

Quick Revision Module (UPSC Prelims 2024) Ancient & Medieval History

GUPTA AND HARSHA PERIOD

○ Rise and Growth of Gupta Empire ○

275 CE

The dynasty of the Guptas gained power and founded by Sri Gupta.



319-20 CE

The Gupta era started by the 1st important Gupta emperor Chandragupta I (319-34).



335-80 CE

Samudragupta, the son and successor of Chandragupta I



550 CE

Guptas lost Bihar and UP



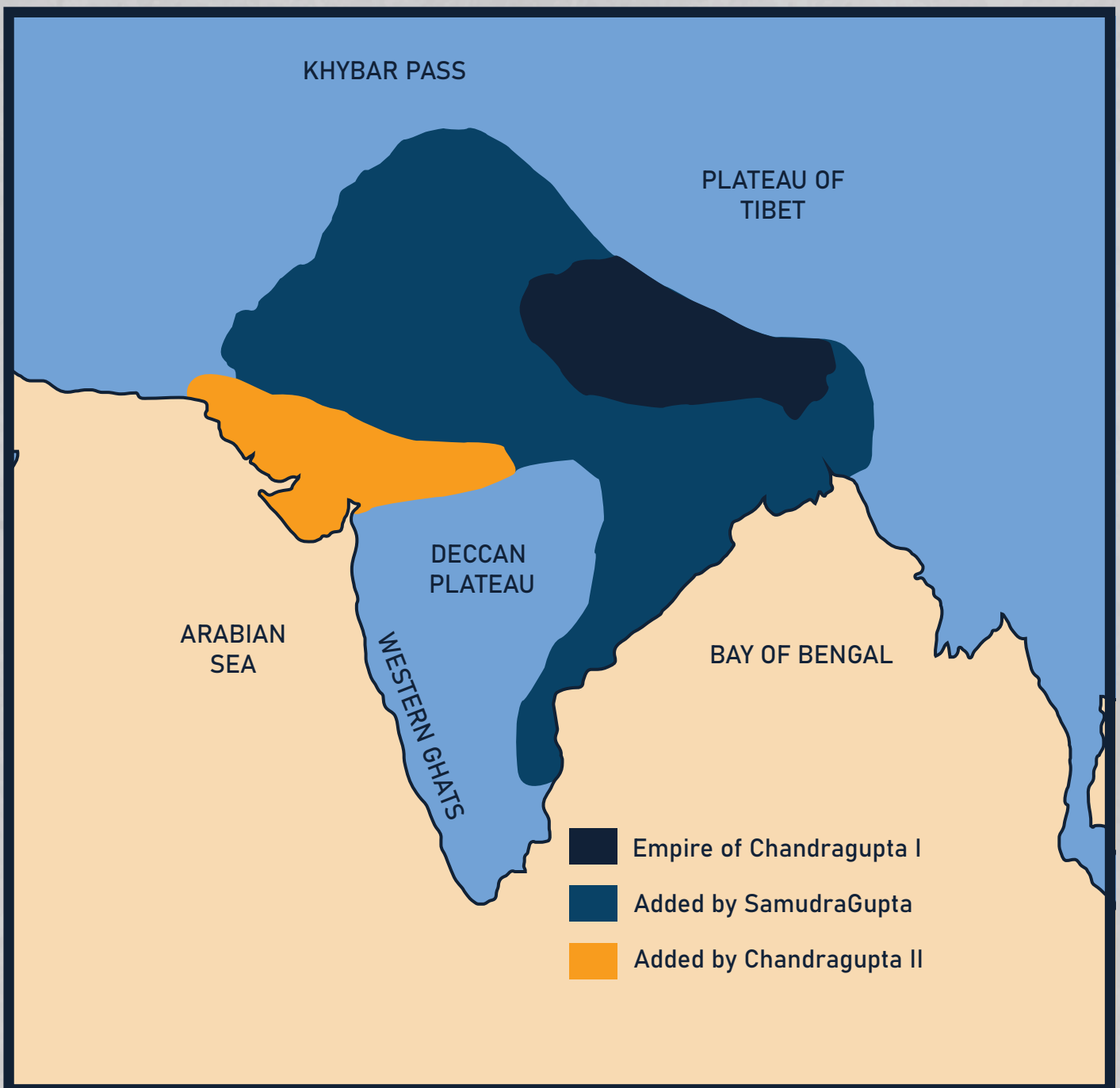
5th Century

Huna invasion and end of Skandagupta's reign



380-412 CE

Chandragupta II



Background

The Gupta empire arose on the ruins of the Kushan empire. The Guptas were possibly feudatories of the Kushans in UP. The original kingdom of the Guptas comprised UP and Bihar at the end of the third century.

