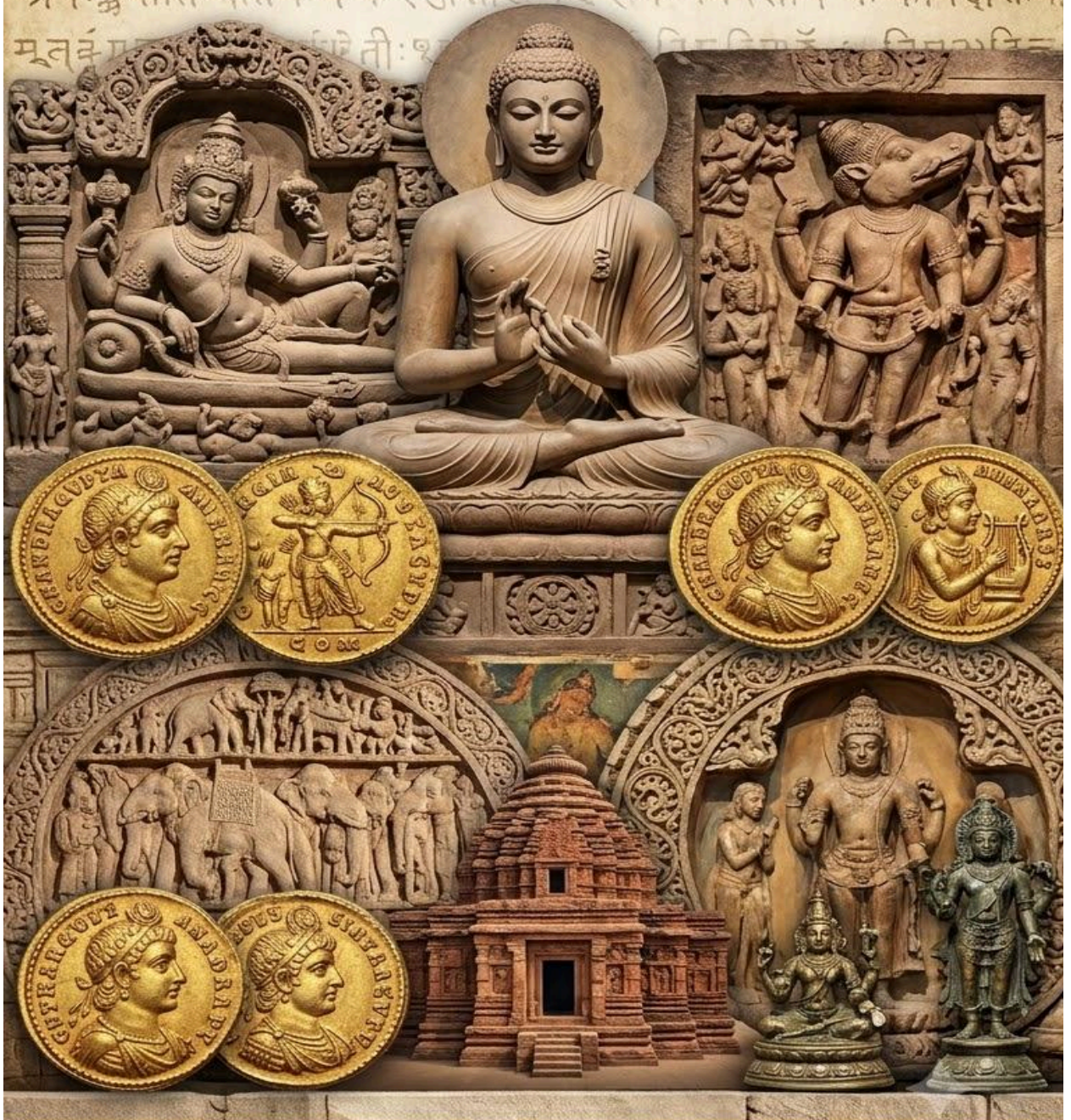


लक्ष्मणार्जुनरथमत्तपुपगजबुधनर्वयलीनवस्वनदाप्र
भयङ्गरुद्गःलक्ष्मणदबशीपुदयःसप्रपःष्यीश्चमलघा
तःयवकःमोर्धुद भृणकाश्चरिजपकृत्तुल्लङ्घीजिय

GUPTA EMPIRE

Art, Culture, and the Classical Age
(c. 319 CE - 550 CE)

श्रयश्चिक्वति यतियःच कर उस्मासुगुरतःथरपतचि कःकमिदालाय
मूतवेपथुःश्रितीःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिःश्रुतिः



STRIVE EDGE IAS ACADEMY

The Gupta Period (320 CE – 550 CE)

The Gupta Period (320–550 CE) is regarded as the '**Golden Age of Ancient India**' because of remarkable achievements in administration, literature, science, mathematics, art, and culture.

- ◆ **Founded by:** Sri Gupta; Chandragupta I formally established the Gupta Empire around 320 CE.
- ◆ **Peak:** Empire reached its zenith under Samudragupta and Chandragupta II Vikramaditya.
- ◆ **Characteristics:** Political stability, economic prosperity, and significant cultural advancements.
- ◆ **Known for:** Flourishing of Sanskrit literature, temple architecture, sculpture, astronomy, and mathematics.



The Golden Age

- ◆ Political unity and stability.
- ◆ Advancement in science and mathematics.
- ◆ Flourishing Sanskrit literature.
- ◆ Development of classical art and temple architecture.
- ◆ Economic prosperity and trade expansion.

Sources of Gupta History

Literary Sources

- ◆ **Puranas:** Provide genealogical information about Gupta rulers.
- ◆ **Harshacharita:** Contains references to the later Gupta period.
- ◆ **Works of Kalidasa:** Raghuvamsha and Abhijnanasakuntalam reflect Gupta society and culture.
- ◆ **Faxian's account:** Chinese pilgrim Faxian (399–414 CE) provides valuable information about administration, society, and religion during Chandragupta II's reign.

