

SEM-II

MAJOR

CC- 3 Paper Title- History of India(300 BC-1206 BC)

UNIT-1

AGE OF THE GUPTAS

During the Gupta period (c. 320–647 C.E., named for the Gupta dynasty) there were tremendous advances in poetry, prose, and drama as well as important discoveries in mathematics and astronomy. This was the age of some of the most celebrated creatives in Indian history, including the fifth century writer Kālidāsa whose works would influence generations of writers. This was also the period in which the fifth century astronomer Aryabhata theorized that the earth rotated on its own axis and calculated the solar year at 365.3586805 days.

The *Puranas*, a compendium of religious literature considered sacred to both the Hindu and Jain religious traditions and consisting of stories and the genealogies of the gods, folk tales, and traditional lore, grew in prominence during the Gupta years. While it is difficult to date the *Puranas* because they contain anonymous texts compiled over many centuries both before and after the Gupta period, we know that *Puranic* stories were a popular religious and cultural reference during the Gupta years from the depiction of *Puranic* episodes in art and architecture. Kālidāsa's poetry and plays also frequently engaged with episodes from the *Puranas*.

The Guptas were ambitious rulers and by the end of the fourth century claimed dominance over a vast swathe of northern India (see map above). They maintained a capital at Pataliputra, the same ancient center used by the formidable, and earlier, Mauryan empire (4th–2nd century B.C.E.) and that of the emperor AshokaMaurya (3rd century B.C.E.)

The golden age of Indian culture?

Although Gupta overlordship was significant throughout the empire in the early years and later, local rulers were allowed a fair bit of autonomy in their territories. It is important

therefore to not conflate the innovations and achievements of the Gupta period with the Guptas, and to acknowledge the contributions of regional dynasties. This is particularly important when works of art and architecture dated to the Gupta period are missing contextual information. Rather than assigning the Gupta dynastic label to these works of art and architecture, art historians use methods of connoisseurship to understand the artists, patrons, and provenance of these works. In the process, we are able to better understand the artistic developments of the period as a whole.

The Gupta period was termed the "Golden Age of Indian Culture" by some early observers who assigned the vast quantity and sophisticated quality of art from that period to the sponsorship of the Guptas. The term "Golden Age" was based on the desire of these writers for an ideal or classical style of art (using the art of ancient Greece as an example), and the opinion that art after the Gupta period was less classical and too decadent to be tasteful. The artistic developments of regional kingdoms in the Gupta era problematizes this Eurocentric perspective. The fifth and sixth century rock-cut temples at Ajanta and Elephanta, in the domain of the Vakataka and Kalachuri rulers respectively, are prominent sites that point to a richer and more complex art history of the Gupta period.

That is not to say that the Gupta rulers themselves were not important patrons of art and architecture. The Udaigiri complex of rock-cut caves in Madhya Pradesh (a large state in central India) is an exceptional site with inscriptions that indicate sponsorship from the Gupta court. Nineteen of the site's twenty caves are dedicated to Hindu gods and date to the fourth and fifth centuries; one cave is dedicated to the Jain religion and is dated to the early fifth century.

Varaha, the man-boar *avatar*

A sculptural panel at Udaigiri (in cave number 5) depicts the Hindu god Vishnu in his man-boar form

avatar

known as Varaha. The panel shows Varaha rescuing Bhudevi (goddess of earth) from a cosmic flood, a story that is recounted frequently in Hindu religious literature, including

the *Puranas*. Varaha is shown here as a hero posing regally with the goddess as she dangles from his tusk. An audience of gods, sages, and people — most in crowds of organized rows — witness the event with awe.

Scholars have suggested that the Guptas may have been especially attached to the Varaha *avatar* of Vishnu. A remarkable sculpture — this time showing the Varaha *avatar* in the form of a boar (not a man-boar as at Udaigiri cave number 5) — is found in Eran, another site in Madhya Pradesh. Eran has a number of temples dated to the Gupta period and its association with the Guptas is well-established by way of inscriptions.

Eran's Varaha is colossal – nearly twelve feet in height – and is shown again with the goddess holding on to his tusk. The artists cleverly included the witnesses of the miracle on Varaha's body itself which is covered almost entirely by rows of spectators. Additional figures are also carved on his ears and snout.