Note: Early Gupta coins and inscriptions are largely found in UP.

The Guptas enjoyed certain material advantages. The centre of their operations lay in the fertile land of Madhyadesh covering Bihar and UP. They were able to exploit the iron ores of central India and south Bihar.

Also, they took advantage of their proximity to the areas in north India that conducted the silk trade with the eastern Roman empire, also known as the Byzantine empire.

Chandragupta I (AD 319–34)

He was the first important king of the Gupta dynasty. He married a Lichchhavi princess, in all probability from Nepal, which strengthened his position.

The Guptas were probably vaishyas, and hence marriage into a kshatriya family lent them prestige.

Note: He assumed the title of 'Maharajadhiraja' and started the Gupta Era.

Samudragupta (AD 335–80)

He was Chandragupta's son and successor. His court poet Harishena wrote a glowing account of the military exploits of his patron.

The inscription is engraved at Allahabad on the same pillar that carries the inscriptions of Ashoka.

Meghavarman, the ruler of Sri Lanka, is believed to have sent a missionary to Samudragupta for permission to build a Buddhist temple at Gaya.

Note: Called 'Napoleon of India' by V.A. Smith

Chandragupta II (AD 380–412)

The reign of Chandragupta II saw the high watermark of the Gupta empire. He extended the limits of the empire by marriage alliance and conquest. He married his daughter Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince. The prince died, and Prabhavati became the virtual ruler.

Chandragupta II adopted the title of Vikramaditya. During his reign, the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien (AD 399–414) visited India and wrote an elaborate account of the life of its people.

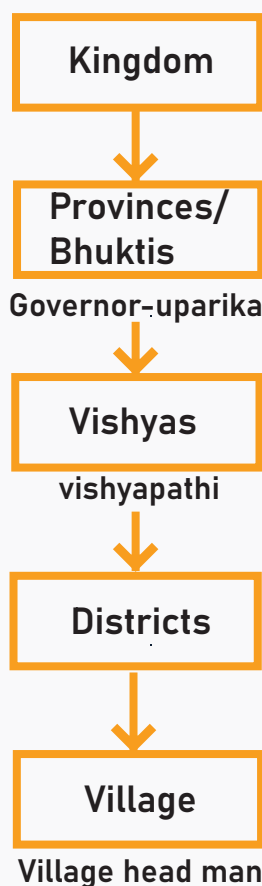
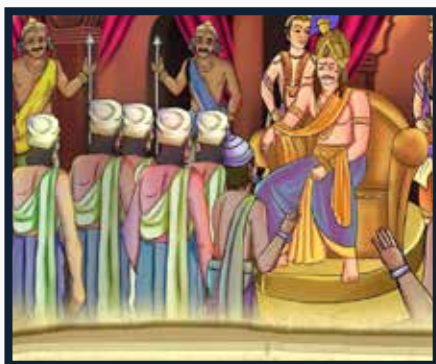
Note: The court of Chandragupta II at Ujjain was adorned by numerous scholars (navratnas) like Kalidasa, Amarsinha, Harisena, Varahmihira, Vararuchi, Vetalbhatta, Sanku, Dhanvanti and Kahapanaka.

NOTE

- The successors of Chandragupta II had to face an invasion by Hunas from Central Asia, which ultimately led to downfall of the empire.
- Kumaragupta I founded Nalanda University.
- Vishnugupta was last known ruler of Gupta dynasty.

Life in Gupta Age

System of Administration



Trends in Trade and the Agrarian Economy



- Fa-Hien visited different parts of the Gupta empire. He found that Magadha was full of cities and its rich people believed in and supported it with charitable offerings.
- In ancient India, the Guptas issued the largest number of gold coins, which were called dinaras in their inscriptions. Although in gold content the Gupta coins are not as pure as the Kushan ones, they not only served to pay the officers in the army and administration but also

Social Developments



- Large-scale land grants to the brahmanas suggest that the brahmana supremacy increased in Gupta times. The brahmanas presented the Gupta kings as possessing god-like attributes. All this helped to legitimize the position of the Gupta princes, who became great supporters of the brahmanical order.
- The castes proliferated into numerous sub-castes as a result of two factors. First, a large number of foreigners had been assimilated

- The king maintained a standing army, supplemented by forces supplied by his feudatories. Horse chariots receded into the background, and cavalry came to the fore. Horse archery became an important element in military tactics.