Epigraphic Sources

- ♦ **Prayag Prashasti:** Composed by Harishena; describes the achievements of Samudragupta in detail.
- ♦ **Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription:** Provides information about Chandragupta II.
- ♦ **Land grant inscriptions:** Reveal administrative and economic conditions of the period.

Numismatic Sources

- ♦ **Gupta gold coins (Dinaras):** Among the finest coins of ancient India; depict kings, queens, military victories, religious beliefs, and economic prosperity.
- ♦ **Key coins:** Coins of Samudragupta and Chandragupta II are particularly important for historical reconstruction.

Archaeological Sources

- ♦ **Temples & monuments:** Dashavatara Temple, Ajanta Caves (later Gupta phase), Mehrauli Iron Pillar.

Note:

- *The Prayag Prashasti is simultaneously a historical source and a literary achievement — it reflects the Gupta tradition of fusing statecraft with artistic expression.*
- *Faxian's account is an independent external corroboration of Gupta prosperity — valuable precisely because it has no political motivation.*

Important Gupta Rulers

Chandragupta I (c. 320–335 CE)

Political Consolidation

- ♦ Considered the real founder of the Gupta Empire.
- ♦ **Marriage alliance:** Strengthened the kingdom through marriage with Kumaradevi of the Lichchhavi clan.
- ♦ **Title:** Assumed the title Maharajadhiraja.
- ♦ **Gupta Era:** Started the Gupta Era (319–320 CE).

Samudragupta (c. 335–375 CE)

Military Expansion

- ♦ **Epithet:** 'Napoleon of India' — coined by historian V.A. Smith for his extensive conquests.
- ♦ **Source:** Prayag Prashasti composed by Harishena is the primary source for his campaigns.
- ♦ **North India policy:** Followed direct annexation — nine Aryavarta kings defeated and territories annexed.

- ◆ **South India policy:** Subordinate alliances (dharma-vijaya) — twelve Dakshinapatha kings defeated but released; political pragmatism over direct control.
- ◆ **Forest kingdoms:** Twelve Madhya Pradesh kingdoms defeated and re-installed as vassals.
- ◆ **Ashvamedha Yajna:** Performed to legitimize imperial conquests and reconnect with Vedic imperial tradition.

Foreign Relations

- ◆ **Sri Lanka & SE Asia:** Maintained diplomatic relations; received embassies from foreign rulers, indicating Gupta prestige.
- ◆ **Tribute states:** Samatata (Bengal), Davaka (Assam), and island kingdoms paid tribute.

Note:

- *Samudragupta's south Indian policy — defeat and release — shows political pragmatism; direct control was impractical, tributary relationships more sustainable.*
- *The Ashvamedha revival after centuries signals the Gupta desire to connect with Vedic imperial tradition for political legitimacy.*

Chandragupta II Vikramaditya (c. 375–415 CE)

- ◆ **Shaka conquest:** Defeated the Western Kshatrapas (Shakas) and annexed Gujarat and Malwa — eliminated the long-standing foreign Shaka power from western India.
- ◆ **Trade boost:** Secured access to western seaports, boosting trade with the Roman world.
- ◆ **Peak:** His reign marks the peak of Gupta power and prosperity.

Cultural Importance

- ◆ **Faxian's visit:** Chinese pilgrim Faxian visited India during his reign; described a prosperous, well-governed society with free hospitals.
- ◆ **Navaratnas:** Patronised the famous Nine Gems (Navaratnas) at his court.
- ◆ **Lyrist coin:** His 'Lyrist type' coin depicts him playing the veena — unique evidence of a ruler presenting himself as patron of arts.

Navaratnas — Nine Gems of Chandragupta II

The court of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya was home to nine celebrated scholars:

- ◆ **Kalidasa:** Literature — greatest Sanskrit poet and dramatist; works: Abhijnanasakuntalam, Raghuvamsha, Meghaduta.
- ◆ **Amarasimha:** Lexicography — author of Amarakosha, one of the earliest and most famous Sanskrit dictionaries.
- ◆ **Varahamihira:** Astronomy & Science — author of Brihat Samhita and Pancha Siddhantika; contributions to astronomy, meteorology, geography, and astrology.



- ♦ **Dhanvantari:** Medicine — famous physician associated with Ayurveda; regarded as authority on medical science and surgery.
- ♦ **Vararuchi:** Grammar — known for contributions to Sanskrit grammar and linguistics.
- ♦ **Kshapanaka:** Astronomy & Religion — expert in astronomy and religious studies.
- ♦ **Shanku:** Architecture & Geography — associated with architecture, measurement, surveying, and town planning.
- ♦ **Vetala Bhatta:** Literature & Philosophy — known for expertise in philosophy, debate, and literature.
- ♦ **Ghatakarpara:** Poetry — Sanskrit poet known for literary compositions and poetic works.

Note:

→ The Navaratnas represent the Gupta state's conscious investment in intellectual capital — a model of state patronage of knowledge production.

Kumaragupta I (c. 415–455 CE)

Administration and Stability

- ♦ Preserved the vast empire built by his predecessors.
- ♦ **Nalanda University:** Associated with the foundation of Nalanda University — the greatest residential international university of the ancient world.
- ♦ **Coins:** Issued a large number of gold coins reflecting continued prosperity.

Foreign Invasions

- ♦ **Pushyamitras:** Towards end of reign, Pushyamitras posed a threat to Gupta authority.
- ♦ **Huna pressure:** Early signs of Huna pressure began to emerge on the northwestern frontier.

Skandagupta (c. 455–467 CE)

- ♦ **Epithet:** Last great ruler of the Gupta Empire.
- ♦ **Pushyamitras:** Successfully defeated the Pushyamitras and restored imperial authority.

Huna Invasion

- ♦ Repelled the first major Huna (White Huns) invasion into India.
- ♦ His victories temporarily protected India from Central Asian incursions.
- ♦ **Junagarh Inscription:** Records repair of the Sudarshana Lake dam — evidence of continued state investment in infrastructure despite military pressures.

