

11th History Lesson 3 Notes in English

3. The Guptas

Introduction

- After the Mauryan empire, many small kingdoms rose and fell. In the period from c. 300 to 700 CE, a classical pattern of an imperial rule evolved, paving the way for state formation in many regions.
- During this period, the Gupta kingdom emerged as a great power and achieved the political unification of a large part of the Indian subcontinent. It featured a strong central government, bringing **many kingdoms under its hegemony**.
- Feudalism as an institution began to take root during this period. With an effective guild system and overseas trade, the Gupta economy boomed. Great works in Sanskrit were produced during this period and a high level of cultural maturity in fine arts, sculpture and architecture was achieved.
- The living standards of upper classes reached a peak. Education, art and study of science progressed, but the feudal system of governance put people in some form of hardship.
- Although some historians proclaim that Gupta period was a golden age, it is not entirely accurate. **Many scholars would, however, agree that it was a period of cultural florescence and a classical age for the arts.**

Sources

There are three types of sources for reconstructing the history of the Gupta period.

I. Literary sources

- Narada, Vishnu, Brihaspati and Katyayana smritis.
- Kamandaka's Nitisara, a work on polity addressed to the king (400 CE)
- Devichandraguptam and Mudrarakshasam by Vishakadutta provide details about the rise of the Guptas.
- Buddhist and Jaina texts
- Works of Kalidasa
- Accounts of the Chinese traveller Fahien

II. Epigraphical Sources

- Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription – achievements of Chandragupta I.
- Allahabad Pillar inscription – describing Samudragupta's personality and achievements in 33 lines composed by Harisena and engraved in Sanskrit in Nagari script.

III. Numismatic Sources

- Coins issued by Gupta kings contain legends and figures. These gold coins tell us about the titles the Guptas assumed and the Vedic rituals they performed.

Origins of the Gupta Dynasty

- Evidence on the origin and antecedents of the Gupta dynasty is limited. The Gupta kings seem to have risen from modest origins. Chandragupta I, who was the third ruler of the Gupta dynasty married **Kumaradevi, a Lichchavi prince**.
- The marriage is mentioned in the records of his successors with pride indicating that that royal connection would have contributed to the rise of Guptas.
- **Lichchavi was an old**, established gana-sangha and its territory lay between the Ganges and the Nepal Terai.
- According to Allahabad pillar inscription Samudragupta, the illustrious son of Chandragupta I, had conquered the whole fertile plains west of Prayag to Mathura and launched a spectacular raid through Kalinga into the south as far as **Kanchipuram**, the Pallava capital.
- The Puranas mention Magadha, Allahabad and Oudh as the Gupta dominions.

Chandragupta I and Empire Building

- The first ruler of the Gupta Empire was **Sri Gupta (240–280 CE)** who was succeeded by his son **Ghatotkacha (280–319 CE)**.
- Both Sri Gupta and Ghatotkacha are mentioned as Maharajas in inscriptions. Chandragupta I, the son of Ghatotkacha, ruled from **319 to 335 CE** and is considered to be the first great king of the Gupta Empire.
- Chandragupta held the title of maharaja-adhiraja (great king over other kings). His imperial position is inferred from the records of others. No inscriptions or coins have survived from his reign.

Samudragupta

- Chandragupta I appointed his son **Samudragupta to succeed him in 335 CE**. A lengthy eulogy on him, inscribed on an Ashokan pillar, suggests that he was claiming the legacy of the Mauryan kingdom.
- This inscription gives an impressive list of kings and regions that succumbed to Samudragupta's march across the country.
- Four northern kings were conquered mainly in the area around Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh.
- The kings of the south and the east were forced to pay homage, and from the places mentioned, it appears that Samudragupta campaigned down the eastern coast as far as **Kanchipuram**. Nine kings of the western half of the Ganges Plain were violently uprooted.
- The forest kings (tribal chiefs of Central India and the Deccan) were forced to pay tribute.

