

The Maurya and Gupta Empires

The Maurya Empire (321-185 BCE)

Alexander the Great and his troops departed India in 325 BCE. After this, a local ruler from the central Ganges plain rose to power. Chandragupta Maurya (322-298 BCE) began a program of conquest that would include northwestern India, areas of the Ganges plain and would form the first unified, centralized government in India. Chandragupta and his successors amassed an empire that encompassed all of present day India except for the southern tip. The Mauryan's supported their government by taxing agricultural crops. Standard coinage throughout the empire facilitated trade, while government control of manufactures, mines, and shipbuilding strengthened the state. A national army consisted not only of infantry and cavalry divisions, but also of chariots and war elephants.

1. Who was Chandragupta? What were some of his accomplishments?

The Rule of Ashoka

The greatest of the Maurya rulers was Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta. One of Ashoka's greatest joys was conquest, until he witnessed the horrible results of his conquests in eastern India. Ashoka converted to Buddhism and embarked on a program to construct public works and to encourage vegetarianism in an effort to reduce the slaughter of animals. His policy of ending the killing of cows, combined with the already revered status of the cattle from the Aryan era, contributed to the concept of the sacred cows in the Indian civilization. Ashoka also attempted to live his Buddhist faith by spreading peace and building an efficient government. His efforts met with resistance from the caste of Brahmins, whose power was displaced by Ashoka's central government. The Buddhist groups witnessed a growing number of Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist law also improved the status of women by granting them more authority within their families and by allowing them to enter the monasteries as Buddhist nuns.

Ashoka publicized his tolerant Buddhist program by engraving his decisions on large rocks and sandstone pillars. Great shrines of stone, called *Stupas* were constructed by the Buddhists to house relics of the Buddha. Ashoka also furthered the Buddhist faith by sending missionaries across Asia by means of the Silk Roads, which spread the religion. After Ashoka's death in 232 BCE, weak rulers took control and allowed invaders into the country. These invaders began to cripple the Maurya Empire. Because of this a new empire rose into power and forced out the Maurya and Buddhism was replaced by Hinduism as the main religion.

1. Who was Ashoka? What were his achievements?

The Decline of Buddhism

The decline of Buddhist power in India was caused by the actions of the Buddhist monks themselves. The monks had become preoccupied with philosophy than with serving the needs of the common people. As the monks devoted more time to the wealthy patrons who supported the monasteries, Brahmins used this opportunity to capture the attention of the ordinary people of India. The new focus on Hinduism called upon followers to become personally involved in the worship of the major gods Shiva and Vishnu. More temples arose to house statues of the gods, and even untouchables were allowed to embrace the new form of Hinduism, which eventually allowed the inclusion of the Buddha as one of the many Hindu gods. Women were also permitted to participate. The *Upanishads* acquired new prominence as Hinduism taught that the ultimate purpose of the soul was to merge with the divine essence from which it had originated. The world itself was viewed as an illusion.

After the fall of the Han Empire in the third century CE, trade decreased, creating a decline in merchant support for the Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, the arrival of a new dynasty sympathetic to

Hinduism accelerated the decline of Buddhism in India. The center of Buddhism would now shift to central and southeast Asia and to China, Japan, and Korea.

1. What were some of the reasons that Buddhism declined in India?

The Gupta Empire

The Gupta Empire was founded by a family from eastern India. By the conclusion of the fourth century CE, the Gupta family had amassed an empire that included most of northern India. The Gupta Empire succeeded in bringing nearly three hundred peaceful and prosperous years to the people.

Gupta rule further defined Hindu beliefs and the caste system. Restrictions upon members of the lowest castes and the untouchables became even more severe. The position of women also declined under the Gupta. Under Hindu law, women were minors subject to men. Women were not allowed to own or inherit property and marriages were usually arranged. Female infants were viewed as economic liabilities and frequently killed. Women who were widowed before they had sons were excluded from society; widows with sons were not permitted to remarry. The most severe degradation of women in India involved the custom of *sati*. This was observed in some parts of India among the elite castes, and expected a widow to throw herself on her husband's burning funeral pyre. Women who failed to honor their deceased husbands in this manner were forbidden to remarry and were excluded from society.

