# UNIT 7: GUPTA EMPIRE

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## 7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the emergence of the Guptas in ancient India
- explain the extension and consolidation of the Gupta Empire
- describe the polity and administration of the Guptas
- analyse the causes for the downfall of the Guptas.

## 7.2 INTRODUCTION

India had witnessed a number of Empire building efforts throughout the ancient period of its history. We have already discussed one such successful effort at the initiative of the Mauryas. Even after the fall of the Mauryas this imperial ambition continued for centuries when different royal

dynasties like Sunga, Kushana, Satavahana, etc tried to emulate the Mauryas, in building an empire but nothing special happened on the lines of an Empire, until the appearance of the Guptas in Indian politics during the 4th century A.D. However, some scholars like Romila Thapar refused to recognize the initiatives of the Guptas as being the perfect realization of the concept of an Empire, primarily because of its decentralized form of administration. Whatever might be the fact, the Gupta period (starting from 4th century A.D. to of 6th century A.D.) is an important phase in Indian history with manifestation of excellence and glory in every walk of life. The Gupta period epitomised the enduring achievements of ancient Indian Civilization.

In this unit we will now discuss the Gupta Empire in detail. The emergence of the Guptas, the territorial expansion and consolidation by the Gupta rulers, the Gupta system of administration, and the factors that brought about the downfall of the Gupta dynasty will be the major part of discussion in this unit.

## 7.3 EMERGENCE OF THE GUPTAS

The origin of the Guptas, like most of the ruling dynasties of ancient India, is somewhat obscure in nature. Different theories have been put forward by historians from time to time about the origin of Gupta dynasty. Some historian believed that they were the rulers of a small principality in Magadha, while others held that their original homeland was the Western Gangetic plain. On the other hand, depending on their name, some historians tried to identify them as belonging to the *Vaishya* community, but some others tried to accord them with the status of a *Brahmana*.

Now regarding the question of their actual emergence, the Gupta records mentioned the name of the first three rulers of the family as Maharaja Srigupta, his son Maharaja Ghatotkachagupta and the latter's son Maharajadhiraja Chandragupta I . Depending on different records the majority of historians now confirm that during the 4th century A.D. there was a general tradition among the sub-ordinate chiefs to be normally styled as *Maharaja,* while the independent kings liked to call themselves *Maharajadhiraja*. As to

the line of that description- the first two rulers of the Gupta dynasty appeared to be the feudatory chief, but it is difficult to know the name of their suzerain.




**Fig. 10.1: Gupta Empire**

Source: Google Image



## LET US KNOW

I-tsing, a Chinese traveler, who visited India in the 7th century A.D. made some comments about the first Gupta ruler Srigupta, (275-300 A.D.) which was supposed to be a authentic one. According to him Srigupta's kingdom comprised of a portion of North Bengal and Bihar. Srigupta became a Buddhist and said to have constructed a temple for the Chinese pilgrims near Mrigashikhavana. The Vakataka records refer to Srigupta as the *adiraja* or the first ruler of the Gupta line. Srigupta was succeeded by Ghatotkachagupta.

Chandragupta I, the third ruler of the Gupta line succeeded Ghatotkacha and brought the house successfully under the full light of history by removing the veil of obscurity. It was he who determined the tract of an imperial identity for the Guptas in future. Chandragupta I married into the Lichchavi family, once an old established *Gana-Sangha* of North Bihar, now associated with the kingdom of Nepal. This Lichchavi-Gupta matrimonial alliance had a special significance for the emergence of Gupta power in future. Eminent historian Romila Thapar has put forwarded the view that perhaps the Guptas had no royal origin, and under such circumstances, the marriage alliance with an old prestigious family, had normally set a stamp of acceptability. On the other hand V.A Smith expressed the view that the Lichchavi Princess Kumaradevi brought to her husband as her dowry valuable influence which in due course of time offered him a paramount position in Magadha and in the neighbouring countries. In other words, it can be said that the marriage alliance of Chandragupta I was important less from the social point of view but more from political point of view.

After stabilizing his position in Indian politics, Chandragupta I successfully extended his rule over the main heartland of Gangetic plain which had included some of the important territories like Magadha, Saketa, Prayaga. This inclusion sufficiently proved his independent status to adopt the title like *Maharajadhiraja* or king of kings. Based upon the campaigns of Chandragupta I some historians consider his kingdom as consisting of whole of Bihar, a portion of Bengal except the part of Samatata or Eastern Bengal, Eastern U.P. i.e. a territory extending upto Benaras. However, there are lot of confusions over the question of the extension of his Empire. The establishment of the Gupta era from the date of his accession i.e. in and about 319-320 A.D. has further highlighted the political importance of the reigning period of Chandragupta I, thus the first three rulers of the Gupta line had successfully established themselves as emerging power of Indian politics.



**ACTIVITY 7.1**

Prepare a list of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty.