Significance

- ♦ Continuous warfare weakened Gupta finances and military resources.
- ♦ After his reign, Gupta power began to decline rapidly.

Note:

→ Skandagupta is a tragic figure — capable enough to repel the Hunas but ruling a structurally weakened empire he could not save alone.

Gupta Administration

The Gupta administration was more decentralised than the Mauryan administration. While the king remained the supreme authority, considerable powers were delegated to provincial and local officials. The system combined central authority with local autonomy, contributing to administrative efficiency.

King

- ◆ **Position:** Supreme head of state; exercised executive, judicial, military, and legislative powers.
- ◆ **Titles:** Maharajadhiraja, Paramabhattaraka, Parameshwara.
- ◆ **Divine origin:** Kingship based on the principle of divine origin but was not absolute.

Central Administration

Council of Ministers (Mantriparishad)

- ◆ Assisted the king in important decisions regarding administration, military affairs, and foreign relations.

Important Officials

- ◆ **Kumaramatya:** High-ranking civil officers appointed by the king.
- ◆ **Mahadandanayaka:** Chief judicial and military officer.
- ◆ **Sandhivigraha:** Minister for war and peace (foreign affairs).
- ◆ **Mahasenapati:** Commander-in-Chief of the army.

Provincial Administration

- ◆ **Bhukti (Province):** Governed by Uparikas appointed by the king.
- ◆ **Vishaya (District):** District administration headed by Vishayapati.

Local Administration

Town Administration

- ◆ Governed by local committees and officials.
- ◆ Merchants and guilds often participated in urban administration.

Village Administration

- ◆ **Gramika:** Village headman administered the basic unit.
- ◆ Village assemblies played an important role in local governance.

Revenue Administration

Sources of Revenue

- ◆ **Land revenue:** Main source — generally one-sixth of agricultural produce.
- ◆ **Other taxes:** Trade taxes, professional taxes, forest revenue, mining revenue.

Land Grants

- ◆ Gupta rulers frequently granted land to Brahmins, temples, and officials.
- ◆ This practice increased local autonomy and gradually weakened central control.

Judicial Administration

- ◆ **King:** Highest judicial authority.
- ◆ **Punishments:** Generally milder compared to the Mauryan period — Faxian noted fines rather than corporal punishment for most offences.
- ◆ **Local justice:** Guilds, village assemblies, and caste councils often settled disputes locally.
- ◆ **Naradasmriti:** Important legal text of the Gupta period dealing with civil law, contract, and property.

Military Administration

- ◆ **Army composition:** Infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots.
- ◆ **Mahasenapati:** Headed the army.
- ◆ **Feudatories:** Samantas and subordinate rulers supplied troops when required.
- ◆ **Role:** Played a crucial role in resisting Huna invasions, especially under Skandagupta.

Feudal Tendencies

Rise of Samantas

- ◆ Local chiefs and feudatories (Samantas) gained increasing power.
- ◆ They collected taxes, maintained armies, and administered local territories.
- ◆ This marked the beginning of the Indian feudal system.

Significance

- ◆ Strengthened local administration initially.
- ◆ Later contributed to the decline of Gupta central authority.

Note:

- *Gupta administration marks a shift from centralised Mauryan bureaucracy to a more feudal structure — a proto-feudal transition with far-reaching consequences for medieval India.*
- *Greater village autonomy laid the foundation for the self-governing village republics that characterised medieval Indian polity.*
- *The land grant system was the Guptas' greatest internal contradiction — it funded cultural achievement while simultaneously eroding the state's economic and political foundations.*

Society

Gupta society was characterised by the strengthening of the Varna system, growth of Brahmanical traditions, and increasing social stratification. At the same time, economic prosperity, urban life, and cultural achievements contributed to social stability.

Varna System

- ◆ **Structure:** Society organised into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.
- ◆ **Rigidity:** Varna system became more rigid compared to earlier periods.
- ◆ **Brahmin status:** Brahmins enjoyed the highest social status due to royal patronage and land grants.

Growth of Jati System

- ◆ Numerous Jatis (sub-castes) emerged based on occupation and birth.
- ◆ Social mobility became more restricted, leading to greater stratification.

Position of Women

Status

- ◆ Women generally enjoyed respect within the family but their public role declined.
- ◆ Early marriage became more common.
- ◆ Participation in education and administration was limited.
- ◆ Inter-caste marriages existed but became less common.

Positive Aspects

- ◆ **Stridhana:** Women could own personal property (Stridhana).
- ◆ **Education:** References to educated women found in literary sources.

Decline

- ◆ **Widow remarriage:** Gradually declined among upper castes.
- ◆ **Sati:** Not yet compulsory but references to the practice begin appearing in Gupta-period texts.
- ◆ **Devadasi:** Temple devadasi system became institutionalised during this period.

Education

Centres of Learning

- ◆ **Nalanda University:** Founded by **Kumaragupta I**; greatest residential international university of the ancient world; taught **Buddhism, Vedas, logic, grammar, medicine, and mathematics**; attracted scholars from **China, Korea, Java, and Sri Lanka**.
- ◆ **Ujjain:** Important centre for **astronomy and mathematics**.

Subjects

- ◆ Sanskrit grammar, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and religion were widely studied.

- ◆ **Medium:** Sanskrit for higher learning; Pali for Buddhist studies; Prakrit for popular literature.

Religion and Society

- ◆ **Brahmanism:** Evolved into Puranic Hinduism.
- ◆ **Popular worship:** Worship of Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti became popular.
- ◆ **Buddhism & Jainism:** Continued to exist but received comparatively less patronage.
- ◆ **Religious tolerance:** Gupta rulers generally followed a policy of religious tolerance.

Slavery and Untouchability

Slavery

- ◆ It existed but was less severe than in many contemporary societies.
- ◆ Slaves worked mainly in domestic and agricultural sectors.

Untouchability

- ◆ Growing practice of untouchability.
- ◆ **Faxian's observation:** Chandalas were required to announce their presence when entering towns.
- ◆ Certain groups were placed outside the Varna hierarchy.

