta I in *c.* 319/320, although the era itself was not introduced by him. Chandragupta I married a Licchavi princess early in his career. The Licchavis were an old-established clan who ruled over the Magadhan region during the first quarter of the fourth century. The Guptas were very proud of this alliance: they publicized it by issuing a class of gold coins known as the Chandragupta I–Kumaradevi type and by describing Samudragupta, the son and successor of Chandragupta I, as '*Licchavi-dauhitra*' (son of the daughter of the Licchavis) in their inscriptions.

At the time of the death of Chandragupta I in *c.* 350, the Guptas, in alliance with the Licchavis, had become the greatest power of northern India. This alliance brought with it certain problems, however, since the nature and traditions of the two states were fundamentally different. The Guptas were monarchical and patrons of Brahmanism, whereas the Licchavis had strong Buddhist leanings. The Allahabad pillar inscription tells us that Chandragupta nominated Samudragupta as his successor. This choice was obviously resented by some members of the family, since Kacha, who is known to us from his Chakradhvaja and Garudadhvaja variety of coins, revolted against his brother Samudragupta. Kacha's reign was shortlived, however; he was easily overcome and Samudragupta ascended the throne in *c.* 350.

A lengthy eulogy to Samudragupta (who ruled until *c.* 375) was inscribed on an Aśokan pillar at Allahabad that provides detailed information about his military achievements and lists the names of the states and people conquered by him. Unsupported by other evidence, and coming from a eulogy, this information must be treated with caution. Nevertheless the list is impressive. In real terms, however, Samudragupta's direct political control was confined to the Ganges valley, since the kings of the south and the Deccan were not under his suzerainty, but merely paid him tribute. The position was similar with the tribes of Rajasthan and Panjab, although Samudragupta's campaigns broke the power of the already weakened tribal republics. In the west, the Sakas remained unconquered. The validity of Samudragupta's wider claims is questionable. *Daivaputra shāhi shāhānushāhi* is clearly a Kushan title, but the precise nature of the relationship with them remains uncertain (see

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Chapters 5 and 6). Nevertheless Samudragupta achieved the difficult task of bringing about the political unification of the Ganges valley.

Samudragupta was succeeded by his son, Chandragupta II, who ruled for 40 years (*c.* 375 – *c.* 415). There appears to have been trouble over his succession, just as in the case of his father. A play entitled the *Devī Chandraguptam*, written by Vishakhadatta some two centuries later and supposedly dealing with events on the death of Samudragupta, suggests that Ramagupta succeeded Samudragupta. The discovery of copper coins of Ramagupta in Vidisha-Airikina (in the eastern Malwa region), of the lion, garuda (a bird that was the vehicle of Vishnu and the badge of the Guptas), garudadhvaja (a garuda standard) and border legend types, lends credence to the possibility that Ramagupta was a governor of Malwa who assumed independence at the death of Samudragupta, but was eventually defeated by Chandragupta II.

The *Devī Chandraguptam*, however, points to the fact that Chandragupta II's major campaign was fought against the Sakas. The Udaygiri cave inscription of Virasena, Chandragupta II's minister of war and peace, records that Chandragupta came with him to that region to 'conquer the whole world', referring to the Saka wars. The last known date of the *kṣatrapa* coins is *c.* 388 and the earliest silver coins of Chandragupta II, struck in imitation of them, were of 409. Thus the annexation of western India to the Gupta kingdom must have taken place between these dates. This completed the Gupta conquest of northern India and gave them access to the western Indian ports.

It is generally believed that Chandragupta II gave his daughter Prabhavatigupta in marriage to the Vakataka crown prince Rudrasena II to secure an ally for his Saka campaigns. But the Vakatakas, who had risen to the position of major power in the Vidarbha and adjacent regions in the latter half of the third century, were then passing through a crisis and were thus unable to act as a safeguard for the Guptas against their Saka adversaries. The Guptas nevertheless put this marriage alliance to good use. Rudrasena II died five years after coming to the throne and as his sons were minors, his widow, the daughter of Chandragupta II, acted as regent from 390 to 410. This allowed the Guptas to secure virtual control of the Vidarbha region.

Gupta power reached its apogee under Chandragupta II. In the east the frontiers were preserved and in the west they were stretched beyond the Jamuna. The republican states to the west of Mathura were finally integrated with the kingdom; western India was added; and the Deccan was brought under its orbit of direct influence. Chandragupta II assumed the title of *Vikramāditya*. He developed fully the concept of kingship, in consonance with the religious ideal of the time, as attested by the discovery of his Chakravikrama type of coins. The reverse of the coin contains a *chakra* (wheel), inside which is a standing male

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handing three balls to a haloed royal figure. The entire symbol has been interpreted as the *chakrapuruṣa* of Vishnu, who is bestowing on the *chakrabartī* (sovereign) the three kingly virtues of authority, energy and counsel.