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**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Fill in the blanks:

a) The first three rulers of the Guptas were ....., ....., and .....

b) Independent kings liked to call themshelves as .....

c) Chandragupta I married the Lichchavi Princess .....

**Q 2:** How did Lichchavi-Gupta matrimonial alliance helped the Guptas? (Answer in about 60 words)

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## 7.4 EXTENSION OF THE GUPTA EMPIRE

The Gupta rulers established a far flung Empire in India. They were very good conquerors and by the might of their sword, they occupied different areas, thereby extending the dominion of the Gupta Empire. In this section we will discuss the extension of the Gupta Empire.

### 7.4.1 Samudragupta's Policy of Expansion

The extension of Gupta Empire was mainly the handi-work of great Gupta Emperor Samudragupta, who ascended the throne in about 335 A.D. The main source of information of his campaign is

a lengthy eulogy, inscribed on an Asokan Pillar at Allahbad known as the *Allahbad Pillar* ***Prasasti***. The writer of this eulogy was his court poet Harisena. Apart from this inscription, the Bhitari Seal and Pillar, different numismatic evidences, along with *Vayu Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana* throw a good deal of light on the political condition of India at that time.

There is a controversy regarding a civil war for the throne, on the basis of a Sanskrit term *Tulya Kulaja* i.e. 'Princes of Equal Birth'. Allahabad *Prasasti* clearly states that Samudragupta was nominated to the throne by his father Chandragupta I on the occasion of a full session of royal court. His nomination probably offended the Princess of his equal birth as some historians think and provided an opportunity of a revolt under the leadership of an obscure Prince Kacha. This Kacha was supposed to be the eldest brother of Samudragupta. But subsequent numismatic evidence proves that Kacha was an alias of Samudragupta himself. This view is yet to gain the general acceptability of the scholars and it still remains as a matter of further research. Whatever might be the trouble that led to his coronation, Samudragupta had successfully overcome it.

*Allahbad Pillar Inscription* gives an impressive list of kings and the region that were conquered and brought under various degrees of his subjugation. Depending on that list the victorious campaign of Samudragupta can be discussed in the following.

The great king started his career of expansion by subjugating the neighbouring kings in the Ganga-Yamuna Valley and thus tried to consolidate his position at home before he started his campaign in the remote South. It was at that initial strokes that he defeated four important kings of modern UP and Central India. They were Achyuta of Ahichhatra (Modern Ramnagar and Rai Bareilly district of U.P) Nagasena of Mathura, Ganapati Naga of Padmavati (Gwalior) and the Prince of the Kota family (yet to be ascertained).

Samudragupta was a great conqueror. After consolidating

his position in and around his home tract of Magadha, he might have started his campaign towards *Dakshinapatha* (South India). It is interesting that his South Indian campaign was formulated with a theory of *Dharmavijaya* which was marked by three principles namely *Grahana* (capture of the enemy), *Moksha* (liberation) and *Anugraha* (principle of favoring by reinstating the enemy). During the course of his campaign, Samudragupta defeated as many as twelve kings of South India, whom he first captured and then liberated and ultimately reinstated in their respective kingdom. The list of the twelve South Indian kings as put forward by the Allahbad *Prasasti* are as follows- Mahendra of Kosala (Bilaspur, Raipur, Sambalpur district), Vyaghraja of Mahakantara (forest tract of Jaipur region of Orissa), Mantaraja of Kurala (yet to be ascertained), Mahendragiri of Pishtapuram (Pithapuram in Godavari district), Svamidatta of Kottura (Ganjam district), Damana of Erandapalla (Vizagopatam district), Vishnugopa of Kanchi, Hastivarman of Vengi (Ellore in Krishna- Godavari district), Nilaraja of Avamukta (yet to be ascertained), Ugrasena of Palakka (Vellore district), Kuvera of Devarashtra (Gapatam district) and Dhananjaya of Kushalapura (in North Arcot district).

Probably when Samudragupta was engaged in his Southern Campaign, some of the North Indian rulers, by taking the opportunity of his absence, might have started a revolt against him. To deal with the matter Samudragupta hurried back home and found that nine of his hostile North Indian kings formed a confederacy to resist his victorious campaign. Among these nine rulers- three of them were the Naga rulers of Central India, namely Achyuta, Nagasena and Ganapati Naga whom he had defeated in his earlier campaign. The other six rulers of North India to form the confederacy were: Rudradeva (identified as Rudrasena I of Vakataka), Matila (Western UP), Nagadatta, Nandin, Balavarman and three other Naga rulers of Central India. Inspite of their combined efforts, the descriptions of Poet Harisena has made it clear that Samudragupta not only defeated them but also uprooted them violently.

Apart from these three major campaign Samudragupta also defeated some of the forest kings or the tribal chiefs of Central India and the Deccan. Along with that, nine republics, including the age old *Malavas*, *Yaudheyas*, *Madrakas* were also forced to accept the Gupta suzerainty. His victory over the tribal and the republican states proved to be disastrous one for the later Guptas. Accordingly, when the Hunas invaded North-Western India, including Punjab and Rajasthan, no power was there to act as a buffer for the Gangetic plain.