- The kings of Assam and Bengal in eastern India and those of small kingdoms in Nepal and the Punjab also paid tribute by submission. Nine Republics in Rajasthan, including the Malavas and Yaudheyas, were forced to accept Gupta's suzerainty.
- In addition, foreign kings, such as the **Daivaputra Shahanushahi (a Kushana title)**, the Sakas and the king of Lanka also paid tribute, as mentioned in the eulogy.
- Though this statement is exaggerated, it is undeniable that the southern kings paid tribute, while the northern kingdoms were annexed to the Gupta Empire under Samudragupta.
- His direct control was confined to the Ganges valley, since the Sakas remained unconquered in western India. The tribes of Rajasthan paid tribute, but the Punjab was outside the limits of his authority.
- Samudragupta's campaign broke the power of the tribal republics in those regions that led to repeated invasions from the Huns. The relationship with Kushanas is not certain, but with regard to Lanka, its ruler Meghavarman sent presents and requested permission from Samudragupta to build a Buddhist monastery at Gaya.
- Samudragupta's reign lasted for about **40 years**, which must have given him ample time to plan and organise these campaigns. He performed the horsesacrifice ritual to proclaim his military conquests.
- Samudragupta patronised scholars and poets like Harisena and thus promoted Sanskrit literature. Though an ardent follower of Vaishnavism, he also patronised the great Buddhist scholar **Vasubandhu**.
- As a lover of poetry and music, he was given the title "**Kaviraja**". His coins bear the insignia of him **playing the vina (lute)**.

Chandragupta II

- Named after his grandfather, Chandragupta II was a capable ruler, who ruled for **40 years from c. 375 to 415 CE**.
- He came to power after a succession struggle with his brother Rama Gupta. He is also known as Vikramaditya.
- With the capital at Pataliputra, Chandragupta II extended the limits of the Gupta Empire by conquest and matrimonial alliances.
- He married off his daughter **Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince**, who ruled the strategic lands of Deccan.
- This alliance was highly useful when he proceeded against the Saka rulers of western India. Chandragupta II conquered western Malwa and Gujarat by defeating the Saka rulers who had reigned for about four centuries in the region.
- The kingdom's prosperity grew out of its trade links with Roman Empire. After establishing himself in eastern and western India, Chandragupta II defeated northern rulers like the Huns, **Kambojas and Kiratas**.

- He was a great conqueror and an able administrator as well. His other names (as mentioned in coins) include **Vikrama, Devagupta, Devaraja, Simhavikrama, Vikramaditya and Sakari**.
- His court had nine jewels or navaratnas, that is, nine eminent people in various fields of art, literature and science. This included the **great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, the Sanskrit scholar Harisena, the lexicographer Amarasimha, and the physician Dhanvantari**.
- Fahien, the Buddhist scholar from China, visited India during his reign. He records the prosperity of the Gupta Empire.
- Chandragupta II was the first Gupta ruler to issue silver coins. His rule thus formed the peak period of Gupta's territorial expansion. Chandragupta II was succeeded by his son Kumara Gupta I, who founded the Nalanda University.
- He was also called Sakraditya. The last great king of the Gupta dynasty, Skanda Gupta, was the son of Kumara Gupta I.
- He was able to repulse an attack by the Huns, but the recurrence of Huns' invasion strained his empire's coffers. The Gupta Empire declined after the death of **Skanda Gupta in 467 CE**.
- He was followed by many successors who hastened the end of the Gupta Empire. The last recognised king of the Gupta line was Vishnu Gupta who reigned from **540 to 550 CE**.

Gupta's Administrative System

- During the Gupta age, political hierarchies can be identified by the titles adopted. Kings assumed titles such as maharajadhiraja, parama-bhattaraka and parameshvara.
- They were also connected with gods through epithets such as parama-daivata (the foremost worshipper of the gods) and **parama-bhagavata (the foremost worshipper of Vasudeva Krishna)**.
- Some historians have suggested that the Gupta Kings claimed divine status. For example, Samudragupta is compared to **Purusha (Supreme Being)** in the Allahabad inscription.
- These assertions can be seen as reflections of an attempt to claim divine status by the king.