Observations of Faxian

- ◆ Described society as prosperous and peaceful.
- ◆ Noted mild punishments, charitable institutions, and social welfare measures.
- ◆ Mentioned the existence of untouchables (Chandalas) — important socio-historical evidence.

Note:

- *The paradox of the 'Golden Age': extraordinary cultural achievement coexisted with deteriorating conditions for women and outcastes — a critical analytical point for Mains.*
- *Gupta land grants to Brahmins reinforced varna hierarchy while creating a class of economically powerful priestly landlords — reshaping social structure permanently.*
- *Nalanda's destruction by Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193 CE remains one of history's greatest intellectual losses — its Gupta-period foundation makes it doubly significant.*

Economy

The Gupta economy was primarily agrarian, supported by flourishing trade, crafts, guilds, and a stable monetary system. Economic prosperity during this period contributed significantly to the cultural and scientific achievements of the Gupta Age.

Agriculture

- ◆ **Main crops:** Rice, wheat, barley, sugarcane, cotton, and pulses.
- ◆ **Irrigation:** Wells, tanks, canals, and reservoirs supported agricultural production.
- ◆ **Land grants:** Large-scale land grants to Brahmins, temples, and officials gradually reduced state control over revenue and encouraged feudal tendencies.

Land Revenue

- ◆ **Main source:** Land revenue was the chief source of state income; generally collected as one-sixth of agricultural produce.
- ◆ **Other taxes:** Trade taxes, professional taxes, forest taxes, mining taxes.

Trade and Commerce

Internal Trade

- ◆ Trade flourished due to political stability and a well-developed road network.

External Trade

- ◆ **Partners:** Southeast Asia, China, and Central Asia.
- ◆ **Roman trade:** Declined compared to the Kushana period.
- ◆ **Western ports:** Chandragupta II's Shaka conquest opened Bharuch (Barygaza) — boosted Arabian and Mediterranean trade.
- ◆ **Exports:** Textiles, spices, precious stones, ivory products.
- ◆ **Imports:** Silk, horses, luxury goods.

Guilds (Shrenis)

Economic Importance

- ◆ Guilds of merchants and artisans played an important role in production and trade.
- ◆ They functioned as economic institutions, banks, and charitable organisations.

Functions

- ◆ Regulated quality and prices.
- ◆ Provided loans and financial assistance.
- ◆ Protected the interests of members.
- ◆ **Social role:** Maintained dharmashalas and funded temples.

Industry and Crafts

- ◆ **Major industries:** Textile production, metalwork, jewellery making, pottery, ivory carving.
- ◆ **Mehrauli Iron Pillar:** Demonstrates advanced metallurgical knowledge — 7.2 metres tall, 1,600 years old, has not rusted due to high-phosphorus iron composition.
- ◆ **Sultanganj Buddha:** Large copper Buddha (7.5 feet) — evidence of advanced large-scale metal casting.

Coinage

Gold Coins (Dinaras)

- ◆ Gupta rulers issued a large number of high-quality gold coins known as Dinaras.
- ◆ Coins depict kings performing sacrifices, hunting, or playing musical instruments.
- ◆ **Decline:** Towards the later Gupta period, purity of gold coins declined — measurable indicator of economic stress.

Silver Coins

- ◆ Introduced mainly after Chandragupta II defeated the Western Kshatrapas.
- ◆ Influenced by Shaka coinage patterns; circulated mainly in western India.
- ◆ **Significance:** Demonstrates Gupta control over Gujarat and Malwa; indicates expansion of commercial activities.

Copper Coins

- ◆ Issued in smaller quantities; used for everyday local transactions.
- ◆ Less artistically refined than gold coins; reflect internal trade and market exchanges.

Urban Economy

- ◆ **Key cities:** Pataliputra, Ujjain, and Mathura were important commercial centres.
- ◆ **Urban growth:** Supported by trade and craft production.
- ◆ **Later decline:** Some historians point to gradual decline of long-distance trade and urban centres in the later Gupta period.

Feudal Tendencies in Economy

- ◆ Increase in land grants reduced direct state revenue.
- ◆ Local landholders and beneficiaries gained economic and administrative powers.
- ◆ Led to emergence of a semi-feudal economy and contributed to weakening of central authority.

Evidence from Faxian

- ◆ Faxian described India as prosperous and economically stable.
- ◆ He noted flourishing agriculture, trade, and charitable institutions.

Note:

- *The Mehrauli Iron Pillar's rust-resistance has baffled modern metallurgists — physical proof that Gupta-era technology achieved what modern science took centuries to replicate.*
- *Decline in gold coin purity in the later Gupta period is a measurable economic indicator of imperial decline — numismatic evidence of political history.*
- *The land grant system funded cultural achievement while simultaneously eroding the state's economic and political foundations.*

Gupta Temple Architecture

The Gupta period marks the beginning of structural temple architecture in India. Temples shifted from temporary wooden structures to permanent brick and stone constructions. The Gupta style laid the foundation for the later Nagara (North Indian) and Dravida (South Indian) temple traditions.

Salient Features of Gupta Temples

- ◆ **Garbhagriha (Sanctum Sanctorum):** Small square chamber housing the main deity — symbolises the abode of God; usually dark, replicating a cave or womb.
- ◆ **Mandapa (Pillared Hall):** Small porch or hall in front of the Garbhagriha — used for worship and religious gatherings.
- ◆ **Shikhara (Superstructure):** Early Gupta temples had flat roofs; later Gupta temples developed the curvilinear Shikhara — the defining feature of Nagara architecture.
- ◆ **Jagati (Raised Platform):** Temples built on a raised platform; steps provided to reach the sanctum.
- ◆ **Doorway decoration:** Richly ornamented with floral motifs, river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, and divine figures.
- ◆ **Materials:** Both stone and brick used; brick temples particularly popular in the Gangetic plains.
- ◆ **Panchayatana layout:** Main shrine surrounded by four subsidiary shrines at the corners — became prominent in later North Indian temple architecture.