The impression of his power compelled some of the frontier states *Pratyanta Nripatis* like Samatata (South-Eastern Bengal) Davaka (Dabaka in Nagaon district of Assam) Kamarupa, Nepal, Kartripura, to become voluntarily his vassals by paying tribute, obeying his order and offering him personal homage. Apart from that even some of the independent or semi-independent foreign powers beyond the frontier of Samudragupta's Empire like *Daivaputra Shahi Shahanu Shahi Saka Murundas,* etc also entered into sub-ordinate alliance with him. Moreover, Meghavahana, the king of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) maintained diplomatic relation with him.

Thus, the Gupta Empire during the time of Samudragupta included whole of North India except the tract of the Saka rule in Western India, Kashmir, Western Punjab, Western Rajputana. In the South, the Gupta hegemony was extended even upto the tract of Tamil Nadu. Despite his all round conquest of the Indian sub-continent, the main area of his rule, however was much more limited as his direct rule comprised only of U.P, Bihar, West Bengal a portion of Central Province and Vindhya region. To commemorate his victory Samudragupta performed the *Asvamedha* Sacrifice (Horse Sacrifice), the performance of which is often regarded in history as a symbol of imperialism.

### 7.4.2 Chandragupta II's Policy of Expansion

There was another important phase of expansion of Gupta history, which started with the reigning period of Chandragupta II, son and successor of Samudragupta. This was a campaign against the Sakas of Western India. This campaign took place in between 388-409 A.D. The main source of information of this campaign are the two inscriptions in Udaygiri and Vishakhadatta's Sanskrit drama *Devi Chandraguptam*. According to the story of the drama, after the death of Samudragupta, his eldest son Ramagupta became the king of the Gupta Empire.The name of the wife of the king Ramagupta was Dhruvadevi. The Sakas invaded the Gupta territory and Ramagupta failed to resist the Saka invasion. Ultimately he had to make an agreement with the Saka ruler to surrender his wife Dhruvadevi in return for his kingdom. Chandragupta II who was the younger brother of Ramagupta was disgusted with the action of his elder brother and he in a heroic attempt not only rescued Dhruvadevi from the Sakas but also killed the Saka king. Then Chandragupta II killed his elder brother and occupied the Gupta throne and married queen Dhruvadevi. Whatever might be the truth, the story in its turn confirmed the natural tendency of Westward expansion of Gupta Empire which Samudragupta left to his successor.

As we have already discussed, Samudragupta had extended the frontier of the Gupta Empire on all sides. He left his vast Empire to his successor Chandragupta II. We have to depend upon various literary and geographical evidences for forming our idea about Chandragupta II's conquests. Samudragupta had extended his frontier East and Southward. His Westward expansion halted at Eastern Malwa. Further expansion Eastward and Southward was not possible. Hence the natural tendency of expansion in the reign of Chandragupta II lay Westward against the kingdom of the Saka Satrapas of Western Malwa and Gujarat. He feared an alliance between the Sakas and the Vakatakas of Maharastra and the Nagas.

Therefore, he followed a policy of isolating the Sakas by forging a matrimonial alliance with the Vakatakas and the Nagas.

As a result of that Chandragupta II married Kuvera Naga, a Princess of the Naga family and won the friendship of the Naga power. The Nagas formed a powerful political force in Central India and their alliance consolidated Gupta authority in the region. Prabhavati Gupta, the daughter of Chandragupta II and his queen Kuvera Naga, was married to Rudrasena II, the Vakataka ruler of Maharashtra. The geographical position of the Vakataka kingdom was such that it could be of immense help to Chandragupta II for his projected campaigns against the Sakas of Kathiwar and their hostility could seriously embarrass him. Moreover, the Vakataka alliance was a useful deterrent against any future revolt of the Sakas in Saurashtra. Rudrasena II had died at an early age and after his death Prabhavati

Gupta became the regent of her minor sons, which indirectly increased Gupta influence in the Vakataka court. According to a tradition, Chandragupta II or his son married a Kadamba Princess of the Kuntala country. This marriage is politically useful for operation against the Sakas. Thus, by a policy of matrimonial alliance with the Nagas, Vakatakas and Kadambas, Chandragupta II encircled the Sakas.

Chandragupta II's brilliant victory over the Saka Satrap united Western India with the rest of Northern India. It rounded off the Gupta Empire by pushing its Western limit to the natural frontier on the Arabian Sea. The Gupta Empire now extended from the Bay of Bengal in the East to the Arabian Sea on the West. The annexation of Saurashtra and Malwa by Chandragupta II opened up to the Guptas free access to the ports of the Western coast especially to the part of Barygaza. Indian trade between Northern and Western India vastly increased as a result of the conquest of Malwa and Saurashtra. The city of Ujjaini lay on the high road of trade between the Northern and Western India. The city became a great emporium of trade. It became a great centre of culture and religion. Chandragupta II converted this

city into his second capital. However, Chandragupta II's great victory over the Sakas is not directly mentioned in any official epigraph of the Guptas.