The reign of Kumaragupta I (*c.* 415 – *c.* 454), the son and successor of Chandragupta II, was one of peace and relative inactivity. Thirteen inscriptions of his reign that have come to light show that, like his father, he succeeded in keeping the kingdom intact. The discovery of his coins from as far as Ahmedabad, Valabhi, Junagadh and Morvi suggests that he kept the newly acquired western provinces in a firm grip. There was possibly no fresh conquest to his credit. Towards the end of his reign, peace was disturbed by the invasion of an enemy whose identity has not been definitely established. According to the Bhitari pillar inscription of Skandagupta (*c.* 454 – *c.* 467), the son and successor of Kumaragupta I, the hostile forces belonged to a tribe called Pushyamitra. Far more serious, however, was the threat of a Huna (Hephthalite) invasion and Skandagupta had to concentrate on defending the kingdom against external invasions throughout his reign. Although the Bhitari inscription leaves no doubt as to the severity of the struggle, the Hunas were finally repulsed.

After Skandagupta's death, the Guptas were unable to resist the repeated waves of Huna invasions (see Chapter 6) and central authority declined rapidly. The succession of the kings that followed is uncertain. A number of administrative seals have been discovered with the names of the same kings, but in a varied order of succession, which points to a confused close of the dynasty. A major blow came at the end of the fifth century, when the Hunas successfully broke through into northern India.

The Hunas who attacked northern India, and eventually ruled parts of it, were not entirely independent but functioned under a Huna overlord whose dominions extended from Persia to Khotan. The Huna king Toramana consolidated Huna power in Panjab, from where he invaded the Gupta kingdom. Toramana was succeeded by Mihirakula, who ruled at the same time as the Gupta king, Narasimhagupta II, *c.* 495. In his struggle against Mihirakula, Narasimhagupta II received support from some powerful feudatories, particularly the Maukhari chief Ishvaravarman and Yashodharman of Malwa, whose Mandasor inscription states that Mihirakula paid tribute to him. The political impact of the Hunas in India subsequently subsided. Acting as a catalyst in the political process of northern India, however, the Hunas saw the slow erosion and final dissolution of the Gupta kingdom by the middle of the sixth century.

With the disintegration of the Gupta kingdom, the notion of a pan-Indian Empire came to an end until the advent of the Türks, although it was briefly revived during the reign of Harshavardhana in the seventh century. The post- Gupta period in northern India saw the emergence of regional kingdoms, mostly derived from the feudatories of the Guptas. The

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more important among them were the Later Guptas, the Maukharis, the Pushyabhutis and the Maitrakas.

The Later Guptas had no connection with the Gupta main line. The Aphsad inscription gives a detailed history of the dynasty which shows that the Later Guptas were rulers of Magadha with suzerainty over Malwa. They were eventually ousted from Magadha by the Maukharis of Kanauj, who originally held the region of western Uttar Pradesh. The Pushyabhutis ruled in Thaneswar (modern Harvana). They had made a marriage alliance with the Maukharis and on the death of the last Maukhari king, the Maukhari nobles requested Harsha, the reigning king of the Pushyabhuti dynasty, to unite his kingdom with them and rule from Kanauj. The Maitrakas ruled in Gujarat, with Valabhi as their capital.

Of all these states which arose out of the ruins of the Gupta kingdom, that of Valabhi proved to be the most durable. The unusually large number of records of this family that have come to light help to reconstruct their political history with some degree of certainty. There were able rulers among them, such as Shiladitya, under whose leadership Valabhi became the most powerful kingdom of western India towards the close of the sixth century. The Maitrakas continued to rule until the middle of the eighth century, when they succumbed to outside attacks – probably from the Arabs, as mentioned by al-Biruni.

Of all the successor states to the Guptas, that which rose to greatest eminence, however, was ruled by the Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar. The Pushyabhuti family came to the fore with the accession of Prabhakaravardhana, but it was during the reign of his son Harshavardhana (606–647) that they succeeded in establishing political authority over most parts of northern India. The early history of Harsha's reign is reconstructed from his biography, the *Harśā Caritaṃ*, written by his court poet Bana. This is supplemented by the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, who visited India during Harsha's reign. Harsha made Kanauj the seat of his power and it rose to political prominence from the late sixth century as a place of strategic importance. From there he extended his authority in all directions. Rajasthan, Panjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa were all under his direct control and he exercised influence over a much wider area. The peripheral states acknowledged his suzerainty and thus Harsha, like the Guptas, ruled a large kingdom in northern India that was loosely connected by feudal ties.

The most important political development in western India from the seventh century was the rise of the Rajputs. Their origin is somewhat obscure, but it has been suggested that they came from Central Asia with the Hunas, displaced the original tribal inhabitants of Rajasthan and laid the foundation of the later Rajput families. The theory of indigenous origin has also been proposed. The most notable among the Rajput dynasties were the

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Gurjaras Pratiharas, the Guhilas and the Cahamanas, but they were to play their part in wider Indian politics only at a later date.

Social and economic conditions

For a reconstruction of social conditions under the Guptas, we depend heavily on the contemporary legal texts, or *smṛtis*. A number of such texts, most of which took the *Dharmaśāstra* of Manu as their basis, were written during this period, the best-known being the *Yājñavalkya*, the *Nārada*, the *Bṛhaspati* and the *Kātyāyana*. These *smṛtis* provide an ideal representation of society from the brahmanical point of view. Contemporary Sanskrit plays and prose literature, however, do not always corroborate this ideal and it may be safely assumed that the injunctions of the *smṛtis* were not necessarily strictly enforced. This conclusion is supported by the inscriptions of the period and by the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hsien and Hsüan-tsang.

