



Urban Life During Gupta Period; A social Perspective

Submitted by
Mrs. NEENA
Research Scholar,
Sunrise University

Gupta Empire

By the fourth century A.D., political and military turmoil destroyed the Kushan empire in the north and many kingdoms in the south India. At this juncture, India was invaded by a series of foreigners and barbarians or Mlechchhas from the north western frontier region and central Asia. It signaled the emergence of a leader, a Magadha ruler, Chandragupta I. Chandragupta successfully combated the foreign invasion and laid foundation of the great Gupta dynasty, the emperors of which ruled for the next 300 years, bringing the most prosperous era in Indian history.

The reign of Gupta emperors can truly be considered as the golden age of classical Indian history. Srigupta I (270-290 AD) who was perhaps a petty ruler of Magadha (modern Bihar) established Gupta dynasty with Patliputra or Patna as its capital. He was succeeded by his son Ghatotkacha (290-305 AD). Ghatotkacha was succeeded by his son Chandragupta I (305-325 AD) who strengthened his kingdom by matrimonial alliance with the powerful family of Lichchavi who were rulers of Mithila. His marriage to Lichchavi princess Kumaradevi, brought an enormous power, resources and prestige. He took advantage of the situation and occupied whole of fertile Gangetic valley. Chandragupta I eventually assumed the title of Maharajadhiraja (emperor) in formal coronation.

Samudragupta (335 - 380 AD) succeeded his father Chandragupta I. He was perhaps the greatest king of Gupta dynasty. Samudragupta enlarged the Gupta Kingdom by winning a series of battles till he was a master of northern India. Soon he defeated the kings of Vindhyan region (central India) and Deccan. He although made no attempt to incorporate the kingdoms of south of Narmada and Mahanadi rivers (southern India) into his empire. When he died his mighty empire bordered with Kushan of Western province (modern Afganistan and Pakistan) and Vakatakas in Deccan (modern southern Maharashtra).

Samudragupta was a staunch Hindu and after all his military triumphs, he performed the Ashwamedha Yagna (Horse sacrifice ceremony) which is evident on some of his coins. Ashwamedha Yagna gave him the coveted title of Maharajadhiraj, the supreme king of kings.

Vikramaditya (380 - 413 AD) the son of Samudragupta is the legendary emperor of India. More stories/legends are associated with him than any other ruler of India. It was during his (and his son Kumargupta) reign, India was at the pinnacle of prosperity and opulence. Although named after his grandfather Chandragupta, he took a title of Vikramaditya, which became a synonym for sovereign of tremendous power and wealth. Vikramaditya succeeded his father Samudragupta (possibly there was another prince, or his elder brother who ruled briefly, and according to legends slayed by Shakas). He married princess Kubernaga, daughter of Naga Chieftains and later gave his daughter Prabhavati in marriage to Rudrasena of powerful family of Vakatakas of the Deccan (modern Maharashtra). His most significant and well celebrated military achievement being total destruction of Kshatrapas, the Shaka (Scythian) rulers of Malawa and Saurashtra, the western India (modern Gujrath and neighbouring states). He scored a fantastic victory over the Kshatrpa rulers and incorporated these provinces into his increasing empire. The cool courage he showed in fight with Shakas and killing their king in their own city entitled him the epithets Shakari (destroyer of Shakas) or Sahasanka. He has also been responsible for the era, popularly known as Vikram Samvat which commence in 58 BC. This era has been used by major Hindu dynasties and still in use in modern India.

Vikramaditya was succeeded by his able son Kumargupta I (415 - 455 AD). He maintained his hold over the vast empire of his forebears, which covered most of India except southern four states of India. Later he too performed the Ashwamegha Yagna and proclaimed himself to be Chakrawarti, king of all kings. umargupta also was a great patron of art and culture; evidence exist that he endowed a college of fine arts at great ancient university at Nalanda, which flourished during 5th to 12th century AD.

Skandagupta (455 - 467 AD) took over the Gupta empire and soon had to face with the formidable enemy, the Huns (Hepthalites). He successfully repelled their early invasions and proved to be able king and administrator in time of crisis. In spite of heroic efforts of SkandaGupta, Gupta empire did not survive long the shock it received from invasion of

the Huns and internal uprising of Pushyamitras. Although there was some sort of unity till reign of the last king Budhagupta in the 6th century AD.