Chandragupta II's greatest achievement was the conquest of Malwa, Gujarat and Kathiwar from the Western Saka Satraps. The Sakas of Western India were a very powerful neighbour. They remained a thorn on the side of the Gupta Empire. Chandragupta II, while he was a crown prince, acted as a governor of Eastern Malwa and was conscious of the Saka problem on the frontier. He connected Eastern Malwa as his lease of operation against the Saka Satrap Rudrasinha II. This is corroborated by the *Udayagiri Inscription* and also by the *Harshacharita*. The *Mehrauli Iron Pillar* (near the Qutub Minar inDelhi) Inscription refers to the exploit of a king Chandra who quelled a rebellion in Bengal and vanquished the rulers of the Sapta Sindhu area. As Chandragupta II is called 'Chandra' in his coin, historians generally accept his identification with the Chandra of the inscription. With the end of the reigning period of Chandragupta II, the period of expansion of Gupta Empire has come to an end. Despite his important conquests he was remembered not as a great conqueror but as a consolidator.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 3:** Write True / False:

a) Harisena was a court poet.

b) Tulya Kulaja means Princes of Unequal Birth.

c) Dakshinapatha means the Western part of India.

d) Devi Chandraguptam is a Sanskrit drama of Vishakhadatta.

e) Chandragupta II married Kuvera Naga.

f) Ujjaini lay on the high road of trade between the Northern and Western India.

**Q 4:** What is the main source of information for Samudragupta's policy of conquest?

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**Q 5:** Who was Ramagupta?

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**Q 6:** Write about Samudragupta's policy of conquest towards South India in about 60 words.

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## 7.5 CONSOLIDATION

After the vigorous campaign of Samudragupta, there came a phase of consolidation and stabilization. Samudragupta left for his successor Chandragupta II a legacy of a vast Empire. Justifying his nomination, the fifth ruler of the Gupta line had not only completed the work left undone by his father, but also assimilated large number of tribal tracts, including the territories ruled by the Sakas and the Kushanas in Western India, Samatata or a part of Eastern Bengal.

As we have discussed earlier, Chandragupta II liberated Western India from the age old servitude of the Saka Satraps. Thus, by bringing the land between the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea under the shadow of an Imperial identity, Chandragupta II completed the work of the political unification of Northern India.

In consolidating the Gupta power in India the political marriage had always played a vital role. At the stage of their emergence the Lichchavi marriage alliance provided them with political status and acceptability. Similarly, at the stage of consolidation also marriage alliances provided them an opportunity to strengthen their hold further in North Indian politics. Chandragupta II, the great consolidator concluded a number of marriage alliances with different Indian rulers which created a ring of a friendly states around him. Except the campaign against the Western Saka, no major military expedition had been taken by Chandragupta II. The entire period of

his reign was a peaceful one. His pacific policy further strengthened the process of consolidation of the Gupta Empire.

As a result of his pacific policy Gupta history entered into a phase of cultural renaissance. It provided him an opportunity to pay more attention to the development of Gupta art and culture. Chandragupta II was known as the patron of legendary Nine Gems or *Nava Ratna*, of whom Kalidasa was the most prominent one. This great poet Kalidasa immortalized the age by his great literary creations.

The Gupta period witnessed the ultimate revival of Brahmanical culture which saw its beginning in the horse sacrifice of Samudragupta. One of the main vehicles of this Brahmanical culture was the Sanskrit language. By patronizing the gems of the Sanskrit literature, Chandragupta II put it at the pin node of its glory. By patronizing the creative spirit of his age, he successfully enhanced not only the military but also the cultural pride of the Empire and consolidated the position of Gupta Empire as a centre of creative activity.



**LET US KNOW**

The Nine Gems or *Nava Ratna* were Kalidasa, Khatakarpara, Dhanwantari, Varahamihira, Kshapanaka, Shankhu, Amarasimha, Vetalbhatt (or Vetalabhatta) and Vararuchi.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** Which marraige alliance initially provided the Guptas political status and acceptability?

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**Q 8:** Who provided patronage to the Nava Ratna?

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**Q 9:** Who was the most prominent amongst the Nava Ratna?

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## 7.6 POLITY AND ADMINISTRATION

We have a few important sources for the study of the Gupta polity and administration. Some literary sources like various *Smritis, Manava Dharma Sastra*, *Yajnavalka Smritis*, *Narada Smriti* and Kamandaka's *Nitisara*, etc are important sources. The Damodarpur and the Eran Inscriptions throw light on Gupta administration. Let us analyse the polity and administration of the Guptas.