Ministers and other officials

- Seals and inscriptions make a mention of official ranks and designations, whose precise meaning is often uncertain.
- The term **"kumaramatya"** occurs in six Vaishali seals, which suggests that this title represented a high-ranking officer associated with an office (adikarana) of his own.
- The designation **"amatya"** occurs on several Bita seals, and the **"kumaramatya"** seems to have been pre-eminent among amatyas and equivalent in status to princes of royal blood.
- Kumaramatyas were attached to the king, crown prince, revenue department or a province. One of the Vaishali seals refers to a kumaramatya who seems to have been in charge of the maintenance of the sacred coronation tank of the Lichchavis.
- Individuals holding the ranks of kumaramatya sometimes had additional designations as well, and such ranks were hereditary.

- For example, Harisena, composer of the Allahabad prashasti (inscriptions of praise), was a **kumaramatya, sandhivigrahika and mahadandanayaka, and was the son of Dhruvabhuti, a mahadandanayaka.**

Council of Ministers

- The Gupta king was assisted by a council of mantrins (ministers). The Allahabad prashasti refers to an assembly or council, presumably of ministers, which was known as the Sabha.
- The various high-ranking functionaries included the **sandhivigrahika or mahasandhivigrahika (minister for peace and war)**, who seems to have been a high-ranking officer in charge of contact and correspondence with other states, including initiating wars and concluding alliances and treaties.
- High-ranking officials were called dandanayakas, and mahadandanayakas were high-ranking judicial or military officers.
- One of the seals mentions a mahadandanayaka named Agnigupta. The **Allahabad prashasti refers to three mahadandanayakas.**
- All these suggest that these posts were hereditary by nature. Another person had a designation mahashvapati (commander of the cavalry), indicating military functions.

Division of the Empire



- The Gupta Empire was divided into provinces known as **deshas or bhuktis**. They were administered by governors who were usually designated as uparikas.
- The uparika was directly appointed by the king and he, in turn, frequently appointed the head of the district administration and the district board.
- Uparika carried on the administration **"with the enjoyment of the rule consisting of elephants, horses and soldiers"**, indicating his control over the military machinery as well.
- The fact that the uparika had the title maharaja in three of the Damodarpur plates indicates his high status and rank in the administrative hierarchy.

- The Eran pillar inscription of Budhagupta, dated Gupta year **165 CE**, refers to maharaja Surashmichandra as a lokpala, governing the land between the Kalinndi and Narmada rivers. Lokpala here seems to refer to a provincial governor.
- The provinces of the Gupta Empire were divided into districts known as visayas, which were controlled by officers known as vishyapatis.
- The vishyapatis seems to have been generally appointed by the provincial governor. Sometimes, even the kings directly appointed the vishyapatis.
- Prominent members of the town assisted the vishyapati in administrative duties.

Administrative Units below the District level

- The administrative units below the district level included clusters of settlements known variously as **vithi, bhumi, pathaka and peta**.
- There are references to officials known as **ayuktakas and vithi-mahattaras**. At the village level, villagers chose functionaries such as **gramika and gramadhyaksha**.
- The Damodarpur copper plate of the reign of Budhagupta mentions an **ashtakula-adhikarana (a board of eight members)** headed by the mahattara.
- Mahattara has a range of meanings including village elder, village headman, and head of a family community.
- The Sanchi inscription of the time of Chandragupta II mentions the panchmandali, which may have been a corporate body.

Army

- Seals and inscriptions mention military designations such as **baladhikrita and mahabaladhikrita (commander of infantry and cavalry)**.
- The standard term "**senapati**" does not occur in Gupta inscriptions, but the term could be found in some Vakataka epigraphs.
- A Vaishali seal mentions the ranabhandagar-adhikarana, which is the office of the military storehouse.
- Another Vaishali seal mentions the adhikarana (office) of the dandapashika, which may have been a district-level police office.
- The officials connected specifically with the royal establishment included the mahapratihara (chief of the palace guards) and the khadyatapakita (superintendent of the royal kitchen).
- A Vaishali seal mentions a person both as a mahapratihara and a taravara. The top layer of the administrative structure also included amatyas and sachivas, who were executive officers in charge of various departments.
- The system of espionage included spies known as dutakas. The ayuktakas were another cadre of high-ranking officers.