This period is regarded as the golden age of Indian culture. The high points of this cultural creativity are magnificent and creative architecture, sculpture, and painting. The wall-paintings of Ajanta Cave in the central Deccan are considered among the greatest and most powerful works of Indian art. The paintings in the cave represent the various lives of the Buddha, but also are the best source we have of the daily life in India at the time. There are forty-eight caves making up Ajanta, most of which were carved out of the rock between 460 and 480, and they are filled with Buddhist sculptures. The rock temple at Elephanta (near Bombay) contains a powerful, eighteen foot statue of the three-headed Shiva, one of the principle Hindu gods. Each head represents one of Shiva's roles: that of creating, that of preserving, and that of destroying. The period also saw dynamic building of Hindu temples. All of these temples contain a hall and a tower.

The greatest writer of the time was Kalidasa. Poetry in the Gupta age tended towards a few genres: religious and meditative poetry, lyric poetry, narrative histories (the most popular of the secular literatures), and drama. The greatest Mathematician of India Aryabhata also belongs to this age. The Panchatantra and Kamasutra were written during this period. The Nalanda University in Bihar, came to fame during the Gupta rule.

Unfortunately, very few monuments built during Gupta reign survive today. Examples of Gupta architecture are found in the Vaishnavite Tigawa temple at Jabalpur (in Madhya Pradesh state) built in 415 AD and another temple at Deogarh near Jhansi built in 510 AD. Bhitia in Uttar Pradesh State has a number of ancient Gupta temples, most are in ruins.

Because of extensive trade, the culture of India became the dominant culture around the Bay of Bengal, profoundly and deeply influencing the cultures of Burma, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. In many ways, the period during and following the Gupta dynasty was the period of "Greater India," a period of cultural activity in India and surrounding countries building off of the base of Indian culture.

Not only were they full of happy, busy people, they were full of animals. A monkey might sneak up and steal food right out of your hand! Imagine coming home from the market, and telling your mother that the monkeys stole the food you bought, again!

The concept of breakfast did not exist. In earlier times, meals were both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, depending upon your religious beliefs. After the coming of Buddhism, Jainism and other pacifist religion and reforms in Hinduism, vegetarian food (strictly excluding animal and fish meat) became the norm for as much as half of the population. In the Gupta Empire, they mostly ate vegetables, cereals, fruits, breads, and drank milk.

The Gupta empire was founded in northern India at the beginning of the fourth century AD after a long period of chaos which ensued when the Kushan empire ended in the middle of the third century. In the interim period a number of new peoples and states emerged about whom there is very little historical record. It is only with the foundation of Gupta Empire, that there was once again unity and peace over almost the whole of North India. The Gupta empire lasted for more than two centuries and was vast: it stretched over the major part of north India and to Balkh in the east. In the west, the Guptas totally defeated the foreign invaders, the Sakas, who had been ruling Gujarat for more than 200 years. Known as the 'Golden Age' and the 'Classical Period', in the age of the Guptas a degree of balance and harmony in all the arts and an efficient system of administration was achieved.

GUPTA CITIES

The Gupta Empire existed at about the same time as the Roman Empire. It dominated northern India. The Gupta Empire was neat. Villages were protected from bandits and raids with local military squads. Each squad was made up of one elephant, one chariot, three armored cavalrymen and five foot soldiers. In times of war, all the squads were brought together to form the royal army!

People were happy during the Gupta period, the "Golden Age" of ancient India. They had religious freedom. They were given free medical care, which included simple surgery. Criminals were never put to death. Instead, they were fined for their crimes. Rewards of money were given to writers, artists, and scholars to encourage them to produce wonderful work, and they did. Very few of the common people were educated, but the

Gupta Empire had many universities. Students came from as far away as China to study at Gupta universities!

Gupta villages: Streets between the homes were narrow and twisted. Stalls for selling things were located on both sides of the street. People mostly walked where they wanted to go inside their village. Villages were very noisy places.

