
UNIT 1 RISE AND GROWTH OF THE GUPTAS*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you shall be able to:

- learn about the political conditions in India at the beginning of the 4th century CE;
- familiarise yourself with the circumstances that led to the rise of Gupta power;
- explain the expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire;
- understand the order of succession of the Gupta rulers and their military exploits; and
- understand the process that led to the decline of the Guptas.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, after briefly discussing the political situation of the 4th century CE we will analyse the historical situation which led to the rise of the Gupta dynasty. The attempt here will be to give you a political outline of the period. We take into account the controversies relating to the succession of Gupta kings and, at the same time, discuss some of their achievements which made possible the formation and consolidation of the empire. Kings like Samudragupta, Chandragupta-II, Kumaragupta and Skandagupta figure very prominently in the history of the empire. The Unit also takes into account some of the problems faced by the Gupta kings and the factors responsible for the decline of Gupta.

*This Unit has been borrowed from EHI-02, Block-8.

1.2 POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In the beginning of the 4th century CE no large state structure existed in India. You have read in earlier Course that in the post-Mauryan period two large state structures had emerged in north India and in the Deccan. These were the Kushana state of the north and the Satavahana state of the Deccan. But, although the Kushanas and Shaka chiefs continued to rule even in early 4th century CE, their power had become considerably weak, and the Satavahana state had disappeared before the middle of the 3rd century CE. This does not, however, mean that there was complete political vacuum. There was no major political power but there were minor powers and new families of rulers were emerging. It was in this situation that the Guptas, a family of uncertain origins, began to build up an empire from the beginning of the 4th century CE. Before we take up the history of this empire, we present an outline of the political situation of this period by taking up different regions separately.

1.2.1 North-western and Northern India

Before the middle of the 3rd century CE the rule of the Sassanians had been established in Iran and the Sassanian rulers started claiming overlordship over Kushana kings. The mighty Kushana kings of north-western India were reduced to the position of subordinates and the Sassanian authority also extended to Sindh and certain other areas.

However, a large number of coins which are based on earlier Kushana coins and are found in Afghanistan and Punjab suggest that several branches of rulers, some Kushana, continued to rule in the region. There are also the coins of Kidara Kushana and his successors, in Afghanistan, Kashmir and western Punjab and it is possible that some of these rulers were contemporaries of the early Gupta rulers.

In other parts of the Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, old coins again point to the existence of a number of republican states. These were states which were not ruled by a single king but possibly by several chiefs; it was only occasionally that one finds a chief claiming the status of the king of a clan. The Madras, mentioned in connection with the exploits of the Gupta ruler Samudragupta, were located in the Punjab; the Yaudheyas were extremely powerful with their centre in present-day Haryana and the Malavas were located in Rajasthan. There were many other republican states like these, and some of them are even mentioned in the Gupta records.

Several branches of the Nagas who became very powerful in Mathura and other centres after the decline of Kushana power in north India are also known. Some of the north Indian rulers who were defeated by Samudragupta were definitely of Naga origin.

1.2.2 Western and Central India

You have read that a branch of Kshatrapa rulers established themselves in Western India in the post-Mauryan period. The line of Chastana, to which the well-known Shaka-Kshatrapa Rudradaman belonged, continued to rule till 304 CE. And then a new line of rulers began to rule. However, Kshatrapa rule came to

an end towards the close of the 4th century CE when Gupta ruler Chandragupta-II conquered and annexed their territories.

In the region of ancient Vidarbha, the core of which was Nagpur in north-east Maharashtra, a new power had emerged by the middle of the 3rd century CE. This power was that of the Vakatakas, a new line of rulers started by Vindhyasakti. Vakataka power soon became formidable and a branch was also established at Vatsagulma (modern Basim in Akola district). The Vakataka family later on came into close contact with the Guptas, particularly after a matrimonial alliance was formed between the two families.

1.2.3 The Deccan and South India

The decline of the Satavahana state of the Deccan was followed by the emergence of a number of new royal families in different parts of the Deccan. In coastal Andhra, there was a succession of families like the Ikshvakus, the Salankayanas and others. In Karnataka, the most important ruling family was that of the Kadambas. The Kadamba power was founded by Brahmin Mayurasarman whose Talagunda inscription gives some interesting details of the circumstances leading to the establishment of the kingdom and also some idea regarding its extent. The ruling family of the Pallavas, which became a formidable power in Tamilnadu till the 9th century is known from their records to have started ruling from the middle of the 3rd century CE. The inscriptions of the early Pallava rulers were written in the Prakrit language and were in the form of copper plates. They are generally assigned to the period between c. 250-350 CE. Sivaskandarasman of this family, who ruled in the beginning of the 4th century CE, was a powerful ruler and his kingdom included parts of Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Kanchi or Kanchipuram in the Chingleput district of Tamilnadu became the capital of the Pallavas and when Gupta ruler Samudragupta led an expedition to the south, he encountered Pallavan king Vismigopa at Kanchi. The above sketch does not mention many areas and many ruling families but only those who were comparatively important. It must, however, be noted that in many areas like Bengal, Orissa, forest regions of Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere, kingdoms were emerging for the first time. This was a new trend and was very significant for the later course of political history.

1.3 THE RISE OF THE GUPTAS

The ancestry and early history of the Gupta family are little known, and have naturally given rise to various speculations. Names ending in Gupta, such as Sivagupta which occurs in a Satavahana inscription, are sometimes taken to suggest their ancestry. But these suggestions are rather far-fetched. Different scholars also place the original home of the Guptas differently: some would place it in north Bengal, some in Magadha in Bihar and some in UP. On the basis of the following arguments it may, at the moment, be suggested that the original core of the Gupta territory lay in eastern UP:

- Allahabad pillar inscription, the earliest inscription recording the achievements of an early Gupta ruler Samudragupta, comes from this region.
- The nature of the coin-hoards of the Guptas, found in this region, suggests this.
- The description of early Gupta territories in the *Puranas* may point to this.

It is possible that in the closing decades of the 3rd century CE the Guptas were subordinates of a branch of the later Kushanas ruling in north-western India. However, literary and archaeological sources indicate that they became independent in the second decade of the 4th century CE.

Inscriptions tell us that Srigupta was the first king and Ghatotkacha was the next to follow him. Chandragupta-I was the first independent king with the title *Maharajadhiraja*. After declaring his independence in Magadha, he, with the help of a matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis, enlarged his kingdom. We know about this alliance from a special category of coins. These coins have Chandragupta and his queen Kumaradevi engraved on the obverse and a seated goddess on the reverse with a legend *Lichchhavayah* (i.e. the Lichchhavis). These coins were made of gold, and this fact in addition to the fact that the Guptas followed the weight system of Kushana gold coins, suggests that the Guptas had been in contact with the Kushana territories.