In the Gupta period, brahmanical reaction against Buddhism and Jainism became stronger. As a result, *varṇa*- (i.e. caste-) based social stratification and the supremacy of the brahmans (the highest caste) received much greater emphasis. It is difficult to ascertain the caste of the Guptas, but they were, in all probability, brahmans themselves and strongly supported the brahmanical social order. The brahmans were given land on a large scale and they claimed many privileges which are listed in the *Nārada*. For example, under no circumstances was capital punishment to be inflicted on them or their property confiscated. The *kṣatriyas* (the second, or warrior, caste) continued to enjoy great prestige due to their political influence, and there was a tacit understanding between these two upper castes in sharing social and political power.

The degeneration of the *vaiśyas* (the third, or trader, caste), which had begun earlier, intensified during this period. Because of advanced agricultural techniques and developments in handicrafts, the condition of the *śūdras* (the fourth, or menial, caste) improved and there was no great difference between a poor *vaiśya* and a prosperous *śūdra*. The *vaiśyas*, however, retained their supremacy in industry and commerce and held important positions on the municipal boards. There are repeated references to the *śūdra* peasantry in the contemporary sources as opposed to their status as agricultural labourers in earlier times. The *smṛtis* of the Gupta period make a clear distinction between the *śūdras* and the slaves. This period saw the emergence of the untouchables, who were beyond the pale of the caste structure and lived outside the city boundaries.

From this cumulative evidence it appears that the significance of the traditional *varṇa* structure, based on colour and race, was being seriously undermined and the *jāti*

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structure, based on occupational status, was becoming increasingly important. Like the *varṇa*s, the *jāti* system was hereditary and the number of *jāti*s gradually proliferated. As a social institution the *jāti*s were independent of the *varṇa*s, although Hsüan-tsang describes occupations demarcated for each of the four *varṇa*s. In this period the *jāti* system was not particularly strict and it was still possible for a person to move from one occupational status to another. That social mobility was not altogether restricted is demonstrated by examples of brahmans taking up the professions of merchant, architect or government official. Hsüan-tsang gives a comparative account of the political rights of the four *varṇa*s. He had seen five brahman, five *kṣatriya*, two *vaiśya* and two *śūdra* kings. However, people increasingly came to be identified with the small occupational groups and the wider *varṇa* consciousness was replaced by a commitment to the *jāti*s.

The brahmans had tried to explain the creation of the *jāti*s in terms of the mixed castes, born out of intermarriage between the *varṇa*s, which was prohibited but practised. The father of Bana married a *śūdra* woman. The *Yājñavalkya* prescribed that the son of a *śūdra* mother and a brahman father should inherit his father's property, although this right was not recognized in the *Bṛhaspati*, a text composed towards the end of the Gupta period. The contemporary *smṛti*s mention a number of mixed castes.

Although women were idealized in literature and art, in practice they had a distinctly subordinate social position. Education of a limited kind was permitted to upper-class women but they were not allowed to participate in public life. Early marriage was advocated and strict celibacy was recommended for widows. The attitude of the contemporary *smṛti*s towards women was one of contempt. Women were described as almost a consumer commodity, exclusively owned by their husbands. But there were exceptions to this norm in real life. For example, as mentioned earlier, Prabhavatigupta, the daughter of Chandragupta II, managed the affairs of state for some 20 years. On the whole, however, the only women to enjoy a measure of freedom were those who deliberately chose to opt out of the prevailing system of regulations by becoming a Buddhist nun or a courtesan.

The social supremacy of the brahmans is also reflected in the economy of the period, as attested by the frequency of tax-free land-grants made to them. This was a period of partial decline in trade and consequently a greater concentration on land. There were four categories of land – fallow and waste land, state-owned land and privately owned land. Agriculture expanded with the reclamation of new land for cultivation. Contemporary texts reveal a more liberal and practical attitude towards waste land, with the state encouraging the peasantry to bring uncultivated and forest land under the plough. Those who reclaimed land on their own initiative and made arrangements for its irrigation were exempted from paying taxes until they started earning an income of twice their original investment. Inscrip-

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tions of the Gupta period repeatedly mention the sale and purchase of waste land, which indicates that such transactions were financially profitable. The state actively patronized agricultural activity. This is suggested by the Junagadh inscription of Skandagupta, which records work on Lake Sudarsana at Girnar under state supervision, presumably for irrigational purposes. Kalidasa describes agriculture and animal husbandry as the mainstay of the royal exchequer, since the major portion of revenue came from the land, at one-sixth of the net produce.

Agricultural implements remained much the same, although iron was more widely used for their manufacture. Varhamihira, in his astrological work, the *Bṛhat-saṃhitā*, refers to an instrument for measuring rainfall. Crops were grown twice a year. According to Hsüan-tsang, sugar cane and wheat were grown in the north-west and rice in Magadha and further east. Southern India was known for black pepper and spices. The *Amarakoṣa*, the Sanskrit lexicon belonging to this period, also refers to a large variety of fruit and vegetables. Despite overall growth, however, brahmanical and Buddhist religious injunctions were not conducive to the expansion of agriculture. The *Bṛhaspati* was unwilling to respect the income derived from agriculture and cultivation was prohibited for the Buddhist monks.

