Chapter 18

The Achievements of the Gupta Empire
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Why is the period during the Gupta Empire known as a “golden age”?

18.1 Introduction

Under the Mauryan Empire, India was unified for the first time and Buddhist beliefs became widespread. In this chapter, you will explore the next great empire to unite India. It was called the Gupta (GOOP-tuh) Empire.

The Guptas were a line of rulers who controlled much of India from 320 to 550 C.E. Many historians have called this period a golden age, which is a time of great prosperity and achievement. In unstable times, people are likely to be busy meeting their immediate needs for food, shelter, and safety. But in times of peace and prosperity, people can turn their attention to more creative activities. For this reason, a number of advances in the arts and sciences occurred during the peaceful golden age of the Gupta Empire. Many of these achievements have left a lasting mark on the world.

Archaeologists have made some notable discoveries that have helped us learn about the accomplishments of the Gupta Empire. For example, they have unearthed palm-leaf books that were created about 550 C.E. Sacred texts often appeared in palm-leaf books. These sacred texts are just one of many kinds of literature that Indians created during the Guptas’ reign.

Literature was one of several areas of major accomplishment during India’s golden age. In this chapter, you will learn more about the rise of the Gupta Empire. Then you will take a close look at seven achievements that came out of this rich period in India’s history.

An artist of the Gupta Empire painted this delicate image of Buddha.

In this Ajanta cave, richly colored paintings decorate the walls around a statue of Buddha.
Gupta Empire: the empire covering much of northern India that was ruled by the Guptas from about 320 C.E. to about 550 C.E.

Alliance: a bond between families, states, or other groups to further their common interests.

Province: a territory that is part of a country or an empire.

Golden age: a period of great happiness, prosperity, and achievement.

18.2 The Rise of the Gupta Empire

After the Mauryan Empire fell in about 187 B.C.E., India broke apart into separate kingdoms. For about 500 years, these smaller kingdoms fought each other for land and power. Beginning around 320 C.E., a second great empire arose in India: the Gupta Empire.

The empire began under a ruler named Chandragupta I. He and his family, the Guptas, united the northern kingdoms by conquering them through war. The Guptas also formed some alliances by arranging marriages between members of their family and the sons and daughters of other rulers.

The Gupta line of kings lasted until about 550 C.E. At the height of their power, the Guptas ruled most of northern India. Their empire was the largest that India had known since the days of the Mauryas.

In some ways, the Gupta Empire was similar to the Mauryan Empire. The Guptas set up a central government to oversee the empire. A council, made up of advisers and members of the royal family, helped the king make decisions.

Unlike the Mauryas, the Guptas gave local areas a great deal of independence. They divided the empire into large sections called provinces. Each of these provinces was ruled by a royal governor. Within the provinces, town leaders could make many of their own decisions.

The Guptas’ ruling strategy helped them stay in power for nearly 230 years. The relatively peaceful times, as well as the empire’s stability, encouraged growth in both the arts and the sciences. The result was a golden age that produced some of the greatest advances in Indian history. Let’s look at seven areas of achievement for the Gupta Empire.

During their reigns, Gupta kings were often shown on coins.
Under the rule of the Guptas, India made great advances in many areas, including the arts, education, and the building of roads.
18.3 Universities

The period of the Gupta Empire was a time of learning. The Guptas built many colleges and universities throughout the empire. Some universities were Hindu; others were Buddhist. The schools were open primarily to males. However, teachers’ daughters were allowed to attend.

Hindu universities provided the upper classes with religious training. Students attended classes in religion, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, and Sanskrit. They could also study sculpture, painting, music, and dancing.

The most famous university was the Buddhist school at Nalanda, in northern India. The school had eight colleges and three libraries. It also had a hospital and a monastery. Students were instructed in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. They also studied logic, grammar, and medicine.

