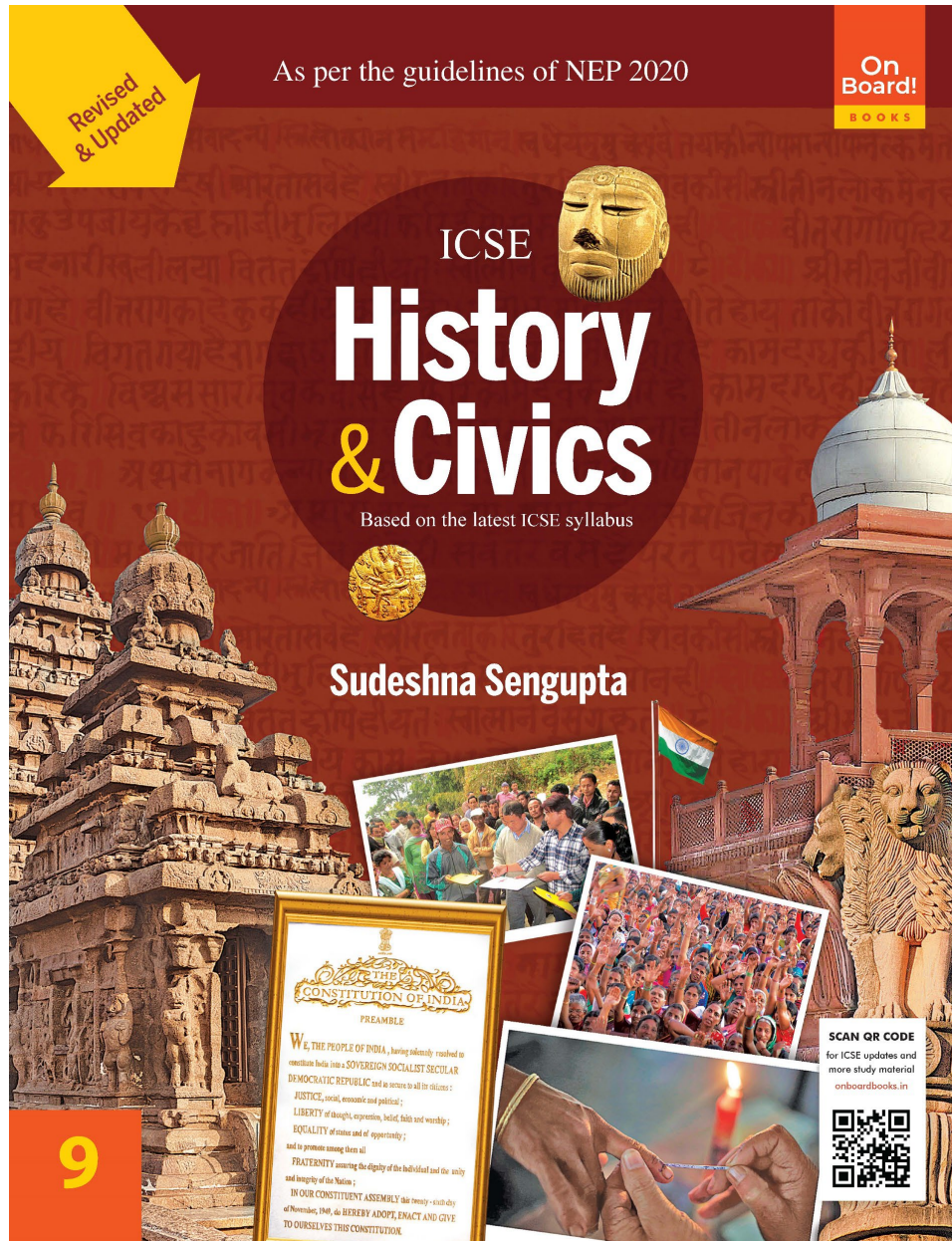


On Board!

B O O K S

History and Civics 9



History 9

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Chapter 6: The Age of Guptas

The Kushanas in the north and the Satavahanas were the only two powers that ruled over large areas. But neither could provide a centralized administration. Thus after an era of political disintegration, following the fall of the Kushanas, the Gupta Dynasty rose to prominence. Almost the whole of northern India was unified under the Guptas. However, under the later Guptas, the Gupta Dynasty declined.

Kingdoms like the Maukharis of Kanauj, Maitrakas of Valabhi, Pushyabhutis of Thanesar arose on the ruins of the Guptas. Among them, it was the Pushyabhuti Dynasty of Thanesar, which emerged as a major power of northern India. Harshavardhana, popularly called Harsha, was the most powerful ruler of the Pushyabhuti Dynasty.

Sources

Sources both archaeological and literary inform us about the Guptas.