- During the Gupta period land taxes increased in number, and those on trade and commerce decreased. In central and western India, the villagers were also subjected to forced labour called vishti.

- The judicial system was far more developed under the Guptas than in earlier times; for the first time civil and criminal laws were clearly demarcated.

Note: The guilds of artisans, merchants, and others were governed by their own laws.

- Religious functionaries were granted land, free of tax, for posterity, and they were authorized to collect from the peasants all the taxes that once went directly to the emperor. The beneficiaries were also empowered to punish criminals.

to meet the needs of the sale and purchase of land. After the conquest of Gujarat, the Guptas issued a large number of silver coins mainly for local exchange. In contrast to those of the Kushans, the Gupta copper coins are very few in number.

- In comparison to the earlier period we notice a decline in long-distance trade. Till AD 550 India carried on some trade with the eastern Roman or Byzantine empire, to which it exported silk. Around AD 550, the people of the eastern Roman empire learnt from the Chinese the art of growing silk, which adversely affected India's export trade.

- The striking development of the Gupta period, especially in eastern and central MP, was the emergence of priestly landlords at the cost of local peasants. Land grants made to the priests brought many virgin areas under cultivation, but these beneficiaries were imposed from above on local tribal peasants who were reduced to a lower status.

ed into Indian society, and each group of foreigners was considered a kind of caste. Second, the absorption of many tribal people into brahmanical society through the process of land grants. The tribal chiefs were assigned a respectable origin, but most of their ordinary kinsmen were assigned a low origin.

- The position of shudras improved during this period. They were now permitted to listen to recitations of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas.

- The number of untouchables increased, especially the chandalas.

- In the Gupta period, like the shudras, women were also allowed to listen to the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas, and were advised to worship Krishna. However, women of the higher orders did not have access to independent sources of livelihood in pre-Gupta and Gupta times. The first example of the immolation of a widow after the death of her husband occurred during the Gupta period in AD 510.



- Buddhism ceased to be as important during the Gupta period as it had been in the days of Ashoka and Kanishka. However, some stupas and viharas were constructed, and Nalanda became a centre of Buddhist education.

- Bhagavatism originated in post-Maurya times and centred around the worship of Vishnu. It overshadowed Mahayana Buddhism by Gupta times. Idol worship in the temples became a common feature of Hinduism from the Gupta period onwards and many festivals also began to be celebrated. The Gupta kings followed a policy of tolerance towards different religious sects.





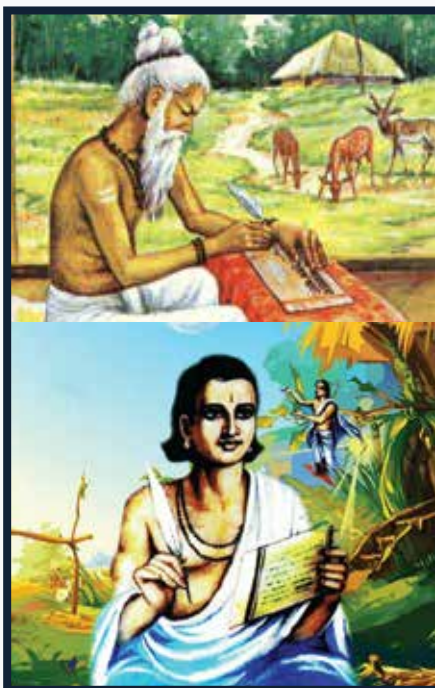
Art and Science during the Gupta times

Art



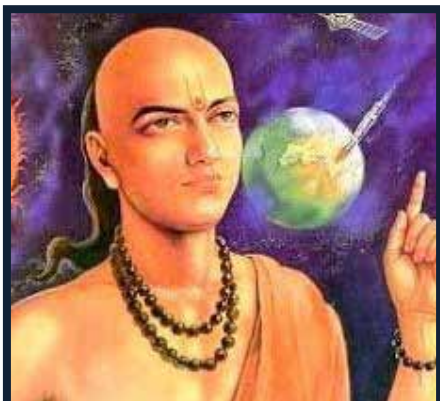
- Both Samudragupta and Chandragupta II were patrons of art and literature.
- Buddhism gave great impetus to art in Maurya and post-Maurya times - creation of massive stone pillars, the raising of high stupas or relic towers etc. During the Gupta period a life-size copper image of the Buddha of more than 6 feet was made. The finest specimens of Buddhist art in Gupta times are the Ajanta paintings.
- As the Guptas supported Brahmanism, images of Vishnu, Shiva, and some other Hindu gods were fashioned for the first time during their period.
- The Gupta period was poor in terms of architecture. There were a few temples made of brick in UP and a stone temple. The Buddhist university at Nalanda was set up in the fifth century, and its earliest structure, made of brick, relates to this period.

