



A STUDY ON BRIEF ACCOUNT ON GUPTA DYNASTY - SOME ACHIEVEMENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

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. The Gupta era dates from the accession of Chandragupta I in c.319/320, although the era itself was not introduced by him. The Chandragupta I married a Licchavi princess early in his career. For a reconstruction of social conditions under the Guptas, we depend heavily on the contemporary legal texts or smritis. A number of such text, most of which took the Dharmasastra of Manu as their basis, were written during this period, the best – known being the Yajnavalkya, the Narada, the Bruhaspati and the Katyana. 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.

Keywords: Guptas, Social conditions, Classical age, Achievements

Introduction:

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.

From the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta, we learn that while the first two kings of the Gupta dynasty were merely maharajas, the Chandragupta I (c.319/320 335 or. 350), the son and successor of the second king, Ghatotkaca (c.280 c.319), assumed the title of maharajadhiraja. 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.

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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 in 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 Asokan 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. Never the less 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 weekend tribal republics. In the west, the Sakas remained unconquered. The validity of Samudragupta's wider claims is questionable. For a reconstruction of social conditions under the Guptas, we depend heavily on the contemporary legal texts. or Smruthi A number of such text, most of which took the Dharmasastra of Manu as their basis, were written during this period, the best – known to be the Yajnavalkya. the Narada, the Brihaspati, and the Katyana. These Smruthi 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 Smruthi were not necessarily strictly enforced.

This conclusion is supported by the inscription of the period and by the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hsien and Hsuan- Tsang. In the Gupta period, the Brahmanical reaction against Buddhism and Jainism became stronger. As a result, Varna – (i.e. caste) based on 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 Narada. For example, under no circumstances was capital punishments to be inflicted on them or great property confiscated. The Kshatriyas (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 vaisya s (the third, or trader, caste), which had begun earlier, intensified during this period. Because of advanced agriculture techniques and developments in handicrafts, the condition of the Sudras (the fourth, or trader, caste) improved and there was no great difference between a poor vaisya and a prosperous Sudra. The Vaisyas, however, retained their supremacy in industry and commerce and held an important position on the municipal boards. There are repeated references to the Sudra peasantry in the contemporary sources as opposed to their status as agricultural laborers in earlier times. The Smruthi of the Gupta period makes a clear distinction between The Sudras 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.

Women in the Society & Caste System

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 the ad to participate in public life. Early marriage was advocated and strict celibacy was recommended for windows. The attitude of the contemporary Smruthi 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 wasteland, state-owned land, and privately owned land. Agriculture expanded with the reclamation I new land for cultivation. Contemporary texts reveal a more liberal and practical attitude towards wasteland, with the state encouraging the peasantry to bring uncultivated and forest land under the plow. 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. Inscriptions of the Gupta period repeatedly mention the sale an purchase of wasteland, which indicates that such transactions were financially profitable.

Agriculture Development:

Agricultural implements remained much the same, although iron was more widely used for their manufacture. Varhamihira, in his astrological work, the *Brhatsamhita*, refers to an instrument for measuring rainfall. Crops were grown twice a year. According to Huan-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 *Amarakosa*, the Sanskrit lexicon belongs to this period, also 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 Brihaspati was unwilling to respect the income derived from agriculture and cultivation was prohibited for the Buddhist monks.

Textiles

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, 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 Hsuan-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 the industrial production, although the elegant black polished ware of earlier times was now replaced by an ordinary redware with a brownish slip.

Trade and Commerce:

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 Turkistan 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 the commercial competition between China and India, the two countries maintained close links. Coins of the Tang 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 merchant's organization which relieved them of government interference. Since this was the time when the lawmakers declared it a great sign for a brahman to travel by sea, this may have resulted in reduced Indian participation in maritime trade.

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 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.

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 mention the adhithana dhikkarana (municipal board), Visayadhikarana (district office) and astakula dhikkarana (possibly, rural board). The full adhithana dhikkarana is said to consist of four members, the nagarasresth (guild president), the sarthavaha (chief merchant), the prathamakulika (chief artisan) and the prathamakayastha (chief scribe). The precise significance of the astakuladhikkarana is unknown, but in one example it is said to be headed by the mahattaras (village elders) and also includes the gramika (village headman) and the kutumbins (householders).

Religious Activities:

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 text called the Puranas, the earliest of which were composed in this period. The Puranas, which began as the historical tradition recording the creation 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 kale, or Dark Age, in all the early Puranas.

Hindus became divided into two main sects, Vaishnava and Shaiva, claiming Vishnu and Shiva respectively as the supreme deity, just as each Purana extolled the superiority of one or the active patronage from the Guptas; Chandragupta II called himself a Parama Bhagavata (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 time expresses in the 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 Hindu came to be defined in terms of a correct dharma (law), Artha (economic well- being), kama (sensual pleasure) and mokhsa (salvation of the soul).

Intellectual Activities:

A notable feature of intellectual life in this period was provided by the lively philosophical disputation between the Buddhists and the Brahmans, centering 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. Vedanta is the most influential of the six systems.

The doctrines of Vedanta were based on the Upanishads (books of the teacher 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. Jainism was saved from a similar fate by its essentially conservative character. Unlike the other religious system, it underwent little change in ideas or doctrines. The fact that it failed to adapt the 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 Svetambaras, and the 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 instruction which was 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 Bhubaneswar are some of the best examples.

Sanskrit literature was given lavish encouragement during this period, mostly through royal patronage. It was a literature of the elite 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 Kumarasambhava and the Raghuvams, and also the Meghaduta, a work of a little over 100verses, 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. Kalidas's long poem the Kumarasambhava has a religious theme, but essentially secular in character and contains passages of great beauty.

It was an intensely active period in mathematics which encouraged the development of astronomy as a precise science. Aryabhatta , who composed his famous work "The Aryabhattiyam" in 499 B.C. Was an accomplished mathematician who knew the use of the decimal place-value system and dealt with the 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, Aryabhatta calculated the length of the solar year to be 365.3586805 days. Varhamihira, who is more known for his astrological work the Brhatsamhita, flourished in the sixth century.

Conclusion

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 which material and intellectual culture reached a level never before attained. Motivated by an entirely different set of reason, the nationalist Historians of the early twentieth century (20th century) sought instead to locate the utopian ' golden age' in this period, again primarily because of its Literary and artistic excellence. This divergent conclusion, however, agrees on the common point of the cultural flowering during this period.

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