Economic Condition

- **Nitisara, written by Kamandaka**, is a text like Arthashastra. It emphasises the importance of the royal treasury and mentions various sources of revenue.
- The many ambitious military campaigns of kings like Samudragupta must have been financed through revenue surpluses.
- Gupta inscriptions reveal some details about the revenue department. The akshapataladhikrita was the keeper of royal records.
- Gupta inscriptions mention the terms **klipta, bali, udranga, uparikara, and iranyavesti** meant forced labour.

Agriculture and Agrarian Structure

Kshetra	Cultivable land
Khila	Waste land
Aprahata	Jungle or waste land
Vasti	Habitable land
Gapata Saraha	Pastoral land

Different Land Tenures

Types of Tenures	Nature of Holding
Nivi dharma	Endowment of land under a kind of trusteeship was prevalent in North and Central India and Bengal.
Nivi dharma aksayana	A perpetual endowment. The recipient could make use of income derived from it.
Aprada dharma	Income from land could be enjoyed, but the recipient is not permitted to gift it to anyone. The recipient has no administrative rights either.
Bhumichchi-dranyaya	Right of ownership acquired by a person making barren land cultivable for the first time. This land was free from any rent liability.

Other Land Grants

Agrahara grants	Given to Brahmins, it was perpetual, hereditary and tax free.
Devagrahara grants	A land grant in favour of a Brahmin as well as gifts to merchants for the repair and worship of temples.
Secular grants	Grants made to feudatories of Guptas.

- Agriculture flourished in the Gupta period due to establishment of irrigation works. Apart from the state and individual cultivators, Brahmins, Buddhists and Jain sanghas brought waste lands under cultivation when they were donated to them as religious endowments.

- Cultivators were asked to maintain their crops properly from damages and those who indulged in damaging the crops were punished.
- Likewise, crops and fields were fenced. The crops cultivated during the Gupta period were **rice, wheat, barley, peas, lentils, pulses, sugarcane and oil seeds**.
- From Kalidasa, we come to know that the south was famous for pepper and cardamom. Varahamihira gives elaborate advice on the plantation of fruit trees.
- The Paharpur copper plate inscription indicates that the king was the sole proprietor of the land. Even when he made land grants, he reserved his prerogatives over it.
- The location and boundaries of individual plots were marked out and measured by the record keepers and influential men in the locality.
- As stated in Paharpur plates, an officer called ustapala maintained records of all the land transactions in the district and the village accountant preserved records of land in the village. During the Gupta period, the land was classified as detailed below.

Irrigation

- The importance of irrigation to agriculture was recognised in India from the earliest times.
- From the **Narada Smriti**, we understand that there were two kinds of dykes: the bardhya, which protected the field from floods, and the khara, which served the purpose of irrigation.
- To prevent inundation, **jalanirgamah (drains)** were constructed, which is mentioned by Amarasimha.
- Canals were constructed not only from rivers but also from tanks and lakes. The most famous lake was the

Sudarsana lake at the foot of Girnar Hills in Gujarat.

Position of Peasantry

List of Different Kinds of Taxes

Tax	Nature
Bhaga	King's customary share of the produce normally amounting to one-sixth of the produce paid by cultivators
Bhoga	Periodic supply of fruits, firewood, flowers, etc., which the village had to provide to the king
Kara	A periodic tax levied on the villagers (not a part of the annual land tax)
Bali	A voluntary offering by the people to the king, but later became compulsory. It was an oppressive tax.
Udianga	Either a sort of police tax for the maintenance of police stations or a water tax. Hence, it was also an extra tax.
Uparikara	Also an extra tax. Scholars give different explanations about what it was collected for.
Hiranya	Literally, it means tax payable on gold coins, but in practice, it was probably the king's share of certain crops paid in kind.
Vata-Bhuta	Different kinds of cess for maintenance of rites for the winds (<i>vata</i>) and the spirits (<i>bhuta</i>)
Halivakara	A plough tax paid by every cultivator owning a plough
Sulka	A royal share of merchandise brought into a town or harbour by merchants. Hence it can be equated with the customs and tolls.
Klipa and Upaklipa	related to sale and purchase of lands.