Archaeological sources include:

- Pillar Inscriptions
- Coins of the Guptas

Literary sources include:

- Works of Kalidasa, Sudraka, Vishakhadatta
- Account of foreign traveller Fa Hien.

CHANDRAGUPTA I (AD 320–335)

Sri Gupta was the first ruler of the dynasty. Chandragupta I was the first powerful ruler of the Gupta Dynasty. He ruled from AD 320 to AD 335. Chandragupta I was able to establish a kingdom, which covered modern Bihar, Jharkhand and eastern Uttar Pradesh.

SAMUDRAGUPTA (AD 335–375)

Samudragupta was the greatest ruler of the Gupta Dynasty. Samudragupta defeated four kings in northern India and brought the present-day Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh under his control. Next, he defeated the kingdoms of the east such as Nepal, Assam and Bengal and received tributes from them. After this, he conquered the tribal republics in Punjab and Rajasthan and the forest tribes of the Vindhya region. He also defeated twelve rulers in the eastern Deccan and the far south. These kingdoms were not annexed by Samudragupta because he felt that it would be difficult to control them from the north. Thus, they were asked to pay an annual tribute and accept him as their king.

Samudragupta's supremacy was acknowledged by the powerful rulers in the western and north-western frontiers of India, such as the Sakas and the Kushanas of western Punjab and Afghanistan. The discovery of coins with names as 'Samudra' and 'Chandra', and the use of Gupta coins by the Scythian rulers of the frontier kingdoms, indicate exercise of Gupta sovereignty over those areas.

Dominions under the direct control of Samudragupta in the mid fourth century AD comprised:

- The populous and fertile kingdoms of northern India extending from the Brahmaputra in the east to the Jamuna and Chambal in the west, and from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to Narmada in the south.

- The frontier kingdoms of Assam and the Gangetic delta as also those on the southern slopes of the Himalayas.
- Tribes of Rajputana and Malwa which were part of the empire by bonds of subordinate alliance.
- The kingdoms of the south, overrun by Samudragupta.

The empire of Samudragupta was by far the largest that existed in India since the days of Ashoka. Samudragupta performed the 'ashwamedha' to assert his political supremacy. He was a follower of Hinduism but was tolerant towards all religions. Samudragupta was not just a conqueror. He was also a patron of art.

CHANDRAGUPTA II (AD 375–415)

Chandragupta II, succeeded Samudragupta and ruled from AD 375 to AD 415. Upon becoming the king, he adopted the title of Vikramaditya. The most important military achievement of Chandragupta's reign was the conquest of Malwa, Gujarat and Saurashtra or Kathiawar, which were under the Saka chiefs, known as the Western Satraps. Thus Chandragupta II gained control over the ports of Broach, Cambay and Sopara, that controlled trade with the western world.

Under Chandragupta II there was a remarkable change in the currency system. While his predecessors issued only gold coins, Chandragupta II issued coins not only of gold, but also of silver and copper.

LATER GUPTAS

Chandragupta II was succeeded by his son Kumaragupta in AD 415. He kept the empire intact. Kumaragupta was succeeded by his son Skandagupta. During his reign the empire was attacked by the Hunas, the nomadic tribesmen of central Asia. Skandagupta's successors were weak. They could not save India from the repeated Huna invasion.

THE GUPTA ADMINISTRATION

The Gupta administration assumed a very imposing form due to the vastness of its structure comprising the i. king, ii. Council of Ministers, iii. Assembly, iv. feudatories and v. a bureaucracy, from centre down to villages. During the Gupta period monarchy was the prevailing form of government. Much information about the Gupta administration has been found in the account of the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien, contemporary inscriptions and the royal transcripts.

CAUSES FOR THE DOWNFALL OF THE GUPTA EMPIRE

The causes of the downfall of the Gupta Empire are not far to seek.

- As early as during the reign of Kumaragupta, the empire received a staggering blow at the hands of a barbaric tribe called the Pushyamitra.
- Hunas attacked northern India and threatened the western provinces of the empire. Skandagupta defeated them and checked their advance for some time. However, the strength of the Gupta Empire was greatly undermined.
- A major part of the empire retained some sort of unity till the time of Budhagupta whose rule extended from Bengal to eastern Malwa. Hunas renewed their onslaughts and established themselves in Punjab and eastern Malwa. This hastened the downfall of the Gupta Empire.
- External factors like the Huna invasion stimulated the ambition of feudatories and local governors. Many of the feudatories held hereditary posts. They commanded local influence. and local governors thus, took advantage of the weak central administration and asserted their independence.

- Thus centrifugal forces were let loose and the Guptas could not control them. It was the Gaudas who finally destroyed the Gupta Empire.

With the fall of the Gupta Empire, many small kingdoms arose. One of them was Thanesar, near Kurukshetra. Within a short span of time this kingdom rose to power under Harshavardhana, a skilful and a powerful ruler.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

The period from fourth century AD to seventh century AD witnessed a cultural renaissance. Religion, literature, science, art, architecture and higher education witnessed all-round development.