There are no concrete evidences to determine the boundaries of Chandragupta's kingdom. But it is assumed that it covered parts of Bihar, UP and Bengal.

Chandragupta-I is said to have also started a new era from 319-320 CE. It is not clear from any records that he started this era, which came to be known as Gupta *Samvat* (Gupta era) but since Chandragupta-I is mentioned as a *Maharajadhiraja* he is credited with the founding of the era. It was during the times of his son Samudragupta that the kingdom grew into an empire.

1.3.1 Samudragupta

An inscription engraved (at a later date) on the Asokan pillar at Allahabad (known as *Prayaga-prashasti*) gives us information about Samudragupta's accession and conquests. Harishena, an important official of the state, had composed 33 lines which were engraved on the pillar. The inscription mentions that *Maharajadhiraja* Chandragupta-I in a highly emotional tone declared his son Samudragupta as his successor. This caused joy among the courtiers and heart-burning among those of equal birth. It can be presumed that other princes might have put forward their contending claims which were put to rest by this declaration. Further, the discovery of some gold coins bearing the name of Kacha has generated a controversy relating to this. The controversy has arisen because:

- i) in many respects Kacha's coins are similar to the coins of Samudragupta,
- ii) the name of Kacha does not appear in the official lists of Gupta rulers, as they are available in the Gupta inscriptions.

Various interpretations have been given in this regard:

- According to one interpretation Samudragupta's brothers revolted against him and placed Kacha, the eldest brother, on the throne. However, he died in the war of succession.
- Another view mentions that these coins were issued by Samudragupta in the memory of his brother.
- A third view mentions Kacha as the initial name of Samudragupta and the later name was adopted only after the conquest of south.

There is no solution to the controversy as each view has arguments in favour or against. We could only say that since the number of Kacha coins found so far is somewhat limited, his hold over the throne would have been for a very short duration. Also that Samudragupta, in spite of Chandragupta's abdication, did face problems in relation to accession to the throne but ultimately he emerged victorious.

1.3.2 Expansion and Consolidation

For the expansion and consolidation of the Gupta power Samudragupta adopted an aggressive policy of conquests. This initiated a process which culminated in the formation of the Gupta empire. However, we have to take note here of the fact that in certain regions – particularly in the South – he let the kings, whom he had defeated, rule over their regions. Of course, they accepted his suzerainty and paid tributes. Such a policy adopted in relation to the far-flung areas might have paid dividends in solving problems of communication and effective control, hence bringing about stability for the time being. Let us briefly discuss the aggressive campaigns taken by Samudragupta in various regions. We may mention again that we come to know about all the campaigns of Samudragupta only from one record: the *Prayaga-prashasti* of Harishena.

1) Campaigns in *Aryavarta*:

Some historians are of the view that Samudragupta carried his victorious campaign of *Aryavarta* at one time. However, some other historians, assuming that the *Prayaga-prashasti* mentions the conquests of Samudragupta in a chronological order, have opined that there were two campaigns in north India. This is because the *prashasti* first mentions three *Aryavarta* kings, then it goes on to mention his southern campaign and again mentions nine *Aryavarta* kings. It appears that taking advantage of the war of succession, which Samudragupta had to face, certain rulers attempted to establish their dominance. It might be in this context that Samudragupta defeated Achyuta, Nagasena and Kota-Kulaja. There are no details regarding these conquests or regarding the identity of the specific regions over which they ruled. However, historians have identified Achyuta as ruling over Ahichchhatra, Nagasena over Gwalior area and Kota-Kulaja as ruler of the Kota family in east Punjab and Delhi. Though differences continue to prevail over these identifications it is clear that Samudragupta, after defeating them, established firm control not only over the Ganga valley but also over some adjacent regions.

2) Campaign in South:

The *Prayaga-prashasti* mentions 12 rulers from *Dakshinapatha* (south India) who were defeated by Samudragupta. These were:

- Mahendra of Kosala (Raipur, Durg, Sambalpur and Bilaspur districts)
- Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara (Jeypore, forest region of Odisha)
- Mantaraja of Kaurata (probably Sonpur area in Madhya Pradesh or plain country to the north-east of Mahendra hill)
- Mahendragiri of Pishtapura (Pithasuram, east Godavari district)
- Svamidatta of Kottura (Ganjam district)

- Damana of Erandapalla (Chicacole or west Godavari district)
- Vishnugopa of Kanchi (Chingleput district)
- Nilaraja of Avamukta (Godavari valley)
- Hasti-varman of Vengi (Cellor in the Krishna-Godavari delta)
- Ugresena of Palakka (Nellore district)
- Kubera of Devarashtra (Yellamanchiti in Visakhapatnam district), and
- Dhananjaya of Kushthalpura (possibly in north Arcot district in Tamilnadu).

However, again there are differences among historians as to the specific identifications of these kings and their kingdoms. The *Prayaga-prashasti* says that Samudragupta showed favour to *Dakshinapatha* kings by first capturing them (*grahana*) and then releasing them (*moksha*). *Aryavarta* (north India). He not only defeated them but also annexed their territories which became integrated into the Gupta empire. The north Indian kings defeated by Samudragupta were: Rudradwa, Matila, Nagadatta, Chandravarman, Ganapatinaga, Nagasena, Archyuta, Nandi, Balavarmna and others. It is impossible to identify all of them, but it is certain that they were ruling in different parts of northern India. Some of them were obviously Naga rulers who had been powerful in several regions before the Guptas. Rulers like Chandravarman who ruled in present West Bengal represented new ruling families. The *Prashasti* further says that Samudragupta reduced all states in the forest regions to the position of servants. In another category are mentioned the frontier kingdoms like Samatata (in south-east Bengal), Kamarupa (Assam), Nepala (Nepal) and others and the republican states of the Malavas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Abhiras etc. They paid him tributes of all kinds, carried out his orders and paid him homage. Rulers of another category of states acknowledged his sovereignty in a different way. They pleased him by “Self-surrender, offering (their own) daughters in marriage, and a request of the administration of their own districts and provinces.” This means that they remained independent but their independence had to be approved by Samundragupta. In this category were included the foreign rulers of north-western India like the later Kushanas and the Shaka chief and residents of different island countries including Simhala (Sri Lanka).

Many of the claims made by Harishena – the composer of *Prayaga-prashasti* – are highly exaggerated but many of the claims are also genuine. The military foundations of the Gupta empire were laid by Samundragupta; his successors built upon these foundations.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Fill in the blanks:

- At the beginning of the 4th century CE there were (many/no) small kingdoms in North India.
- Chandragupta-I had a matrimonial alliance with (Shakas/Lichchhavis).
- The *Prayaga-prashasti* refers to the victories of (Pravarsena/Samudragupta).

