

The Gupta Empire (320 C.E. to 550 C.E.)

The Gupta Empire came to rule because of their strong, central government that oversaw and gave considerable power to local leaders. Their form of government united a vast area of India and created a Golden Age on the subcontinent of India; a time of peace and prosperity.



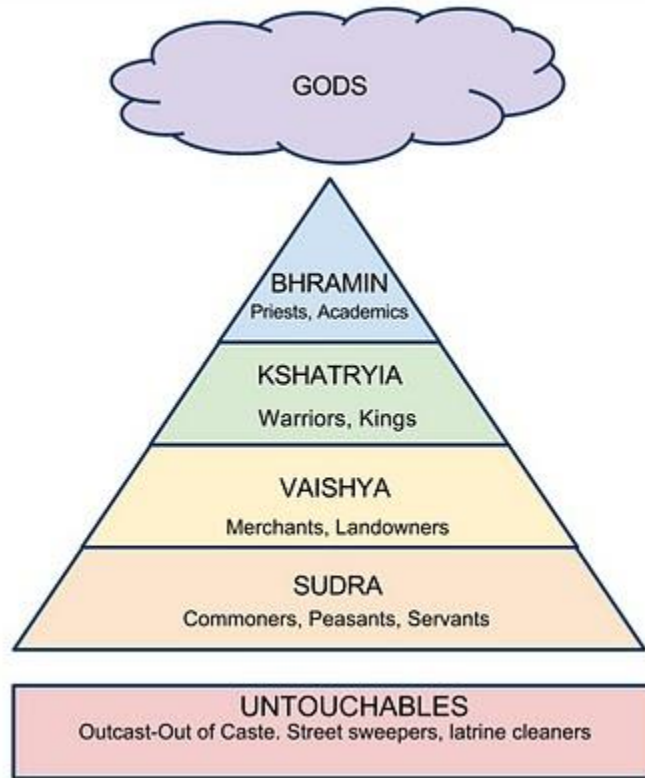
The Gupta dynasty followed the reign of the Maurya dynasty. It is important to note that these were the only two early civilizations that were capable of uniting India. At the heart of both empires was Magadha, an ancient kingdom that was the center of both dynasties.

Similar to the Maurya dynasty, the Gupta arose in the northern regions and moved southward.

Hinduism has a strong impact on Gupta life. It had a major role on the cultural, intellectual and political achievements throughout the reign of the empire. The central focus to society was the caste system.

The caste system came to India from the Aryan society. It was originally a series of four basic castes but during the Gupta Empire, it included many more groupings. People believed that their karma, all of the good and bad events in life, was determined by their caste. A person could not change their caste in one lifetime but they believed that they could be born into a higher caste during their next lifetime after reincarnation if they had fulfilled their moral duties (dharma) during their first lifetime.

The Caste System



Central Government: The capital of the empire was Pataliputra, the former Mauryan city. It was from here that the strong central government allowed farming and trade to prosper. The city was to become a center for both learning and the arts.

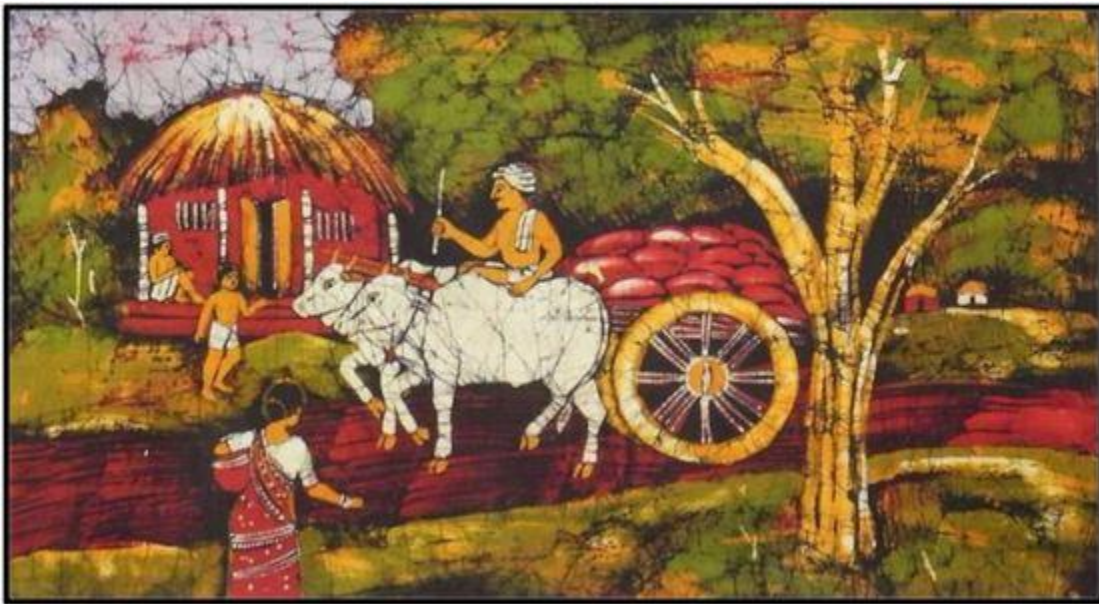
Local Government: The Gupta gave a great deal of power to their local rulers. The leaders were elected by merchants and artisans within the region. In each village there was a headman with a council who made decisions for that village. The most respected people of the village served on the council.