Monarchy was advocated as an ideal system of government in the Gupta period. There were some tribal republics like those of the *Malavas*, *Yaudheyas*, *Arjunayanas* in Northern India. There was always contradiction between the two systems of government. Kingship being sanctioned by the Brahmanical *Shastras* was powerful and aggressive against the republics.

The king or *Samrata* was at the head of the government. He ruled by hereditary right. The Gupta Emperors adopted the high sounding titles of *Maharajadhiraja*, *Paramabhattaraka,* etc. They brought additional lustre to their position by claiming for themselves divine origin and super human qualities. Hence, they assumed magnificent titles like *Paramesvara*, *Achintyapurusha, Lokadhamadeva, Paramadaivata,* etc.

Theoretically, there was no limit on the king's power. He ruled over his vast Empire with absolute command over all the branches of the government. He was the supreme commander of the army. Samudragupta and Chandragupta II personally led the army. The governors, important civil and military officers were appointed by the king and they held office at his pleasure. The central bureaucray functioned under his personal supervision. The king was the master of all lands and he could grant them to anybody.

However, the claim of divine origin and the enjoyment of vast theoretical rights did not convert the Gupta Emperors into crude despots without any touch of benevolence among them. Samudragupta and Chandragupta II were aware of their duties to the people. The government did not interfere in the daily life of the people. It was sympathetic to people's needs. Moreover, there were certain practical checks on the king's authority and power. He had to share power with high officials. It was a custom for

the king to abstain from routine duties of ministers. He had to obey the rules laid down by the *Dharmashastras*. The local bodies enjoyed a good deal of autonomy in which he normally did not interfere. Moreover, the system of granting *agrahara* and *brahmadeya* lands led to increasing decentralization in administration and weakening hold of the central authority. The succession to the throne was hereditary but the Emperor reserved the right of selecting the heir apparent. Samudragupta was nominated by Chandragupta I as his successor from among the sons of the latter. Kumaragupta I probably nominated Skandagupta. But the system of nomination was not free from trouble.

The king was the supreme head of the government. Next in rank to him was the *Yuvaraja* or crown prince. The *Mantrin* or ministers stood at the head of the civil administration and their offices were generally hereditary. Perhaps some other high offices were also hereditary and limited to a number of families only. The *Mahadandanayakas* held offices in hereditary capacity.*Sandhivigrahika* or minister of war and peace was a new office of minister created in the Gupta period. Some of the ministers combined different offices at the same time. We do not know whether there was a *Mantri Parishad* or Council of Ministers of the Mauryan type. Kalidasa refers to a council of ministers whose decision was conveyed to the Emperor by the chamberlain or *Kanchuki*. Generally, ministers acted as individual advisers and assistants of the king.

The vast Empire of the Guptas could only be managed with the help of an organized bureaucracy. The central and provincial officials were differentiated by their designation. Among the high officials in the central administration mention may be made of *Mahabaladhikrita* (commander-in-chief), *Mahadandanayaka* (chief general), *Mahapratihara* (chief of the palace guards), *Sandhivigrahika* (minister in charge of war and peace), *Akshapataladhikrita* (keeper of State documents); *Mahakapati* (head of the cavalry force), etc. They were assisted by a host of junior officials. There was no distinction between civil and military officials and sometimes both duties were combined in a single person.

There was another class of officials called *Kumaramatyas* and *Ayuktas*. They worked as the link between the central and provincial administration. High imperial officers and officers of the personal staff of the Emperor were included in the rank of the *Kumaramatyas*. It is said that *Kumaramatyas* means ministers for *Kumara* or crown prince. It is also said that *Kumaramatya* was a cadet or apprentice minister, who was minister from youth. However, *Kumaramatyas* served both the Emperor and crown prince and served in the province and district level. *Ayuktas* were employed by the Emperor specially in districts and metropolitan towns. They also performed the duty of restoring properties of the defeated king who had been reinstated.

### 7.6.1 Administrative Divisions

The Empire was divided into a number of provinces. The usual names of the provinces were *Bhuktis*, *Desas* and *Bhogas*. The provinces were sub-divided into districts called *Vishayas*. A part of the *Vishaya* was called *Vithi*. The villages or *Grama* were the lowest administrative units.

The provinces called *Bhuktis* were governed by officers called *Uparikas* or sometimes by princes of royal blood bearing the title *Maharajajouta Devabhattarka*. The provinces called *Desas* were governed by officers called *Goptis* or wardens of the marches. The districts or *Vishayas* were ruled by district officers styled *Vishayapatis*, *Kumaramatyas* and *Ayuktas*. Sometimes districts were governed by feudatories or *Samantas*. Usually the district officer was appointed by the provincial governor, though sometimes he was directly appointed by the Emperor. The *Ayuktas* served as a link between the central and district administration as discussed earlier. The *Vishayapati* or district officer generally acted under the *Uparikas* or provincial governors as testified by the Damodarpur Copper Plate. The *Antarvedi Vishaya* or the Doab region was the heartland of the Gupta Empire. The *Vishayas* were pivots of the

Gupta provincial administration. In every *Vishaya* perhaps there was an advisory council or *Parishad* comprising local representatives. (village headman), *Bhojakas,* etc. The *Gramikas* ruled the villages with the help of village councils. He was a paid official of the state. The *Talabara*, *Vinayasthitisthapaka* were new dignitaries vested with military and religious and judicial duties respectively.

