

SOUTH ASIA'S GOLDEN AGE

THE GUPTA EMPIRE

In about 320 CE, a minor Indian prince married an Indian princess. In a region with more than 30 kingdoms and states, one more royal marriage wouldn't seem to be a big deal—but this one was. The prince, whose name was Chandra, came from one of India's smaller kingdoms. (Although his family name was Gupta, he probably wasn't related to the Mauryan emperor, Chandragupta.) His young wife came from the Licchavi family, who controlled what is now northeastern India and Nepal. Their marriage, and Chandra Gupta's conquests, brought together northern and central India for the first time since soon after Ashoka's death, more than 500 years before—a *very* big deal.

We don't know a whole lot about Chandra Gupta I, who ruled for only 15 years—only what historians have pieced together from coins, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence. His reign was probably a bumpy one, because his son, Samudra Gupta, had to recapture territory once controlled by his father.

We know more about Samudra Gupta, who wanted it that way. One of the stone columns Ashoka had put up 500



The gold coin on the left shows Samudra Gupta playing a stringed instrument called a vina, which represents his artistic achievements. The coin on the right depicts his grandson Kumara Gupta on a war elephant.

“ KALIDASA,
VISAKHADATTA,
XUANZANG,
AND PILLAR
INSCRIPTION

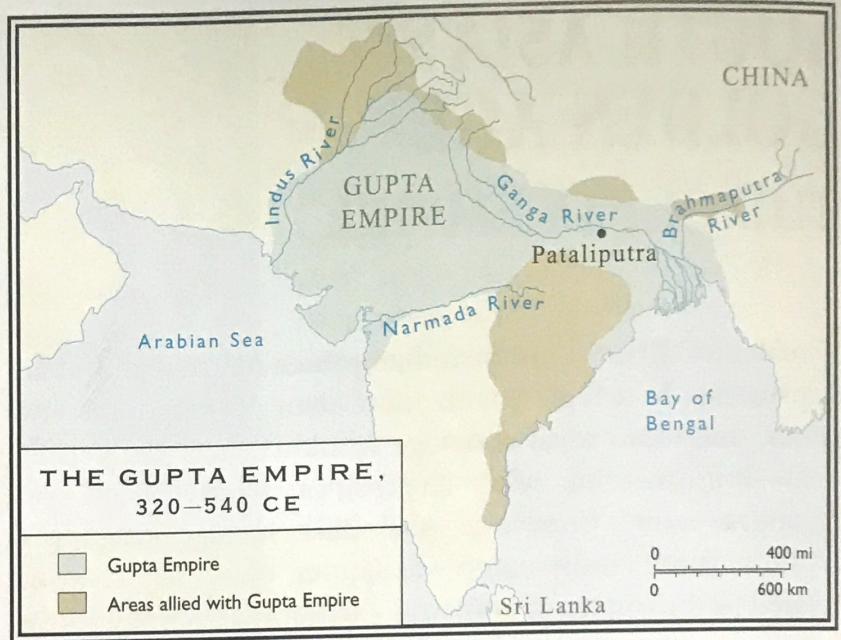
WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Nicknames were important in Gupta times. Chandra Gupta II, Samudra Gupta's son, was known as “Universal Lord,” “Moon Among Kings,” “the Sun of Valor,” “Valorous like a Lion” (when he conquered Gujarat, the land of the lions), and “Conquerer of Tigers” (when he conquered Bengal, land of the tigers). But Samudra Gupta's nicknames were the best. The “King of Poets,” was also called “Uprooter of Kings,” and, even more spectacularly, “Sadhvasad-hudayapralayahetupursasy-acintyasya,” which means “A hero unfathomable, the cause of the elevation of the good and the destruction of the bad, and thus a counterpart of the Unfathomable Absolute, which is the cause of the creation and destruction of the world, and in which the good and the bad have their being.”

Where's the beef?

Fa Hien was a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited central India at the beginning of the fifth century CE. He wrote that:

Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas. In that country they do not keep pigs and fowls and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butcher's shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink.



years earlier had a short inscription on it about peace. Samudra Gupta noticed that there was still a lot of perfectly good blank space on the column, so he had one of his ministers add a long description of all the battles he won and what a wonderful king he was. Samudra Gupta's nickname was "King of Poets." The Gupta court even had poet-announcers whose job it was to sing the praises of the king. They also announced the time for the king's bath and meals by loudly singing songs such as this one, which called him to lunch:

Victory to the king! The sun has climbed up to the zenith, for the geese rest with closed eyes in the shade of the leaves of the lotuses on the ornamental water, the pigeons shun on account of the extreme heat the sloping roofs of the palace which they ordinarily frequent, the peacocks desirous of drinking the particles of water continually flung out, fly to the revolving water-wheel, the sun blazes with all his rays at once, as thou with all thy princely qualities.

