

Srikrishna College, Bagula

Study Material for 2nd semester

History programme Course

By Aniket Mitra

Gupta Dynasty

Origins

The Gupta Empire rose to prominence in 320 AD and spread to large parts of northern India, central and small parts of southern India.

The founder of the Gupta dynasty is Sri Gupta.

The original homeland of the Guptas is not known. But they might have originated from Bengal. Some scholars think they are from Prayaga (Allahabad in UP).

They are thought to be either Brahmins or Vaishyas.

Apart from political might and strength, the Gupta kings were also known for their great achievements in the field of science, art, culture, and literature.

The Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta mentions Maharaja Srigupta and Maharaja Ghatotkacha as his ancestors.

I-tsing, a Chinese traveler, came to India between A.D. 671 and 695. He mentioned Srigupta as the builder of a temple at Gaya for the Chinese pilgrims about 500 years before his time.

The king, Srigupta, has been identified as the first Gupta king mentioned in the Allahabad pillar inscription.

Puranas also mentioned that the early Guptas controlled the area along the Ganga (the middle Gangetic basin), Prayag (Allahabad and surrounding region), Saketa (Ayodhya region), and Magadha.

Ghatotkacha succeeded his father Srigupta. He was also referred as the Maharaja in Gupta records.

Chandragupta-I

Chandragupta-I succeeded his father Ghatotkacha in A.D. 320.

Chandragupta-I was considered to have laid the foundation of the great Gupta Empire. He was married to a Lichchavi princess Kumaradevi. The Lichchavis were related to Gautama Buddha.

Acquired the strategically important Magadha kingdom on marriage to a Lichchavi princess Kumaradevi.

In the Allahabad inscription, Samudragupta son of Chandragupta-I and Kumaradevi, proudly called himself Lichchhavis 'Dauhitra' i.e. son of the daughter of Lichchhavis.

The Gupta era was started with a coronation of Chandragupta-I in A.D. 320.

He was the first Gupta king to adopt the title 'Maharajadhiraja' (great king of kings) and issued gold coins. Chandragupta-I introduced a new era called Gupta era.

He is considered the first great king of the Gupta Empire.

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Samudragupta

Samudragupta succeeded his father Chandragupta-I about A.D. 340. He earned a reputation as one of the greatest kings and conquerors. He was chosen by his father as his successor because of his qualities that would make him into a good king.

The Allahabad pillar inscription gives a detailed account of the career and personality of Samudragupta.

Harishena one of the officials composed the inscription and engraved on the Ashoka's pillar at Allahabad.

Samudragupta was a great military general. He had a long list of the kings and rulers whom he defeated and subdued as a part of his military achievements. He uprooted nine kings and princes from the Aryavarta and annexed their kingdom.

Samudragupta performed 'Ashvamedhayajna' after his several conquests and issued gold coins depicting the sacrificial horse and bearing the legend, which conveying that he performed the Ashvamedha sacrifice.

Meghavarna, the king of Sri Lanka, sent an embassy to Samudragupta for his permission to build a monastery and a guest house for Buddhist pilgrims at Bodh Gaya.

Samudragupta was a versatile genius. He was called as 'Kaviraja' i.e. the king of poets. He was proficient in war and Shastras as well.

The Allahabad pillar inscription calls him a great musician. This is also confirmed by his lyricist type of coins, which shows him playing veena (lute).

Samudragupta patronized learned men in his court and appointed them as his ministers.

Samudragupta died in about A.D. 380 and was succeeded by his son Chandragupta 2nd.

He was also called “Indian Napoleon” by art historian Vincent Smith.

He also performed Ashvamedha sacrifice. Hence, one of his coins refers to him as “the restorer of Ashvamedha.”

He was also called “Kaviraja” since he composed verses.

