

Examrace

Competitive Exams: The Age Of Guptas

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Before the Guptas

When the last of the Mauryan kings was assassinated in 184 BC, India once again became a collection of unfederated kingdoms. During this period, the most powerful kingdoms were not in the north, but in the Deccan to the south, particularly in the west. The north, however, remained culturally the most active, where Buddhism was spreading and where Hinduism was being gradually remade by the Upanishadic movements, which are discussed in more detail in the section on religious history. The dream, however, of a universal empire had not disappeared. It would be realized by a northern kingdom and would usher in one of the most creative periods in Indian history.

The Gupta Dynasty (320 – 550)

Under Chandragupta I (320 – 335), empire was revived in the north. Like Chandragupta Maurya, he first conquered Magadha, set up his capital where the Mauryan capital had stood (Patna), and from this base consolidated a kingdom over the eastern portion of northern India. In addition, Chandragupta revived many of Asoka's principles of government. It was his son, however, Samudragupta (335 – 376), and later his grandson, Chandragupta II (376 – 415), who extended the kingdom into an empire over the whole of the north and the western Deccan. Chandragupta II was the greatest of the Gupta kings; called Vikramaditya (“The Sun of Power”), he presided over the greatest cultural age in India.

This period is regarded as the golden age of Indian culture. The high points of this cultural creativity are magnificent and creative architecture, sculpture, and painting. The wall-paintings of Ajanta Cave in the central Deccan are considered among the greatest and most powerful works of Indian art. The paintings in the cave represent the various lives of the Buddha, but also are the best source we have of the daily life in India at the time. There are forty-eight caves making up Ajanta, most of which were carved out of the rock between 460 and 480, and they are filled with Buddhist sculptures. The rock temple at Elephanta (near Bombay) contains a powerful, eighteen foot statue of the three-headed Shiva, one of the principle Hindu gods. Each head represents one of Shiva's roles: That of creating, that of preserving, and that of destroying. The period also saw dynamic building of Hindu temples. All of these temples contain a hall and a tower.

The greatest writer of the time was Kalidasa. Poetry in the Gupta age tended towards a few genres: Religious and meditative poetry, lyric poetry, narrative histories (the most popular of the secular literatures), and drama. Kalidasa excelled at lyric poetry, but he is best known for his dramas. We have three of his plays; all of them are suffused with epic heroism, with

comedy, and with erotics. The plays all involve misunderstanding and conflict, but they all end with unity, order, and resolution.

The Guptas tended to allow kings to remain as vassal kings; unlike the Mauryas, they did not consolidate every kingdom into a single administrative unit. This would be the model for later Mughal rule and British rule built off of the Mughal paradigm.

The Guptas fell prey, however, to a wave of migrations by the Huns, a people who originally lived north of China. The Hun migrations would push all the way to the doors of Rome. Beginning in the 400's, the Huns began to put pressure on the Guptas. In 480 they conquered the Guptas and took over northern India. Western India was overrun by 500, and the last of the Gupta kings, presiding over a vastly diminished kingdom, perished in 550. A strange thing happened to the Huns in India as well as in Europe. Over the decades they gradually assimilated into the indigenous population and their state weakened.

Harsha, who was a descendant of the Guptas, quickly moved to reestablish an Indian empire. From 606 – 647, he ruled over an empire in northern India. Harsha was perhaps one of the greatest conquerors of Indian history, and unlike all of his conquering predecessors, he was a brilliant administrator. He was also a great patron of culture. His capital city, Kanauj, extended for four or five miles along the Ganges River and was filled with magnificent buildings. Only one fourth of the taxes he collected went to administration of the government. The remainder went to charity, rewards, and especially to culture: Art, literature, music, and religion.

Because of extensive trade, the culture of India became the dominant culture around the Bay of Bengal, profoundly and deeply influencing the cultures of Burma, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. In many ways, the period during and following the Gupta dynasty was the period of "Greater India," a period of cultural activity in India and surrounding countries building off of the base of Indian culture. This medieval flowering of Indian culture would radically change course in the Indian Middle Ages. From the north came Muslim conquerors out of Afghanistan, and the age of Muslim rule began in 1100.

Decline of the Gupta Empire

The last great king of the Gupta was Skanda Gupta was ascended the throne about 455 A. D. Even during the later years of Kumar Gupta's reign, the empire was attacked by a tribe called Pushyamitra but it was repulsed, And immediately after the accession of Skanda Gupta, Hunas made inroads, but they too were repelled.