Some North Bengal inscriptions throw an interesting sidelight on the association of popular representatives in the Gupta administration. In the provincial, district or village level of administration, the officer in charge was assisted by an *Adhikarana* or Council consisting of local representatives. In the cities, the Municipal Boards (*Adhikaranas*) consisted of guild president, chief merchant or *Nagara Shresthi*, chief artisan or *Prathama Kulika* and chief scribe or *Prathama Kayastha*. In the districts and villages the Boards consisted of village head-men, householders, etc. The Guptas made a bold administrative experiment by associating popular elements in the administration.



**LET US KNOW**

Beyond the Empire under direct rule of the Guptas lay the frontier states both monarchical and republican. With politic generosity the Guptas left them in a position of sub-ordinate status of vassals to the Gupta suzerain without disturbing their internal autonomy. Samudragupta's *prasasti* (eulogy) gives a long list of such frontier vassal states brought under his sub-ordinate dependence. Their status varied according to their relative strength in comparison with that of the suzerain power. Among the states in the Eastern frontiers were the monarchies of Samatata, Kamarupa, Davaka, Nepal and Kartripura and on the Western frontier the nine tribal republics of Punjab and Rajputana.

### 7.6.2 Judicial Administration

The inscriptions of the Guptas do not throw any definite light on their judicial system. The *Katyayana Smriti* lays down in the traditional way that the king is the highest judge. He personally attended the court to listen to cases and was assisted by the body of Ministers *(Amatyas)* , Judges (*Pradvivaka*), Brahmins (*Purohita*). In the cities, the city magistrates were assisted by the heads of the *Shrenis* or guilds, merchants, etc. In the villages, the village panchayats or family gatherings (*Kulas*) disposed of the cases. The criminal law as a whole was lenient as testified to by the Chinese pilgrim ***Fa-hien***.

### 7.6.3 Revenue Administration

The main sources of royal revenue were various types of land revenues, fines realized for offences, commercial taxes and tax on salt, taxes on mines, etc. Exemptions from taxes were granted to villages on some occasions. The officials were recruited on the basis of merit and ability. No distinction between caste and creed was made. Guilds continued to flourish among the merchants and artisans.

The guilds or *Shrenis* were autonomous, and the guilds were governed by their own laws. Even the Buddhist Churches or *Sanghas* participated in trade and acted as bankers or *Shresthis* and lent money on interest. The state and the village society collectively held the ownership of land and without mutual consent land could not be bought or sold.

As a whole, the Gupta administration had a benevolent character and people lived happily under it. The benevolent ideal of the government even survived after the fall of the Gupta Empire. The Kalachuris, the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas were inspired by the models of the Gupta administrative system.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 10:** Match the following:

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|---|---|
| Samrat | 1. Chamberlain |
| b) Sandhivigrahika | 2. Provincial Officer |
| c) Kanchuki | 3. Head of the Cavalry Force |
| d) Mahakapati | 4. Record Keepers |
| e) Goptis | 5. King |
| f) Pusta Palas | 6. Minister of War and Peace |

**Q 11:** Who was Mahabaladhikrita?

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**Q 12:** Write a note on the revenue administration of the Guptas in about 50 words.

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## 7.7 DOWNFALL OF THE GUPTAS

The factors responsible for the decline of Gupta power in India were many. The Huna invasion was one of the prime factors responsible for the decline of the Gupta power in India. A branch of the Hunas from Central Asia had occupied Bactria in the 4th century A.D. and crossed the Hindukush mountains during the time of Kumaragupta I, son and successor of Chandragupta II (415-54 A.D.). But we learn from the *Bhitari Pillar Inscription* and *Junagarh Rock Inscription* that the *Yuvaraja* Skandagupta succeeded in repelling this invasion in the 5th century A.D.

But, after him, repeated waves of the Huna invasions made the Gupta power weak. Even Skandagupta who battled violently and resisted the Hunas for some time from entering into the main heartland of India had to face different internal problems, like the revolt of his feudatories, which made his task a difficult one. The death of Skandagupta in about 467 A.D. was followed by a succession of various kings, who could not keep the Empire intact.

The final blow to the Gupta power came towards the end of 5th century A.D., when the Hunas poured into North India and hastened the process of ultimate disintegration of Gupta Empire within the next half a century and thus it paved the road for the creation of a number of small kingdoms.