The manufacture of textiles of various kinds was one of the more important industries at this time. There was a vast domestic market, since textiles were a prime item of trade between northern and southern India. There was also a considerable demand in foreign markets. Silk, muslin, calico, linen, wool and cotton were produced in great quantity. The production of silk decreased towards the end of the Gupta period since many members of an important guild of silver-weavers in western India abandoned their traditional occupation and took to other professions. This might have been due to the increasing use of the Silk Route and the Sea Route to China, which brought a large amount of Chinese silk to India or, more generally, to the decline in trade with the West. Metalwork, particularly in copper, iron and lead, continued as one of the essential industries. The use of bronze increased and gold and silver ornaments were in constant demand. We have little clue as to the sources of the abundant supply of metals in the Gupta period and it seems that copper, lead and tin had to be imported from abroad. Gold may have been obtained from the Byzantine Empire in exchange for Indian products, although Hsüan-tsang mentions that it was also produced indigenously in huge quantities. The working of precious stones continued to maintain its high standard. Pottery remained a basic part of industrial production, although the elegant black polished ware of earlier times was now replaced by an ordinary red ware with a brownish slip.

The guild was the major institution in the manufacture of goods and in commercial enterprise. Some historians believe that the importance of the guilds declined in the Gupta

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period. India no longer participated in the long-distance trade in luxury goods. Instead a new kind of commercial network emerged on regional lines, based on the exchange of articles in daily use. In these changed circumstances, the powerful guilds of the earlier times disintegrated. Contemporary sources, particularly the seals found at Vaisali and Bhita, suggest nevertheless that both the activities and the significance of the guild remained during this period. Guilds sometimes acted as bankers and loaned money on interest, as did some of the Buddhist *sanghas* (communities). The rate of interest varied according to the purpose for which money was required. The lowering of the interest rate implies an increased confidence in overseas trade as well as a greater availability of goods and the consequent decrease in profit margins.

Trade between northern India and South-East Asia was conducted through the ports of the east coast. The west coast ports served as the link in India's trade contacts with the Mediterranean region and Western Asia. Several inland routes connected India with China through Central Asia and Tokharistan and across the Karakorum range and Kashmir. The most important event in the economic history of East and South-East Asia during this period was the development of an inter-oceanic trade, reaching from China through Indonesia and the east coast of India up to Simhala and extending from there along the west Indian coast to Persia, Arabia and Ethiopia. Despite commercial competition between China and India, the two countries maintained close links. Coins of the T'ang emperors of China have been discovered in southern India and Indian merchants resided in Canton. Still more far-reaching in their consequences were India's trade contacts with South-East Asia, leading to Indian settlements there and an Indian influence that permeated the local pattern of life, particularly in Thailand, Cambodia and Java.

The export of spices, pepper, sandalwood, pearls, precious stones, perfumes, indigo and herbs continued as before. Pepper was exported from the ports of the Malabar coast and sesame, copper and cotton garments from Kalyana. The Pandya area had an important role to play in the pearl trade. The commodities that were now being imported to India, however, differed from those in earlier times. Chinese silk came in greater quantity, as did ivory from Ethiopia. Imports of horses from Arabia, Iran and Tokharistan also increased. Copper came from the western Mediterranean region and sapphire from Simhala. The Gupta king issued special charters to merchants' organizations which relieved them of government interference. Since this was the time when the law-makers declared it a great sin for a brahman to travel by sea, this may have resulted in reduced Indian participation in maritime trade.

Some historians have characterized the socio-economic developments of the Gupta period in terms of feudalism. They argue that although there had been a long tradition of

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donating land to the brahmans, the number of such donations greatly increased in the Gupta period. Villages along with their inhabitants, revenue due to the king, administrative and judicial rights, exemption from the interference of government officials, and even the right to enjoy fines levied on cultivators, were all transferred to the religious beneficiaries. What began as grants to the priestly class were later extended to administrative officials. With the emergence of a local, self-sufficient economy, religious donations as well as land-grants to secular officials (either in lieu of salary or as a reward for services) became popular. The principal characteristics of this selfsufficient economy were the decline of trade and urban centres and a scarcity of coinage. Thus from the economic point of view, the central feature of Indian feudalism was the emergence of landed intermediaries. As a result, the freedom of the peasantry was curtailed, their mobility was restricted and they were forced to serve as unpaid labour.

Those historians who do not subscribe to this view have challenged the premises of Indian feudalism. They argue that during the Gupta period, trade did not decline and the scarcity of coins was at best marginal. Quantitative analyses of the coinage of this period have still to be made and the relative scarcity of coins is still merely an assumption. Some of the old-established towns did lose their importance, but new urban centres emerged to replace them. Finally, the two indispensable institutions of European feudalism, namely manor and serfdom, never developed in India. Historians who subscribe to this second view are therefore inclined to describe the practice of land-grants as nothing but India's traditional landlordism. The debate is still to be settled.