SET UP OF CRAFT AND INDUSTRIES DURING GUPTA PERIOD

There are ample evidences to show that the country was prosperous. People enjoyed a high standard of living. Agriculture and industry made considerable progress. The Guilds controlled the industries and Crafts. Trade flourished. Foreign trade was carried on with countries like China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The craftsmen worked with iron and copper. Their iron work, especially, was outstanding. Even today, statues exist from this period, made of iron, that show very little rust! This civilization produced great works of marvelous works of art. They were very good at sculpture. The Guptas were great patrons of art and architecture sculpture and painting. The stone temple for Vishnu at Deogarh in Jhansi and the brick temple at Bithargaon in Kanpur and the Bhitari temple at Ghazipur are very famous. Beautiful images of Buddha were made at Saranath and Mathura. The world famous wall paintings of Ajanta and Ellora belong to the Gupta period. Music also developed considerably during the Gupta period.

CITY CULTURE- A DISTINCT PHENOMENON

Education received importance under the Guptas. Scholars and learned men were patronized by the Kings. Universities like Nalanda, Taxila, Ujjain, Saranath and Vikramasila were famous. Students from foreign countries came and studied in these places. They learnt Indian culture. The Gupta rulers encouraged learning and literature. The Nine Gems or the nine learned men adorned Chandragupta II court. The chief of them was Kalidasa. The most important of his classical works are Kumara Sambhava, Meghadhuta and Raghuvamsa. Among the dramas, mention may be made of Shakuntalam, Malavikagnimitram and Vikrama Oorvasiyam. It is because of his writings

Kalidasa is compared to William Shakespeare (16th Century English Dramatist) and called as Indian Shakespeare. The famous physician Dhanvanthiri, the great astronomer Varahamihira and the great lexicographer (a person who compiles a dictionary) Amarasimha were among the Nine Gems. Shudraka wrote a play called Mrchhakatika. Vishakhadatta wrote the play Mudrarakshasa, Vishnu Sharma wrote Panchatantra Stories. The Eighteen Puranas were also written during the Gupta period.

THE NAGARAKA AND LIFE PATTERN

Another aspect of social life was that there existed great difference between the ways of 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.

CITY ADMINISTRATION

According to inscriptions, the Gupta kings assumed titles like Paramabhattacharya, Maharajadhiraja, Parameswara, Samrat and Chakravartin. The king was assisted in his administration by a council consisting of a chief minister, a Senapati or commander-in-chief of the army and other important officials. A high official called Sandivigraha was mentioned in the Gupta inscriptions, most probably minister for foreign affairs.

The king maintained a close contact with the provincial administration through a class of officials called Kumaramatyas and Ayuktas. Provinces in the Gupta Empire were known as Bhuktis and provincial governors as Uparikas. They were mostly chosen from among the princes. Bhuktis were subdivided into Vishyas or districts. They were governed by Vishyapatis. Nagara Sreshtis were the officers looking after the city administration. The villages in the district were under the control of Gramikas.

Bibliography

1. Allen, John, Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties (New Delhi: Oriental Books Collection, 1914).
2. Bhattacharya, Tarapada, The Canons of Indian Art, or a Study on Vāstuvidyā (Calcutta: Firma K.L Mukhopadhyay, 1963).
3. Basak, Radhagovinda, The History of North-Eastern India: Extending From the Foundation of the Gupta Empire to the Rise of the Pāla Dynasty of Bengal (c. AD 320-760) (Calcutta: Sambodhi, 1967).
4. Batley, Claude, The Design Development of Indian Architecture (London: Academy Editions, 1973).
5. Craven, Roy, A Concise History of Indian Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).
6. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., Early Indian Architecture - Palaces (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975).
7. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., History of Indian and Indonesian Art (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972).
8. Dandekar, R.N., The Age of the Guptas and Other Essays (Delhi: Ajanta, 1982).
9. Duran, Jane, "The Stupa in Indian Art: Symbols and the Symbolic", British Journal of Aesthetics, 36, 1(Jan 1996), 66-74.
10. in India and Ceylon: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).
11. Sivaramurti, C., Indian Sculpture (Bombay: Allied, 1961).
12. Viṣṇu-Sarma?, The Hitopadesa: Fables and Proverbs, trans. Charles Wilkins (London: Routledge, 1885).

13. Winstedt, Sir Richard (ed), Indian Art (New York: October House, 1967).
14. Access: History Vol. 2, No. 1. Winternitz, M., A History of Indian Literature
(Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1959).