

6th Social Science Lesson 17 Notes in English

17] The Age of Empires: Guptas and Vardhanas

Introduction:

- By the end of the 3rd century, the powerful empires established by the Kushanas in the north and Satavahanas in the south had lost their greatness and strength.
- After the decline of Kushanas and Satavahanas, Chandragupta carved out a kingdom and establish his dynastic rule, which lasted for about two hundred years.
- After the downfall of the Guptas and thereafter and interregnum of nearly 50 years, **Harsha of Vardhana dynasty ruled North India from 606 to 647 A.D (CE).**

Archaeological Sources

- Gold, silver and copper coins issued by Gupta rulers.
- Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta.
- The Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription.
- Udayagiri Cave Inscription, Mathura Stone Inscription and Sanchi Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II.
- Bhitari Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta.
- The Gadhwa Stone Inscription.
- Madubhan Copper Plate Inscription
- Sonpat Copper Plate
- Nalanda Inscription on clay seal

Literary Sources

- Vishnu, Matsya, Vayu and Bhagavata
- Puranas and Niti Sastras of Narada
- **Visakhadatta's Devichandraguptam and Mudrarakshasa and Bana's Harshacharita Dramas of Kalidasa**
- Accounts of Chinese Buddhist monk Fahien who visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II.

Gupta dynasty:

- **Sri Gupta** is considered to be the founder of the Gupta dynasty. He is believed to have reigned over parts of present-day Bengal and Bihar. He was the first Gupta ruler to be featured on coins.
- **Sri Gupta was succeeded by his son Ghatotkacha.** Both are mentioned as Maharajas in inscriptions.

Chandragupta I (c. 319–335 AD (CE))

- Chandragupta I married **Kumaradevi** of the famous and powerful Lichchhavi family. Having gained the support of this family, Chandragupta could **eliminate various small states in northern India and crown himself** the monarch of a larger kingdom.
- The gold coins attributed to Chandragupta bear the images of **Chandragupta, Kumaradevi and the legend 'Lichchhavayah'.**

Samudragupta (c. 335–380)

- Samudragupta, son of Chandragupta I, was the greatest ruler of the dynasty. Consolidation of Gupta Dynasty Samudragupta was a great general and when he became emperor, he carried on a vigorous campaign all over the country and even in the south.
- The **Prayog Prashasti**, composed by Samudragupta's court poet **Harisena** was engraved on Allahabad Pillar. This Allahabad Pillar inscription is the main source of information for Samudragupta's reign.
- In the southern Pallava kingdom, the king who was defeated by Samudragupta was **Vishnugopa.**
- Samudragupta conquered **nine kingdoms in northern India.**
- He reduced **12 rulers of the southern India** to the status of feudatories and forced them to pay tribute.
- He received homage from the rulers of East Bengal, Assam, Nepal, the eastern part of Punjab and various tribes of Rajasthan.

Chandragupta II (c.380 - 415)

- Chandragupta II was the son of Samudragupta. He was also known as **Vikramaditya.**
- He conquered western Malwa and Gujarat by **defeating the Saka rulers.** He maintained friendly relationship with the rulers of southern India.
- The iron pillar near Chandragupta II was succeeded by his son **Kumaragupta I**, who built the famous Nalanda University.

- Kumaragupta's successor **Skandagupta** had to face a new threat in the form of the invasion of Huns. He defeated them and drove them away. But after twelve years, they came again and broke the back of the Gupta Empire.
- The last of the great Guptas was **Baladitya**, assumed to have been Narasimha Gupta I. He was himself attracted towards Buddhism.
- **Mihirakula** turned treacherous and drove away Baladitya from Magadha. After Baladitya, the great Gupta Empire faded away.
- The last recognised king of the Gupta Empire was **Vishnugupta**.