- 2) Discuss the efforts made by Samudragupta for the expansion of Gupta empire.

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- 3) List five minor powers in north India at the beginning of 4th century CE.

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1.4 CHANDRAGUPTA-II

The Gupta inscriptions mention Chandragupta-II as Samudragupta's successor. But, on the basis of literary sources, some copper coins and inscriptions it is suggested that the successor was Samudragupta's other son Ramagupta. Visakhadatta's drama *Devi Chandraguptam* mentions that Chandragupta-II killed his elder brother Ramagupta. He did this because Ramagupta was facing defeat at the hands of the Shakas and in order to save the kingdom, he had agreed to surrender his wife to the Shaka king. Chandragupta protested and went to the Shaka camp in the disguise of the queen Dhruvadevi. He was successful against the Shaka king but as a result of the subsequent hostility with his brother he killed him and married his wife Dhruvadevi. Certain other texts like the *Harshacharita*, *Kavyamimamsa* etc. also refer to this episode. Some copper coins bearing the name Ramagupta have also been found and inscriptions on the pedestals of some Jaina images found at Vidisha bear the name *Maharaja Ramgupta*. Similarly, Dhruvadevi is described as mother of Govindagupta (Chandragupta's son) in a Vaishali seal. We can say that Chandragupta ascended the throne at a time when there were problems emerging again and he had to lead military campaigns to establish Gupta supremacy once again. He entered into matrimonial alliances with the Nagas by marrying princess Kuberanaga whose daughter Prabhavati was later on married to Rudrasena-II of the Vakataka family. Though there is no record like the *Prayaga-prashasti* to describe the events of his reign, we do get information about Chandragupta's campaigns and successes from certain inscriptions, literary sources and coins: He defeated the Shaka king Rudrasimha-III and annexed his kingdom. This brought an end to Shaka-Kshatrapa rule in western India and added the regions of Gujarat, Kathiawad and west Malwa to the Gupta empire. The details of Chandragupta-II's campaigns against the Shakas are not known. His matrimonial alliances with the Vakatakas and the Nagas must have been of tremendous significance in his preparations for the campaigns. Two inscriptions at the Udayagiri caves near Sanchi and one inscription at Sanchi – all referring to Chandragupta II and to his

subordinate rulers and military officials – also suggest that he was present in eastern Malwa for some time preparing for the campaigns. One inscription describes him as “desirous of conquering the whole earth”. That his conquest of the territories of the Shakas was complete is proved beyond doubt because:

- We no longer find any Shaka coins minted after this period, although Shaka coins were being minted without a break for almost 400 years previously.
- The Guptas, from the time of Chandragupta, started minting Shaka-type silver coins for this region. They only added their own distinct symbols on these coins; otherwise, the coins were like Shaka coins in circulation till then. This definitely shows that the Shaka areas came within the control of Chandragupta-II.
- The success of Chandragupta-II against the Shakas seems to have developed later on into the tradition of *Shakari Vikramaditya* i.e. “Vikramaditya who was an enemy of the Shakas”.
- ‘King Chandra’ whose exploits have been mentioned in the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription, located in the Qutub-Minar complex in Delhi, is identified by many scholars with Chandragupta-II. According to this inscription, Chandra crossed the Sindhu region of seven rivers and defeated Valhikas (identified with Bactria). Some scholars identify Chandragupta-II with the hero of Kalidasa’s work *Raghuvamsha* because Raghu’s exploits appear comparable with those of Chandragupta.
- The Mehrauli inscription also mentions Chandragupta’s victory over enemies from Vanga (Bengal).

On the basis of these evidences it can be suggested that Chandragupta-II was able to extend the frontiers of the Gupta empire to western, north-western and eastern India.

An important incident which took place during this period was the visit of Fa-Hien, a Chinese pilgrim, who came to India in search of Buddhist texts. In his memoirs he has given a vivid description of the places he visited and certain social and administrative aspects related to them. However, he does not mention the name of the king in his accounts. But he speaks highly of the king of *Madhya-desha* – the region which was directly ruled by the Gupta monarch in this period – under whom the people were prosperous and happy.

Chandragupta-II is also known for his patronage to men of letters and he ruled till about 415-16 CE.

1.5 KUMARAGUPTA-I

Chandragupta-II was succeeded by his son Kumaragupta. We get information about him from certain inscriptions and coins. For example:

- The earliest known inscription of his period is from Bilsad (Etah district) which is dated 415 CE (Gupta Era 96).
- The Karamdanda (Fyzabad) inscription of Kumaragupta’s minister (436 CE) mentions his fame having spread to the four oceans.

- A stone inscription from Mandor (436 CE) mentions Kumaragupta as reigning over the whole earth.
- The Damodar Copper Plate inscriptions (433 CE or 447 CE) refer to him as *Maharajadhiraja* and show that he himself appointed the governor (*Uparika*) of Pundravardhana *bhukti* (or province) being the biggest administrative division in the empire.
- The last known date of Kumaragupta is from a silver coin dated 455 CE (Gupta Era 136).

The wide area over which his inscriptions are distributed indicates that he ruled over Magadha and Bengal in the east and Gujarat in the west. It has been suggested that towards the last year of his reign the Gupta empire faced foreign invasion which was checked by the efforts of his son Skandagupta. He maintained cordial relationship with the Vakatakas which had been established through matrimonial alliances.

1.6 SKANDAGUPTA

Skandagupta, who succeeded Kumaragupta-I, was perhaps the last powerful Gupta monarch. To consolidate his position he had to fight the Pushyamitras, and the country faced Huna invasion from across the frontiers in the north-west. However, Skandagupta was successful in throwing the Hunas back. It appears that these wars adversely affected the economy of the empire, and the gold coinage of Skandagupta bears testimony to that. In comparison to the gold coins of the earlier rulers the types of gold coins minted by Skandagupta were limited. In addition to the earlier system of weights, he introduced a new, heavier weight system for gold coins but generally his coins had less gold in them than earlier coins.

Moreover, he appears to have been the last Gupta ruler to mint silver coins in western India. However, the Junagadh inscription of his reign tells us about the public works undertaken during his times. The Sudarshana lake (originally built during the Maurya times) burst due to excessive rains and in the early part of his rule his governor Parnadatta got it repaired. This indicates that the state undertook the task of public works. The last known date of Skandagupta is 467 CE from his silver coins.

