

HIS†ORY

New Empires and Kingdoms

The Gupta Empire

A new and a powerful empire emerged in the Indian subcontinent about 1700 years ago. This was the Gupta Empire which reached its height under the rule of Samudragupta, one of the greatest kings of the Gupta dynasty. We mainly know about him from his *prashasti* written by his court poet Harishena inscribed on the Ashoka pillar at Allahabad. Prashasti is a Sanskrit word which means 'in praise of'. It is a long poem which recounts the annexations and the glory of the king. The *prashasti* of King Samudragupta reveals the following facts:

- Chandragupta and Kumara Devi were the parents of Samudragupta.
- Samudragupta adopted the title of maharaj-adhiraj
- King Samudragupta was a great king, a true warrior and one of the best poets.
- He annexed many North Indian kingdoms of the land known as 'aryavrata'.
- He defeated the rulers of the south but allowed them to rule their states.
- Many neighbouring states like Bengal and many ganasanghas in the north-west gave him regular tribute and followed his orders.
- The descendants of the Kushanas and the Shakas and the ruler of Sri Lanka also submitted to him.



A gold coin dating back to the Gupta Empire

Chandragupta, the father of Samudragupta took the title of maharaj-adhiraja, which was also used by the latter. Samudragupta's son, Chandragupta II defeated the Shakas. His court was adorned with many learned scribes such as the poet Kalidasa and the astronomer Aryabhata.

King Harshavardhana

King Harshavardhana ruled about 1400 years ago. We know about his rule from his biography 'Harshacharita' written by Banabhatt, his court poet. He was the king of Thanesar. After the king of Kanauj, his brother in law was killed by the ruler of Bengal, Harsha recaptured Kanauj. He conquered both, Magadha and Bengal. He tried to capture the kingdoms in Deccan, but was defeated by the king of Chalukya, Pulakeshin II.

The Kingdoms of the Pallavas and Chalukyas

The kingdoms of the Pallavas and Chalukyas were two major ruling dynasties of South India.

- The capital of Pallavas was Kanchipuram. This empire extended from Kanchipuram to the Kaveri delta.
- Aihole was the capital of the Chalukyas and also an important trading centre. Pulakeshin II was the best known ruler of this dynasty.
- His prashasti written by his court poet Ravikirtai forms an important source of information about this period.



The city of Kanchipuram was the capital of the Pallavas

- Pulakeshin II led expeditions along the west and the east coast. He also stopped the advancing armies of King Harshavardhana in Deccan.
- Pulakeshin II also attacked the Pallavas.
- Gradually both dynasties became weak and two new dynasties- the Rashtrakutas and the Chola emerged.

The Administration of the Kingdoms

Some of the main features of the administration of the kingdoms at this time were:

- Important administrative posts like that of the chief judicial officer were hereditary. Poet Harishena in the court of Samudragupta, was the *maha-danda-nayaka* or the chief judicial officer.
- At times, many offices were held by one person. For example, Harishena was not only the chief judicial officer but also a minister of war and peace.
- Important people like the *nagara-shreshthi* or the chief banker, the *sarthavaha* or the leader of the merchant caravans, the *prathamakulika* or the chief craftsman and the head of the *kayastha* or the scribes were influential members in the local administration.
- In South India, there were a number of assemblies during the rule of the Pallavas.
- There was a Sabha- an assembly of Brahmin land owners. This assembly had various sub assemblies under it which looked after departments like irrigation, roads, agricultural operations etc.
- The *ur* was a village assembly in areas where the land owners were not Brahmins. *Nagaram* was an organisation of the merchants.
- These assemblies were probably controlled by rich and powerful landowners and merchants.



Map showing the kingdoms of the Chalukyas and the Pallavas with their capitals.

Main features of the Army

Some of the main features of the army were:

- The kings maintained well organised armies which had elephants, cavalry, chariots and foot soldiers.
- Many military leaders known as *samanthas* maintained troops of their own and provided these and equipments of warfare to the kings during wars.
- These military leaders were not paid regular salaries. Instead, they received grants of lands from the king.
- These samanthas sometimes became very powerful and even threatened the authority of the weak kings.

Common People in the Kingdom

As shown in the plays of Kalidasa, the king and most of the Brahmins spoke sanskrita while the common people spoke Prakrit. The Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian observed that the people of lower castes lived a miserable life. The untouchables lived on the outskirts of the city. Their contact was considered to be polluting and people avoided touching them.

Through the writings of Banabhatta, we know that whenever the king's army was on the move, it was assisted by the villagers. But while marching, the army often destroyed the villages. For example, the elephants in the army while moving destroyed the fields and trampled the huts of the villagers.