

# Gupta Empire : A Powerful Ancient Indian Empire

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## Introduction

**Rise of the Gupta Empire:** The rise of the Gupta Empire occurred near Prayag (modern-day Allahabad) in Kaushambi towards the end of the 3rd century. The Guptas were feudatories of the Kushanas. Initially, the Gupta kingdom was based in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It appears that Uttar Pradesh held more importance for the Gupta rulers than Bihar, as most early inscriptions were found in Uttar Pradesh. From there, the rulers expanded in various directions. They established dominance over Anuganga (Middle Ganga Plain), Prayag, Saket (modern Ayodhya), and Magadha.

**Origin of the Guptas:** The history of the Gupta dynasty is known through literary and archaeological sources, as well as the accounts of foreign travelers.

## Literary Sources:

1. **Puranas:** Matsya, Vayu, and Vishnu Puranas provide information about the early rulers.
2. **Buddhist Texts:** Arya Manjushri Mulakalpa, Vasubandhu Charita, and Chandragarbha Pariprichha.
3. **Jain Texts:** Harivansh and Kuvalayamala.
4. **Smritis:** Narada, Parashara, and Brihaspati Smritis give insights into the social, economic, and political aspects of the Gupta period.
5. **Secular Literature:** "Devichandraguptam" by Vishakhadatta provides details about Ramagupta and Chandragupta. Other works include Abhijnana Shakuntalam, Raghuvamsa, Mudrarakshasa, Mrichchhakatika, Harshacharita and Kamasutra.

## Epigraphic Sources:

1. The most notable is the Prayag Prashasti of Samudragupta, highlighting his coronation, conquests, and personality.
2. Other inscriptions include the Udayagiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II, the pillar inscription of Kumaragupta at Bilsad, and the Junagadh inscription of Skandagupta.

## Foreign Accounts:

1. Fa-Hien, who visited during Chandragupta II's reign, described the people and culture of the Madhya region.
2. Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century also provided insights,

mentioning rulers like Buddhagupta, Kumaragupta I, Shakaditya, and Baladitya. He stated that Kumaragupta founded Nalanda University.

**Views on Gupta Origin:** There is disagreement among historians regarding the caste origin of the Guptas:

Caste	Historians
Shudra/Lower caste	K.P. Jayaswal
Vaishya	Allan, S.K. Aiyangar, A.S. Altekar, Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma
Kshatriya	S. Chattopadhyay, R.C. Majumdar, G.S. Hira Chandra Ojha
Brahmin	Dr. Rai Chaudhary, Dr. Ramgopal Goyal

**Gupta Administration:** The republic system declined, and monarchy based on divine rights prevailed. Succession was hereditary, typically passing to the eldest son. At its peak, the empire stretched from the Himalayas in the north to the Vindhyas in the south and from the Bay of Bengal in the east to Saurashtra in the west.

## Revenue Sources:

1. Bhaga: One-sixth of land produce.
2. Bhoga: Possibly daily gifts like fruits and vegetables.
3. Pranayakar: A compulsory or voluntary tax on villagers.
4. Bhumika: Mentioned in Manusmriti.
5. Bhent (Gift Tax): Mentioned in Harshacharita.

**Trade and Commerce:** Trade flourished in cities like Ujjain, Bharuch, Pratishthan, Vidisha, Prayag, Pataliputra, Vaishali, Tamralipti, Mathura, Ahichhatra, and Kaushambi. Ujjain was the most important hub due to its central location. The abundance of gold coins supported this prosperity.

**Social Structure:** Society was divided into the traditional four varnas:

1. Brahmins
2. Kshatriyas
3. Vaishyas
4. Shudras

Texts like Arthashastra and Brihat Samhita prescribed separate settlements for each varna. Judicial tests were unique to each varna (e.g., fire for Kshatriyas, water for Vaishyas, etc.)

**Religion:** The Gupta period marked the revival of

Brahmanism and Hinduism. Idol worship became mainstream, and rituals shifted from yajnas to personal devotion. Vaishnavism and Shaivism gained prominence and coexistence.

**Art and Architecture:** The Gupta period saw remarkable achievements in sculpture, painting, and pottery. Temples began to be built on raised platforms with sanctums, pradakshina paths, and flat roofs. Some had shikhara (towers). Bricks and stones were commonly used.

#### Important Gupta Temples:

Temple	Location
Vishnu Temple	Tigwa (Jabalpur, MP)
Shiva Temple	Bhumra (Nagod, MP)
Parvati Temple	Nachna Kuthar (MP)
Dashavatara Temple	Deogarh (Jhansi, UP)
Shiva Temple	Khoh (Nagod, MP)
Brick Lakshman Temple	Bhitargaon (Kanpur, UP)

**Literature:** The Gupta period is considered the Golden Age

of Sanskrit literature. According to Barnett, it was as important to Indian history as the Periclean age was to Greece. Writers like Kalidasa, Sudraka, and others thrived.

**Golden Age Concept:** The Gupta period is also called:

1. Golden Age
2. Classical Age
3. Periclean Age

It was an age of literary, scientific, and artistic brilliance, religious tolerance, economic prosperity, good governance, and political unity. However, historians like R.S. Sharma, D.D. Kosambi, and Romila Thapar argue this notion is exaggerated, pointing to feudalism, urban decline, and economic stagnation.

#### References:-

1. Bharat Ka Itihas – Maurya Trivedi
2. Bharat Ka Itihas – Sharma Pawa
3. NCERT Class 11 History Textbook

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