The literary records of this period suggest an overall economic prosperity at least among the upper classes. Fa-hsien describes the people of Madhyadesha (the 'middle country') as prosperous and happy towards the beginning of the fifth century. Evidence of material conditions obtained from excavations also points to a high standard of living. The prosperous urbandwellers lived in luxury; and comfort, in the urban centres at least, was not confined to the upper classes. Yet it was a culture with wide variations. The untouchables lived on the outskirts of the opulent cities and the peasantry were being gradually impoverished. The maintenance of an imperial façade was a purposeless expense which must have been a drain on the economy. Indeed, the debased Later Gupta coinage indicates an economic crisis.

Administration

In many respects, the Gupta administration constitutes the watershed between India's past and future traditions of polity and government. The most noticeable feature of the

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post-Mauryan administrative development was the gradual erosion of the government's centralized power. First, the Satavahanas and the Kushans entered into feudatory relations with the smaller kingdoms. Second, land-grants, which began from this time, created administrative pockets in the countryside managed by the religious beneficiaries. A third factor which contributed to the process of decentralization was the existence of autonomous governments in several cities of northern India. Guilds of traders from these cities even issued coins, which was normally the prerogative of the sovereign power. At several points, however, the old centralized system of administration was continued and even strengthened by the accession of new elements.

The Guptas discarded the modest title of *rāja* and adopted the high-sounding ones brought into vogue by the Kushans. The most typical example is *mahārājadhirāja* which, along with its several variants, appears in Gupta inscriptions. The Gupta kings also claimed superhuman qualities for themselves. They continued the traditional machinery of bureaucratic administration with nomenclature that was mostly borrowed or adopted from earlier times. Thus the *mantri* (prime minister) stood at the head of the civil administration. Among other high officers were the *mahābalādhikṛta* (commander-in-chief), *mahādaṇḍanāyaka* (general) and *mahāpratihāra* (chief of the palace guards). A high-ranking officer, encountered for the first time in the Gupta records but destined to have a long career, was the *sandhivigrahika* (foreign minister). The *bhuktis* (provinces) were usually governed by princes of royal blood and sometimes by a class of officers called *uparikas*. The link between the central and provincial administration was furnished by *kumārāmātyas* and *āyuktas* who ruled over *viṣayas* (districts). The district officers were nominated by the provincial governors.

For the first time, the inscriptions give us an idea of systematic local administration in the Gupta period, which assumed many new dimensions. The series of northern Bengal epigraphs mentions the *adhiṣṭhāṇādhikaraṇa* (municipal board), *viṣayādhikaraṇa* (district office) and *aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa* (possibly, rural board). The full *adhiṣṭhāṇādhikaraṇa* is said to consist of four members, the *nagaraśreṣṭhī* (guild president), the *sārthavāha* (chief merchant), the *prathamakulika* (chief artisan) and the *prathamakāyastha* (chief scribe). The precise significance of the *aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa* is unknown, but in one example it is said to be headed by the *mahāttaras* (village elders) and also includes the *grāmika* (village headman) and the *kutumbins* (householders).

Under the Guptas, the scope and functions of royal authority underwent a significant change. The Guptas left a number of conquered states in a position of subordinate independence. With the exception of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and parts of Bengal, the kingdom was held by feudatories such as the Parivrajaka princes, who issued their own land-grants.

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The presence of these feudatories must have severely restricted the Guptas' royal authority. We do not have much information about military affairs, but can reasonably surmise that the troops supplied by the feudatories must have accounted for a good proportion of the Gupta army. The state no longer enjoyed a monopoly over the possession of horses and elephants. The significant aspect of Gupta bureaucracy was that, since it was less organized and elaborate than the Mauryan administration of the third century B.C. (seen in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*), it allowed several offices to be combined in the hands of the same person and posts tended to become hereditary. In the absence of close supervision by the state, village affairs were now managed by leading local elements who conducted land transactions without consulting the government.

Similarly in urban administration, organized professional bodies enjoyed considerable autonomy. The law-codes of the Gupta period, which provide detailed information about the functioning of the guilds, even entrusted these corporate bodies with an important share in the administration of justice. With the innumerable *jātis* (which were systematized and legalized during this period) governing a large part of the activities of their members, very little was left for central government. Finally, the Gupta kings had to take account of the brahman donees, who enjoyed absolute administrative privileges over the inhabitants of the donated villages. Thus in spite of the strength of the Gupta kings, institutional factors working for decentralization were far stronger during this period. This Gupta administration provided the model for the basic administrative structure, both in theory and in practice, throughout the early medieval period.

Religious life

The rise of the Guptas was analogous to the emergence of Puranic Hinduism. The vehicle for the propagation of this resurgent Hinduism was a set of texts called the *Purāṇa*s, the earliest of which were composed in this period. The *Purāṇa*s, which began as the historical tradition recording the creation of the universe and detailed the genealogies of each dynasty, were originally composed by bards. During this period, however, they were rewritten by the brahmans in classical Sanskrit to include information on Hindu sects, rites and customs. Before the coming of the Guptas, the ideal brahmanical social order had been disrupted to such an extent by rulers who patronized the heretical cults that we see an obsessive fear of the *Kali*, or Dark Age, in all the early *Purāṇa*s.