Gupta Rulers after Skandagupta

It is not very clear in what order the successors of Skandagupta ruled. Skandagupta himself may not have been the rightful heir to the throne and therefore, he had to fight other contenders to the throne. This may be the reason why a seal inscription traces a line of Gupta rulers after Skandagupta from Kumaragupta-I and his son Purugupta and not Skandagupta. Secondly, it is probable that the division of the Gupta empire into many parts already began towards the close of Skandagupta's reign. Thus, an inscription from western Malwa recorded in the last year of Skandagupta does not refer to him but to some other rulers beginning with Chandragupta-II.

Some of the successors of Skandagupta, mentioned in inscriptions, were: Budhagupta, Vainyagupta, Bhanagupta, Narasimhagupta Baladitya, Kumaragupta-II and Vismigupta. It is unlikely that all of them ruled over a vast

empire, as Chandragupta-II and Kumaragupta-I had done in an earlier period. The Guptas continued to rule till about 550 CE but by then their power had already become very insignificant.

1.7 DISINTEGRATION OF THE GUPTA EMPIRE

In this section we deal with some of the factors that contributed towards the disintegration of the Gupta empire.

1) Huna Invasions

From the time of Kumaragupta-I the north-west borders had been threatened by the Hunas: a central Asian tribe which was successfully moving in different directions and was establishing pockets of rule in north-western, northern and western India. But their attacks were repulsed during that period. However, towards the end of the 5th century CE the Huna chief Tormana was able to establish his authority over large parts of western India and in central India. Mihirakula, his son, further extended the dominions. Thus, the Huna attacks caused a major blow to the Gupta authority particularly in northern and western regions of the empire.

2) Administrative Weaknesses

The policy adopted by the Guptas in the conquered areas was to restore the authority of local chiefs or kings once they had accepted Gupta suzerainty. In fact, no efforts were made to impose a strict and effective control over these regions. Hence, it was natural that whenever there was a crisis of succession or a weak monarchy within the Gupta empire these local chiefs would reestablish their independent authority. This created a problem for almost every Gupta king who had to reinforce his authority. The constant military campaigns were a strain on the state treasury. Towards the end of the 5th century CE and beginning of 6th century CE, taking advantage of the weak Gupta emperors, many regional powers reasserted their authority, and in due course declared their independence.

Besides these, there were many other reasons which contributed to the decline of Guptas. For example, it has been argued that the Guptas issued land-grants to the *Brahmana* donees and in this process surrendered the revenue and administrative rights in favour of the donees. Further, it is believed that the *samanta* system in which the *samantas* (minor rulers), who ruled as subordinates to the central authority, started to consolidate itself in the Gupta period. This is also believed to be the reason why Gupta administrative structure became so loose. There is diversity of opinion as to how the system originated and regarding the details of the system, but the presence of many *Samantas* within the empire does show that they wielded power almost independently of the Gupta authority.

There is no doubt that divisions within the imperial family, concentration of power in the hands of local chiefs or governors, loose administrative structure of the empire etc. contributed towards the disintegration of the Gupta empire.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the military campaigns of Chandragupta-II.

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- 2) Discuss the factors which brought about the disintegration of Gupta empire.

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- 3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong?

- a) The Huna invasion during Kumaragupta's time was checked by Skandagupta. ()
- b) Fa-Hien came to India in search of Jaina texts. ()
- c) Ramagupta is said to be Chandragupta-II's elder brother. ()
- d) Sudarshana lake was repaired during Skandagupta's rule. ()

1.8 SUMMARY

In the beginning of the 4th century CE north India was divided into many small kingdoms and chiefdoms. These kingdoms in different regions often fought with each other. It was in such a political situation that the Gupta dynasty gained power and gradually established an empire. The kings of this dynasty undertook extensive military campaigns in different regions. It was under Samudragupta and Chandragupta-II that the imperial power was properly consolidated. The Guptas remained a strong force till the time of Skandagupta but after him the process of disintegration started. Various factors like foreign invasion, dissension within the ruling family, reassertion of power by local chiefs, administrative weakness etc. hastened the process of disintegration.

1.9 KEY WORDS

- Aryavarta** : Literally meaning “abode of the Aryans”, it is the region where the Vedic Aryans settled after their migration into the Indian subcontinent. It covers parts of north-western and northern India.
- Prashasti** : Panegyric/Eulogy.
- Puranas** : Encyclopaedic Hindu texts on a variety of topics.

1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) many, b) Lichchhavis, c) Samudragupta
- 2) Compare your answer by reading Sub-sec. 1.3.2
- 3) Yaudheyas, Malavas, Nagas, Madras, Later Kushanas. See Sub-sec. 1.2.1.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Compare your answer with the contents in Sec. 1.4
- 2) See Sec. 1.8
- 3) a) $\checkmark$ b) $\times$ c) $\checkmark$ d) $\checkmark$

1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Banarsidass.Gupta, P.L. *The Imperial Guptas*. Varanasi.

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UNIT 2 ECONOMY, SOCIETY, CULTURE AND POLITY: THE GUPTAS*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Administration under the Guptas
 - 2.2.1 King
 - 2.2.2 Council of Ministers and Other Officials
 - 2.2.3 Army
 - 2.2.4 Revenue Administration
 - 2.2.5 Provinces, Districts and Villages
- 2.3 Economy
 - 2.3.1 Agriculture
 - 2.3.2 Crafts Production and Trade
- 2.4 Culture
- 2.5 Society
- 2.6 Summary
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 2.9 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you shall be able to learn about:

- the administrative set-up of the Guptas;
- the economic conditions under the Guptas in relation to agriculture, crafts production and trade; and
- the various aspects of culture and social life during this period.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

After having made you familiar with an outline of the political history of the Gupta period (Unit 1) we now take up certain other aspects of this period. There are a variety of sources which tell us about economic, social, administrative and cultural aspects of this period. These sources of information are:

- i) inscriptions written on different materials like copper plates, stone, clay seals;
- ii) coins issued by rulers of different dynasties;
- iii) material from excavations;
- iv) contemporary literature; and
- v) accounts left by foreign travellers like Fa-Hien.

* This Unit has been borrowed from EHI-02, Block-8.

In this Unit we shall tell you about the administrative set-up adopted by the Guptas. It will also deal with the economic activities of the period and different sources of state revenue. The Unit also discusses culture and the social conditions during this period.

2.2 ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE GUPTAS

We have already mentioned in Unit 1 that the Gupta kings did not interfere in the administration of those regions where the kings had accepted their suzerainty. However, this does not mean that the Guptas were ruling only through their feudatories. They had an elaborate administrative system which was in operation in areas which were directly controlled by them.

