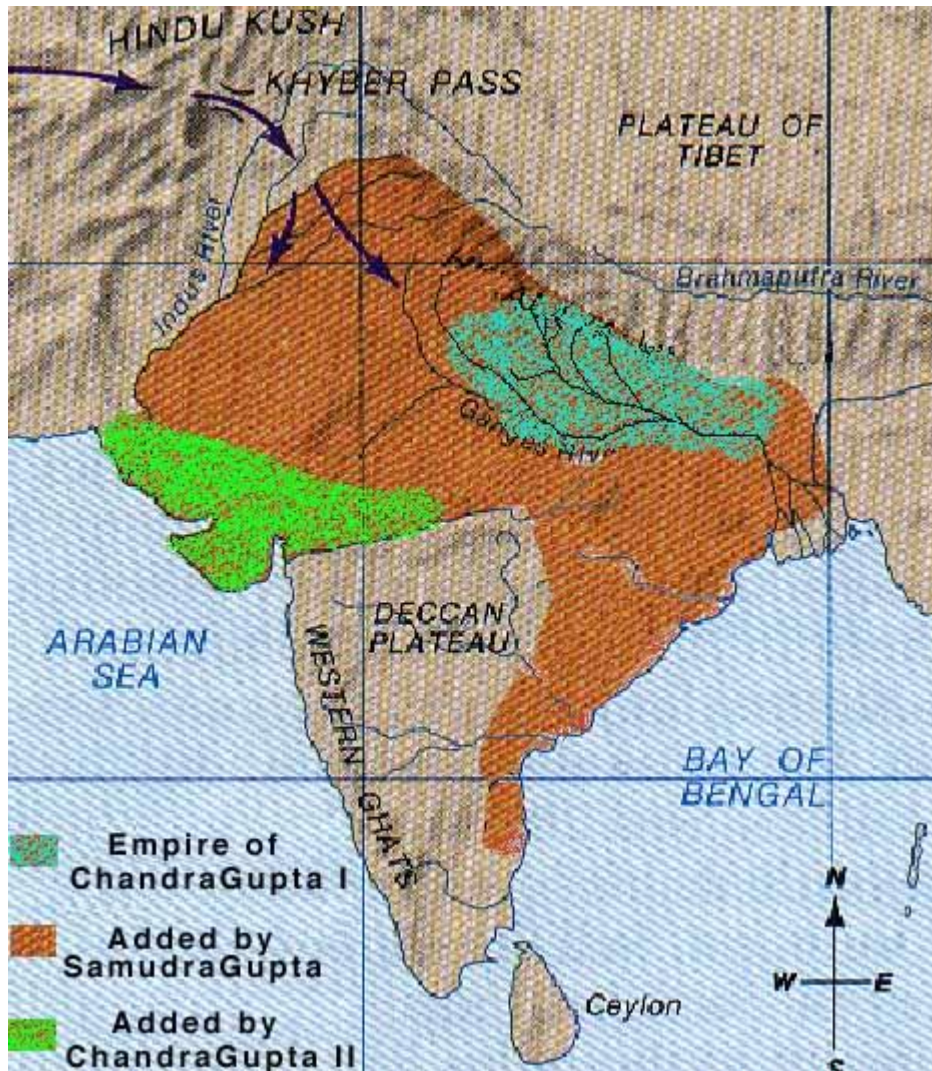




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Origin of Gupta Empire



The decline of the [Mauryan empire](#) resulted in the rise of two major political powers – the Kushanas and the Satavahanas in the north and south respectively. Both these empires brought political unity and economic growth in their respective areas. The Kushan reign in north India came to an end around c.230 CE and then a good part of central India came under the domain of the Murundas (possible kinsmen of the Kushanas).

The Murundas ruled for only 25 – 30 years. Around the last decade of the 3rd century CE (about 275 CE), the dynasty of the Guptas came to power. The Gupta empire established its control over a good part



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of the former dominions of both the Kushanas and the [Satavahanas](#). The Guptas (possibly Vaishyas) kept northern India politically united for more than a century (335 CE- 455 CE).

- The Guptas are believed to have been feudatories of the Kushanas.
- The original kingdom of the Guptas comprised Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with their centre of power at Prayag (U.P).
- The Guptas set up their rule over the fertile plains of the Madhyadesha, also known as Anuganga (the middle Gangetic basin), Saketa (U.P Ayodhya), Prayag (U.P) and Magadha (mostly Bihar).
- The Guptas made good use of the iron ore reserves in central India and south Bihar and also took advantage of their proximity to the areas in north India which carried on silk trade with the Byzantine empire (eastern Roman empire).
- **The Gupta period in ancient India is referred to as the “Golden Age”** because of the numerous achievements in the field of arts, literature, science and technology. It also brought about the political unification of the subcontinent.