Literature



- **Bhasa** was an important poet in the early phase of the Gupta period. He was the author of a drama called *Dradiracharudatta*, which was later refashioned as *Mrichchhakatika* or the *Little Clay Cart* by Shudraka.
- **Kalidasa** lived in the 4th-5th century. He was the greatest poet of classical Sanskrit literature and wrote *Abhijnanashakuntalam* which is very highly regarded in world literature.
- The two great epics, namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were almost completed by the fourth century AD.
- The Gupta period also saw the development of Sanskrit grammar based on the work of Panini and Patanjali. This period is particularly memorable for the compilation of *Amarakosha* by Amarasimha, who was a luminary in the court of Chandragupta II.

Science and Technology



- In mathematics, in the fifth century, a work called *Aryabhatiya* was written by Aryabhata who belonged to Pataliputra.
- A Gupta inscription of AD 448 from Allahabad district suggests that the decimal system was known in India at the beginning of the fifth century.
- In the field of astronomy, a book called *Romaka Sidhanta* was compiled, its title indicating that it was influenced by Greek and Roman ideas.
- Bronze images of the Buddha began to be produced on a considerable scale because of the knowledge the smiths had of advanced metal technology.
- With regard to iron objects, the best example is the iron pillar found at Mehrauli in Delhi. Manufactured in the fourth century AD. The pillar has not gathered any rust over the subsequent fifteen centuries which is a great tribute to the technological skill of the craftsmen.

Spread of Civilization in Eastern India

Orissa, and Eastern and Southern MP	Bengal	Assam
<p>▶▶ Kalinga, or coastal Orissa south of the Mahanadi, rose to importance under Ashoka, though a strong state had been founded in that area in the first century BC.</p> <p>▶▶ In the 4th century Kosala and Mahakantara were conquered by Samudragupta, and covered parts of northern and western Orissa. From the 2nd half of the 4th century to the 6th century several states were</p>	<p>▶▶ The area situated between the Ganges and the Brahmaputra now covering Bangladesh emerged as a settled and fairly Sanskrit-educated region in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Gupta governors, who seem to have become independent after about AD 550, occupied north Bengal; some part of it may also have been seized by the rulers of Kamarupa. By AD 600 the area came to be</p>	<p>▶▶ Kamarupa, coterminous with the Brahmaputra basin running from east to west, shot into prominence in the seventh century. In the fourth century Samudragupta received tributes from Davaka and Kamarupa. The rulers who submitted to Samudragupta may have been chiefs living on the tributes collected from the tribal peasantry.</p>

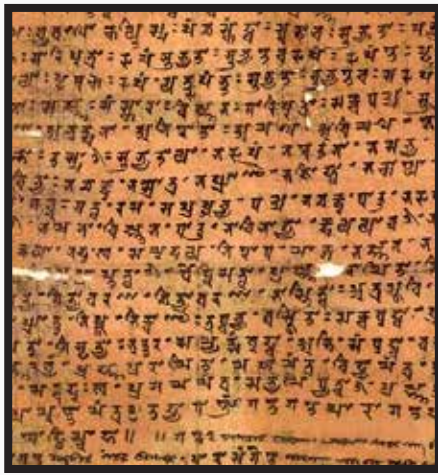
formed in Orissa, and at least five of them can be clearly identified. The most important of those was the state of the Matharas, also **known as Pitribhaktas**, who at the peak of their power dominated the area between the Mahanadi and the Krishna.

- ▶▶ The induction of the brahmanas through land grants brought new lands under cultivation and introduced better methods of agriculture. Formerly the year was divided into three units, each of four months, and time was reckoned on the basis of three seasons. Under the Matharas, in the mid-fifth century, people began the practise of dividing the year into twelve lunar months. This implied a sound idea of weather conditions which was useful for agricultural operations.
- ▶▶ In coastal Orissa, writing had certainly been known since the third century BC, and inscriptions up to the mid-fourth century AD were written in Prakrit, but from about AD 350 onwards Sanskrit began to be used.

known as Gauda and functioned as an independent state ruled by **Shashanka, Harsha's adversary**.