2.2.1 King

The king remained the central figure of administration. However, there was a considerable change in the character of monarchy. We find that the Gupta monarchs adopted high sounding titles like:

- Paramabhattacharya,
- Parama-daivata,
- Chakravarti,
- Parameshvara etc.

For example, the Allahabad **Prashasti** of Samudragupta describes him as “equal to the gods Dhanada (Kubera), Varuna (Sea-God), Indra and Antaka (Vama); who had no antagonist of equal power in the world...” Like the king who has been given a divine status in the **Smriti** scriptures, the Gupta monarchs, too, came to be considered a divinity on earth. However, in the spirit of **Smriti** literature and that of Kalidasa we find Skandagupta in his Bhitari Pillar inscription eulogized as a person who “subdued the earth and became merciful to the conquered people, but he became neither proud nor arrogant though his glory was increasing day by day”. His father Kumaragupta “followed the true path of religion”. Such references to the monarchy indicate that in spite of the supreme powers that vested in the king he was expected to follow a righteous path, and had certain duties:

- It was the King’s duty to decide the policy of the state during war and peace. For instance, Samudragupta was prudent enough to reinstate the monarchs of *dakshinapatha* in their original kingdoms.
- It was considered a prime duty of the monarch to protect his countrymen from any invasion.
- The King was to lead the army in case of war. This is demonstrated through the campaigns of Samudragupta and Chandragupta-II.
- The King was also expected to support the *Brahmanas*, *Sramanas* and all others who needed his protection.
- He was also supposed to venerate the learned and religious people and give them every possible help.
- As the supreme judge he looked after administration of justice according to religious precepts and existing customs.

- It was the duty of the King to appoint his central and provincial officers.
- The **Prayaga-prashasti** as well as the **Apratigha** type coins of Kumaragupta-I point to the appointment of successor to the throne by the reigning King.

An important political development of this period was the continuity of various kings in their regions once they had accepted the suzerainty of the Gupta King. And the Gupta King would not interfere with the administration of such regions.

2.2.2 Council of Ministers and Other Officials

The Gupta inscriptions are not very clear about the hierarchy of ministers. However, there is no doubt that the King used to take counsel of his ministers and issue written instructions to officials on all important matters.

The minister's office was perhaps hereditary. For example, the Udayagiri inscription of the time of Chandragupta-II informs us that Virasena Saba, the minister for war and peace, was holding this office by inheritance. Though the supreme judicial powers were vested in the King, he was assisted by the **Mahadandanayaka** (Chief Justice). In the provinces this work was entrusted to the **Uparikas** and in districts to the **Vishayapatis**. In villages, the headman and the village elders used to decide the petty cases. The Chinese traveller Fa-Hien states that capital punishment was not given at all.

There were some other high officials. For example, the **Mahapratihara** was the chief of the palace guards, the **Pratihara** regulated ceremonies and granted the necessary permits for admission to the royal presence. There existed an espionage system as in the earlier period. The land-grant inscriptions often mention **Dutakas** who were associated with the task of implementing gifts when gifts of land were made to *brahmanas* and others.

2.2.3 Army

The Guptas must have had a big army organisation. At the time of war the King led his army but ordinarily there was a minister called **Sandhi-Vigrahika** (Minister in charge of peace and war) who was helped by a group of high officials. The official title **Mahabaladhikrita** occurs in many inscriptions. Officials like **Pilupati** (head of elephants), **Ashvapati** (head of horses), **Narapati** (head of foot soldiers) possibly worked under him. The army was paid in cash and its needs were well looked after by an officer-in-charge of stores called **Ranabhandagarika**. Amongst other duties this officer was to look after the supply of offensive and defensive weapons such as battle-axes, bows and arrows, spear pikes, swords, lances, javelins etc.

2.2.4 Revenue Administration

Land revenue was the main source of the state's income besides the fines. In Samudragupta's time we hear of an officer **Gopasramin** working as **Akshapataladhikrita**. His duty was to enter numerous matters in the accounts registers, recover royal dues from the sureties of servants, to check embezzlement and recover fines for loss due to neglect or fraud.

Another prominent high official was **Pustapala** (record-keeper). It was his duty to make enquiries before recording any transaction. The Gupta kings maintained

a regular department for the proper survey and measurement of land as well as for the collection of land revenue. Kamandaka in the **Nitisara** suggests that a King should take special care of his treasury, for the life of the state depends solely on it.

Both Kalidasa and the author of the **Narada-Smriti** state that one-sixth of the produce should be claimed as the royal revenue. Besides this there was the **Uparikara** which was levied on cloth, oil, etc. when taken from one city to another. The organisation of traders had to pay a certain commercial tax (**Shulka**), the non-payment of which resulted in cancellation of the right to trade and a fine amounting to eight times of the original **Shulka**. The King had a right to forced labour (**Vishthi**), **Bali** and many other types of contributions. The King's income from royal lands and forests was considered as his personal income. Besides this, the King's treasury had a right to treasure troves (treasures in the forms of coin-hoards, jewels or other valuable objects, discovered from below the earth accidentally), digging of mines and manufacture of salt.

2.2.5 Provinces, Districts and Villages

The whole empire was divided into **Desas**, or **Rashtras**, or **Bhuktis**. The inscriptions provide us with the names of certain **Bhuktis**. In Bengal we hear of Pundravardhara **Bhukti** which corresponded to north Bengal. **Tira-bhukti** corresponded to north Bihar. The **Bhuktis** were governed by **Uparikas** directly appointed by the King. In areas like western Malwa we find local rulers like Bandhuvarman ruling as subordinate to Kumaragupta-I but Parnadana was appointed a governor in Saurashtra by Skandagupta.

The Province (**Bhukti**) was again divided into districts (**Vishayas**) under an official called **Ayuktaka** and in other cases a **Vishyapati**. His appointment was made by the provincial governor. Gupta inscriptions from Bengal show that the office (**Adhikarana**) of the district-head associated with itself representation from major local communities:

- the **Nagarasreshthi** (head of city merchants),
- **Sarthavaha** (Caravan-leader),
- **Prathama-Kulika** (head of the artisan community) and
- **Prathama Kayastha** (head of the Kayastha community).

Besides them, were the **Pustapalas** – officials whose work was to manage and keep records. The lowest unit of administration was the village where there was a headman called **Gramapati** or **Gramadhayaksha**.

However, the Gupta inscriptions from north Bengal show that there were other units higher than the village. In some cases we find references to **Astakuladhikarana**. Different categories of villages mentioned as **Gramikas**, **Kutumbis** and **Mahattaras** sent representatives to these offices which on various occasions functioned above the level of the village.