Students of medicine learned the practices of the day. They were trained in how to question patients about their physical problems. Students were taught how to make cures from bark, roots, leaves, and minerals. They also learned how to use the front claws of giant ants to stitch up wounds. Hindu doctors were especially skilled at performing surgery.

philosophy a theory or set of values by which one lives; the search for wisdom and knowledge
18.4 Literature

Gupta writers created many kinds of literary works. They wrote poetry, fables, and folktales. They also created plays, including both comedies and dramas. Some of the plays were about historical and political subjects. Large audiences gathered to watch the performances.

There were other forms of writing as well. Scholars and lawyers wrote about Hindu law and religion. Some of the great Sanskrit literature took shape during this time. The *Puranas* ("Ancient Lore") was a collection of Hindu legends that taught the lessons of the Vedas, or sacred Hindu texts, through tales of sages and kings. These stories had been passed down orally for generations. The Guptas were the first to gather these stories together and record them. The *Mahabharata* ("Great Work"), a poem composed over hundreds of years, reached its final form during the Gupta era. Its themes relate to Hindu values and the battle between good and evil.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (BAH-guh-vahd GHEE-tuh) is part of the *Mahabharata*. Its name means "Song of the Lord." The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most beloved works of Hinduism. In this poem, Prince Arjuna is taught basic truths of Hinduism by Krishna, an earthly form of the deity Vishnu.

Some Gupta literature spread beyond India. Gupta sacred texts influenced cultures of countries as far away as Greece and Persia (present-day Iran). The famous Arabian tale about Aladdin and his magic lamp was inspired by a Gupta folktale.

Manuscripts were written in Sanskrit and often illustrated. This page is from the *Bhagavata Purana*, a sacred Hindu literary text. This work's 18,000 verses about the Hindu god Vishnu have greatly influenced Indian culture.
18.5 Painting

The Gupta Empire is known for its paintings. This art form was an important part of life for noble families. These families were wealthy people of high birth. No home was complete without a painting board or an easel. Popular subjects included deities and other religious topics. Nobles and members of the royalty also hired artists to create works of art. Some paintings highlighted the luxury of noble life. They were often done on long scrolls.

Perhaps the greatest ancient Indian paintings are those known as the Ajanta (uh-JUHN-tuh) cave murals. The murals cover the walls of the 30 caves that make up an ancient Buddhist monastery in central India. The paintings are done in rich, bright colors including red, purple, and green. Artists made the paints from minerals and clay.

Some of the Ajanta murals show scenes from the Buddha’s life. Some murals portray stories that reflect Buddhist values, such as love and understanding. Many of the scenes include graceful images of kings, queens, musicians, and dancers. Other scenes show animals and hunters in the forest. These woodland scenes are decorated with flowers, trees, and complex patterns. Gupta artists were skilled painters.
Another art form in the Gupta Empire was sculpture. Sculptors created statues out of stone, wood, bronze, and terra-cotta clay. Many of these statues portrayed the Buddha or Hindu deities. Some sculptures showed scenes from important people’s lives. Many sculptures were created to stand on their own foundations. Others were carved into the walls of temples and caves.

Gupta sculptures portrayed the human form simply and gracefully. One example is the sculpture of the river deity, Ganga, shown on this page. She is riding on the back of a sea monster. The statue’s lines are curved and elegant. Her dress and hair are carved in much detail.

The temple statue of the Buddha shown below reflects the same attention to clean lines and detail. The Buddha sits on a highly decorated seat. His hands and legs are smoothly crossed. His expression is calm and peaceful. The sculptor used lowered eyes and a calm face to portray the Buddha’s wisdom.
18.7 Metalwork

One remarkable accomplishment of the Gupta Empire was its metalwork. Gupta kings controlled huge mines of gold, copper, and iron. Metalworkers made gold and copper coins. They engraved the coins with pictures honoring Gupta rulers. The coins often highlighted the rulers’ wealth and their achievements in art, politics, and war.

Gupta metalworkers were also famous for their ironwork. An iron pillar at a place called Meharauli is one example of these artisans’ unusual skill. The pillar is made of solid iron. It stands 25 feet tall and weighs about 13,000 pounds. The sides are engraved with a story that describes the achievements of a Gupta emperor. The iron is nearly rust free after 1,600 years in the rain and sun. No one knows how Gupta ironworkers acquired such advanced metalworking skills.

