

The Achievements of the Gupta Empire

Essential Question: Why is the period during the Gupta Empire known as a “golden age”?

Introduction

Under the **Mauryan Empire**, India was unified for the first time and Buddhist beliefs became widespread. The next great empire to unite India was called the **Gupta (GOOP-tuh) Empire**.

The Guptas were a line of rulers, beginning in the mid-300s, who controlled much of India from 300 C.E. to 550 C.E. Many historians have called this period a golden age, which is a time of great **prosperity [a situation of wealth and success]** and **achievement [a positive result gained by hard work]**. In unstable times, people are likely to be busy meeting their immediate needs for food, shelter, and safety.

However, in times of peace and prosperity, people can turn their attention to more creative activities. For this reason, a number of advances in the arts and sciences occurred during the peaceful golden age of the Gupta Empire. Many of these achievements have left a lasting mark on the world.

Archaeologists have made some notable discoveries that have helped us learn about the accomplishments of the Gupta Empire. For example, they have unearthed palm-leaf books that were created about 400 C.E. Sacred texts often appeared in palm-leaf books. These sacred texts are just one of many kinds of literature that Indians created during the Guptas' reign.

Literature was one of several areas of major accomplishment during what would become known as India's **Classical Age**. In this lesson, you will learn more about the rise of the Gupta Empire. Then you will take a close look at seven achievements that came out of this rich period in India's history and how these achievements affected the people of India.

1. The Rise of the Gupta Empire

After the Mauryan Empire fell around 185 B.C.E., India broke apart into separate kingdoms. For about 300 years, these smaller kingdoms fought each other for land and power. Beginning around 300 C.E., a second great empire arose in India: the **Gupta Empire [the empire covering much of northern India that was ruled by the Guptas from around 320 C.E. to around 550 C.E.]**

This is the entrance to one of the Ajanta caves, which contain many art forms created during the Gupta Empire



A Gupta artist painted this mural, which can be found within the Ajanta caves



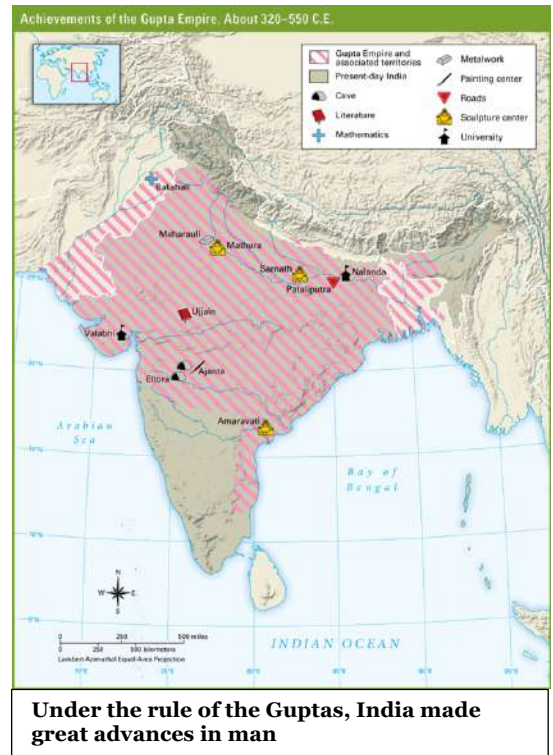
The empire began under a ruler named **Chandragupta I**. He and his family, the Guptas, conquered and united the northern kingdoms. Arranged marriages between members of the Gupta family and the sons and daughters of other rulers helped this new kingdom form **alliances [a bond between families, states, or other groups to further their common interests]**.

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

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

Unlike the **Mauryas**, the Guptas gave local areas a great deal of independence. They divided the empire into large sections called **provinces [a territory that is part of a country or an empire]**. Each of these provinces was ruled by a royal governor. Within the provinces, town leaders could make many of their own decisions.

The Guptas' ruling strategy helped them stay in power for nearly 250 years. The relatively peaceful times, as well as the empire's stability, encouraged growth in both the arts and the sciences. The result was a **golden age** [golden age: a period of great happiness, prosperity and achievement] that produced some of the greatest advances in Indian history. Let's look at seven areas of achievement for the Gupta Empire.



2. Universities

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

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

The most famous university was the Buddhist school at Nalanda, in northern India. The school had eight colleges and three libraries. It also had a hospital and a monastery. Students were instructed in Buddhist and Hindu **philosophy [a theory or set of values by which one lives; the search for wisdom and knowledge]**. They also studied logic, grammar, and medicine.



The ruins of the university at Nalanda are impressive in size. Notice how well preserved this ancient building is.

Students of medicine learned the practices and treatments of the time and were trained in how to question patients about their physical problems. Students were taught how to make cures from bark,

roots, leaves, and minerals. They also learned how to use the front claws of giant ants to stitch up wounds. Hindu doctors were especially skilled at performing surgery.

3. Literature

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

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



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

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

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

4. Painting

In the Gupta Empire, painting was an important art form and part of life for noble families, who were wealthy people of high birth. No home was complete without a painting board or an easel. Popular subjects included deities and other religious topics. Nobles and members of the royalty also hired artists to create works of art, including pieces made on long scrolls that highlighted the luxury of noble life.