However, fresh waves of Invaders arrived and shattered the fabric of the Gupta Empire. Although in the beginning the Gupta king Skanda Gupta tried effectively to stem the march of the Hunas into India, his successors proved to be weak and could not cope with the Huna invaders, who excelled in horsemanship and who possibly used stirrups made of metal, Although the Huna power was soon overthrown by Yasodharman of Malwa, the Malwa prince successfully challenged the authority of the Guptas and set up Pillars of victory commemorating

his conquest (AD 532) of almost the whole of northern India. Indeed Yasodharman's rule was short lived, but he dealt a severe blow to the Gupta empire.

The Gupta empire was further undermined by the rise of the feudatories. The governors appointed by the Gupta kings in north Bengal and their feudatories in Samatata or south-east Bengal broke away from the Gupta control. The later Gutpas of Magadha established their power in Bihar. Besides, the Maukharis rose to power in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and had their capital at Kanauj. Probably by AD 550 Bihar and Uttar Pradesh passed out of Gupta hands. And the rulers of Valabhi established their authority in Gujarat and Western Malwa

Another Cause

After the reign of Skanda Gupta (467 AD) any Gupta coin or inscription has been found in western Malwa and Saurashtra. The migration of guild of Silk weavers from Gujarat to Malwa in AD 473 and their adoption of non-productive professions show that there was not much demand for cloth produced by them. The advantages from Gujarat trade gradually disappeared. After the middle of the fifth century the Gupta kings made desperate attempts to maintain their gold currency by reducing the content of pure gold in it. The loss of western India complete by the end of the fifth century, must have deprived the Gutpas of the rich revenues from trade and commerce and crippled them economically, and the princes of Thaneswar established their power in Haryana and then gradually moved on to Kanauj.

The causes of the downfall or disappearance of the Guptas were basically not different from those that brought the end many ancient and medieval dynasties. Over and above the usual causes of administrative inefficiency, weak successors and stagnant the fall of the Guptas: Dynastic dissensions, foreign invasions and some internal rebellions.

Dynastic Dissensions and Weak Rulers

There is evidence to show that following the death of Kumaragupta and Skandagupta, there were civil wars and struggles for the throne. For instance, we have the successors of Buddhagupta, highlighting the rule of more than just one king. Those were Vinayagupta in Bengal and Bhanugupta in Iran.

Absence of law of primogeniture along with strong centralized authority in ancient and medieval periods led to chaos. Thus we see that the resources of the empire were frittered away in petty squabbles and wars for the throne.

Besides circumstances weakening the Gupta monarchy, the very personalities of the later Gupta Kings contributed to the ultimate fall of this dynasty. They were not only men of weak character but also some of them followed policies that affected other spheres of administration, particularly that of military efficiency.

Foreign Invasions

Foreign invasions was the second major factor in the decline and disappearance of the Gutpas. The invasion of barbaric tribe Pushyamitra was not the decisive. A far more important

invasion was that of the White Huns, who, after settling in the Oxus vally, invaded India. First appeared during the reign of Budhagupta. Again they reappeared under the command of Toramana who annexed a large portion of the north-western region including parts of Moder U P He followed by hisson, Mihirakula, who became the overlord of north India. Indeed he was defeated by Yashodharman of Malwa but the repercussions of these invasions were disastrous for the Gupta Empire.

Internal Rebellions

As a result of the weakning of Central Authoriy a number of feudal chieftans, principally those of the north-western region, assumed the status of independent rulers might more some names in this regard such as Maitrakas (of Kathiawar), Panivarajaks (of Budndhelkhand), Unchkalpas, Laxman in Allahabad. Etc.

After the reign of Buddhagupta, the status of certain, governors of North Bengal and Yamuna-Narmada area around Magadh too assumed independence and became to be known as the later Guptas.

By fat one of the most important rebellions was that of Yashodharman of western Malwa who became independentand established his kingdom. He defeated Mihirakula and sesms to have made extensive conquests from the Himalayas to Brahamputra. However, his empire did not last very long. Nevertheless, it set a pattern for other feudal cheiftans, who in due course, broke away from Central authority.

Last but not the lest, we might note that the change in the Gupta polity from one of militancy to that of pacifism greatly affected the composition of the empire. We do have instance some of the later Gupta kings who changed from Hinduism to Buddhism and this was reflected inmate total military inefficiency of the later Guptas.