Apart from the Huna invasions there were number of other factors responsible for the decline of Gupta power in India. As we have stated earlier, the breaking away of the feudatories of Gupta was one such major factor of the decline of Gupta power. One such good example was the invasion of the Vakataka. By means of a matrimonial alliance Chandragupta II had established a friendly relation with the Vakatakas. But the successors of Chandragupta II had no peaceful relation with the Vakatakas. In the reigns of Budhagupta, the Vakataka king Narendrasena invaded some of the Central Indian region like Malwa, Kosala, and Mekala, etc. This invasion considerably weakened the Gupta hegemony in Central Indian region. In subsequent years, another Vakataka king Harisena conquered Gujarat and Malwa from the Imperial Guptas, which on the one hand weakened the Gupta prestige and on the other hand, inspired their feudatories to declare their independence. Similarly, the rulers like Yasodharman also inflicted a death blow to the Gupta Empire. These examples were followed by other feudatories which led to the ultimate disintegration of the Gupta Empire.

At the same time the decentralized form of administration had also contributed substantially to its downfall. The provincial governors of the Gupta Empire enjoyed a good deal of freedom and authority. The Gupta rulers failed to erect any such administrative machinery to keep a check on the highhandedness of the provincial governors. The Gupta rulers also failed to pay cash salary to any of their officials. In lieu of that they granted land by which the official developed a feudal character in them. They identified themselves only to their local interest in defiance of the central authority. Thus, the growth of the feudal elements further accelerated the process of decentralization of Gupta Empire.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 24:** During whose reign did the Hunas cross the Hindukush mountains?

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**Q 25:** How Chandragupta II established a friendly relationship with the Vakatakas?

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**Q 26:** How did feudal character develop in the Gupta administration?

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## 7.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt about–

- The emergence of the Guptas in India marked the beginning of a glorious period in ancient Indian history. But the origin of the Guptas cannot be directly ascertained as it is somewhat obscure in nature. Srigupta laid down the foundation of the Gupta Empire and he was followed by rulers like Ghatotkachagupta, Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, Kumaragupta I, Skandagupta and others. The first two rulers of the Gupta dynasty were probably sub-ordinate chiefs as they took the tile Maharaja. But the third ruler Chandragupta I not only brought the Gupta dynasty to its glory but also became an independent ruler adopting the title Maharajadhiraja.
- The first three rulers of the Gupta dynasty laid down the basis upon which the superstructure was built by Samudragupta, and Chandragupta II with their expansionist policies. Samudragupta after consolidating his position at home brought Dakshinapath (South India)

upto Tamil Nadu under his control defeating as many as twelve rulers as stated in the Allahbad Prasasti. He too defeated the rulers of North India, Central India and Eastern India along with the forest kings, tribal chiefs, etc. and performed the Asvamedha sacerifice showing his imperial authority. His son and successor Chandragupta II too continued his father's policy led his expansion campaign in Western India and gought against the Sakas who dominated Western India at that time. By a policy of matrimonial alliance with the Nagas, Vakatakas and Kadambas, Chandragupta II encircled the Sakas, defeated them and united Western India with the Northern India by occupying Malwa,Gujarat and Kathiwar. He too had other successful military campaigns to his credit.

- Chandragupta II is more remembered as a consolidator than a conqueror. He completed the task of conquest left incomplete by his father Samudragupta and after that stabilized and consolidated the conquest made by the Gupta rulers. By concluding a number of marraige alliances with different Indian rulers, Chandragupta II created a ring of a friendly states around the Gupta Empire. His pacific policy created such a peaceful atmosphere in the Gupta Empire that there began a cultural renaissance in the Empire. Chandragupta II provided patronage to the Nava Ratna.
- Monarchy was the form of government with the king being the supreme head. The kingship was hereditary. He was assisted by the crown prince, ministers and other officials. The Guptas had an organized bureaucracy with the central and provincial officials being differentiated by their designation. The Empire was divided into provinces called Bhuktis or Desas. The provinces were divided into districts or Vishayas. In Judicial matters, the king was the highest judge who personally attended the court to hear the cases and was assisted by other officials. In cities the city magistrates and in villages the panchayats or family gatherings used to dispose of the cases. Different sources of royal revenue were there in the form of land revenues, fines, commercial taxes, etc. The ownership of land was collectively

held by the state and village society. As a whole the Gupta administration was benevolent one and was followed by later dynasties like Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, etc.

- Several factors brought about the downfall of the Gupta Empire. Foremost among these factors was the invasion of the Hunas who, towards the end of the 5th century A.D, gave a death blow to the Gupta power. The breaking away of the feudatories also weakened the power of the Guptas. With the decentralization in administration, the provincial governors under the Guptas enjoyed much freedom and authority for which they displayed their local interest defying the central authority. Instead of cash salary the provincial governors were given land which developed a feudal character in them further accelerating the process of decentralization of Gupta Empire and leading to its eventual downfall.



## 7.9 FURTHER READING

1) Majumdar, R. C., Raychaudhuri, H.C., Datta, K. (1986). *An Advanced History of India*. New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd.

2) Sharma, L. P. (1981). *Ancient History of India (pre-historic Age to 1200 A.D.).* New Delhi, Vikas Publication House Pvt. Ltd.