All the major aspects of brahmanical religion, by which Puranic Hinduism came to be identified in later centuries, crystallized in this period. The image of the deity emerged as the centre of worship and worship superceded sacrifice, although a sacrificial offering to

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the image remained central to the ritual. This in turn encouraged *bhakti* (devotionalism), which consisted of an intense personal attachment to the object of worship. As a result, worship of a god became an individual concern and the priest ceased to be so dominant a figure as in the sacrifice.

Hindus became divided into two main sects, Vaishnava and Shaiva, claiming Vishnu and Shiva respectively as the supreme deity, just as each *Purāṇa* extolled the superiority of one or the other. The worshippers of Vishnu were more prevalent in northern India, where they received active patronage from the Guptas; Chandragupta II called himself a *paramabhāgavata* (devotee of Vishnu). Shaivism took firm root in the south, although it was not confined to that region. The Huna king Mihirakula, Shashanka the ruler of Bengal, some kings of the Pushyabhutis of Kanauj and the Maitrakas of Valabhi were all followers of Shiva. Despite such sectarian preferences, at times expressed in acute rivalry, there was an underlying strain of monotheism in Puranic Hinduism which saw the various deities as manifestations of a unified whole. The social existence of a Hindu came to be defined in terms of a correct *dharma* (law), *artha* (economic well-being), *kama* (sensual pleasure) and *mokṣa* (salvation of the soul).

A notable feature of intellectual life in this period was provided by the lively philosophical disputations between the Buddhists and the brahmans, centring around six different schools of thought which came to be called the six systems of Hindu philosophy. Although their origin can be traced to the thinking of a much earlier period, some of their cardinal principles were enunciated at this time. *Vedānta* is the most influential of the six systems. The doctrines of *Vedānta* were based on the *Upaniṣadas* (books of the teaching of sages) and gave logical and organized form to their many mystical speculations. It postulated the existence of the 'Absolute Soul' and maintained that the final purpose of existence was the union of the individual and this 'Absolute Soul' after physical death. Together these six systems constitute the core of Hindu philosophy and all subsequent developments are its ramifications.

Although Buddhism was theoretically still a formidable rival of Hinduism, by the end of this period its influence was waning (see Chapter 18, Part Two).

Jainism was saved from a similar fate by its essentially conservative character. Unlike the other religious systems, it underwent little change in ideas or doctrines. The fact that it failed to adapt to new environments accounts for its restricted popularity but much longer life compared with Buddhism. Jainism continued to be supported by the merchant community of western India. In certain areas of the Deccan and the south it received patronage from local royalty, though much of this patronage ceased after the seventh century. The organizational split between the two principal Jaina sects, the *Śvetāmbaras* and the

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Digambaras, reached its culmination during this period. In the early sixth century, the second Jaina Council was held at Valabhi to recover and systematize the Jaina canonical instructions which were facing extinction. At this council, the Jaina canon was defined substantially as it exists today. The Jainas had by now evolved a series of icons: the images of the *tirthankaras* (Jaina teachers) in the Khandagiri cave at Bhubaneshwar are some of the best examples.

Literature

Sanskrit literature was given lavish encouragement during this period, mostly through royal patronage. It was a literature of the élite and those associated with the court circle. Classical Sanskrit poetry flourished with Kalidasa's works probably in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Kalidasa reflects the court culture of the time. Though deeply imbued with tradition, all his works reveal his distinct personality. He wrote two long poems, the *Kumārasambhava* and the *Raghuvaṃśa*, and also the *Meghadūta*, a work of a little over 100 verses, which is one of the most popular Sanskrit poems; it has unity, balance and a sense of wholeness that is rare in early Indian literature. Kalidasa's long poem the *Kumārasambhava* has a religious theme, but is essentially secular in character and contains passages of great beauty.

Many poets after Kalidasa wrote courtly epics, but none so ably as he. The two best examples of such poems are Bharavi's *Kirātārjunīya* (mid-sixth century) and Magha's *Śiśupālavadha* (late seventh century). Magha had set the trend for the poetic style of the later period, which became progressively ornate and artificial. The finest poet in this genre was Bhartrhari, possibly of the seventh century, who left only 300 separate stanzas on the subjects of wordly wisdom, love and renunciation respectively, which are considered masterpieces of concise expression. Another important exponent of this style was Amaru, also of the seventh century.

As in poetry, the greatest exponent of Sanskrit drama in this period was Kalidasa, who was able to achieve the effects he wanted and to capture the conflicting emotions of his characters. The real value of his work, however, lies in his imagery, language and dialogue, which are fresh and vigorous. Shudraka, probably Kalidasa's contemporary, has left only one play, the *Mṛcchaktika*, which is the most realistic of Indian dramas. Vishakhadatta, who probably belonged to the sixth century, has only one complete surviving play, the *Mudrārākṣasa*; the plot is exceedingly complicated, but is worked out with great skill and leads to a breathtaking climax. One interesting convention of the Sanskrit theatre of this period is that it allows no tragedy. Tragic and pathetic scenes are common enough but the

