

The Gupta Dynasty

The Classical period of Hinduism or what is often referred to as the Golden Age of Hinduism, saw the rise and fall of the Gupta Dynasty which reigned from 320-500 C.E. This empire ruled in Northern India and was concentrated around Pataliputra which is currently Patna. This was also the capital city of the Mauryan Dynasty which among other dynasties ruled northern India before the Gupta Dynasty. According to scholars the exact geographical and familial origins of the rulers of the Gupta Empire are largely unknown (Gupta 1). Some sources infer from the name Gupta that they belonged to the *vaishya* caste while others believe them to be Brahmin (Thapar 282). The three best known rulers of this time period are Chandragupta I, his son Samudragupta, and his youngest son Chandragupta II (Heitzman & Worden). They were all victorious in unifying the people of Northern India which spurred the expansion of Hinduism. Chandragupta I began his reign by gaining control of the Magadha region at the local level and expanding from there (Basham 46). His marriage to Mahadevi Kumaradevi who was a member of the powerful and wealthy Licchavi lineage also helped him secure his kingdom (Gupta 1). Samudragupta and his kingdom were able to defeat many rivals and expand their territory to the west and south; he was known for his skills in battle (Gupta 2).

The time period of the Gupta Dynasty is often referred to as the “Golden Age” of Hinduism or the Classical Period. Some attribute this partly to Samudragupta and his love of the arts. He is said to have been a poet and musician and often assembled literary scholars at his kingdom (Gupta 2). When Chandragupta II came to succession, there were many threats being made to the kingdom. One of the best known plays composed in this time period was about how Chandragupta II came to be king. The *Devi- Chandraguptam* tells the rather mysterious tale of how Chandragupta, the son of Samudragupta came to succession. Apparently after the death of

Samudragupta, Rama Gupta (Chandragupta's older brother) was the decided heir to the throne. When Rama Gupta was defeated by the Sakas he decided to give up his wife Dhruvadevi as a trade. Chandragupta thought this was despicable so he concealed himself under the disguise of the Dhruvadevi and killed the king of the Sakas (Thapar 285). He then went on to kill his brother Rama who was furious with him, and in the end he married Dhruvadevi. Chandragupta is well known for spearheading the annexation of western India which resulted from the triumphant attack against the Sakas (Basham 46). He was able to consolidate the empire and once again bring harmony and unification back to Northern India (Gupta 3). The Gupta's were eventually overthrown by the Hunas (or White Huns) in 500 C.E (Heitzmen & Worden). The relative peace and harmony created by these rulers allowed for an atmosphere that was conducive to innovation and the bringing together of people culturally and religiously.

The cultural advances that occurred during the Gupta period can be seen in literary sources, language, art, architecture and the building of temples. There were also scientific advancements in areas such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The Gupta Empire reigned during a time of great economic prosperity from domestic and foreign trade of spices, textiles, ivory, stone, and much more (Basham 47). Sanskrit became more developed and was the language of religion, the courts, scholars and science, and poetry. Many of the most important Hindu texts and scriptures were composed in Sanskrit. One of the best-known Indian playwrights also flourished during this time, his name was Kalidasa. He was known for his beautiful and exemplary use of Classical Sanskrit language and literature. Among his most famous pieces are the drama *Shakuntla*, *Raghuvamsa* and *Kumarasambhava* two of his Mahakavyas, and the poem *Meghaduta* (www.esamskriti.com). Some of the more famous literary works of the time were the Puranas, and the plays *Kamudi-Mahotsava* and *Devi-Chandraguptam* (discussed above).

The Puranas are a broad collection and mixture of history and myths dealing with bhakti. Visnu, one of the great gods in the Hindu tradition is described in the Puranas. Visnu is said to have ten incarnations or avatars, one of which was the boar or Varaha. The myth tells of how Varaha defeats a demon and rescues the Earth Goddess from the cosmic ocean where she was being held hostage. The boar incarnation (Varaha) was widely worshipped by the kings of the Gupta Dynasty (Rodrigues 308). Early Hindu art and architecture largely inspired the evolution of art around the world. Temples began to be constructed from brick and stone rather than wood making them more durable. The Northern and Southern style of temple architecture was born during this time as well. This was a very prosperous time rich with cultural advancement and harmony for the people of northern India.

References and Further Recommended Reading

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