Role of Women: At the start of the Gupta Empire, women were allowed to serve on local councils. However, in the latter stages, as the laws of Hinduism became stricter, more restrictions were placed on women and they could no longer serve on the councils.

Social Life during the Gupta Empire

The village was the center of Gupta life. The houses were built from local stone and earth. They were an agricultural society and grew what they needed (subsistence farming) with a small amount of surplus for trade among other local villages. The villages ran their own day-to-day affairs and faced little or no interference from the central government as long as they paid their taxes.

The enforced caste system created a stable society. The people in the higher castes had the strictest rules, which were designed to keep them from being contaminated by the Untouchables or the “impure.” The life of an Untouchable was very harsh. They had to live apart from other members within the Gupta society and their jobs were the dirtiest such as street cleaning or grave digging.



Family Life: A common feature within Gupta society was the **Joint Family** where parents, children, grandparents, uncles, and their children shared a common home. Indian families lived under a **Patriarchal Structure**, the father or the oldest male in the family was the head of the household. At an early age, Indian children were taught the family trade and they knew what was expected of them by the time they reached adulthood. Any marriage was arranged by the parents but you could not marry someone from outside of your own caste.

An important point of note was that as the Gupta Empire became stronger, the role of women decreased. By the time the empire began to decline, upper-class women were restricted to their homes and forced to cover themselves from head to foot in observance of a stricter Hindu law. Lower class women had to work in order to survive, usually in the fields or doing spinning and weaving of cotton and other textiles.

Scientific and Artistic Contributions

During the Gupta Empire, education took place within the Hindu and Buddhist temples. Students learned many different subjects including mathematics, medicine, physics, and languages.

Zero and the Decimal System: Invented by Gupta mathematicians. We use the same system today.

Arabic numerals: Similar to the same ones we use today, invented by the Gupta. They are known as Arabic due to the cultural diffusion that brought them to India from Arabia.

Medicines: Were made from herbs and other living products. The Gupta even had surgeons who could set bones and use a system similar to plastic surgery. The best known medicine was a vaccine for smallpox, created approximately 1,000 years before Europe!

Architects built beautiful stone temples for Hindu worship. The typical shape was a square (symbolizing the Earth) within a circle (that stood for Eternity). The temples were filled with carvings of gods, ordinary people, and animals such as elephants and monkeys.



Buddhist temples were different during the Gupta Empire. They were large, dome-shaped shrines called stupas that contained the remains of holy people. They were architecturally plain in design but did contain gateways with elaborate carvings that depicted the life of Buddha.



The Gupta were excellent recorders of literature. They used the local language of Sanskrit to write fables and folk tales. Many of these stories were spread by traders into Persia, Egypt, and Greece.

The End of the Gupta Empire

The decline of the empire was similar to that of the Romans and Han China. A series of weak, ineffective rulers and foreign invaders (White Huns from central Asia and nomadic armies) destroyed the many villages throughout the empire and disrupted the trade networks. The way of life of the people was quickly ruined and shattered.