- The position of peasantry was undermined. They were reduced to the position of serfs due to the caste classification and also due to the granting of various privileges and lands to others.
- The practice of lease-holding reduced the permanent tenants to tenants at will (**which means tenants could be evicted without notice**). The farmers were required to pay various taxes.

Industry: Mining and Metallurgy

- Mining and metallurgy was one of the most flourishing industries during the Gupta period.
- **Amarasimha, Varahamihira and Kalidasa** make frequent mention of the existence of mines. The rich deposits of iron ore from Bihar and copper from Rajasthan were mined extensively during this period.
- The list of metals used apart from iron **were gold, copper, tin, lead, brass, bronze, bell-metal, mica, manganese, antimony, red chalk (sanskilajata) and red arsenic.**
- Blacksmiths were next only to agriculturists in importance in the society. Metal was used for the manufacture of various domestic implements, utensils and weapons.

- The improvement in the ploughshare, with the discovery of iron, for deep ploughing and for increasing cultivation happened during this period.
- The most important and visible evidence of the high stage of development in metallurgy is **the Mehrauli Iron Pillar of King Chandra in the Qutb Minar Complex in Delhi, identified with Chandragupta II.**
- This monolith iron pillar has lasted through the centuries without rusting. It is a monument to the great craftsmanship of the iron workers during the Gupta period.
- Coin casting, metal engraving, pottery making, terracotta work and wood carving were other specialised crafts.
- A significant development of the period in metal technology was the making of the seals and statutes of Buddha and other gods.
- It was laid down that the people had to pay for the loss arising out smelting of iron, gold, silver, copper, tin and lead.

Trade and Commerce

- The contribution of traders to the soundness of the Gupta economy is quite impressive. Two distinctive types of traders called **sresti and sarthavaha** existed.
- Sresti was usually settled at a particular place and enjoyed an eminent position by virtue of his wealth and influence in the commercial life and administration of the place.
- The sarthavaha was a caravan trader who carried his goods to different places for profitable sale. Trade items ranged from products for daily use to valuable and luxury goods.
- They included pepper, sandalwood, elephants, horses, gold, copper, iron and mica.
- The abundant inscriptions and seals mentioning artisans, merchants and guilds are indicative of the thriving crafts and trade. **(Guild is a society or other organisation of people with common interests or an association of merchants.)**
- There are several references in several sources to artisans, traders and occupational groups in the guilds.
- Guilds continued as the major institution in the manufacture of goods and in commercial enterprise.
- They remained virtually autonomous in their internal organisation, and the government respected their laws.
- These laws were generally drafted by a larger body, the corporation of guilds, of which each guild was a member.
- The **Narada and Brihaspati Smritis** describe the organisation and activities of guilds. They mention that the guild had a chief and two, three or five executive officers. Guild laws were apparently laid down in written documents.
- The Brihaspati Smriti refers to guilds rendering justice to their members and suggests that these decisions should, by and large, be approved by the king.

- There is also mention of the philanthropic activities of guilds, for instance, providing shelter for travellers and building assembly houses, temples and gardens.
- The inscription also records that the chief of the guilds played an important role in the district-level administrative bodies.
- There is also mention of joint corporate bodies of merchant-bankers, caravan merchants and artisans. The guilds also acted as banks.
- The names of donors are mentioned in this inscription. Usury (the lending of money at an exorbitant rate of interest) was in practice during the Gupta period.
- The detailed discussion in the sources of that period indicates that money was used, borrowed and loaned for profit.
- There were many ports that facilitated trade in the western coast of India such as **Calliena (Kalyan)**, **Chaul port in ruin sixty kilometres south of Mumbai**, and the markets of **Male (Malabar)**, **Mangarouth (Mangalore)**, **Salopatana**, **Nalopatana** and **Pandopatana** on the Malabar coast.
- **Fahien refers to Tamralipti in Bengal** as an important centre of trade on the eastern coast. These ports and towns were connected with those of Persia, Arabia and Byzantium on the one hand and Sri Lanka, China and Southeast Asia on the other.
- Fahien describes the perils of the sea route between India and China. The goods traded from India were rare gems, pearls, fine textiles and aromatics. Indians bought silk and other articles from China.