Gupta Polity:

- The divine theory of kingship (the concept that king is the representative of God on earth and so he is answerable only to God and not to anyone else) was practised by the Gupta rulers. The Gupta kings wielded enormous power **in political, administrative, military and judicial spheres**.
- The Gupta king was assisted by a council of **mantris (ministers)**. The council consisted of princes, high officials and feudatories. A large number of officials were employed by the Gupta rulers to carry on the day-to-day administration of the country.
- High-ranking officials were called **dandanayakas and mahadandanayakas**.
- The Gupta Empire was divided into provinces known as **deshas or bhuktis**.
- They were administered by the governors, designated as **uparikas**.
- The province was divided into districts such as **vishyas** and they were controlled by the officers known as **vishyapatis**.
- At the village level, there were functionaries such as **gramika and gramadhyaksha**.
- The extensive empire shows the important role of military organisation. Seals and inscriptions mentioned military designations as **baladhikrita and mahabaladhikrita** (commander of infantry and cavalry respectively). The system of espionage included spies known as **dutakas**.

Society and Economy:

- Land and Peasants Nitisara, authored by **Kamandaka**, emphasises the importance of the royal treasury and mentions various sources of revenue. The military campaigns of kings like **Samudragupta were financed through revenue surpluses**.
- **Land tax** was the main revenue to the government. The condition of peasants was pathetic. They were required to pay various taxes. They were reduced to the position of serfs.

Trade and Commerce :

- The contribution of the traders for the development of Gupta's economy was very impressive. There were two types of traders, namely **Sresthi and Sarthavaha**.
- Trade items ranged from daily products to valuable and luxury goods. **The important trade goods were pepper, gold, copper, iron, horses and elephants.**
- The Guptas developed roadways connecting different parts of the country. Pataliputra, Ujjain, Benaras, Mathura were the famous trade centres. **Ports in western (Kalyan, Mangalore, Malabar) and eastern (Tamralipti in Bengal) coasts of India facilitated trade.**

Metallurgy:

Mining and metallurgy were the most flourishing industries during the Gupta period. The most **important evidence of development in metallurgy was the Mehrauli Iron Pillar installed by King Chandragupta II in Delhi.** This monolithic iron pillar has lasted through the centuries without rusting.

Society:

- The society that adhered to four **varna system** was patriarchal. According to laws of Manu, which was in force, women should be under the protection of their father, husband or eldest son.
- Polygamy was widely prevalent. The kings and feudatory lords often had more than one wife. Inscriptions refer to **Kubernaga and Dhruvaswamini** as the queens of Chandragupta II. Sati was practised during the Gupta rule.
- Slavery was not institutionalised in India, as in the West. But there are references to the existence of various categories of slaves during the Gupta age.
- There was revival of Vedic religion and Vedic rites. Samudragupta and Kumaragupta I performed **Asvamedha Yagna** (a horse sacrifice ritual).
- We notice the beginning of image worship and the emergence of two sects, namely **Vaishnavism and Saivism**, during the Gupta period. Buddhism also continued to flourish though it split into two sects, namely Hinayana and Mahayana.

Art and Architecture of Guptas:

- The Guptas were the first to construct temples, which evolved from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines. Adorned with towers and elaborate carvings, these temples were dedicated to all Hindu deities.
- The most notable **rock-cut caves** are found at Ajanta and Ellora (Maharashtra), Bagh (Madhya Pradesh) and Udaygiri (Odisha).

- The **structural temples** built during this period resemble the characteristic features of the **Dravidian style**.
- Two remarkable examples of Gupta metal sculpture are
 - (i) a copper image of Buddha about 18 feet high at Nalanda and
 - (ii) Sultanganj Buddha seven-and-a half feet in height.
- The most important examples of the Gupta paintings are found on the Fresco of the Ajanta caves and the Bagh cave in Gwalior.
- Though the language spoken by the people was Prakrit, the Guptas made **Sanskrit the official language** and all their epigraphic records are in Sanskrit.
- The Gupta period also saw the development of Sanskrit grammar based on the grammar of Panini and **Patanjali who wrote Ashtadhyayi and Mahabhashya** respectively.
- A Buddhist scholar from Bengal, **Chandrogomia**, composed a book on grammar titled Chandravyakaranam .
- Kalidasa's famous dramas were **Sakunthala , Malvikagnimitra and Vikramoovashiyam**. Other significant works of Kalidasa were Meghaduta , Raghuvamsa, Kumarasambava and Ritusamhara.
- **Invention of zero** and the consequent evolution of the decimal system were the legacy of Guptas to the modern world.
- **Aryabhatta, Varahamihira and Brahmagupta** were foremost astronomers and mathematicians of the time.
- **Aryabhatta, in his book Surya Siddhanta**, explained the true causes of solar and lunar eclipses. He was the first Indian astronomer to declare that the earth revolves around its own axis.