Important Gupta Temples

Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh (UP)

- ◆ Built during the early 6th century CE.
- ◆ Dedicated to Lord Vishnu.
- ◆ Considered the finest and most mature example of Gupta temple architecture.



Architectural Features

- ◆ Built on a high square platform (Jagati).
- ◆ One of the earliest surviving examples of the Panchayatana style, with a main shrine surrounded by four subsidiary shrines.
- ◆ Originally crowned by an early Shikhara, making it among the earliest Nagara temples.
- ◆ Sanctum (Garbhagriha) surrounded by a circumambulatory path (Pradakshinapatha)

Sculptural Features

- ◆ Famous for three magnificent sculptural panels:
- ◆ Anantasayana Vishnu (Vishnu reclining on Shesha)
- ◆ Gajendra Moksha
- ◆ Nara-Narayana Tapasya
- ◆ Depicts themes from Vaishnavism and Puranic traditions.

Significance

- ◆ Marks the transition from simple shrine architecture to developed temple architecture.
- ◆ Important milestone in the evolution of the Nagara style.

Bhitargaon Temple (UP)

- ◆ Dated to the 5th century CE.
- ◆ Dedicated to Hindu deities, probably Vishnu or Shiva.
- ◆ Considered the oldest surviving brick temple in India.

Architectural Features

- ◆ Constructed entirely of baked bricks.
- ◆ One of the earliest temples with a prominent Shikhara.
- ◆ Features a square sanctum and high superstructure.
- ◆ Demonstrates advanced brick-building technology.



Decorative Features

- ◆ Walls decorated with terracotta panels.
- ◆ Panels depict deities, mythological scenes, and decorative motifs.

Significance

- ◆ Demonstrates the use of terracotta as an architectural ornament.

Tigawa Temple (MP)

- ◆ Dedicated to Lord Vishnu.
- ◆ One of the earliest surviving stone temples of the Gupta period.

Architectural Features

- ◆ Consists of a square Garbhagriha and a pillared porch.
- ◆ Flat-roofed structure without a developed Shikhara.
- ◆ Simple and symmetrical design.



Significance

- ◆ Represents the earliest stage of structural temple architecture.
- ◆ Illustrates the transition from rock-cut to free-standing temples.

Nachna Kuthara Parvati Temple (MP)

- ◆ Dedicated to Goddess Parvati.
- ◆ One of the earliest surviving temples dedicated to a female deity.

Architectural Features

- ◆ Two-storeyed structure, a rare feature in Gupta architecture.
- ◆ Contains a sanctum and upper chamber.
- ◆ Richly decorated doorways and walls.

Significance

- ◆ Demonstrates experimentation in temple planning.
- ◆ Shows the growing importance of Shaktism during the Gupta Age.



Bhumara Temple (MP)

- ◆ Dedicated to Lord Shiva.
- ◆ Built during the late Gupta period.

Architectural Features

- ◆ Square sanctum with a simple layout.
- ◆ Known for its beautifully carved doorway.
- ◆ Contains one of the earliest Ekamukha Shiva Lingas.

Sculptural Features

- ◆ Rich carvings of river goddesses, attendants, and divine figures.
- ◆ Excellent example of Gupta sculptural ornamentation.

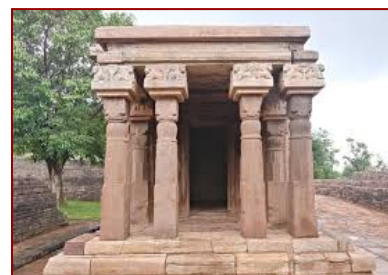


Temple 17, Sanchi (MP)

- ◆ Built during the Gupta period within the Sanchi complex.
- ◆ One of the earliest surviving structural Hindu temples.

Architectural Features

- ◆ Consists of a square sanctum and a columned porch.
- ◆ Flat-roofed structure with simple proportions.
- ◆ Minimal ornamentation compared to later temples.



Significance

- ◆ Considered the prototype of later North Indian temple architecture.
- ◆ Demonstrates the earliest form of Gupta structural temple design.

Architectural Significance

- ◆ **Beginning of structural temples:** First large-scale use of permanent materials like brick and stone.
- ◆ **Nagara style birth:** Early Shikhara developed during this period — became the basis of all North Indian temple architecture.
- ◆ **Ritual space:** Clear separation of Garbhagriha, Mandapa, and entrance porch established the grammar of Hindu sacred space.
- ◆ **Integration of sculpture:** Sculptures became an integral part of temple walls and doorways.

Note:

- Gupta period = birth of the Nagara style = foundation of all North Indian Hindu temple architecture for the next 1,000 years.
- The Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh is the best single example of mature Gupta temple architecture — frequently asked in Mains.
- The shift from rock-cut to structural temples marks a fundamental change — permanence and visibility replaced interiority.

Gupta Sculpture

Gupta sculpture represents the classical phase of Indian sculptural art. It achieved a perfect balance between physical beauty and spiritual expression. Gupta artists emphasised serenity, grace, idealism, and inner spirituality rather than mere physical realism.

Features of Gupta Sculpture

- ◆ **Spiritual expression:** Faces display calmness, meditation, and divine grace — greater emphasis on inner spirituality than external beauty.
- ◆ **Idealised human form:** Figures in perfect proportions with smooth body contours — idealised rather than realistically muscular.
- ◆ **Refined drapery:** Garments thin and transparent, clinging closely to the body — folds minimal and subtle, unlike the heavy Gandharan style.
- ◆ **Halo (Prabhamandala):** Beautifully decorated halo behind the head — symbolises divinity and spiritual enlightenment.
- ◆ **Ushnisha:** Flame-shaped protuberance on Buddha heads — a Gupta innovation replacing the Greco-Roman curly hair of Gandhara.
- ◆ **Delicate ornamentation:** Ornaments elegant and restrained — excessive decoration avoided to maintain aesthetic balance.
- ◆ **Indigenous character:** Predominantly Indian in style; foreign influences seen in earlier periods almost disappeared.

