

B.A- PART-1, PAPER-1

THE GUPTAS-POLITICAL HISTORY (PART-1)

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- ***Srigupta and Ghatotkacha :***

The genealogical accounts of the Guptas mention maharaja Srigupta and Maharaja Ghatotkacha as the first two rulers of the line. It is not clear whether they were independent rulers or subordinates of some other king. It is known from the account left by I-Tsing (673-95), a Chinese pilgrim, Srigupta gave permission for the Chinese to construct a Buddhist Stupa at Mrigasikhavana, located in Bengal. This was built for the use of Chinese monks and endowed with land and revenues of twenty villages. At the time of I-Tsing's itinerary its dilapidated remnants were known as the 'Temple of China'.



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It is thus evident that the Guptas started their rule from a small province in Bengal, probably as subordinates of the Kushanas. He was succeeded by Ghatotkhacha.

- **Chandragupta I (320 – 335 CE.):**

Chandragupta I was the son of Ghatotkacha, the first independent king of the Gupta dynasty. He was a more powerful ruler than his two predecessors. While his two ancestors were given one each the title Maharaja, Chandragupta I, is described in the inscriptions as '*Maharajadhiraja*' emperor. He is thus taken to be the founder of the Gupta empire. The foundation of the Gupta Era



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commenced on 26th February 320 CE, an era which continued in parts of India for several centuries.

The important event of his reign was marriage with Kumaradevi, a Lichchavi princess which enhanced his power and prestige. The marriage was commemorated on coins issued during his reign. Numismatists styled these coins as 'Chandragupta-Kumaradevi' type of coins. They have the figures and names of king and queen on the obverse, the reverse has a goddess seated on lion and the legend 'Lichchavayah'. Chandragupta was the first king to issue coins in gold.



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The importance of this alliance had been a matter of controversy among historians. *V.A.Smith* held that 'Kumaradevi evidently brought to her husband as her dowry valuable influence, which in course of a few years secured him a paramount position in Magadha and the neighbouring countries'. The political influence of this marriage lied in the fact that this resulted in the amalgamation of the two states enabling Chandragupta to assume the imperial title of Maharajadhiraja. Since the father of Kumaradevi did not have a male issue and died before the demise of Chandragupta, the latter might have acquired the actual control of the Lichchhavi state long



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before the accession of Samudragupta. The acquisition of Magadha provided the rulers and the merchant class with the control over the precious mines of the present Jharkhand. A passage in the Vishnupurana refers to the Guptas enjoying all territories along the Ganga upto Prayaga [Allahabad] as well as Saketa and Magadha. It is evident from the above that the empire of Chandragupta I may have included the areas of modern Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bengal.



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- *Samudragupta (335 to 370 CE):*

Chandragupta I was succeeded by his son Samudragupta. He became the ruler after subduing his rival Kacha, an obscure prince of the dynasty. Samudragupta was the greatest of all the kings and his reign witnessed expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription [*Prasasti*] composed by his court poet Harisena, eulogizes the achievements, conquests and personality of Samudragupta. The *Prasasti* contains a long list of states, kings and tribes which were conquered and brought under various stages of subjugation.

The places and countries conquered by Samudragupta can



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be divided into four groups. The first one includes the names of the eight kings of Aryavarta who were defeated and whose kingdoms were incorporated into the Gupta empire. In this campaign he defeated Achyuta, Nagasena and Ganapatideva (generally regarded as the rulers of Ahichchatra, Padmavati and Mathura respectively). After the annexation of the Gangetic basin, he thought that there was every possibility for the vanquished Naga rulers to go for retaliation. Sensing this danger, Samudragupta contracted a diplomatic matrimonial alliance with Ganapatinaga the most powerful Naga ruler. Kuberanaga, the daughter of Ganapatinaga was given in marriage to Chandragupta II, the son of Samudragupta. This is the second matrimonial alliance contracted by the Guptas. This gave an opportunity for the Guptas to occupy the most fertile region which become the nucleus of the Gupta empire.



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The second group includes the rulers of the eastern Himalayan states and some frontier states who were made to feel the weight of Samudragupta's arms. It covers five prathyantas or border states and also nine tribal republics that were forced to pay all kinds of taxes and obey his orders. The five Border States were Samatata (East Bengal), Davaka (Assam), Kamarupa (Assam), Nepala and Kartipura (Kashmir). The nine tribal republics were the Malavas, Arjunayanas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Abhiras, Prarjunas, Sarakinakas, Kavas and Kharaparikas.

The third group includes 12 rulers of the eastern Deccan and South India who were conquered and reinstated. The twelve



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kings of the South were Mahendra of Kosala, Mahendra of Pithapura, Hastivarman of Vengi (Salankayana ruler), Ugrasena of Palaka (Nellore region of Andhra Pradesh), Vishnu Gopa of Kanchi (Pallava ruler), and the rulers of Erandapalli, Devarashtra, Avamuktha, Dusthalapura, Mahakantara, Kurala and kothura. The fourth group includes foreign kings such as Daivaputrashahi Sahanushahi, Shaka Murundas and the dwellers of Simhala and all the other islands who pleased the Gupta Emperor by offering their own persons for service to him, bringing presents of maidens and applying for charters bearing the Garuda seal for the enjoyment of their own territories. According to a Chinese source, Meghavarna the ruler of Srilanka (375 – 415 C.E) sent presents to the emperor Samudragupta and sought his permission to build a Buddhist monastery at Gaya. This was granted and the temple was developed into a huge monastic establishment.



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- *Extent of the Empire:*

The states that are said to have succumbed to the power of Samudragupta make a fairly long list and would cover a large part of the subcontinent. It is clear from the above conquests that Samudragupta's empire seems to have comprised much of Northern India, viz., the Upper Gangetic valley, Central India and South western part of Bengal.

These territories were directly administered by him. The Saka and Kushana principalities on the west and northwest were within the sphere of his influence. The kings of Deccan and south paid him homage. Still farther south, the Srilankan king, also said to have acknowledged Gupta suzerainty.



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Thus Samudragupta through his successful military campaigns, political relationships of paramount and subordination covered a large part of the subcontinent.

- ***Estimate of Samudragupta:***

Samudragupta's military achievements remain remarkable in the annals of History. Samudragupta emerges from the *Allahabad Prasasti* as a restless conqueror. He is described as an able and compassionate ruler, concerned about the welfare of his subjects. He performed Asvamedha sacrifice to proclaim his conquests and power. He also issued in that connection a special gold coin, styled by the numismatists as Asvamedha type of coin.

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It appears from the Allahabad Prasasti that Samudragupta was not only a conqueror but also a poet, musician and patron of learning. He is described as Kaviraja (king among poets), whose poetry surpassed the glory of the genius of poets. He wrote Krishnacharita, a work in Sanskrit. His court was adorned by a great Sanskrit scholar Harisena. Thus he must have credited with a share in the promotion of Sanskrit literature and learning. His love of music is attested by his lyrist type gold coin which represents him as playing the Vina. He was an ardent follower of Vaishnavism but was tolerant of other creeds too. He evinced keen interest in Buddha and was the patron of the great Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu.

(To be continued)