Religion

The Gupta kings were Brahmanical Hindus and so the Gupta period has been described as ‘the period of Hindu revival or renaissance.’

- In the absence of royal patronage, Buddhism declined. However, the Gupta kings were tolerant of Jainism and Buddhism.
- Vishnu and Shiva were the main Gods worshipped in this period. The Shiva Purana and the Vishnu Purana were some of the important texts written in this period.
- We find wide prevalence of idol worship.
- The doctrine of bhakti became popular in this age.
- Another important characteristic feature of the period was the spirit of toleration among the followers of different religious sects.

Literature

Sanskrit became the court language under the Guptas. Evolution of fables as a form of Sanskrit literature reached its fullness during the Gupta period. Significant strides were also made in the field of Sanskrit grammar. While the Gupta period witnessed progress in secular literature, religious literature too did not lag behind.

Science

The study of all branches of science, particularly astronomy, mathematics, medicine and metallurgy flourished under the Guptas.

Astronomy and Mathematics

Aryabhata and Varahamihira were the leading astronomers and mathematicians of that period. Varahamihira wrote the Brihat-Samhita which is an encyclopaedia of science. Brahmagupta was a noted mathematician of the period. He wrote the Brahmasphuta Siddhanta.

Medicine

Dhanvantari and Sushruta were the greatest physicians of this time. Veterinary science also developed during the Gupta period.

Metallurgy

The science of metallurgy made rapid advance in this period. The Gupta gold coins reveal the artistic excellence achieved in the field of metal casting.

Art and Architecture

Art, architecture, painting and sculpture witnessed unprecedented growth in this period. Many temples survive today as specimens of the new architectural style and system. Brahmanical rock-cut shrines, although lesser in number than those of the Buddhists, were not rare either.

Painting

The art of painting, including terracotta and clay modelling, reached its peak in this period. Episodes from the life of Buddha were the subject matter of the Gupta painters. In fact, these paintings provide a visual representation of contemporary India. The Gupta paintings have been praised by art critics for their brilliance of colour, richness of expression and delicacy of execution.

Sculpture

The art of sculpture attained perfection under the Guptas. Gupta sculpture suggests 'serenity, security and certainty'.

Higher Education

The Guptas were patrons of education.

To Remember

Background—After the decline of the Mauryas, India was ruled by some foreign dynasties like the Indo-Greeks, Indo-Parthians, Kushanas under Kanishka emerged as a formidable power in north India, after the decline of the Kushanas, the Gupta Dynasty came to power, however the later Guptas could not rule efficiently, as a result the Pushyabhutis, under Harshavardhana emerged as masters of north India.

Chandragupta I—He was the first powerful ruler of the Gupta Dynasty, ruled between AD 320 and AD 335, concluded matrimonial alliance and thus enhanced the Gupta power.

Samudragupta—One of the greatest of the Gupta rulers, extended the kingdom up to the south, acknowledged by all-powerful rulers, Harisena praised the king in Allahabad Pillar Inscription, patron of learning, poet and an accomplished musician.

Chandragupta II—A valiant king, adopted the epithet of Vikramaditya, defeated the Western Satraps, Fa Hien visited during his reign, issued coins of gold, copper and silver.

Later Guptas—Kumaragupta managed to keep the empire intact, succeeded by Skandagupta who repulsed the Huna invasion.

Gupta administration—Elaborate administration, administration divided into central and provincial, provinces divided into districts and districts further divided into villages.

Causes for the downfall of the Gupta Empire—Attack by tribes like Pushyamitras and Hunas, feudatories grew ambitious, central authority grew weaker, smaller kingdoms became powerful and asserted their independence.

Cultural developments—Religion, literature, science, art, architecture, painting, sculpture and education witnessed all-round development, Religion: Revival of Hinduism, new Gods and Goddesses like Shiva, Vishnu, Lakshmi and Parvati worshipped, stress on idol worship and concept of bhakti, a spirit of toleration, Vishnu regarded as an incarnation of Buddha, Literature: Kalidasa contributed to Sanskrit literature, other authors like Sudraka, Vishakhadatta, development of fables, Panchatantra, development of lexicography and Sanskrit grammar, Science: Aryabhata and Varahamihira noted scientists, Dhanvantari and Sushruta noted physicians, Iron Pillar at Mehrauli and the Gupta gold coins point to the advance in metallurgy, Art and architecture: The Dasavatara Temple and the Bhitargaon Temple notable temples of this period, painting on the Ajanta cave walls, the Seated Buddha at Sarnath, Higher education: The Nalanda University was the most important university of this period, patronized by Kumaragupta and Harsha.

Thank You