Gupta Empire – Kings

A brief about the kings of the Gupta dynasty is given in the table below:

| Gupta Dynasty Kings | Facts about Gupta Kings |
|---------------------|--|
| Sri Gupta | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founder of Gupta Dynasty• Reign from 240 CE to 280 CE• Used the title of ‘Maharaja‘ |
| Ghatotkacha | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Son of Sri Gupta• Took the title of ‘Maharaja‘ |
| Chandragupta I | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reigned from 319 CE to 335/336 CE |



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| | |
|-----------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Started the Gupta Era• He assumed the title of 'Maharajadhiraja'• Married Lichchavi princess Kumaradevi |
| Samudragupta | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reigned from 335/336 CE to 375 CE• Called 'Napoleon of India' by V.A. Smith (Irish Indologist and Art Historian)• His campaigns are mentioned in the Eran inscription (Madhya Pradesh) |
| Chandragupta II | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reigned from 376-413/415 CE• Navratnas (9 Gems in his Court)• Took the title 'Vikramaditya' |
| Kumaragupta I | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reigned from 415 CE to 455 CE• Founded Nalanda University• He was also called Shakraditya |
| Skandagupta | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reigned from 455 AD – 467 AD• Was a 'Vaishnavite'• Son of Kumaragupta• Repulsed an attack by the Hunas but this strained his empire's coffers |



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| | |
|-------------|---|
| Vishnugupta | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Last known ruler of the Gupta Dynasty (540 AD – 550 AD) |
|-------------|---|

Gupta Empire – Chandragupta I (320 – 335 CE)

- Was the son of Ghatotkacha.
- Chandragupta I is considered to be the founder of the Gupta Era which started with his accession in 319 – 320 CE.
- He strengthened his position by a matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis (Nepal). He married Kumaradevi, a princess of the Lichchhavi clan and this added to the power and prestige of the Gupta family (Vaishyas).
- He extended his kingdom through conquests. His territory extended from the Ganges River to Prayaga by 321 AD.
- He issued coins in the joint names of his queen and himself.
- He assumed the title of Maharajadhiraja (great king of kings).
- He was successful in building a small principality into a great kingdom.
- His empire consisted of Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and parts of modern Bihar, with Pataliputra as its capital.
- He is considered the first great king of the Gupta Empire.

Gupta Empire – Samudragupta (c. 335/336 – 375 CE)

- The Gupta kingdom was enlarged enormously by Chandragupta I's son and successor Samudragupta.
- The Allahabad Pillar Inscription (Prayaga – Prashasti) gives a detailed account of his achievements. He followed the policy of war and conquest. This long inscription was composed by his court poet, Harisena, in chaste Sanskrit. The inscription is engraved on the same pillar that carries the inscription of peace-loving Ashoka.



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- Much of the Indian subcontinent was directly or indirectly under his control – from kingdoms in Nepal and Punjab in the north to the Pallava kingdom at Kanchipuram in the southeast. The last vestiges of the Kushana rule, like the [Shakas](#), the Murundas and even the independent territory of Simhala (Sri Lanka) acknowledged his suzerainty. The places and the territories conquered by Samudragupta can be divided into five groups:
 - **Group I** – Includes rulers of Ganga-Yamuna doab, who were defeated. He uprooted nine Naga rulers and annexed their territories.
 - **Group II** – Includes rulers of the eastern Himalayan states and some frontier states such as the princes of Nepal, Assam, Bengal, etc. who surrendered to his might. It also includes parts of Punjab.
 - **Group III** – Includes the forest kingdom situated in the Vindhya region (central India) known as atavika rajyas and forced their rulers into servitude. The conquest of this region helped him to move towards the south.
 - **Group IV** – Includes twelve rulers of eastern Deccan and south India who were defeated and his power reached as far as Kanchi (Tamil Nadu), where the Pallavas were forced to recognise his suzerainty. It is important to mention that Virasena was the commander of Samudragupta during his southern campaign. In the south, he adopted the policy of political conciliation and reinstated the defeated kings on their thrones. These states acknowledged his suzerainty and paid him tributes and presents.
 - **Group V** – Includes the Shakas of western India and Kushana rulers of north-west India and Afghanistan. Samudragupta swept them out of power.
- Though he had spread his influence over a vast area, and even received tributes from many kings of south-east Asia, Samudragupta exercised direct administrative control mainly over the Indo-Gangetic basin. According to Chinese sources, Meghavarman, the ruler of Sri Lanka, sent a missionary to Samudragupta for permission to build a Buddhist temple at Bodh Gaya.
- After conquering the territories, Samudragupta celebrated by performing the asvamedha (horse sacrifice). He issued coins with the legend “restorer of the asvamedha”. It is because of his military achievements that Samudragupta was hailed as the ‘Indian Napoleon’.
- He was equally great in his personal accomplishments. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription speaks of his magnanimity to his foes, his polished intellect, his poetic skills, and his proficiency in music. He is known by the title Kaviraja (king among poets) because of his ability in composing verses.