Major Schools of Gupta Sculpture

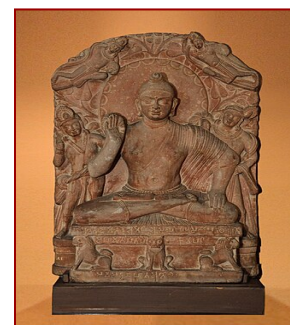
Sarnath School

- ◆ **Features:** Finest example of Gupta sculptural art; Buddha figures highly spiritualised and graceful; transparent drapery almost merges with body; smooth surface and serene facial expression.
- ◆ **Masterpiece:** Seated Buddha of Sarnath — Dharmachakra Mudra (First Sermon Pose); Chunar sandstone; considered the masterpiece of Gupta Buddhist sculpture.



Mathura School (Gupta Phase)

- ◆ **Features:** Continued the earlier Mathura tradition; figures possess greater physical strength and fuller body forms than Sarnath; combine spirituality with physical vitality.
- ◆ **Example:** Mathura Buddha — broad shoulders, gentle smile, spiritual calmness; represents transition from Kushana to Gupta artistic ideals.



Hindu Sculptures of the Gupta Period

Varaha Sculpture

- ◆ **Udayagiri Caves:** Depicts Vishnu's Varaha avatar rescuing Goddess Earth (Bhudevi) — symbolises restoration of cosmic order; one of the greatest achievements of Gupta Hindu sculpture.



Vishnu Sculptures

- ◆ **Features:** Vishnu shown with four arms holding divine attributes; reflects rise of Vaishnavism during the Gupta period.
- ◆ **Dashavatara Temple:** Famous for the Anantasayana Vishnu panel — Vishnu reclining on the serpent Shesha.

Shiva Sculptures

- ◆ **Features:** Shiva represented in human and symbolic forms; demonstrates growing popularity of Shaivism.
- ◆ **Bhumara Temple:** Contains important Gupta-period Shaiva sculptures.

Jain Sculptures

- ◆ **Features:** Tirthankaras depicted in Padmasana and Kayotsarga postures; emphasis on meditation, detachment, and spiritual purity.
- ◆ **Centre:** Mathura — major centre of Gupta Jain sculpture; numerous Tirthankara images discovered here.

Importance of Gupta Sculpture

- ◆ **Iconographic standardisation:** Established standard forms of Buddha, Vishnu, Shiva, and Jain Tirthankaras.
- ◆ **Influence:** Influenced the sculpture of Pallavas, Chalukyas, Palas, and Cholas; Sarnath school influenced Buddhist art in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.
- ◆ **Sultanganj Buddha:** Large **copper Buddha (7.5 feet)** found in Bihar — evidence of advanced Gupta metallurgy alongside artistic excellence.



Note:

- Gupta sculpture achieved what no other school did — it combined physical beauty with spiritual transcendence, influencing Buddhist art across Southeast and East Asia.
- The Sarnath school's aesthetic became the international standard for Buddhist iconography — a soft-power export of the Gupta state.

Gupta Painting

The Gupta period represents the golden age of classical Indian painting. Gupta paintings are known for their elegance, naturalism, emotional expression, and spiritual depth. Most surviving examples are found in Buddhist cave complexes.

Features of Gupta Paintings

- ◆ **Naturalism:** Human figures depicted in a realistic and graceful manner; great attention to facial expressions, gestures, and body movements.
- ◆ **Spiritual & emotional expression:** Paintings convey compassion, love, devotion, and sacrifice — successfully portray inner feelings and psychological depth.
- ◆ **Colours:** Rich but harmonious — red, brown, yellow, green, blue, and white; derived from natural pigments.
- ◆ **Narrative art:** Depict Jataka Tales, Buddha's life, and contemporary society in continuous narrative style.
- ◆ **Secular themes:** Besides religious subjects, portray kings, queens, merchants, musicians, dancers, and common people.
- ◆ **Fresco-secco technique:** Paintings executed on dry plaster — contributed to durability and artistic quality.

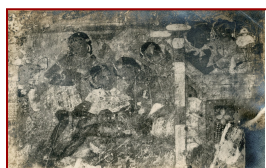
Important Centres of Gupta Painting

Ajanta Caves (Maharashtra)

- ◆ **Importance:** Finest surviving examples of ancient Indian painting; most paintings belong to the Vakataka period, contemporary with the Guptas.
- ◆ **Gupta-period caves:** Caves 1, 2, 16, 17 contain the finest Gupta-period paintings.



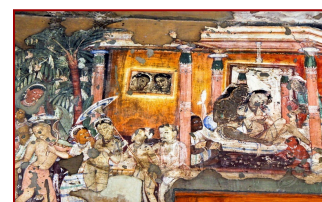
- ◆ **Bodhisattva Padmapani (Cave 1):** Depicts Avalokiteshvara holding a lotus — famous for compassion, grace, and spiritual serenity; often compared to the Mona Lisa for psychological depth.



- ◆ **Bodhisattva Vajrapani (Cave 1):** Depicts the protector of Buddha — known for strength and dignity.

- ◆ **Dying Princess (Cave 16):** Known as Sundari — masterpiece of emotional expression.

- ◆ **Cave 17:** Called the 'picture gallery' — maximum number of Jataka paintings.



- ♦ **Mahajanaka Jataka:** Illustrates one of Buddha's previous births — excellent narrative composition.



Bagh Caves (Madhya Pradesh)

- ♦ Closely resembles Ajanta painting tradition; more secular and human-centred themes; rich colours and expressive figures.

Significance of Gupta Paintings

- ♦ **Social history:** Provide information about dress, ornaments, hairstyles, architecture, and daily life.
- ♦ **Artistic excellence:** Represent the highest achievement of ancient Indian mural painting.
- ♦ **Influence:** Influenced the painting traditions of Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, and Southeast Asia.