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endings are almost invariably happy and melodramatic, often necessitating an unnatural forcing of plots. Another notable feature is that the characters of high social status speak Sanskrit while women and the 'lower orders' speak Prakrit: this defines the standing of Sanskrit and Prakrit in a social context. The best examples of Sanskrit prose literature of this period are provided by Dandin, Subandhu and Bana, all of whom lived in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

The *Śvetāmbara* Jaina canon and its exegetic literature in Ardha-Magadhi Prakrit, the few religious texts of the *Digambara* Jainas in Shauraseni Prakrit and the commentaries of Buddhist texts written in Pali constitute the most important specimens of Prakrit and Pali literature of this period. The attempts of the Jaina monks to redefine their canon, following the second Jaina Council, resulted in the production of a vast literature, which is didactic in style, arid in content and deficient in literary value. Mention may also be made of independent religious narratives such as the *Vasudevahiṇḍi* by Dharmadasa and Sanghadasa and a religious romance called the *Taraṅgavartīkathā* attributed to Padalipta. Among the Prakrit long narrative poems, the most noteworthy are the *Setubandha* by Pravarasena and the *Gauda-vaho* by Vakpatiraja.

The Gupta period is referred to as the ' classical age' of ancient India, mainly because of its cultural achievements. The description seems to be true for the upper classes, amongst whom material and intellectual culture reached a level never before attained. It has been suggested that every great literary form implies the unfolding of a new social grouping, headed by some new class. Those who hold this view argue that this great period of classical Sanskrit literature – which witnessed an unprecedented growth and development – was intimately connected with the rise of feudalism. Motivated by an entirely different set of reasons, the nationalist historians of the early twentieth century sought instead to locate the utopian ' golden age' in this period, again primarily because of its literary and artistic excellence. These divergent conclusions, however, agree on the common point of the cultural flowering during this period.

Science

There was a corresponding development in the field of science, though it was not comparable in scale or quality with the growth in literature, and the knowledge of metals had improved tremendously. The treatises of *Aṣṭāṇga-saṃgraha* and *Aṣṭānga-hṛdaya-saṃhitā* were mostly compilations from earlier texts. Books on the diseases of animals, particularly horses and elephants, now appeared for the first time.

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It was an intensely active period in mathematics which encouraged the development of astronomy as a precise science. Aryabhata, who composed his famous work the *Āryabhatiyā* in 499, was an accomplished mathematician who knew the use of the decimal place-value system and dealt with area, volume, progressions, algebraic identities and indeterminate equations of the first degree. He was the first writer to hold that the earth was a sphere rotating on its axis and that eclipses were caused by the earth's shadow falling on the moon. With remarkable accuracy, Aryabhata calculated the length of the solar year to be 365.3586805 days. Varhamihira, who is more known for his astrological work the *Bṛhat-saṃhitā*, flourished in the sixth century.

Despite an accurate knowledge of the duration of the solar year, the basic unit in recording dates was the lunar day, approximately 30 of which formed the lunar month. Twelve lunar months make only 354 days and hence every 30 months an extra month was added to the year. The Hindu calendar, though quite accurate, was thus rather cumbrous. The solar calendar, imported with Western astronomy, was also known from the Gupta period, but it did not replace the lunar calendar. Hindu thinkers had evolved a cyclical theory of time.

Art and architecture

The Gupta period also represents a watershed in the history of Indian art. In one respect, it marks the culmination and ultimate exhaustion of earlier tendencies in architectural types and forms. In another, it marks the beginning of a new age, connected with the phenomenal growth and development of the temple. The material prosperity of the period is reflected in its town planning. Most cities were laid out in squares; wooden buildings were replaced by buildings of brick; houses were oriented to the cardinal points; and drains and wells were carefully planned.

Rock-cut cave architecture persisted in this period – mostly Buddhist but with a few brahmanical and Jaina examples. The rock-cut architecture of the Buddhists consisted of two conventional types, the *chaitya* (shrine containing a stupa) and the *vihāra* (monastery). The most notable groups are found at Ajanta, Ellora, Aurangabad and Bagh. Of the 23 caves at Ajanta which were excavated during this period, only caves XIX and XXVI were *chaitya* halls and the rest were *vihāra*s. The most significant innovation here is the wealth of sculptures of the human figure.

The *vihāra* was planned in the form of rows of cells around a central court. Of the *vihāra*s at Ajanta, the most important are caves XVI, XVII, I and II, remarkable for the beauty of their pillars. Of the stupas, which were built in large numbers, two deserve special mention – that at Mirpur Khas and the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath. The rich, elegant patterns

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of the ornamental scheme constitute the chief beauty of the Sarnath monument and its cylindrical shape indicates a date of *c.* the sixth century.

Unfortunately not much has survived of Gupta temple architecture, although the sources indicate that many temples were constructed. It has been suggested that such temples were on the whole unimpressive shrines which were either absorbed in domestic architecture or else built over in later centuries. Extant examples consist of three major groups – the flat-roofed square temple with a shallow porch in front or a squat tower above; the rectangular temple with an apsidal back and barrel-vaulted roof; and the circular temple with shallow projections at the four cardinal points. The Dashavatara temple (fifth century) at Deogarh (Figs. 1 and 2) is one of the best examples of an age of experiments in types and forms which was later elaborated and finally crystallized in the eighth-century Hindu temple in northern India.