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His image depicting him with veena (lyre) is found in the coins issued by him. He is also credited with promoting Sanskrit literature and learning, characteristic of his dynasty.

- He was an ardent follower of Vaishnavism but was tolerant of other religions. He showed a keen interest in Buddhism and was the patron of the great Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu.
- Legends on his coins include epithets such as Apratirathah (invincible), Vyaghra-Parakramah (brave as a tiger), Parakramah (brave).

Gupta Empire – Chandragupta II (c. 376 – 413/415 CE)

- Samudragupta was succeeded by his son – Chandragupta II. But according to some scholars, the immediate successor was Ramagupta, the elder brother of Chandragupta II. But there is little historical proof for this.
- During Chandragupta II's reign, the Gupta dynasty reached its peak by expanding territories through conquests as well as by marriage alliances. He married Kubera-naga, a Naga princess and had a daughter, Prabhavati with her. He married Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince, Rudrasena II (Deccan). After the death of her husband, Prabhavati ruled the territory as regent to her minor sons with the help of her father. Thus Chandragupta II indirectly controlled the Vakataka kingdom.
- Chandragupta II's control over the Vakataka kingdom in central India proved quite advantageous for him. It helped him to conquer Gujarat and western Malwa, which was under the rule of Shakas for about four centuries by that time. The Guptas reached the western sea coast which was famous for trade and commerce. This contributed to the prosperity of Malwa and its main city Ujjain, which was also Chandragupta II's second capital.
- An Iron Pillar inscription at Mehrauli in Delhi indicates that his empire included even north-western India and Bengal. He adopted the title 'Vikramaditya' (powerful as the sun) and Simhavikrama.
- He issued gold coins (Dinara), silver coins and copper coins. On his coins, he is mentioned as Chandra.
- During his reign, a Chinese traveller, Fa-Hien visited India and wrote a detailed account about the life of its people.
- The Udaigiri cave inscriptions refer to his digvijaya, that is, his conquest of the whole world.
- His court at Ujjain was adorned by nine famous scholars known as the **Navratnas** (nine gems).



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- **Kalidasa** – He wrote Abhijnashakuntalam, one of the best hundred literary works in the world and also the earliest Indian work to be translated to European languages.
- **Amarasimha** – His work Amarakosha is a vocabulary of Sanskrit roots, homonyms and synonyms. It has three parts containing around ten thousand words and is also known as Trikanda.
- **Varahamihira** – He wrote three important books-
 - He composed Pancha Siddhantika, the five astronomical systems.
 - His work Brihadsamhita is a great work in the Sanskrit language. It deals with a variety of subjects like astronomy, astrology, geography, architecture, weather, animals, marriage and omens.
 - His Brihat Jataka is considered to be a standard work on astrology.
- **Dhanvantri** – He is considered to be the father of Ayurveda.
- **Ghatakarapara** – An expert in sculpture and architecture.
- **Shanku** – An architect who wrote the Shilpa Shastra.
- **Kahapanaka** – An astrologer who wrote Jyotishya Shastra.
- **Vararuchi** – Author of Prakrit Prakasha, the first grammar of the Prakrit language.
- **Vetala Bhatta** – Author of Mantrashastra and was a magician.

Kumaragupta I (c. 415 – 455 CE)

- Kumaragupta I was the son and successor of Chandragupta II.
- Adopted the titles of 'Shakraditya' and 'Mahendraditya'.
- Performed 'asvamedha' sacrifices.
- Most importantly, he laid the foundation of **Nalanda University** which emerged as an institution of international reputation.
- At the end of his reign, peace did not prevail on the north-west frontier due to the invasion of the Huns of Central Asia. After occupying Bactria, the Huns crossed the Hindukush mountains,



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occupied Gandhara and entered India. Their first attack, during Kumaragupta I's reign, was made unsuccessful by prince Skandagupta.