3) Thapar, Romila. (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India from The Origins to A D 1300*. New Delhi, The Penguin Group.



## 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q No 1:** a) Srigupta, Ghatotkachagupta, Chandragupta I,

b) Maharajadhiraja, (c) Kumaradevi

**Ans to Q No 2:** Chandragupta I married into the Lichchavi family. This Lichchavi-Gupta matrimonial alliance was an important one from the political angle as it greatly helped in the emergence of Gupta power . Romila Thapar said that this matrimonial alliance provided acceptability to the Guptas who perhaps had no royal origin. V.A Smith expressed the view that the Lichchavi Princess Kumaradevi brought to her husband the needed political influence.

**Ans to Q No 3:** a) True, b) False, c) False, d) True, e) True, f) True

**Ans to Q No 4:** Allahbad Pillar Inscription.

**Ans to Q No 5:** Ramagupta was the eldest son of Samudragupta.

**Ans to Q No 6:** A great conqueror Samudragupta probably started his campaign towards Dakshinapatha (South India) after consolidating his position at home. His South Indian campaign was one of *Dharmavijaya* which was marked by three principles namely, grahana, moksha and anugraha. In this campaign,Samudragupta defeated as many as twelve kings of South India, whom he first captured and then liberated and ultimately reinstated in their respective Kingdom.

**Ans to Q No 7:** Lichchavi.

**Ans to Q No 8:** Chandragupta II.

**Ans to Q No 9:** Kalidasa.

**Ans to Q No 10:** a) 5, b) 6, c) 1, d) 3, e) 2, f) 4

**Ans to Q No 11:** Mahabaladhikrita was the Commander-in-Chief.

**Ans to Q No 12:** The royal revenue was collected from different sources like various types of land revenues, fines for offences, commercial taxes, etc.Revenue officials were recruited on the basis of merit and ability without having any distinction on the basis of caste and creed. Exemption from taxation were granted to villages on some occassions.

**Ans to Q No 13:** a) True, b) True, c) False, d) True, e) False, f) False, g) False

**Ans to Q No 14:** a) Vedas, b) slave, c) eight, d) Kumaragupta, e) Varamihira, f) China

**Ans to Q No 15:** Brahmacharya, Garhastha, Banaprastha and Sanyas.

**Ans to Q No 16:** Elephant Riding.

**Ans to Q No 17:** By digging of tanks, wells, cutting of cannals, etc.

**Ans to Q No 18:** An all round industrial growth was witnessed in the Gupta period.This growth was facilitated by the richness of the country in natural resources, mineral, animal and plant produce.Gold, Copper, Textile and Wood Carving were popular industry of the period.

**Ans to Q No 19:** a) True, b) False, c) True, d) False, e) True, f) False, g) True

**Ans to Q No 20:** a) 3, b) 1, c) 2

**Ans to Q No 21:** a) Chandragupta II, b) Mihirakula, c) Bimola, d) Buddhism, e) Samudragupta, f) Kalidasa, g) Harisena, h) Kavya

**Ans to Q No 22:** Small flat roofed temples, sometimes surrounded by the pillared halls are characteristic of the early Gupta period.

**Ans to Q No 23:** Paintings of Ajanta are religious by nature, wheresas Bagh paintings are purely secular.

**Ans to Q No 24:** Kumaragupta I.

**Ans to Q No 25:** By means of a matrimonial alliance Chandragupta II had established a friendly relationship with the Vakatakas.

**Ans to Q No 26:** The Guptas did not pay cash salary to their officials. In lieu of that they granted land to the officials which developed a feudal character in the Gupta administration.



## 7.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**A) Very Short Questions (Answer each Question in about 50 words)**

**Q 1:** Who was Srigupta?

**Q 2:** Name the mother of Prabhavati Gupta.

**Q 3:** Who was Vishnudeva?

**Q 4:** Give one reason of the downfall of the Guptas.

**B) Short Questions** (Answer each question in about 150 words)

**Q 1:** What do you know about the emergence of the Gupta dynasty?

**Q 2:** What light does Allahbad Pillar Inscription throw on Samudragupta's policy of conquest?

**Q 3:** What was the contribution of Chandragupta II in building up the Gupta Empire?

**Q 4:** Write a note on the administrative divisions under the Gupta administration.

**Q 5:** How was the society divided in the Gupta period?

**Q 6:** What was the position of women in the Gupta period?

**Q 7:** Write a note on the development of agriculture in the Gupta period.

**Q 8:** Write a note on the development of Brahmanical Hinduism during the Gupta rule.

**Q 9:** What do you know about the development of Sanskrit literature in the Gupta period?

**C) Long Questions** (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

**Q 1:** Discuss the extension and consolidation of the Gupta Empire.

**Q 2:** Explain the administrative system of the Gupta rulers.

**Q 3:** Describe the socio-economic condition of the Gupta period.

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