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



This part of an Ajanta cave mural depicts the Jataka tales of Buddhism. These stories describe the Buddha's different states of life

Some of the Ajanta murals show scenes from the Buddha's life. Some murals portray stories that reflect Buddhist values, such as love and understanding. Many of the scenes include graceful images of kings, queens, musicians, and dancers. Other scenes show animals and hunters in the forest. These woodland scenes are decorated with flowers, trees, and complex patterns. Gupta artists were skilled painters.

5. Sculpture

Another art form in the Gupta Empire was sculpture. Sculptors created statues out of stone, wood, bronze, and terra-cotta clay. Many of these statues portrayed the Buddha or Hindu deities. Some sculptures showed scenes from important people's lives. Many sculptures were created to stand on their own foundations. Others were carved into the walls of temples and caves.

Gupta sculptures portrayed the human form simply and gracefully. One example is the sculpture of the river deity, Ganga, shown here. The statue's lines are curved, and elegant, and curved details form her dress, hair, and jewelry.

These sculptures of the Buddha's head, and the river deity, Ganga, are typical of Gupta sculptures. Artists from the Gupta Empire put great effort and detail into their works



The temple statue of the Buddha's head shown here demonstrates the same attention to clean lines and detail. Notice the defined curls in his hair, as well as the detail in his lips. His expression is calm and peaceful. The sculptor used lowered eyes and a calm face to portray the Buddha's wisdom.

6. Metalwork

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

Gupta metalworkers were also famous for their ironwork. An iron pillar at a place called **Meharauli** is one example of these artisans' unusual skill. The pillar is made of solid iron, stands 7 feet tall, and weighs about 7,500 pounds. The sides are engraved with a story that describes the achievements of a Gupta emperor.



Gupta metalworkers made gold coins to honor the kings who owned the mines. The coin on the far left depicts a king riding an elephant into battle.

The iron is nearly rust free after 1,600 years in the rain and sun. No one knows how Gupta ironworkers acquired such advanced metalworking skills.

7. Mathematics

Earlier Hindu mathematicians had created a way of writing whole numbers using the numerals 0 through 9. Some Gupta mathematicians made further advances, one of which was developing the decimal system. The **decimal system** uses ten basic numerals that have different values depending on their "place." In the number 100, 1 is in the "hundreds place" and means 100. The system also works for fractions. In the decimal 0.1, 1 means one-tenth. Note the zeros in these examples. Hindu mathematicians were the first to treat **zero** as a number. Many calculations are impossible without the zero.

In later centuries, Arab peoples learned the Indian system of numbers and spread it to Europe. As a result, Europeans called this way of writing numbers –Arabic numerals.“ A more accurate name would be –Hindu-Arabic numerals,“ because the system actually originated with the ancient Indians. We still use this system today.

One of the most famous Gupta mathematicians was a man named **Aryabhata (AR-ee-ah-bah-tah)**, who combined mathematics and astronomy to make important discoveries. He figured out that a year was exactly 365.25 days long. He also calculated the approximate size of Earth and proposed that planets were spheres. Aryabhata was one of the earliest scientists to suggest that Earth spins on its **axis** [axis: a line on which an object spins] , an imaginary line through Earth's center.

The use of mathematics allowed ancient Indians to build complex structures such as this temple. This beautiful structure is called the **Great Mahabodhi Temple, or the Great Awakening Temple**



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

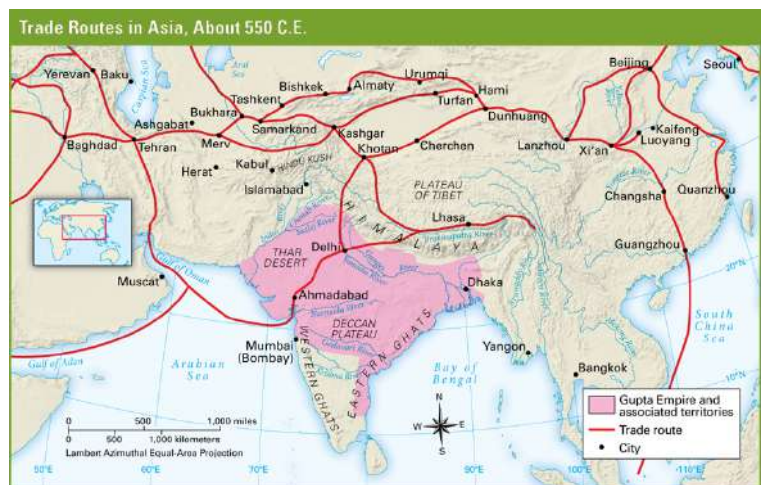
8. Roads

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

Designed for safety and comfort, the roadways were lifted a few feet off the ground. Ditches, or canals, ran along either side, which helped prevent flooding during the rainy monsoon season since water would run off the road and into the ditches.

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

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



The network of roads the Gupta rulers created encouraged trade throughout the empire and beyond it. This trade contributed to the empire's prosperity.

These roads also influenced the exchange of ideas and goods throughout India. The network of roads created during this period allowed people from many different regions across the Indian subcontinent to interact in all aspects of their lives. The roads also facilitated commercial, cultural, and religious exchanges more than in any earlier period.

Lesson Summary

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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