Besides agriculturists, there were certain other groups in the villages who followed such professions as carpentry, spinning and weaving, pot-making, oil extraction, gold smithery, and husbandry. All these groups must have constituted local institutions or bodies which looked after the affairs of the village. The village

disputes were also settled by these bodies with the help of **Grama-vriddhas** (village elders).

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×)?
 - a) The King no more remained a central figure under the Guptas. ()
 - b) The King was to lead the army in case of war. ()
 - c) *Mahadandanayaka* was the minister of revenues. ()
 - d) One-sixth of the produce was claimed as royal revenue. ()
 - e) The highest unit of administration was the village. ()
- 2) Write about the revenue administration of Guptas.

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- 3) Write about the powers and duties of the King.

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2.3 ECONOMY

You have read earlier that agricultural crops constituted the main resources which the society produced and that the major part of the revenue of the state also came from agriculture. This, of course, does not mean that agriculture was the only occupation of the people or that people lived only in villages. There were other occupations like commerce and production of crafts which had become specialised occupations and in which different social groups were engaged. This also means that, as in earlier periods, people lived in forests, in agrarian tracts, in towns and in cities, but certain changes had started taking place in the pattern of economic production and consequently, in relations between different social groups. We shall highlight some of these changes in the course of this and the next section.

2.3.1 Agriculture

Let us begin with the pattern of agricultural production. The concern of the society with agricultural production is clear from the way various aspects associated with agricultural operations are mentioned in the sources of the Gupta period. Various types of land are mentioned in the inscriptions: land under

cultivation was usually called **Kshetra**. Lands not under cultivation were variously called as **Khila**, **Aprahata** etc., and inscriptions give the impression that uncultivated land was being regularly brought under cultivation. Classification of land according to soil, fertility and the use to which it was put was not unknown. Different land measures were known in different regions, although one cannot be certain what exact measure was denoted by a term. In some areas **Nivartana** was the term used for a measure of land whereas in the inscriptions of Bengal terms like **Kulyavapa** and **Dronavapa** are used. It is not possible to classify the regions precisely according to the crops grown, but all the major categories of crops – cereals like barley, wheat and paddy, different varieties of pulses, grams and vegetables as well as cash crops like cotton and sugarcane – were known long before the Gupta period and continued to be cultivated. Of course, you should not assume that crops like maize or vegetables like potatoes or tomatoes were known to the farmers of the Gupta period.

The concern of the society with agricultural production is also reflected in the importance given to irrigation. You have already read about the Sudarshana reservoir (**Tadaga**) in Saurashtra in Gujarat. Originally built in the Maurya period, this reservoir was thoroughly repaired when it was extensively damaged in the time of *Mahakshatrapa* Rudradaman (middle of the 2nd century CE). It was again severely damaged in the time of Skandagupta. Parnadatta, his newly appointed governor of Saurashtra and Parnadatta's son Chakrapalita, undertook the repair of the reservoir this time. Another method for irrigation was to draw water from wells and supply the water to the fields through carefully prepared channels. A mechanism, possibly known before the Gupta period, was to tie a number of pots to a chain: the chain with the pots reached down to the water of the well, and by making the chain and the pots rotate, it was ensured that the pots would continuously fill with water and empty it. This mechanism was known as **ghati-yantra** as **ghati** was the name used for a pot. This type of mechanism also came to be known as **araghatta**. In the **Harshacharita** of Banabhatta, which was written in the 7th century CE there is a very charming description of how cultivated fields, producing crops like sugarcane, were being irrigated with the help of **ghati-yantra**. In regions like Bengal, rainwater was collected in ponds and other types of reservoirs; in peninsular India, tank irrigation became gradually the norm. There were, thus, different systems of irrigation and the role of the state was only marginal in providing irrigation facilities to farmers. The farmers, of course, depended mainly on rainfall and the importance of rainfall is underlined not only in the **Arthashastra** of Kautilya but also in the texts written in the Gupta period.

The sources of the Gupta period suggest that certain important changes were taking place in the agrarian society. The inscriptions from Bengal refer to sale of land by district-level administration to individuals who bought them by paying cash and made gifts of purchased land to *brahmanas* who were expected to perform Vedic sacrifices or to the Buddhist or Jaina religious establishments. But, land was not only purchased and gifted; the practice of gifting land to religious donees had become quite common by now. Even otherwise, remuneration for serving rulers in different capacities was received in the form of land by officials of different categories. Of course, all this was not absolutely new. But, by now the number of ruling families had vastly increased and thus, the number of persons who received land but did not cultivate themselves went on increasing. The virtues of giving land were highly praised and those who

took away gifted land were threatened with many evil consequences. All this led to the appearance, in society, of a class of people who enjoyed superior rights over land and by virtue of these rights and by belonging to higher **varnas** had high economic and social status. Of course, land rights did not belong only to those who received land. The Gupta inscriptions refer to different types of village residents like **Gramikas**, **Kutumbis** and **Mahattaras** who must have been village landholders, and their participation in land transactions indicates that they, too, were important members of rural society.

Compared with the recipients of land from the rulers and the influential categories of land owners in villages, the condition of ordinary cultivators may be considered to have been rather bad. It is believed by some historians that because of the practice of land-grants, the peasant population as a whole were reduced to a very low position in society. This is not entirely untrue. It was the ordinary cultivators, known by various terms such as **Krishibala**, **Karshaka** or **Kinass**, who had low economic and social status. Among the actual cultivators there were those who filled the lands of others and received only a share of the produce.

There were also slaves who worked on the fields of their masters. Even domestic female slaves were cruelly exploited, and a text like the *Kamasutra* written in the Gupta period tells us how much hardship they had to go through at the hands of their masters.

There were other reasons why the condition of the ordinary cultivators declined considerably. One was that in many areas the appearance of small kingdoms of new rulers and their officials and sections of people who did not take part in agriculture created great inequalities in society and imposed great burden on actual tillers of the soil. The number of taxes imposed by the state on the producers also increased in this period. Further, the practice of imposing **vishti** (unpaid labour) was also in vogue, although we do not know for certain how much essential it was for agricultural production. All in all, the condition of the ordinary cultivators seems to have become worse than in the earlier periods.

2.3.2 Crafts Production and Trade

Crafts production covered a very wide range of items. There were items of ordinary domestic use like earthen pots, items of furniture, baskets, metal tools for domestic use and so on; simultaneously a wide variety of luxury items including jewellery made of gold, silver and precious stones; objects made of ivory; fine clothes of cotton and silk and other costly items had to be made available to the affluent sections of people. Some of these items were made available through trade; others were manufactured locally. Descriptions of many luxury objects, of which no trace is generally found in archaeological excavations, may be found in the literary texts or inscriptions of the period. These sources also give us interesting hints regarding the status of different categories of craftsmen. For example, different varieties of silk cloth, called **Kshauma** and **Pattavastra** are mentioned in the texts of this period. An inscription of 5th century from Mandasor in western Malwa refers to a guild of silk-weavers who had migrated from south Gujarat and had settled in the Malwa region. Texts like **Amarakosha** and **Brihat Samhita**, which are dated to this period, list many items, give their Sanskrit names and also mention different categories of craftsmen who manufactured them.