18.8 Mathematics

Earlier Hindu mathematicians had created a way of writing whole numbers using the numerals 1 through 9. Some Gupta mathematicians made further advances, one of which was developing the decimal system. The decimal system uses ten basic numerals that have different values depending on their “place.” In the number 105, for instance, 1 is in the “hundreds place” and means 100. The system also works for fractions. In the decimal 0.10, 1 means one-tenth. Note the zeros in these examples. Hindu mathematicians were the first to treat zero as a number. Many calculations are impossible without the zero.

In later centuries, Arab peoples learned the Indian system of numbers and spread it to Europe. As a result, Europeans called this way of writing numbers “Arabic numerals.” A more accurate name would be “Hindu-Arabic numerals,” because the system actually originated with the ancient Indians. We still use this system today.
One of the most famous Gupta mathematicians was a man named Aryabhata. He combined mathematics and astronomy to make important discoveries. He figured out that a year was exactly 365.258 days long. He calculated the approximate size of Earth. He proposed that planets were spheres. He was one of the earliest scientists to suggest that Earth spins on its axis, an imaginary line through Earth's center.

Mathematics had immediate practical uses as well. For example, Gupta builders applied their knowledge of mathematics to design complex structures like the one shown above.
18.9 Roads

Gupta rulers encouraged trade by creating a system of well-built roads. Care and precision were used to build these roads. First engineers cleared the roadway of plants, trees, and rocks. Then, holes were filled in. Finally, workers smoothed the ground until it was level. The finished roads were made of hard-packed dirt.

The roadways were designed for safety and comfort. They were built a few feet off the ground. Ditches, or canals, ran along either side. These features helped prevent flooding during the rainy monsoon season. Water would run off the road and into the ditches.

Signs along the roadway told travelers where they were. Signs also marked off the distances so people could calculate how far they had traveled. Rest houses gave travelers a place to relax or spend the night. Wells provided water for drinking and cooking.

The empire’s roads greatly benefited trade. They enabled busy traders to move easily from city to city within the large empire. Traders could also move goods from the middle of the country to important waterways. From there, traders could ship their goods and sell them in other countries. The roads also connected India to China and the lands east of the Mediterranean Sea.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the many advances made in ancient India during a golden age under the rule of the Gupta Empire.

The Rise of the Gupta Empire The Gupta Empire arose around 320 C.E. under Chandragupta I. Like the Mauryas, the Guptas created a strong central government, while also giving significant independence to local leaders. This strategy helped create an era of stability and prosperity. India experienced a surge of learning and artistic growth in many areas.

Universities The Guptas built many Hindu and Buddhist universities attended by students from the upper classes. Nalanda was the most famous school.

Literature Writers created poetry, fables, folktales, and plays. Scholars wrote about law and religion. Great works of Sanskrit literature, including the Puranas and the Mahabharata, were recorded. Some of this work spread beyond India and continues to be influential today.

Painting and Sculpture Artists and members of noble families created paintings depicting religious values and noble life. The Ajanta cave murals are among the greatest ancient Indian paintings. Sculptors worked in stone, wood, bronze, and terra-cotta clay. Their work showed Hindu deities, the Buddha, and scenes from important people's lives.

Metalwork Skilled metalworkers engraved gold and copper coins. Artisans were famous for their ironwork, including engravings on iron pillars.

Mathematics Gupta mathematicians developed a decimal system and were the first to treat zero as a number. One astronomer, named Aryabhata, calculated the length of a year and estimated the size of Earth. We still use their advances today.

Roads Engineers designed and built a system of roads that helped improve trade and prosperity.

Each person in this detail of an Ajanta cave mural displays a different mudra, which is a hand position. These Buddhist gestures symbolize beliefs about the gods and communicate such qualities as compassion and fearlessness.