Cultural Florescence

Art and Architecture

By evolving the **Nagara and the Dravida styles**, the Gupta art ushers in a formative and creative age in the history of Indian architecture with considerable scope for future development.

Rock-cut and Structural Temples

The rock-cut caves continue the old forms to a great extent but possess striking novelty by bringing about extensive changes in the ornamentation of the facade and in the designs of the pillars in the interior. The most notable groups of the rock-cut caves are found at **Ajanta and Ellora (Maharashtra)** and **Bagh (Madhya Pradesh)**. The **Udayagiri caves (Orissa)** are also of this type. The structural temples have the following attributes:

- (1) flat-roofed square temples;
- (2) flat-roofed square temple with a vimana (second storey);
- (3) square temple with a curvilinear tower (shikara) above;
- (4) rectangular temple; and

(5) circular temple.

The second group of temples shows many of the characteristic features of the Dravida style. The importance of the third group lies in the innovation of a shikhara that caps the sanctum sanctorum, the main feature of the Nagara style.

Stupas

Stupas were also built in large numbers but the best are found at **Samat (Uttar Pradesh), Ratnagiri (Orissa) and Mirpur Khas (Sind)**.

Sculpture: Stone Sculpture

A good specimen of stone sculpture is the well-known erect Buddha from Sarnath. Of the puranic images, perhaps the most impressive is the great **Boar (Varaha)** at the entrance of a cave at Udayagiri.

Metal statues

The technology of casting statues on a large scale of core process was practised by the craftsmen during the Gupta period with great workmanship. Two remarkable examples of Gupta metal sculpture are

- (1) a copper image of the Buddha about eighteen feet high at Nalanda in Bihar and
- (2) the Sultanganj Buddha of seven-and-a-half feet in height.

Painting

- The art of painting seems to have been in popular demand in the Gupta period than the art of stone sculptures. The mural paintings of this period are found at **Ajanta, Bagh, Badami and other places**.
- From the point of technique, the surface of these paintings was perhaps done in a very simple way.
- The mural paintings of Ajanta are not true frescoes, for frescoes is painted while the plaster is still damp and the murals of Ajanta were made after it had set. The art of Ajanta and Bagh shows the Madhyadesa School of painting at its best.

Terracotta and Pottery

- Clay figurines were used both for religious and secular purposes.
- We have figurines of **Vishnu, Karttikeya, Durga, Naga and other gods and goddesses** Gupta pottery remains found at Ahchichhatra, Rajgarh, Hastinapur and Bashar afford proof of excellence of pottery. The most distinctive class of pottery of this period is the **"red ware"**.

Sanskrit Literature

The Guptas made Sanskrit the official language and all their epigraphic records were written in it. The period saw the last phase of the Smriti literature.

Sanskrit Grammar

- The Gupta period also saw the development of Sanskrit grammar based on **Panini who wrote Ashtadhyayi and Patanjali who wrote Mahabhashya on the topic.**
- This period is particularly memorable for the compilation of the Amarakosa, a thesaurus in Sanskrit, by Amarasimha.
- A Buddhist scholar from Bengal, Chandrogomia, composed a book on grammar named Chandravyakaranam.

Puranas and Ithihasas

- The Puranas, as we know them in their present form, were composed during this time. They are the legends as recorded by the Brahmins.
- They were originally composed by bards (professional storytellers), but now, having come into priestly hands, they were rewritten in classical Sanskrit.
- Details on Hindu sects, rites and customs were added in order to make them sacrosanct religious documents.
- The succession of dynasties was recorded in the form of prophecies. Thus what began as popular memories of the past were revived and rewritten in prophetic form and became the Brahmanical interpretation of the past.
- The Mahabharata and the Ramayana also got their final touches and received their present shape during this period.