However, for an idea of the quantity and variety of objects manufactured in this period one has to go through reports of what have been found at various archaeological sites. Many important sites like Taxila, Ahichchhatra, Mathura, Rajghat, Kaushambi and Pataliputra in the Ganges valley and other sites in other geographical regions have yielded many craft products like:

- earthen wares,
- terracottas,
- beads made of different stones,
- objects of glass,
- items made of metals etc.

It seems that in comparison with crafts production in the preceding Shaka-Kushana period, crafts production in the Gupta period suffered some setback. It has, however, not yet been possible to make a very satisfactory comparative study between these two periods from this angle.

All items were not available at all places; the movement of items for trade from one place to another, therefore, continued as in the earlier periods. You have read that India had extensive trade links with Central, West and South-east Asia and with the Roman world in the preceding period, and trade routes connecting different regions within the country had been developing over centuries. That commercial activities continued in the Gupta period are evident. Like their Kushana predecessors the Gupta rulers, too, minted coins of different types, and the gold coins of the Gupta rulers show excellent qualities of craftsmanship. The Guptas also issued coins in copper, silver and lead. These coins were obviously used for purposes of commercial exchange and in some regions of the Gupta empire at least, the merchants held a high position in society. For example, two types of representatives of merchants – the **Nagarasresthi** and the **Sarthavaha** – were associated with the administration of the district headquarters in north Bengal. The seals of the Gupta period found at Vaishali in north Bihar suggest that the merchants constituted an important section of the population of the city of Vaishali. Literary texts of the period, too, show that in cities like Pataliputra and Ujjayini commercial activities were carried on briskly and people from different countries were present in them. Merchants were important communities also in these cities.

There were organisations which facilitated the functioning of both craftsmen and traders. The ancient term which was generally used for these organisations was **Shreni** (guild) and the State was expected to provide the guilds protection and to respect their customs and norms. Similarly, members of the **Shreni** were also expected to follow the norms of the organisation; otherwise, they were liable to punishment. The term **Shreni** is often interpreted as guild but there are different interpretations of the term and in terms of many details, we are still not quite sure what the **Shrenis** were really like.

Although crafts production and commercial activities were brisk in the Gupta period, there are two points we should especially remember:

- i) There were many types of craftsmen and they were not all identical either in wealth or in social status. For example, there was vast difference between a goldsmith and his family with a shop in a city like Ujjayini and a family

of basket-makers in a village. This is reflected to some extent in the **Dharmashastras** written by the *brahmanas* in this period. The **Dharmashastras** assign different ranks to different groups of craftsmen, although in their scheme the craftsmen and artisans held a status lower than that of the *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas*. The **Dharmashastras** also suggest that each group of craftsmen formed a **jati** (caste). For example, the **Kumbhakar**as (potters) formed one caste, the **Suvarnakar**as (goldsmiths) formed another caste and so on. Although the system of caste was not really so simple, generally the trend among craftsmen was that persons following one craft formed a **jati** (caste).

- ii) Crafts production and commercial activities perhaps started declining from the Gupta Period onward in most regions and according to some historians, this resulted in the decline of towns and cities and in greater dependence of society of agricultural production. You will be reading more about these changes in Unit 7.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Fill in the blanks:
 - a) Land under cultivation was usually called.....(**Khila/Kshetra**).
 - b) The practice of gifting land to religious donees..... (had become/was not at all) common during the 6th-5th century CE.
 - c) The ordinary cultivators..... (flourished/suffered) during this period.
 - d) Sudarshana lake was repaired during the time of..... (Skandagupta/Purugupta).
- 2) Mention the methods adopted for irrigation during this period.

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- 3) Discuss the sources which refer to crafts and craftsmen.

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2.4 CULTURE¹

The Gupta period has often been referred to as “Golden Age” due to its cultural heritage. This applies to great accomplishments in the field of art and architecture, language and literature. The Gupta age, thus, stands out as a significant and noteworthy departure from previous historical periods, particularly in the cultural

¹ This Section has been written by Dr. Abhishek Anand.

history of India due to impressive standards achieved by artistic and literary expressions of this time. For the same reason, cultural development and cultural legacy of the Guptas is dealt with separately in subsequent Unit 15 of this Course.

It has been rightly commented that the Gupta art represents ancient Indian art at its best. From the vantage point of architecture, the Gupta period reflects creative enthusiasm and deep sense and awareness of beauty. These are evident in the *Dashaavataara* temple at Deogarh in Jhansi district (UP), Bhitargaon temple near Kanpur (UP), Vishnu temple at Tigawa (Jabalpur district, MP), Shiva temple at Bhumara (Satna district, MP), Parvati temple at Nachna-Kuthara (Panna district, MP) etc. Some of them are adorned with beautiful sculptural panels. The Gupta temple-building activity represents evolution from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines which now reached a whole new level. However, the high and elaborately carved *shikharas* (towers) on top of the temples were yet to register their appearance. Therefore, Gupta period marks the formative phase of temple construction in India, but it was a significant phase that continued to influence temple-building right up to the medieval period.

What we now refer to as “Classical Sanskrit” developed during the Guptas. Sanskrit was widely patronised by the Gupta rulers, making it the official language of their court. All their inscriptions are written in Sanskrit. Ignored earlier under the influence of the Buddhist and Jaina traditions that encouraged vernacular dialects like Pali, Prakrit and *Ardhamaagadhi*, Sanskrit saw its revival under the Guptas. Due to the same, it became a widespread language in entire north India during the Gupta period. Even Buddhist scholars, particularly those of *Mahayana* Buddhism, began composing their scriptures in Sanskrit. Great poets, dramatists, grammarians and playwrights of Sanskrit are known from this period.

The epics **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** are believed to have been compiled and given their final form around 4th-5th century CE. The great Sanskrit writer-poet Kalidasa – one of the *Navaratnas* (nine gems) of the court of Gupta king Chandragupta Vikramaditya – wrote dramas like **Abhijnana-Shakuntalam**, **Malavikagnimitram**, **Vikramorvashiyam** and poetic works such as **Raghuvamsham**, **Kumarasambhavam** and **Meghadutam** which show the excellent literary standards achieved during the Gupta period. Besides these, Varahamihira wrote **Brihat Samhitaa** that deals with scientific subjects like astronomy and botany. Aryabhatta wrote **Aryabhattiyam**: a famous work on geometry, algebra, arithmetic and trigonometry. The notable creations on medicine include **Charaka Samhitaa** and **Sushruta Samhitaa**. An all-round progress in literature was manifest during this time.