Besides conquering new land and making sure that everyone knew what a terrific, wise, and sensitive king he was, Samudra Gupta tried out a new form of government.

66 Kalidasa, *Malavikagnimitram*, fourth century CE

According to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, kings had total power. But Samudra Gupta thought that his people might be happier in his kingdom if he let local leaders make some of the decisions. These local lords were called **Maharajas**. Letting the Maharajas do some of the governing proved to be a very popular decision.

In 376 CE Samudra Gupta's son, Rama Gupta, succeeded him. Even though he was named after the hero of the *Ramayana*, Rama Gupta was a coward. When he became surrounded during a battle, Rama Gupta made a deal that he'd give his wife to his enemies if they let him go free. When Rama Gupta's little brother, Chandra Gupta II, heard about what had happened, he was furious. And he had a

maha + raja =
 "great" + "king"
 South Asia was so big and transportation and communication were so difficult that Maharajas often did most of the governing.



This cave painting depicts a story about a prince and princess who, having been banished from their kingdom, pass through the royal gardens with their attendants.

66 Visakhadatta, *Devichandraguptam*, fourth century CE

DOES ANYBODY HAVE THE TIME?

A water clock kept time in the Gupta court. Used since Mauryan times, the water clock was a large copper vessel with a thin, delicate copper bowl floating inside. In the bottom of the bowl was a small pinhole that let the water spring up.

Young boys were in charge of the water clock. One would beat a drum to signal the time and the other would empty and float the bowl each time it filled with water. In the morning, one stroke of the drum meant that the boy put the bowl in the copper vessel. The bowl filled with water, then was emptied, filled, and emptied four times—that was one “hour.” There were two “hours” in the morning until noon, and two “hours” in the afternoon. The whole day was divided into eight “hours.”

plan. He dressed up as his brother’s queen, and his warriors dressed up as her ladies-in-waiting. One nervous soldier wasn’t so sure about the plan. He pointed out that even if they infiltrated the enemy, they would be badly outnumbered. Chandra Gupta II answered him this way: “The animals of the forest, though in a pack, at the very scent of a lonely lion, who has unfurled the cluster of his mane, run in fear. For a heroic person, number is immaterial.”

The trick worked. When the enemy king got close to the “queen,” Chandra Gupta II pulled out his weapons and killed him and then took control of the palace. He then became king and married his brother’s wife.

Chandra Gupta II was a very good king, who believed his duty (*dharma*) was to make peace and wealth for his people. Like his father, he shared his power with local leaders, but just in case they disagreed with him, he also built a lot of forts to help defend his conquests. He believed that part of his duty was to bring order to society, which he did by reemphasizing the four castes. Before his reign, people from different varna, or classes, and castes had sometimes married each other (his own grandparents were from different classes), and people sometimes changed their line of work. Now those changes became more difficult.

Gupta society included a caste called the Chandalas, who were even lower than the Shudras. Their job was to carry the corpses to the cremation grounds outside the city and execute the worst kinds of criminals. Unlike vegetarian Brahmins, they fished, hunted, and ate meat. Because they touched dead bodies so often, they were ritually polluted and were not allowed to live inside town limits. They lived outside the town walls, beyond the place where they carried dead bodies to be burned. The Chandalas were called the Untouchables. When they came into towns on business, they clapped two pieces of wood so that everyone would know to move out of the way to avoid touching them.

Besides strengthening Brahmin ideas about caste, the Gupta rulers also worshipped early Hindu gods. They used a symbol, the eagle Garuda who carried Vishnu, the god of preservation, as their royal insignia. By this time, Brahmins

did not make many animal sacrifices, they made offerings of milk and grain to avatars of Vishnu like Krishna and Vamana, the Dwarf. The mother goddess, who was the partner of both Vishnu and Shiva, also became very popular.

Even though the Guptas followed Brahmin ways, they also supported Buddhist and Jain schools and temples. A Buddhist pilgrim from China named Xuanzang wrote that the king “would provide choice meats for men of all sorts of religion.” No matter what the dietary rules of your religion, the royal kitchens made sure that you had something to eat.

The Guptas were excellent rulers, but even they could not stop what happened next. In the middle of the fifth century CE, tribes of White Huns, a nomad people from Central Asia, began raiding northern India, burning and robbing monasteries, temples, and towns on their way. A Gupta king named Skanda Gupta managed to defeat them. One royal order described the fight this way: “by his two arms shook the earth, when he joined in close conflict with the Huns.”

But this did not stop the destruction by the Huns. The Maharajas who once served the Gupta kings were busy defending their own people, and the Gupta Empire fell apart. In time, the Huns settled down and married local Kshatriya rulers. These Maharajas adopted local customs, clothing styles, and even religious beliefs, adding one more layer of diversity to the ever-changing cultures of South Asia.

“ Xuanzang, *A Record of the Western Regions*, seventh century CE

“ Pillar inscription, Bhitari, India, fifth century CE