Buddhist Literature

- The earliest Buddhist works are in Pali, but in the later phase, Sanskrit came to be used to a great extent.
- Most of the works are in prose with verse passages in mixed Sanskrit. **Arya Deva and Arya Asanga** of the Gupta period are the most notable writers.
- The first regular Buddhist work on logic was written by Vasubandhu. Vasubandhu's disciple, Dignaga, was also the author of many learned works.

Jaina Literature

- The Jaina canonical literature at first took shape in Prakrit dialects. Sanskrit came to be the medium later. Within a short time, Jainism produced many great scholars and by their efforts the

- Hindu itihasa and puranas were recast in Jaina versions to popularise their doctrines. Vimala produced a Jaina version of Ramayana. **Siddhasena Divakara** laid the foundation of logic among the Jains.

Secular Literature

- Samudragupta himself had established his fame as Kaviraja. It is widely believed that his court was adorned by the celebrated **navaratnas** like **Kalidasa, Amarasimha, Visakhadatta and Dhanvantri**.
- Kalidasa's famous dramas are **Sakunthalam, Malavikagnimitram and Vikramaurvashiyam**.
- The works of **Sudraka (Mrichchhakatika), Visakhadatta (Mudraraksasa and Devichandraguptam)** and the lesser known dramatists and writers also contributed to the literary and social values in the classical age.
- An interesting feature of the dramas of this period is that while the elite spoke in Sanskrit, the common people spoke Prakrit.

Prakrit Language and Literature

In Prakrit, there was patronage outside the court circle. The Gupta age witnessed the evolution of many Prakrit forms such as Suraseni used in Mathura and its vicinity, Ardhamagadhi spoken in Awadh and Bundelkhand and Magadhi in modern Bihar.

Nalanda University

- Nalanda was an acclaimed Mahavihara, a large Buddhist monastery in the ancient kingdom of Magadha in India.
- The site is located about ninety five kilometres southeast of Patna near the town of Bihar Sharif and was a centre of learning from the **fifth century CE to c. 1200 CE**. It is a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.
- The highly formalised methods of Vedic learning helped inspire the establishment of large teaching institutions such as **Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramashila**, which are often characterised as India's early universities.
- Nalanda flourished under the patronage of the Gupta Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries and later under Harsha, the emperor of Kanauj.
- The liberal cultural traditions inherited from the Gupta age resulted in a period of growth and prosperity until the ninth century.
- The subsequent centuries were a time of gradual decline, a period during which Buddhism became popular in eastern India patronised by the Palas of Bengal.
- At its peak, the Nalanda attracted scholars and students from near and far with some travelling all the way from **Tibet, China, Korea and Central Asia**.
- Archaeological findings also confirm the contact with the Shailendra dynasty of Indonesia, one of whose kings built a monastery in the complex. **Nalanda was ransacked and destroyed**

by an army of the Mamluk dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate under Bakhtiyar Khalji in c. 1200 CE.

- While some sources note that the Mahavihara continued to function in a makeshift fashion for a little longer, it was eventually abandoned and forgotten.
- The site was accidentally discovered when the Archaeological Survey of India surveyed the area. Systematic excavations commenced in 1915, which unearthed 11 monasteries and 6 brick temples situated on **12 hectares (30 acres) of land**.
- A trove of sculptures, coins, seals and inscriptions have also been discovered since then and all of them are on display in the Nalanda Archaeological Museum situated nearby.
- Nalanda is now a notable tourist destination and a part of the Buddhist tourism circuit. Recently, the government of India, in cooperation with other South and South-east Asian countries, has revived this university.

Gupta Sciences

Mathematics and Astronomy

- The invention of the theory of zero and the consequent evolution of the decimal system are to be credited to the thinkers of this age.
- In the **Surya Siddhanta**, **Aryabhatta** (belonging to late fifth and early sixth century CE) examined the true cause of the solar eclipses. In calculation of the size of the earth, he is very close to the modern estimation.
- He was the first astronomer to discover that the earth rotates on its own axis. He is also the author of **Aryabhattiyam**, which deals with arithmetic, geometry and algebra.
- **Varahamihira's Brihat Samhita** (sixth century CE) is an encyclopaedia of astronomy, physical geography, botany and natural history. His other works are **Panch Siddhantika and Brihat Jataka**.
- Brahmagupta (late sixth and early seventh century CE) is author of important works on mathematics and astronomy, namely **Brahmasphuta-siddhanta** and **Khandakhadyaka**.