- ▶▶ For a century from AD 432 we notice a series of land sale documents recorded on copper-plates. The land sale documents not only indicate the existence of different social groups and local functionaries but also shed valuable light on the expansion of agriculture.
- ▶▶ A fiscal and administrative unit called **Dandabhukti** was formed in the border areas between Bengal and Orissa. Danda means punishment, and bhukti enjoyment. The unit was apparently to pacify and suppress the tribal inhabitants of that region and may have promoted Sanskrit and other elements of culture in the tribal areas.
- ▶▶ The two centuries from about the middle of the fifth appear to have been very momentous in the history of Bengal. They saw the progress of Brahmanism and the coming of Buddhism. The statues of the

- ▶▶ By the beginning of the sixth century, the use of Sanskrit and the art of writing are clearly in evidence. The **Kamarupa kings adopted the title varman**, which obtained not only in northern, central, and western India but also in Bengal, Orissa, Andhra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. This title, which means armour and symbolizes a warrior, was given to the kshatriyas by Manu.
- ▶▶ In the seventh century **Bhaskaravarman emerged as the head of a state** which controlled a substantial part of the Brahmaputra basin and some areas beyond it. Buddhism also acquired a foothold, and the Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang visited this state.
- ▶▶ The decline and fall of the Gupta empire therefore coincided with considerable progress in the outlying regions. Many obscure areas, which were possibly ruled by tribal chiefs and were thinly settled, came into limelight.



Buddha are virtually non-existent in early centuries, after which they are found in Bodh-Gaya, Sanchi, Mathura, and Gandhara. In the fifth century, however, statues were set up at several places in Bengal.



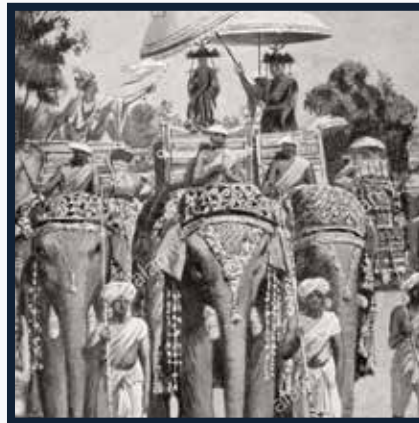
Harsha and His Times

Rise of Harshavardhana



- The Guptas, with their seat of power in UP and Bihar, ruled over north and western India for about 160 years until the mid-sixth century. Then north India again split up into several kingdoms, the Hunas and other feudal dynasties. Gradually one of these dynasties ruling at Thanesar in Haryana extended its authority over all the other feudatories. The ruler who brought this about was Harshavardhana (AD 606–47).
- Harsha made Kanauj his seat of power, and from

Administration



- Harshavardhana's reign is an example of transition from ancient to medieval times. Harsha governed his empire on the same lines as did the Guptas, but his administration had become feudal and decentralized.
- Every feudatory contributed his quota of foot soldiers and horses, and thus enormously added to the imperial army.
- Hsuan Tsang spent many years in Harsha's court and travelled widely in India. Under

Religious Outlook



- Harsha followed a tolerant religious policy. A Shaiva in his early years, he gradually became a great patron of Buddhism. As a devout Buddhist he convened a grand assembly at Kanauj to widely publicize the doctrines of Mahayana, and later an assembly at Prayag.
- Harsha is remembered not only for his patronage and learning but also for the authorship of three plays: Priyadarshika, Ratnavali, and Nagananda.

there he extended his authority in all directions. Kanauj's emergence as a centre of political power from the reign of Harsha onwards typifies the coming of the feudal age in north India just as Pataliputra largely represents the pre-feudal order.

- The early history of Harsha's reign is reconstructed from a study by Banabhatta, who was his court poet and wrote a book called Harshacharita. This can be supplemented by the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuan Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century and stayed in the country for about fifteen years.
- Rajasthan, Punjab, UP, Bihar, and Orissa were under his direct control, but his sphere of influence spread over a much wider area. It appears that the peripheral states acknowledged his sovereignty.
- Harsha's southward march was stopped at the Narmada river by the Chalukya king Pulakeshin, who ruled over a great part of modern Karnataka and Maharashtra with his capital at Badami.

his influence Harsha became a great supporter of Buddhism and made generous endowments to it.

- Hiuan Tsang informs us that Harsha's revenues were divided into four parts. One part was earmarked for the expenditure of the king, a second for scholars, a third for the endowment of officials and public servants, and a fourth for religious purposes. He also tells us that ministers and high officers of the state were endowed with land. The feudal practice of rewarding and paying officers with grants of land seems to have begun under Harsha. This explains why we do not have very many coins issued by this king.
- In Harsha's empire, law and order was not well maintained. Hiuan Tsang was robbed of his belongings, although he reports that according to the laws of the land, severe punishments were inflicted for crime.