Note:

- *Ajanta paintings are the only surviving large-scale examples of ancient Indian painting — irreplaceable evidence of Gupta artistic genius.*
- *Loss of the Ajanta tradition after the 7th century CE makes these paintings even more significant as sole survivors of an entire artistic tradition.*

Gupta Terracotta Art

Gupta terracotta art represents the popular art tradition of the age — unlike elite stone sculpture, it reflects everyday life, religious beliefs, and social practices of ordinary people.

Human Figurines

- ♦ **Subjects:** Men, women, mother goddesses, musicians, dancers, and warriors.
- ♦ **Features:** Rich hairstyles, ornaments, and garments clearly visible; faces show grace, elegance, and realistic expressions.
- ♦ **Significance:** Important source for studying Gupta social life, fashion, and cultural practices.



Animal Figurines

- ♦ **Subjects:** Horses, elephants, bulls, birds, monkeys, and other animals.
- ♦ **Uses:** Used as toys, ritual objects, and decorative items.
- ♦ **Significance:** Reflect the role of animals in economy, transport, religion, and daily life.



Religious Terracotta Images

- ◆ Images of Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Buddha, and Bodhisattvas widely produced.
- ◆ Demonstrate growing popularity of Puranic Hinduism and religious pluralism.

Architectural Terracottas

- ◆ **Bhitargaon Temple:** Best example — terracotta panels extensively used in brick temples; combined architecture with sculpture.

Note:

- *Terracotta art democratised artistic expression in the Gupta period — it was the art of the people, not just the court.*
- *Mould-based mass production in Gupta terracotta indicates early commercialisation of art — a significant economic and social development.*

Literature

The Gupta Age is regarded as the Golden Age of Sanskrit Literature. Sanskrit emerged as the dominant language of literature, administration, and intellectual discourse. Royal patronage encouraged the growth of poetry, drama, grammar, philosophy, astronomy, and scientific works.

Sanskrit Literature

- ◆ **Character:** Sanskrit attained its highest level of refinement and popularity.
- ◆ **Themes:** Religion, love, nature, politics, and ethics.

Kalidasa — Greatest Literary Figure

Epics (Mahakavyas)

- ◆ **Raghuvamsha:** Lineage of Rama's dynasty.
- ◆ **Kumarasambhava:** Birth of Kartikeya.

Dramas

- ◆ **Abhijnanasakuntalam:** First Indian literary work translated into a European language (German, 1791, by Georg Forster); praised by Goethe.
- ◆ **Malavikagnimitram:** Historical drama set in the Shunga period.
- ◆ **Vikramorvasiyam:** Mythological drama.

Lyric Poetry

- ◆ **Meghaduta:** Cloud Messenger — one of the finest lyric poems in world literature.
- ◆ **Ritusamhara:** Depicts the six seasons of India.

Drama and Theatre

- ◆ **Vishakhadatta — Mudrarakshasa:** Describes rise of Chandragupta Maurya and the role of Chanakya; important source for ancient political history.
- ◆ **Vishakhadatta — Devichandraguptam:** Provides information about Gupta rulers.
- ◆ **Shudraka — Mrichchhakatika:** Depicts urban life, trade, society, and human relationships; unique for depicting a Brahmin hero in love with a courtesan.



Prose Literature

- ◆ **Subandhu — Vasavadatta:** One of the earliest Sanskrit prose romances.

Religious Literature

Puranas

- ◆ Major Puranas were compiled and revised during the Gupta Age.
- ◆ Helped spread Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and other Hindu traditions.

Smritis

- ◆ **Narada Smriti:** Deals with law, justice, and social norms.
- ◆ **Brihaspati Smriti:** Deals with law and administration.
- ◆ **Katyayana Smriti:** Deals with judicial procedures.

Buddhist Literature

- ◆ **Vasubandhu — Abhidharmakosa:** Systematically explained Buddhist philosophy and psychology; became one of the most influential texts of Mahayana Buddhism.

Scientific Literature

- ◆ **Aryabhata — Aryabhatiya:** Explained Earth's rotation causing day and night; correctly explained solar and lunar eclipses; calculated $\pi \approx 3.1416$; contributions to algebra, trigonometry, and astronomy; proposed heliocentric idea centuries before Copernicus.
- ◆ **Varahamihira — Pancha Siddhantika:** Compilation and analysis of five earlier astronomical schools; preserved ancient Indian astronomical knowledge.
- ◆ **Varahamihira — Brihat Samhita:** Encyclopaedic work covering astronomy, astrology, architecture, geography, rainfall, agriculture, and natural sciences.
- ◆ **Amarasimha — Amarakosha:** One of the earliest and most famous Sanskrit dictionaries; standardised Sanskrit vocabulary; foundational text for linguistic studies.
- ◆ **Brahmagupta — Brahmasphutasiddhanta:** Formulated rules for arithmetic operations involving zero and negative numbers; major contributions to algebra and astronomy.
- ◆ **Dhanvantari:** Associated with development of Ayurveda; regarded as one of the greatest physicians of ancient India.
- ◆ **Panchatantra — Vishnu Sharma:** Animal fables with embedded political wisdom; translated into Persian (Kalila wa Dimna) and spread across the world — one of the most widely translated books in history.

Grammar and Lexicography

- ◆ **Amarasimha — Amarakosha:** One of the most famous Sanskrit dictionaries; standardised Sanskrit vocabulary; became a foundational text for linguistic studies.

Note:

- *Abhijnanasakuntalam* was the first Indian literary work translated into a European language — evidence of Kalidasa's universal appeal across cultures and centuries.
- Aryabhata's heliocentric idea predates Copernicus by over a millennium — underlines the danger of Eurocentrism in the history of science.
- The decimal system and zero, formalised in Gupta India, transformed global mathematics and science — without them, modern computing would be impossible.
- The Panchatantra's journey (Sanskrit → Pahlavi → Arabic → Latin → European languages) makes it one of the most consequential literary transmissions in world history.

Religion

The Gupta period witnessed the revival and consolidation of Brahmanical Hinduism, leading to the rise of Puranic Hinduism. At the same time, Buddhism and Jainism continued to flourish, reflecting the spirit of religious tolerance.