1. How were women treated in the Gupta Empire?

The Achievements of the Gupta Empire

While denying educational opportunities to women and members of lower castes, the Gupta Empire was noted for an array of achievements in mathematics and science. Gupta mathematicians accurately calculated the value of pi and the circumference of the earth. They also used decimals and developed the concept of zero. Another achievement was the introduction of the numbers used around the globe (Arabic numerals). Gupta physicians set up hospitals and developed treatments for numerous diseases and various surgical techniques.

The Gupta period was also renowned for its artistic and literary achievements. The poet Kalidasa, who is considered the greatest writer in the Sanskrit language, painted word pictures of Gupta life. Also significant were the rock paintings and statues of the Buddha located in caves and Buddhist monasteries. Commerce flourished between Gupta India and other areas. Archeological finds of Roman coins in southern India show the presence of trade between these two areas. One remaining trade route included passage through the Hindu Kush Mountains to Persia and the Mediterranean world.

1. Discuss the achievements of the Gupta.

The Decline of the Gupta

Similar to the experiences of the Han and the Roman Empires, the Gupta Empire was plagued by repeated attacks from foreigners along its border areas. The Huns exerted pressure on the borders of the Han Empire also raided across the Himalayas into northern India during the early fifth century CE. The drain of the treasury resulting from efforts to repel Hun invaders, combined with internal struggles between Gupta rulers and their vassals, led to the eventual collapse of the Gupta Empire. By 530 CE, the empire was overrun further by Hun invasions and forced the empire to break up into numerous local governments.

1. What were some reasons the Gupta Empire collapsed?

Travels in India

There are many achievements of the Gupta Empire. You learned that this period was called a golden age because it was a time of great prosperity and achievement.

Imagine traveling to India during this amazing time period. Fa-hsien, a Buddhist monk from China, did just that. He went to India to learn more about Buddhism. He recorded his experiences in a diary that gives a firsthand look into the Gupta Empire and the surrounding kingdoms in India.

Below is an excerpt from Fa-hsien's records, *The Travels of Fa-hsien or Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (394 to 414 c.e.). In many places in his journal, Fa-hsien describes India as "prosperous." As you read, think about what information supports his opinion.

“The people are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households, or attend to any magistrates [officials] and their rules; only those who cultivate [farm] the royal land have to pay a portion of the gain from it. If they want to go, they go; if they want to stay on, they stay. The king's bodyguards and attendants all have salaries. The cities and towns of this country are the greatest of all in the Middle Kingdom. The inhabitants are rich and prosperous, and vie [compete] with one another in the practice of benevolence [kindness] and righteousness. Every year on the eighth day of the second month they celebrate a procession of images. They make figures of divas [goddesses], with gold, silver, and lapis lazuli [a type of gem] grandly blended and having silken streamers and canopies hung out over them. The Heads of the Vaisya [merchant] families in them [kingdoms of India] establish in the cities houses for dispensing charity and medicines. All the poor and destitute in the country, orphans, widowers, and childless men, maimed people and cripples, and all who are diseased, go to those houses, and are provided with every kind of help, and doctors examine their diseases. They get the food and medicines that their cases require, and are made to feel at ease; and when they are better, they go away of themselves. In the city there are many Vaisya elders and foreign merchants, whose houses are stately and beautiful. The lanes and passages are kept in good order.”

Investigating Primary Sources

Signs of prosperity or economic health can help historians to call a time period a golden age. Historians might look for the existence of a merchant class or the productivity of trade. Fa-hsien's writings give us a firsthand look into ancient India and its economy. Answer these questions to evaluate Fa-hsien's diary:

1. Culture includes such things as art, celebrations, and social classes. What facts does Fa-hsien give about various aspects of Indian culture during this golden age?
2. What opinions does Fa-hsien express about India?
3. Fa-hsien describes ancient India as "prosperous." What evidence about the health of India's economy can be drawn from Fa-hsien's writings? List at least three pieces of evidence.
4. How useful are Fa-hsien's records to historians studying about India during its golden age? Do his writings really prove anything? Explain.