

Ancient India experienced prolific cultural and political advancement under the reign of the imperial Guptas. The Guptas carried the torch of classicism and it was under their reign that early India saw significant advancements in mathematics, art, architecture and drama (Saunders 106). These progressions are attributable to strong leadership by the great rulers of the Gupta Empire as well as advantageous connections through marriage and the practice of relatively peaceful external relations (Avari 156). The relatively blissful condition in which the Guptas reigned is portrayed well by Fa Hian, a Chinese pilgrim who had the opportunity to witness the Guptan civilization under Chandragupta II. Fa Hian, praised the lifestyle of the Guptas who “ruled without corporal punishment... [and] abstain from taking life or drinking wine...” (Saunders 105).

The empire, originating from a relatively small land plot in the “western Ganga plains” (Avari 155) grew quickly and eventually encompassed the majority of continental India. The vast expansion of Guptan territory is connected to the conquests and acquisitions of the great Guptan emperors. The first of these distinguished rulers was Chandragupta I, who would be succeeded by two emperors that would successfully transform continental India. Samudragupta was a leader of great power and influence and it is under him that the Guptas vastly expanded their territory. He swelled their lands by subduing much of Bengal and by obtaining some influence “as far west as the Indus river, and over most of central and eastern India, as far south as Kanchi.” (Robb 39). Samudragupta was a skilled tactician on the battlefield, according to writings inscribed on an Ashokan pillar; Samadragupta was responsible for the submission or defeat of over a dozen ancient Indian kings (Avari 157). Like most monarchs, Samadragupta was a well

rounded intellectual and scholar. His son, Chandragupta II (Vikramaditya) would reign until 415 C.E. and would also expand Gupta territory significantly through marriage as well as military conquest (Avari 158). His great military campaign would be against the Shakas of western India, who he would eventually subdue (Robb 39). Ancient Gupta coins exemplify the importance of the *ksatriyas* (warrior) expansionist type mindset. Coins dating from the reign of Chandragupta II depict the king, armed with a bow combating a lion (Emeneau 86).

The Gupta dynasty expanded its territory through a policy of militarism but within its own borders, the Guptas displayed an enlightened sense of the arts and political structure. Literature flourished under the Gupta dynasty, many works were written in Sanskrit and it is believed that the Guptas played a significant role in legitimizing the language. Like his father, Chandragupta II was a well rounded scholar and had a definite affinity for the arts. Chandragupta II encircled himself with poets and intellectuals (Avari 171). The *Shakuntala* is one of the most notable pieces of literature to come out of the Gupta dynasty. It is a play that tells a story of romance between Shakuntala and King Dushyanta (Avari 171).

Politically, the Guptas moved towards a system of medieval feudalism. Although the Gupta emperors were considered to be all powerful they did not rule by a system of absolutism, but were governed by a policy of *rajadharma* (royal dharma). Which basically prescribes that royalty be governed by “fundamental ethical considerations” (Derrett 606). The policy did not promise protection and justice but that the “king should rule his subjects (including of course, the brahmins) in such a manner as to give general satisfaction...” (Derrett 606) Essentially, the Gupta emperors ruled with a political

hierarchy in which conquered kings could be spared and could continue to rule their respective kingdoms within Gupta territory as long as wealth was shared (Avari 159). Bureaucracy was kept basic and the Guptas ruled lightly, allowing for the highest degree of cooperation between the various differing and newly annexed or conquered Gupta communities.

The Guptas were generous with land. The distribution of land plots throughout their domain allowed them to maintain a continued sense of order over their large territories. Grants entitling members of the society to land were not uncommon and were most often given to men that belonged to the priestly class (*brahman*). The Puranas uncover some evidence as to why land was so commonly distributed to the *brahman*. According to the sacred text, land could be contributed as a way to obtain a certain level of religious merit (Avari 164). Land could also be bestowed upon crown officers, military generals or skilled craft workers (Avari 163). As opposed to the reasoning behind the donation of land to the priestly class, the giving of land to the other castes can be explained by way of payment, as international trade between Rome and the Levant was diminishing (Avari 164).

Although the Guptas were in many ways ahead of their time with respect to social order and government they continued to follow a somewhat rigid order of caste. The *Chandalas* (outcastes) were prosecuted, as they are to some extent in modern India. Members of the lowest caste were required to live outside of population centers. When entering a town, they were obliged to make their presence known by creating audible noises with two pieces of wood, warning people belonging to more distinguished castes of their coming (Smith 171). This being said, there is some evidence that points towards

a certain degree of caste mobility under the Guptas. Land grants allowed groups that were largely outside the realm of caste to be included within it (Avari 166). There was also some evidence that pointed towards the reduction of the connection between caste and occupation as lower castes were in some cases able to perform the duties of the upper castes (Avari 167).

The great Gupta Empire can be compared with the other great civilizations of history. This classical age saw advancements not only on a cultural level but to some extent on a social level. Through military conquest and strategic marriage, the Guptan emperors would rule most of continental India for over two hundred years. Constant invasions from the North West, by the White Huns would eventually weaken the Guptas and end this classical age (Thapar 286).

REFERENCES AND OTHER FURTHER READING

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gupta_Empire
<http://encyclopedia.stateuniversity.com/pages/9245/Gupta-Empire.html>

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