Medical Sciences

- Metallic preparations for the purpose of medicine and references to the use of mercury and iron by Varahamihira and others indicate that much progress was made in chemistry.
- The **Navanitakam** was a medical work, which is a manual of recipes, formulation and prescriptions.
- **Hastayurveda** or the veterinary science authored by **Palakapya** attests to the advances made in medical science during the Gupta period.

Decline of the Gupta Empire

- The last recognised king of the Gupta line was **Vishnugupta who reigned from 540 to 550 CE**.

- **Internal** fighting and dissensions among the royal family led to its collapse. During the reign of a Gupta king, **Budhagupta**, the **Vakataka ruler Narendrasena** of western Deccan, attacked Malwa, Mekala and Kosala.
- Later on, another Vakataka king Harishena conquered Malwa and Gujarat from the Guptas.
- During Skanda Gupta's reign, the grandson of Chandragupta II, the Huns invaded northwest India. He was successful in repulsing the Huns, but consequently his empire was drained of financial resources.
- In the sixth century CE, the Huns occupied Malwa, Gujarat, Punjab and Gandhara.
- As the Hun invasion weakened the Gupta hold in the country, independent rulers emerged all over the north like **Yasodharman of Malwa**, the **Maukharis of Uttar Pradesh**, the **Maitrakas in Saurashtra** and others in Bengal. In time, the Gupta Empire came to be restricted to only Magadha. They did not focus on empire building and military conquests. So, weak rulers along with incessant invasions from foreign as well as native rulers caused the decline of the Gupta Empire. By the beginning of the sixth century, the empire had disintegrated and was ruled by many regional chieftains.

More to Know:

1. Feudalism The social formation of feudalism was the characteristic of the medieval society in India. Feudal features listed by historian R.S. Sharma are:

- royal grants of land; transfer of fiscal and judicial rights to the beneficiaries;
- the grant of their rights over peasants, artisans and merchants;
- an increased incidence of forced labour;
- appropriation of surplus by the state;
- a decline in trade and coinage;
- payment of officials through land revenue assignments; and the growth of the obligations of the samantas (subordinate or feudatory rulers).

2. Eighteen major puranas are listed. Of them the well known are: Brahma Purana, Padma Purana, Vishnu Purana, Skanda Purana, Shiva Maha Purana, Markendeya Purana, Agni Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Matsya Purana and Shrimad Bhagavat Purana.

3. Smritis are religious texts covering a wide range of subjects such as ethics, politics, culture and art. Dharmasastras and puranas form the core of this body of literature

4. The Guptas issued many gold coins but comparatively few silver and copper coins. However, the post-Gupta period saw a decline in the circulation of gold coins.

5. Fahien's account on Mathura and Pataliputra.

At Mathura, the people are numerous and happy; they do not have to register their household. Only those who cultivate the royal land have to pay a portion of the grain from it. Criminals are fined

both lightly and heavily depending on the circumstances. In the case of repeated rebellion, their right hands are cut off. Throughout the whole country, the people do not kill any living creatures or drink any intoxicant. The inhabitants of Pataliputra are rich and prosperous and vie with one another in the practice of benevolence. In the cities, the Vaisya families establish houses for dispensing charity and medicines. All the poor and destitute, orphans, widows and childless, maimed and cripples are provided with every kind of help.

6. The origin of Huns is not definitely known. According to Roman historian Tacitus, they were a barbarian **tribe living near Caspian Sea and contributed to the fall of Roman Empire**. They organised under Attila and were known for their savagery and bestiality in Europe. One branch of Huns, known as white Huns, moved towards India from Central Asia and their invasion began about a hundred years after the Kushanas.