

Chapter

6

# The Age of the Guptas

## Sources

The literary and archaeological sources for the reconstruction of the age of the Guptas are discussed here.

### Literary Sources

Information regarding the Gupta period is available from a variety of literary sources. (The accounts of foreign travellers such as Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang and Kalidasa's writings provide detailed information on the Gupta period.)

**Accounts of Fa-Hien:** Fa-Hien was a Chinese monk who visited India during the age of Chandragupta Vikramaditya or Chandragupta II. He conveyed a fine impression about his empire. (The various aspects of the Gupta Empire, such as political, religious, social and economic, were recorded in his writings.) He travelled mostly on foot with the purpose of collecting Buddhist canon in India to carry them to China. Although his book *The Travels of Fa-Hien* is largely devoted to places of worship of Buddha, his observations give us valuable information about India in the fifth century CE.)

He described the country as peaceful and prosperous under the rule of the Guptas. The overall impression is that while Buddhism still flourished, it had lost its importance and royal patronage in the land of its origin. Hinduism was in the ascendancy again.

### Archaeological Sources

The archaeological sources mainly consist of three categories—inscriptions, monuments and coins. These sources provide us more precise information regarding the Gupta period.

**Inscriptions:** The prominent inscriptions of the Gupta period include:

- Allahabad Pillar inscription (composed by Harisena, the court poet of Samudragupta)
- Mathura Stone inscription (Chandragupta II)
- Udayagiri Cave inscription (two inscriptions of Chandragupta II)
- Junagadh rock inscription (Skandagupta)

Other stone pillar inscriptions are those at Bhitari, Kahaum, Bilsad and Eran. There are many other inscriptions found at different places which help us reconstruct the age of the Guptas.

The Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta is the most important epigraphic evidence of the imperial Guptas. Written in Sanskrit by Harisena, (some parts of the *Prayaga Prasasti* were composed in verse and others in prose. The verse portion containing eight stanzas is followed by the prose part. Historians, both ancient and modern, have considered the historical value of *Prayaga Prasasti*.)

- ✓ It provided an impressive list of kings and tribal republics that were conquered by Samudragupta.
- ✓ It records a list of twelve rulers whom Samudragupta had captured and released as a favour to them on his expedition to the South (daksinapatha). It gives us extensive knowledge about East and South India.

However, some scholars argue that since *Prayaga Prasasti* was composed by the court poet of Samudragupta under his patronage, the version might be exaggerated.

### Samudragupta (335 to 380 CE)

King Samudragupta's mother was the Licchavi queen Kumaradevi and possibly he was not the eldest son. From the Allahabad Pillar inscription composed by Harisena, it is learnt that Chandragupta I deliberately chose Samudragupta to succeed him as the next king. These were some of his characteristics.

- Historians such as R K Mukherjee have called Samudragupta the opposite of Ashoka as his principle was war and aggression. The historian Vincent Smith has called him 'Indian Napoleon' due to his military exploits.
- He was not only a great conqueror but also an outstanding diplomat, statesman and an able and efficient administrator.
- He was also known as 'the prince of poets' (*Kaviraj*) as he composed several poems.
- He was also a protector of the poor and the weak.

**Conquests:** Samudragupta made elaborate plans for his conquests of the North and the South. He decided to subdue the neighbouring kingdoms first and then went for far off expeditions.

- In his first campaign in North India, Samudragupta defeated Achyuta, the ruler of Ahichhetra (areas of modern Bareilly district), the Naga kings of Mathura and the ruler of Padmavati (near Gwalior). The Naga kings were the most powerful kings among them.

- The Dashavatar temple at Deogarh is a fine example of the Gupta architecture.
- The Nalanda University was established in the fifth century CE under the Gupta rule. It was supposedly the first international residential university in the world. Students from various parts of the world came here to study.