2.5 SOCIETY

You have already read that according to the scheme of society conceived by the *brahmanas*, society was divided into four *varnas* (*Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*), with each *varna* performing the set of functions prescribed for it and enjoying whatever rights were given to it. This was the ideal social order and the state was expected to preserve it. This means that when even a small state emerged in some corner of the country, the King of that state was expected to recognize this as the ideal social order. The *Brahmanas* came to exert considerable influence on the kings and this is quite clear from the way they

received land from the kings and others. The kings, officials and others gave land not only to individual *brahmanas* but also some times incited big groups of *brahmanas* to come and settle in remote areas. Thus, the number of *brahmana* settlements variously called **Brahmadiyas**, **Agraharas** and so on started increasing and they started spreading, among other things, the idea of a **varna**-divided social order.

However, **varna** order was an ideal order and there were many groups in society whose **varna** identity could never be determined. Secondly, it was assumed that the **varnas** would perform their duties; in reality, they may not have done so. These suggest that real society was different from the ideal society and this was also recognized by the *brahmana* writers of the **Dharmashastras**. They, therefore, tried to determine the status of various castes (**jatis**) in society by giving fictitious explanations of their origins. They suggested that various **jatis** originated through **varna-samkara** that is inter-marriages between various **varnas**.

The various foreign ruling families of the pre-Gupta period — of Greek or Siythian origin – were given the semi-*kshatriya* status (**vratya-Kshatriya**) because they could not be considered to be of pure **Kshatriya** origin. Similarly, fictitious origins were thought of for tribal groups who came to be absorbed into the Brahmanical society.

The **Dharmashastras** also speak of **apadharma**: conduct to be followed during periods of distress. This means that the **varnas** could take to professions and duties not assigned to them when they found it necessary to do so. In matters of profession also the **Dharmashastras**, thus, recognized that the real society was different from their ideal society. These changes, of course, originated much before the Gupta period, but with the spread of the *Brahmanas* to different parts of India, the social structure came to be very complex. The new society had to absorb many social groups. Thus, the actual social structure came to vary from region to region, although certain ideas were common to them:

- The *Brahmanas* came to be recognized as the purest and, therefore, the highest **varna**. Since they were associated with Sanskrit learning and performed priestly functions, they came to be closely connected with royal power. Even when the rulers were supporters of Buddhism, Jainism or a particular religious sect, they continued to patronize *brahmanas*, particularly those of high learning. This remained one of the major reasons for the economic prosperity and prestige of the *brahmanas*.
- Ideally, although there were four **varnas**, there were various groups who were kept out of this scheme. They were the **antyajas** (untouchables). They were considered impure; even their touch was considered impure and their physical presence in areas where higher **varnas** lived and moved was not allowed. The **Chandalas**, the **Charmakaras** and similar groups were considered impure and outcasts. Thus, in the Brahmanical order of society the condition of a number of social groups remained miserable throughout.
- The position of women of higher **varnas** was low. Although we hear of personalities like the Vakataka queen Prabhavatigupta who wielded considerable power, not all women were so privileged. The *Brahmana* texts set down norms which women were expected to follow and women were expected, in the family, to function mainly as an ideal wife and ideal

mother. In many *Brahmana* texts, women were even considered, for various reasons, to be of the same category as the *Shudras*. It is significant that although *Brahmanas* were given land-grants regularly, we do not come across evidence of land being given to *Brahmana* women.

Another aspect of social life was that there existed great difference between the ways of life of the rich city-dwellers and people living in villages. The ideal city-dweller was the **nagaraka** i.e. the urbanite who, because of his affluence, lived a life of pleasure and refined culture. There are interesting descriptions of this way of life not only in Vatsyayana's **Kamasutra** but also in other literary texts of the period. Of course, it would be wrong to presume that all classes of people who lived in cities could afford this way of life.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×) ?
 - a) The *Brahmanas* exerted considerable influence on kings from the Gupta period. ()
 - b) The real society during the Gupta period was different from the ideal society. ()
 - c) *Antyajjas* were the highest in **varna** scheme. ()
 - d) The life of the city-dwellers and the villagers was the same. ()
- 2) Discuss the changes in the **varna** system.

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2.6 SUMMARY

In this Unit, after going through the various aspects of Gupta administration, economy, culture and society we find that considerable changes had taken place when compared to the earlier periods. An important aspect related to kingship was the continuity of various kings in their regions once they had accepted the suzerainty of the Gupta King. There was considerable concern towards agricultural production and this is reflected from the way irrigation got priority during this period. The practice of gifting land to religious donees had become quite common and the *Brahmanas* exerted considerable influence over the King. There was differentiation amongst the cultivators and compared to the rich, the condition of ordinary cultivators declined considerably. Similarly, the wealth and social status of different types of craftsmen also varied. Though commercial activities continued during this period, it appears that there was a decline in crafts production. This period also witnessed significant development in art, architecture and literature. The **varna** system continued in society. Various foreign ruling families were assimilated in the **varna** system. At the same time, various

groups were kept out of the **varna** scheme and were considered untouchables. There was also a considerable decline in the position of women in society.

2.7 KEY WORDS

- Dakshinapatha** : Ancient south region of the Indian subcontinent below *Uttarapatha*. It also connotes the great route linking Magadha and Pratishthana (present-day Paithan in Maharashtra) in ancient times.
- Chandala** : One of the lowest rungs of the *Varna* order of ancient times. They were regarded untouchables and supposedly engaged in disposal of corpses.
- Charmakaras** : Those involved in tanning leather.
- Sramanas** : Literally meaning “one who toils, labours or exerts himself”, it refers to the ascetics; those in pursuit of spiritual liberation.
- Terracotta** : The Italian word meaning “baked earth”. It is a type of ceramic pottery made by baking terracotta clay. It was also widely used in ancient times to make sculptures.

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) (a) × (b) √ (c) × (d) √ (e) ×
- 2) See Sub-sec. 2.2.4
- 3) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 2.2.1

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) (a) *Kshetra* (b) had become (c) suffered (d) Skandagupta.
- 2) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 2.3.1
- 3) Check your answer by comparing with the first two paragraphs of Sub-sec. 2.3.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) (a) √ (b) √ (c) × (d) ×
- 2) Check your answer by reading Sec. 2.5

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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