Revival of Brahmanical Hinduism

- ◆ **Gupta faith:** Gupta rulers were predominantly followers of Hinduism, especially Vaishnavism.
- ◆ **Vedic revival:** Vedic traditions revived along with Puranic beliefs; religious rituals and sacrifices gained importance.
- ◆ **Evidence:** Ashvamedha Yajna performed by Samudragupta; extensive land grants to Brahmins and temples.

Rise of Vaishnavism

- ◆ **Popularity:** Worship of Vishnu became highly popular; Gupta rulers adopted the title Parama Bhagavata (devotee of Vishnu).
- ◆ **Royal emblem:** Garuda became the royal emblem of the Gupta dynasty.
- ◆ **Evidence:** Dashavatara Temple; numerous Vishnu sculptures and coins bearing Garuda symbols.

Growth of Shaivism

- ◆ **Expansion:** Worship of Shiva expanded significantly; worshipped in both anthropomorphic and Linga forms.
- ◆ **Construction:** Construction of Shaiva temples increased.
- ◆ **Evidence:** Shiva sculptures at Bhumara Temple; growing popularity of Shaiva sects.

Development of Shaktism

- ◆ **Goddesses:** Durga, Lakshmi, and Parvati became widely revered.
- ◆ **Evidence:** Numerous sculptures and terracotta images of female deities; references in Puranic literature.

Rise of Puranic Hinduism

- ◆ **Puranas:** Compilation and redaction of major Puranas — Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Vayu Purana, Markandey Purana.
- ◆ **Bhakti:** Popularisation of personal devotion (Bhakti) as a means of salvation — made religion accessible to common people.
- ◆ **Temple worship:** Greater emphasis on image worship in permanent stone temples.
- ◆ **Significance:** Made religion accessible to common people; strengthened Hindu cultural traditions.

Buddhism During the Gupta Period

- ◆ **Continued patronage:** Received less than Hinduism but remained significant; Mahayana Buddhism became dominant.
- ◆ **Nalanda:** Nalanda University flourished as a great Buddhist learning centre.
- ◆ **Faxian's account:** Found Buddhism flourishing despite Hindu dominance.

Jainism During the Gupta Period

- ◆ **Patronage:** Continued to flourish especially in western and central India; merchant communities remained major patrons.
- ◆ **Evidence:** Jain images from Mathura; development of Jain religious literature.

Note:

- *The Gupta Puranic synthesis created the foundations of modern Hinduism — the most enduring religious legacy of any Indian dynasty.*
- *The peaceful coexistence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism under the Guptas is a model of religious pluralism — important for contemporary relevance questions in Mains.*

Decline of the Gupta Empire

The Gupta Empire began to decline after the reign of Skandagupta in the late 5th century CE. A combination of internal weaknesses and external invasions led to the disintegration of the empire.

Huna Invasions

- ◆ **Most important cause:** The Hunas (White Huns) repeatedly invaded northwestern India.
- ◆ **Initial resistance:** Skandagupta defeated the first major Huna invasion (455 CE), but later Gupta rulers failed to resist.
- ◆ **Key invaders:** Toramana and Mihirakula caused widespread destruction — dismantled Gupta administrative network and disrupted trade routes.
- ◆ **Impact:** Weakened the military and economy of the empire fatally.

Weak Successors

- ◆ After Skandagupta, a series of weak rulers occupied the throne.
- ◆ They lacked the military and administrative capabilities of earlier Gupta rulers.
- ◆ Central authority gradually weakened.

Rise of Feudalism

- ◆ **Land grants:** Extensive land grants made to Brahmins, temples, and officials; grantees acquired administrative and fiscal rights.
- ◆ **Consequence:** Reduced royal control over provinces; encouraged rise of powerful local chiefs and feudatories (Samantas).

Growth of Samantas

- ◆ Feudatories became increasingly autonomous.
- ◆ Many stopped obeying central authority and established independent kingdoms.
- ◆ Political fragmentation increased rapidly.

Economic Decline

- ◆ **Trade decline:** Decline in long-distance trade, particularly with the Roman world.
- ◆ **Military costs:** Continuous warfare against Hunas strained the treasury.
- ◆ **Revenue loss:** Reduction in tax revenue due to land grants.
- ◆ **Coin debasement:** Decline in purity of gold coins in later Gupta period — measurable evidence of economic stress.

Administrative Decentralisation

- ◆ Provincial governors and local officials became more powerful.
- ◆ Centralised control gradually disappeared.
- ◆ The empire became difficult to govern effectively.

Succession Disputes

- ◆ Frequent disputes over succession weakened political stability.
- ◆ Internal conflicts reduced the strength of the ruling dynasty.

Regional Powers Emerged

- ◆ **Later Guptas:** Ruled in Magadha after the main Gupta line weakened.
- ◆ **Maukharis:** Rose to power in the Gangetic plains.
- ◆ **Vakatakas:** Powerful in the Deccan — had earlier been Gupta allies through matrimonial alliances.
- ◆ **Pushyabhutis:** Rose to power in Thanesar (Haryana) — later produced Harshavardhana.

Note:

- The Huna invasions accelerated a decline already structurally underway — the feudal land grant system was the Guptas' greatest internal contradiction.
- The decline of the Guptas ended the last pan-Indian empire for nearly a millennium until the Mughals — India entered a prolonged period of regional kingdoms.
- Post-Gupta fragmentation was not entirely negative — regional kingdoms patronised regional languages (Tamil, Kannada, Telugu) and produced distinct artistic traditions.



The Gupta period stands as the high watermark of ancient Indian civilization. In no other era did political stability, artistic brilliance, scientific innovation, literary genius, and philosophical depth converge so completely. The Guptas demonstrated that a state's greatest reach extends not through conquest, but through culture — ideas that in the form of zero, Sanskrit poetry, Buddhist philosophy, and classical sculpture, continue to shape the world today. The Golden Age of India was golden not merely for India, but for all humanity.