- After securing his position in the Ganga-Yamuna valley, he turned his attention towards the southern kingdoms. Samudragupta's successful southern expedition is considered to be his biggest achievement. In the South, he marched against twelve kings, including those of modern Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and defeated them all. However, he realised that governing the far-flung areas of the South would be difficult from his capital. Therefore, he did not annex these kingdoms. He allowed their kings to rule as **feudatory** chiefs.
- Impressed by his military success, many frontier states submitted to Samudragupta and agreed to pay annual tribute. These were the states of Bengal, Assam, Nepal, Kartripura (part of Kumaon, Garhwal and Rohilkhand).
- There were many independent republican tribes that existed on the western frontier of the Guptas. The Allahabad inscription mentions that nine tribes that inhabited Punjab, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh submitted to Samudragupta.
- He led military expeditions to kingdoms of local tribes such as the Malwas, Yaudhyeyas, Arjunayanas, Maduras and Abhiras. When he died in 380 CE, there were twenty kingdoms in his empire that stretched from the Himalayas in the North to Narmada in the South. He also conquered Afghanistan and Kashmir which were known as *mlechha* (barbarian or non-Vedic) countries.

According to Harisena, Samudragupta had performed an ashwamedha yajna or 'horse sacrifice'. A stone replica of the horse has been kept at the Lucknow Museum. He also had issued gold coins to celebrate his conquests.

**Patron of art:** Apart from his military prowess, Samudragupta also had great inclination towards art, literature and learning. Many eminent scholars adorned his court. Harisena, Asanga and Vasubandhu were the major scholars. He was also a music-lover. In some of his coins, he is shown seated on the couch playing a veena or lute.

**Religious policy:** Though Samudragupta was an orthodox Hindu and a follower of Vishnu, he was tolerant to other religions. He permitted Sirimeghvanna, a Buddhist king from Sri Lanka, to construct a monastery at Bodh Gaya.

### Review

1. What were the two policies followed by Chandragupta I to increase his power and prestige?
2. How do we know that Samudragupta was a patron of art?
3. Who were known as 'mlechha'?

### Chandragupta Vikramaditya or Chandragupta II (375 to 415 CE)

Chandragupta II, also called **Vikramaditya**, was the son of Samudragupta from his queen, Dattadevi. He was chosen as the successor to the imperial throne by Samudragupta himself. However, it is also said that he came to power by assassinating a weak elder brother.

Inheriting a large empire, he continued the policy of his father by extending control over the neighbouring territories. During his rule, art, architecture and sculpture flourished and the cultural development of India reached its climax.

**Foreign policy:** Chandragupta Vikramaditya used matrimonial alliances as a part of his foreign policy.

- He married the Naga princess, Kubernaga. With this marriage, the powerful Naga rulers became his allies.
- He also married the Kadamba princess from the Kuntala region.
- He then got his daughter Prabhavati, born of the Naga queen, married to Rudrasena II, the Vakataka prince from South India. This alliance helped him establish political influence in the Deccan.

**Military policy:** Chandragupta II also carried out military campaigns to extend his territories.

- He fought a long campaign against the Saka rulers of West India. By 408–409 CE, the Saka rule in Malwa, Gujarat and Saurashtra had come to an end. He was given the title 'Sakari' or the 'conqueror of Sakas'.
- He also crushed the chiefs of Bengal (then known as Vanga) and his main enemy Rudrasimha III.
- According to Kalidasa, Chandragupta II also conquered Paraskias and Kambojas who lived near present-day Iran.
- Kalidasa also said that Chandragupta II won the lands run by tribes such as Kiratas and Kinnaras. He had stated that Chandragupta II had won 21 kingdoms within and outside India.

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- A Kashmiri writer, Kshemendra, has described in *Brihatkathamanjari* the victories attained by the emperor over tribes such as Yavanas and Tusharas.

**Administration:** If the reign of Samudragupta is known as the period of conquest and expansion of the empire, then **Chandragupta II's period was one of consolidation, peace and prosperity.**

**We learn about the administration of Chandragupta II from the accounts of Fa-Hien.** He described Chandragupta II as a tolerant king and described the administrative system as:

- ✓ People lived in peace and prosperity in his kingdom. The government was efficient and well organised.
- ✓ The administration was never harsh with punishments. (They suggested fines for certain acts of crime.)
- ✓ Chandragupta II was a follower of Vishnu but was tolerant to other religions too, like his father.
- His gold coins show that he was a great lover of art and learning, literature and sculpture. Many learned poets and writers adorned his court. Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Varahamihira and Amarsimha were a part of the group of nine literary geniuses called the navaratna.

Answer the following:

1. With reference to the age of the Guptas, state how the following sources contributed:
  - a) Fa-hien's accounts.
  - b) The Allahabad Pillar inscription.
2. State the reasons for which Samudragupta was termed as 'Indian Napoleon'.
3. Discuss Chandragupta Vikramaditya's military policy and administrative policy.