The pivot of Gupta sculptural art was the human figure. By now all animal and vegetal patterns had been eliminated from the narrative and simply underlined the importance of the human form. The body was given perceptual form with the help of a full modelling that, in its naturalism, is almost unparalleled in Indian art. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

FIG. 1. Deogarh. Dashavatara temple. General view. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

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FIG. 2. Deogarh. Dashavatara temple. Side view. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

of the fifth and sixth centuries represent the final achievement of the highly subtle, mystical and fluid thought of the Mahayana school. The most important centres of sculpture were Mathura and Sarnath. One of the best examples is the seated Buddha in *dharmachakrapravarttana* (Fig. 3) attitude from Sarnath, where the body sheds its toughness and attains complete ease and serenity. All this is achieved with the help of delicate modelling, a smoothly flowing, melting line and an utmost economy of technique.

The Hindus, however, treated the image as a symbol. Although the god took a human form, he might well have several arms or the head of an animal. The Hindu gods, as represented in the sculpture of this period, were mainly incarnations of Vishnu, the most popular among them being those of *nṛsiṃha* (half man/half lion) and *varāha* (boar). The cult of Shiva was mostly confined to phallic worship, which did not offer much sculptural scope. The more significant brahmanical sculptures of the time were influenced by the Puranic vision of the evolution of the universe from its material cause and its re-creation from the constituent elements into which it is merged. This explains the origin and meaning of the latent dynamic strength and power in the magnificent reliefs of the Udaygiri caves of eastern Malwa or of Badami, Ellora, Aurangabad and Elephanta. For example, the Great Boar

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FIG. 3. Sarnath. Buddha in *dharma-chakra-pravarttana*. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

(an incarnation of Vishnu who rescued the earth from the cosmic ocean) carved in relief near the entrance of a cave at Udaygiri conveys the impression of a great primordial power working for good against the forces of chaos and destruction, and bears a message of hope, strength and assurance.

While the quest for form in stone concerned itself with themes and expressions of a deeper and more fundamental significance, painting had a secular character and was presumably in more general demand. The *Viṣṇudharmottara*, a text of the Gupta period,

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devotes an entire chapter to the art of painting, laying down many of its theoretical canons. The best examples of painting can be found in the murals of caves I, II, XVI, XVII and XIX of Ajanta (Figs. 4–7), caves IV and III of Bagh and caves III and II of Badami. The Ajanta paintings do not show a progressively developing style, as in contemporary sculpture. The murals chiefly depict scenes from the life of the Buddha and from the *jātaka*s (birth stories of the Buddha). There is no perspective, but an illusion of depth is given by placing the background figures somewhat above those in the foreground. Although painted for religious purposes, the Ajanta murals bear a secular message. They depict the entire panoply of life in ancient India: princes in their palaces, ladies in their apartments, coolies, beggars, peasants and ascetics, together with the many Indian birds, beasts and flowers.

Very different are the enormous number of terracotta reliefs from northern India and Bengal. Produced from sketchy moulds in large quantities, they were carefully finished and often painted. Employed for various purposes, their primary use was in decorating the exterior walls of Buddhist establishments and residential houses.

A remarkable example of handicraft is the ivory Triratna (trident symbol of the three jewels of Buddhism) in high relief representing a Buddha with attendant Bodhisattvas. The central figure is like a miniature Mathura image of the period. The wealth of jewellery worn by women of this period is seen in the flying *apsarā*s (nymphs of the sky) in the Ajanta

FIG. 4. Ajanta. Mural painting in cave XVI. Dying princess. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

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FIG. 5. Ajanta. Mural painting in cave XVII. Indra accompanied by his celestial musicians. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

FIG. 6. Ajanta. Mural painting in cave XVII. Vessantara *jātaka*. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

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FIG. 7. Ajanta. Mural painting in cave XVII. Rahul and his mother Yashodhara. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

FIG. 8. Ajanta. Mural painting in cave XVI. Flying *apsarā*. (Photo: © Archaeological Survey of India, Janpatch, New Delhi.)

murals (Fig. 8), which also show the variety of high-quality textiles such as embroidery, tie and dye work, brocade and muslin. A rare example of Gupta metalwork is an object that has been identified as an architect's plummet, made of iron coated with bronze. On its

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neck is a plaque with a representation of dancing figures framed in prongs terminating in lotus buds which is reminiscent of the decorative forms of Gupta stone sculpture. Among the most splendid examples of the minor arts of the period are the gold coins of the Gupta dynasty, executed with impeccable finesse.

Some authorities have depicted the Gupta kings as the liberators of India from foreign rule. But the invaders had become thoroughly Indianized by the Gupta period and this made the task of assimilating them into Indian society relatively simple by assigning them appropriate caste status. They continued to exert an influence on aspects of Gupta culture, however, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in Gupta art. Many characteristic architectural forms and motifs of the Guptas were inherited from Kushan Mathura and Gandhara. Gupta sculpture undeniably developed from an emphasis on massive power inherited from the Kushans, but gradually it evolved its own style, with graceful and more linear creations. Gupta culture, with all its inevitable borrowings from previous traditions, was essentially indigenous in character and set the norms for subsequent developments.

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