Various experts in Various fields:

- Dhanvantri was a famous scholar in the field of medicine. He was a specialist in Ayurveda.
- Charaka was a medical scientist.
- Susruta was the first Indian to explain the process of surgery.

Vardhana Dynasty



- The founder of the **Vardhana or Pushyabhuti dynasty** ruled from Thaneswar. Pushyabhuti served as a military general under the Guptas and rose to power after the fall of the Guptas.
- With the accession of Prabakaravardhana, the Pushyabhuti family became strong and powerful. Rajavardhana, the eldest son of Prabhakaravardhana, ascended the throne after his father's death.
- **Rajavardhana's sister Rajayashri's husband, Raja of Kanauj, was killed by the Gauda ruler Sasanka of Bengal. Sasanka also imprisoned Rajayashri.** Rajavardhana, in the process of retrieving his sister was treacherously killed by Sasanka.
- This resulted in his younger brother Harshavardhana becoming king of Thaneswar. The notables of the Kanauj kingdom also invited Harsha to take its crown.
- After becoming **the ruler of the both Thaneswar and Kanauj, Harsha shifted his capital from Thaneswar to Kanauj.**

Conquest of Harshavardhana

- The most popular king of the vardhana dynasty was Harshavardhana. **Harsha ruled for 41 years.** His feudatories included those of Jalandhar, Kashmir, Nepal and Valabhi.

- Sasanka of Bengal remained hostile to him. It was Harsha who unified most of northern India.
- But the extension of his authority in the south was checked by Chalukya king Pulikesin II.
- The kingdom of Harsha disintegrated rapidly into small states after his death in **648 AD (CE)**. He maintained a cordial relationship with the rulers of Iran and China.

Administration

- The emperor was assisted by a council of ministers. The prime minister occupied the most important position in the council of ministers. **Bhaga, Hiranya and Bali were the three kinds of tax collected during Harsha's reign.**
- Criminal law was more severe than that of the Gupta age. Life imprisonment was the punishment for violation of the laws and for plotting against the king. Perfect law and order prevailed throughout the empire.
- Harsha paid great attention to discipline and strength of the army. Harsha built charitable institutions for the stay of the travellers, and to care for the sick and the poor.

Religious Policy

- Harsha was the worshipper of Shiva in the beginning, but he embraced Buddhism under the influence of his sister Rajyashri and the Buddhist monk and traveller Hiuen Tsang. He belonged to Mahayana school of thought.
- Harsha treated Vedic scholars and Buddhist monks alike and distributed charities equally to them. He was the last Buddhist sovereign in India.
- As a pious **Buddhist, Harsha stopped the killing of animals for food. He was noted for his policy of religious toleration and used to worship the images of Buddha, Shiva and Sun simultaneously.**
- He summoned two Buddhist assemblies, one at Kanauj and another at Prayag.

Art and Literature

- Harsha, himself a poet and dramatist, gathered around him a best of poets and artists. Harsha's popular works are Ratnavali, Nagananda and Priyadharshika. His royal court was adorned by Banabhatta, Mayura, Hardatta and Jayasena.
- Temples and monasteries functioned as centres of learning. Kanauj became a famous city. Harsha constructed a large number of viharas, monasteries and stupas on the bank of the Ganges.
- The Nalanda University, a university and monastery combined, was said to have had **10,000 students and monks in residence, when Hiuen Tsang visited the university.**

More to Know:

1. The metals used by them were: iron, gold, copper, tin, lead, brass, bronze, bell-metal, mica, manganese and red chalk.
2. Samudragupta introduced the Gupta monetary system. Kushana coins provided inspiration to Samudragupta. The Gupta gold coins were known as **Dinara**.

3. Fahien:

During the reign of Chandragupta II, the Buddhist monk Fahien visited India. His travel accounts provided us information about the socio-economic, religious and moral conditions of the people of the Gupta age.

4. According to Fahien, the people of Magadha were happy and prosperous, that justice was mildly administered and there was no death penalty. Gaya was desolated. **Kapilavasthu had become a jungle, but at Pataliputra people were rich and prosperous.**

5. **Shrimeghavarman, the Buddhist king of Ceylon**, was a contemporary of Samudragupta.