Apart from these three major groups of causes, that led to the final disappearance of the Gupta empire, it is to be borne mind that no empire after the Mauryas was a reality. Ver often they were total fictions. With the disappearance of the Mauryan empire no empire in its full connotation came into existence in India since we had no tradition like that of the Greeks where it is held that the State comes into existence for the necessities of life but continues to exist for the good of life, and man, by nature, is a political animal. Somehow, after the Mauryan era the thinking of India became apolitical. The first factor that contributed for this outlook of Indians was the emergence of feudalism about which evidence is there from the days of the Satavahanas. This tendency grew in the Christian ara and was firmly established by the seventh century AD.

Along with this development one more saboteur of political consciousness was the religious perception of ancient Indians. Beginning before the Christian are it came to be gradually established that the kingship has its own dharma known as rajya-dhrma while the people had a handul of dharmas like varnashrama dharma and the grihadharma. All these dharmas led the individual loyalty or perception towards a non-political entity. This thinking is given

religious sanction by the priestly order. This thinking is given religious sanction by the priestly order of the day. Thus the State never was the architectonic factor in the life of ancient India except during the Mauryan era. It is this perception of ancient India that made the emergence and disappearance of hundreds of States mere non-events.

Post-Gupta Period (500 – 750 a. D.)

The political scene in India from the decline of the Guptas until the rise of Harsha was bewildering. Large scale displacement of peoples continued for some time. Small kingdoms vied with each other for the heritage of Guptas. Northern India was divided into four kingdoms of later Guptas of Magadha, the Maukharis, the Pushyabhutis and the Maitrakas. The Maukharis first held the region of western U P around Kanauj. Gradually they ousted the later Guptas and made them move to Malwa. The Pushyabhuti is ruled to Thaneswar north of Delhi. They had a marriage alliance with the Maukharis. After the death of the last Maukhari king, probably the Maukhari kingdom and that of Pushyabhuti were united into one kingdom. Probably the Maitrakas were of Iranian origin and ruled in Gujarat. They developed Vallabhi as their capital which became an important center of learning. On the periphery of these four kingdoms a number of small principalities were continuously fighting with each other. All the kingdoms came into prominence after the Hun invasion since it left a political vacuum in northern India.

Although the political picture was discouraging, there were a few formative trends in this period. The Gupta imperial tradition seems to have continued. Numerous inscriptions of kings reveal that the kings claimed descent from the Gupta-Vakataka dynasties. In the same period even the character of the Hun invaders underwent change. Toramana was no savage but a Hinduised frontier king attacking a decaying empire. He ceased to be a foreigner. His successor, Mihirakula, was undoubtedly one of the known tyrants of history. Let by Baladitya Gupta, the last great monarch of the imperial dynasty, the rulers of north India combined to attack him and overthrow his power in a great battle of 528 A. D. The Hun dynasty ended with it.

After this event the kingdoms of the age carried on the traditions of the empire. In and around the Vindhyas the Vakatakas ruled with effective authority. In the Gangetic valley the Maukhari kings consolidated their rule. True, the imperial tradition was under eclipse, but the country, as a whole was peaceful and prosperous and it was not subject to anarchical disruption.

The university of Nalanda flourished in the sixth century. Saintly Sthiramati was its head in the middle of the sixth century. Dharmapala, who extended his patronage to the university in the latter half of the century was an eminent scholar. As a matter of fact, Nalanda witnessed its golden period in this period.

It is also to be kept in mind that classical Sanskrit reached its perfection in the sixth century. Bharavi, Kumaradasa and Dandin among the poets and Vishakhadatta among the dramatists lived in the sixth century A. D. Some historians ascribe the development of Indian

mathematics and astronomy to the sixth century. Varahamira is said to have died in 587 A. D. Aryabhata was born in 476.

It can equally be said that philosophy, logic and mimamsa matured during this period. Buddhist and Hindu systems of logic witnessed their golden age. It is also noteworthy that vernacular literatures began to grow. Prakrit evolved into a literary language possessing its own grammars. It was this development that enabled Rajasekhara and other to create classical literature of Prakrit in the next century.

Thus the old view that the sixth century was a period of anarchy and the age of Harsha that followed it was the last glow of ancient period, cannot be sustained. On the other hand the sixth century was a germinal period which sowed the seeds of later developments.

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