- The inscriptions of Kumaragupta I's reign are – Karandanda, Mandsoor, Bilsad inscription (oldest record of his reign) and Damodar Copper Plate inscription.

Skandagupta (c. 455 – 467 CE)

- Adopted the title 'Vikramaditya'.
- Junagarh/Girnar inscription of his reign reveals that his governor Parnadatta repaired the Sudarshan lake.
- After Skandagupta's death, many of his successors like Purugupta, Kumaragupta II, Buddhagupta, Narasimhagupta, Kumaragupta III and Vishnugupta could not save the Gupta empire from the Huns. Ultimately, the Gupta power totally disappeared due to a variety of reasons.

Also read: [Vakatakas](#)

Decline of Gupta Empire

The various reasons that led to the fall of the Gupta empire are discussed below:

Hun Invasion

The Gupta prince Skandagupta fought bravely and successfully against the early Huns' invasion. However, his successors proved to be weak and could not check the Huns' invasion. The Huns showed excellent horsemanship and were expert archers which helped them to attain success, not only in Iran but also in India. In the latter half of the 5th century, the Hun chief Toramana conquered large parts of western India, up to Eran near Bhopal in central India. By 485 CE, Huns had occupied Punjab, Rajasthan, Kashmir, eastern Malwa and a large part of central India. Toramana (in 515 CE) was succeeded by his son Mihirkula, who was a tyrant ruler as is mentioned in the Rajatarangini by Kalhana and Hieun-Tsang refers to him as a persecutor of Buddhists. Mihirkula was defeated and the Huna power was overthrown by Yashodharman of Malwa, Narasimha Gupta Baladitya of the Gupta empire and the Maukharis. However, this win over Huns could not revive the Gupta empire.

Rise of Feudatories

The rise of feudatories was another factor that led to the fall of the Gupta empire. Yashodharman of Malwa (belonged to the Aulikara feudatory family) after defeating Mihirkula successfully challenged the authority of the Guptas and set up, in 532 CE, pillars of victory commemorating his conquest of almost



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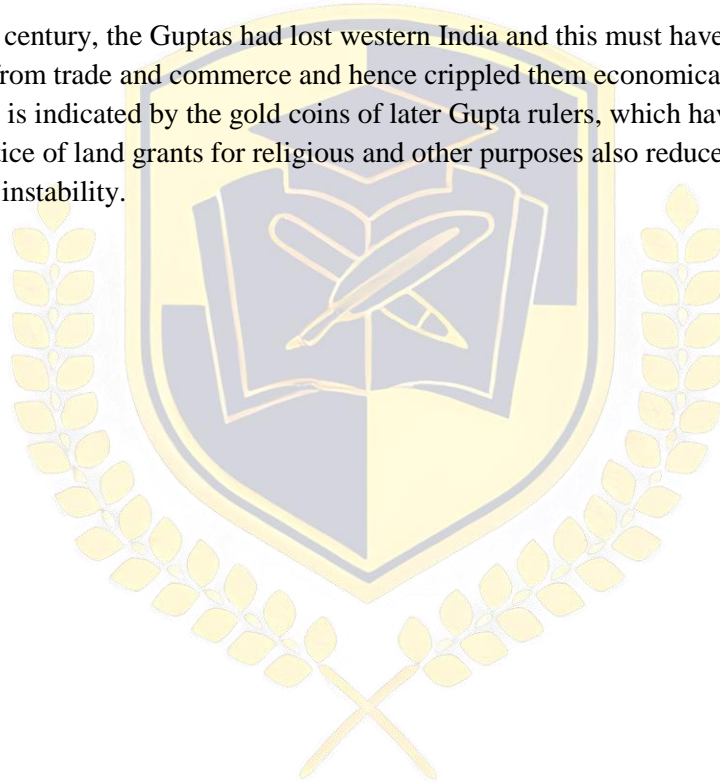


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the whole of northern India. Although Yashodharman's rule was short-lived, it certainly gave a huge blow to the Gupta empire. The other feudatories too rose in rebellion against the Guptas and ultimately became independent in Bihar, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Valabhi, Gujarat, Malwa and so on. It is important to mention that after the reign of Skandagupta (467 CE) hardly any coin or inscription has been found in western Malwa and Saurashtra.

Economic decline

By the end of the 5th century, the Guptas had lost western India and this must have deprived the Guptas of the rich revenues from trade and commerce and hence crippled them economically. The economic decline of the Guptas is indicated by the gold coins of later Gupta rulers, which have less percentage of gold metal. The practice of land grants for religious and other purposes also reduced the revenues which resulted in economic instability.



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