The Gupta Empire: An Indian Golden Age

The Gupta Empire, which ruled the Indian subcontinent from 320 to 550 AD, ushered in a golden age of Indian civilization. It will forever be remembered as the period during which literature, science, and the arts flourished in India as never before.

Beginnings of the Guptas

Since the fall of the Mauryan Empire in the second century BC, India had remained divided. For 500 years, India was a patchwork of independent kingdoms. During the late third century, the powerful Gupta family gained control of the local kingship of Magadha (modern-day eastern India and Bengal). The Gupta Empire is generally held to have begun in 320 AD, when Chandragupta I (not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan Empire), the third king of the dynasty, ascended the throne. He soon began conquering neighboring regions. His son, Samudragupta (often called Samudragupta the Great) founded a new capital city, Pataliputra, and began a conquest of the entire subcontinent. Samudragupta conquered most of India, though in the more distant regions he reinstalled local kings in exchange for their loyalty.

Samudragupta was also a great patron of the arts. He was a poet and a musician, and he brought great writers, philosophers, and artists to his court. Unlike the Mauryan kings after Ashoka, who were Buddhists, Samudragupta was a devoted worshipper of the Hindu gods. Nonetheless, he did not reject Buddhism, but invited Buddhists to be part of his court and allowed the religion to spread in his realm.

Chandragupta II and the Flourishing of Culture

Samudragupta was briefly succeeded by his eldest son Ramagupta, whose reign was short. In 380 AD, a younger son of Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, came to the throne. Like his father, Chandragupta is often called "the Great." Under his rule, the Gupta Empire reached its zenith, and this is considered the golden age of India. His reign, like his father's, was marked by religious tolerance and great cultural achievements.

Poetry and drama flourished at the court of Chandragupta II, at his new capital of Ujjain. Hindu legend tells of a great king of Ujjain called Vikramaditya, who kept a group of unrivaled poets, known as the Nine Gems, at his court. The Vikramaditya of legend is almost certainly Chandragupta II. The poets at his court included Kalidasa, one of the greatest authors of Sanskrit poetry and drama. His plays are some of the most famous works of Indian literature, and continue to have an influence on playwrights to this day. Visual art also flourished in the reign of Chandragupta II. Hindu art reached new heights, as exemplified in the carved reliefs of the Dashavata Temple. Chandragupta II also patronized Buddhist art. The Ajanta Caves, decorated with images of the life of Buddha, provide a vivid example of Gupta-era Indian painting.

Chandragupta II also sponsored work on medicine, mathematics, and science. One of the greatest thinkers of the time was Aryabhatta, who made great contributions



to mathematics and astronomy. He developed the concept of zero, and accurately described the earth as a sphere and figured out that it rotates on its axis. He may have even realized that it rotates around the sun. The *Sushruta Samhita*, a work on medicine and surgery, also dates to this period.

Besides presiding over a cultural golden age, Chandragupta II expanded the empire through military feats. He conquered many new lands for his empire, and even expanded the empire outside the Indian subcontinent. When he died in 415 AD, the Gupta Empire was at its height.

Decline of the Gupta Empire

The Gupta Empire declined precipitously under Chandragupta II's successors. By the middle of the fifth century a new and dangerous enemy to the empire appeared: nomadic-pastoralist warriors from the Eurasian steppe. These invaders were called Huna or Huns by the Indians, and today are commonly called Hephalites or White Huns (to distinguish them from the other Huns, who were attacking the Roman Empire around the same time). In the year 480 AD, the Huns launched a full-scale invasion of India. By the year 500 AD, the Huns had overrun the Gupta Empire.

Though the Huns were eventually driven out of India, the Gupta Empire would never recover. The Gupta Dynasty retained only its home territory of Magadha in the chaos, and it had permanently lost control of the rest of India. The subcontinent once again became a patchwork of independent states. However, the legacy of the Gupta Empire, and the cultural renaissance it presided over, has continued to be a source of inspiration for India up to the present day.

Summary:

- The Gupta Empire is generally held to have begun in 320 AD, when Chandragupta I ascended the throne. He expanded Gupta power from a local royal family in the kingdom of Magadha to a powerful empire.
- His son, Samudragupta the Great, conquered much of India for the Gupta Empire. He also sponsored art, music, and other cultural expressions.
- Samudragupta's son and successor, Chandragupta II, presided over the zenith of the Gupta Empire, a golden age for India.
- Some of the great artists and thinkers that flourished in the time of Chandragupta II include Kalidasa, one of the greatest authors of Sanskrit poetry and drama, and Aryabhatta, a brilliant and influential mathematician and astronomer.
- In the fifth century, the Gupta Empire was overrun by the Huns. Though the Huns were eventually driven out of India, the Gupta Dynasty permanently lost control of India, which returned to a patchwork of independent states.