Chandragupta 2nd

Chandragupta was a son of Samudragupta and queen Dattadevi, as attested by his own inscriptions. According to the official Gupta genealogy, Chandragupta succeeded his father on the Gupta throne. The Sanskrit play Devichandraguptam, combined with other evidence suggests that he had an elder brother named Ramagupta, who preceded him on the throne. In the play, Ramagupta decides to surrender his queen Dhruvadevi to a Shaka enemy when besieged, but Chandragupta goes to the enemy camp disguised as the queen and kills the enemy. Sometime later, Chandragupta dethrones Ramagupta, and becomes the new king. The historicity of this narrative is debated among modern historians, with some believing it to be based on true historical events, while others dismissing it as a work of fiction.

The Mathura pillar inscription of Chandragupta II (as well as some other Gupta inscriptions) mention two dates: several historians have assumed that one of these dates denotes the king's regnal year, while the other date denotes the year of the Gupta calendar era. However, Indologist Harry Falk in 2004 has theorized that the date understood to be the regnal year by the earlier scholars is actually a date of the *kālānuvarttamāna* system. According to Falk, the *kālānuvarttamāna* system is a continuation of the Kushana calendar era established by emperor Kanishka, whose coronation Falk dates to 127 CE. The Kushana era restarts counting after a hundred years (e.g. the year after 100 is 1, not 101).

The date portion of the Mathura inscription reads (in IAST):

chandragupta-sya vijarajya-saṃvatsa[re] ... *kālānuvarttamāna*-saṃvatsare ekaśaṣṭhe 60 ... [pra]thame śukla-divase pañcāmyaṃ

The letters before the words *kālānuvarttamāna*-saṃvatsare are abraded in the inscription, but historian D. R. Bhandarkar (1931-1932) reconstructed them as *gupta*, and translated the term *gupta-kālānuvarttamāna*-saṃvatsare as "year following the Gupta era". He translated the entire sentence as:

"In the ... year of ... Chandragupta, ... on the fifth of the bright half of the first (Ashadha) of the year 61 following the Gupta era".

Historian D. C. Sircar (1942) restored the missing letters as "[paṃ]cāme" ("fifth"), and concluded that the inscription was dated to the Chandragupta's fifth regnal year. The missing letters have alternatively been read as "prathame" ("first"). According to these interpretations, the inscription is thus dated in year 61 of the Gupta era, and either the first or the fifth regnal year of Chandragupta. Assuming that the Gupta era starts around 319-320 CE, the beginning of Chandragupta's reign can be dated to either 376-377 CE or 380-381 CE.

Falk agrees that the missing letters denote a numerical year, but dismisses Sircar's reading as "mere imagination", pointing out that the missing letters are "abraded beyond recovery". In support of his Kushana era theory, Falk presents four Gupta inscriptions (in chronological order) that mention the term *kālānuvarttamāna-saṃvatsare*:

Kumaragupta-I

Chandragupta-II died about A.D. 413. His son Kumaragupta became the next king.

Kumaragupta ruled for more than forty years. He performed an Ashvamedha sacrifice; though his military achievements are not known.

Kumaragupta issued Ashvamedha type of coins like his grandfather, Samudragupta.

The epigraphic records show that he organised the administration of vast empire and maintained its peace, prosperity, and security for a long period of forty years.

The Gupta Empire was challenged by the Pushyamitras at the end of Kumaragupta's reign.

Pushyamitras were living on the banks of the Narmada.

Skandagupta was the son of Kumaragupta-I.

Skandagupta

Kumaragupta-I died in A.D. 455. His son Skandagupta became the next king.

Skandagupta's reign seems to have been full of wars. He struggled with his brother Purugupta.

Hunas were the greatest enemies of Gupta's empire during this period.

Hunas were a ferocious barbarian horde. They lived in Central Asia.

Skandagupta successfully defeated the Hunas. So they did not dare to disturb the Gupta Empire for half a century. Though they continue to disconcert Persia during this period.

The important event of Skandagupta's reign was the restoration and repair of the dam on Sudarsana Lake after 8 hundred years of construction. It was built during Chandragupta Maurya's reign.