6. The surnames of Chandragupta II were Vikramaditya, Narendrachandra, Simhachandra, Narendrasimha, Vikrama Devaraja, Devagupta and Devasri.

7. Importance of samudragupta:

- Samudragupta was a devotee of Vishnu.
- He revived the Vedic practice of performing horse sacrifice to commemorate victories in wars. He issued gold coins and in one of them, he is portrayed playing harp (veena).
- Samudragupta was not only a great conqueror but a lover of poetry and music and for this, he earned the title '**Kaviraja**'.

8. Prashasti:

Prashasti is a Sanskrit word, meaning commendation or '**in praise of**'. Court poets flattered their kings listing out their achievements. These accounts were later engraved on pillars so that the people could read them.

9. **Lichchhavi** was an old gana-sanga and its territory lay between the Ganges and the Nepal Terai.

10. Navaratna in the Court of Vikramaditya:

| Navaratna in the court of Vikramaditya | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Kalidasa | Sanskrit poet |
| Harisena | Sanskrit poet |
| Amarasimha | Lexicographer |
| Dhanvantri | Physician |
| Kahapanaka | Astrologer |
| Sanku | Architect |
| Varahamihira | Astronomer |
| Varauchi | Grammarian and Sanskrit scholar |
| Vittalbhatta | Magician |

11. Empire extent of Guptas:



12. Classification of Land in Gupta Period:

| Classification of land during Gupta period | |
|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Kshetra</i> | cultivable land |
| <i>Khila</i> | waste land |
| <i>Aprahata</i> | jungle or forest land |
| <i>Vasti</i> | habitable land |
| <i>Gapata Saraha</i> | pastoral land |

13. Importance of Nalanda University:**Nalanda University**

- Nalanda University flourished under the patronage of the Gupta Empire in the 5th and 6th centuries and later under emperor Harsha of Kanauj.
- At Nalanda, Buddhism was the main subject of study. Other subjects like Yoga, Vedic literature and Medicine were also taught.
- Hiuen Tsang spent many years studying Buddhism in the University.
- Eight Mahapatashalas and three large libraries were situated on the campus.
- Nalanda was ravaged and destroyed by Mamluks (Turkish Muslims) under Bhaktiyar Khalji.
- Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Nalanda University

14. Huns:

Who were the Huns? Huns were the nomadic tribes, who, under their great Attila, were terrorising Rome and Constantinople. Associated with these tribes were the White Huns who came to India through Central Asia. They undertook regular invasions and were giving trouble to all Indian frontier states. After defeating Skandagupta, they spread across Central India. Their chief, Toramana, crowned himself as king. After him, his son Mihirakula ruled the captured territories. Finally, Yasodharman, ruler of Malwa in Central India, defeated them and ended their rule.



Portrayal of Toramana, the Hun chief, in coins.

15. The Difference Between Sresti and Sarthavaha:

| Sresti | Sarthavaha |
|--|---|
| <i>Sresti traders usually settled at a standard place.</i> | Sarthavaha traders were caravan traders who carried their goods to different places |

16. Chandragupta I was the contemporary of Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor, who founded Constantinople.

17. Harsha's time coincided with a early days of Tang Dynasty of China. Their capital(Xi'an) was a great centre of art and learning.

18. The assembly at Kanauj was attended by 20 kings. A large number of Buddhist, Jain and Vedic scholars attended the assembly. A golden statue of Buddha was consecrated in a monastery and a small statue of Buddha (three feet) was carried in a procession.

19. In the assembly at Prayag, Harsha distributed his wealth among the Buddhists, Vedic scholars and poor people. Harsha offered fabulous gifts to the Buddhist monks on all the four days of the assembly.

20. Hiuen Tsang:

Hiuen Tsang, the 'prince of pilgrims', visited India during Harsha's reign. His Si-Yu-Ki provides detailed information about the social, economic, religious and cultural conditions of India during Harsha's time. Hiuen Tsang tells us how Harsha, though a Buddhist, went to participate in the great kumbhamela held at Prayag.

21. Harsha met the Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang, at Kajangala near Rajmahal (Jharkhand) for the first time.