

UNIT 32 RISE AND GROWTH OF GUPTAS

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32.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you shall be able to:

- know about the political conditions in India at the beginning of the fourth century A.D.,
- familiarise yourself with the circumstances that led to the rise of Gupta power,
- know about the expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire,
- understand the order of succession of the Gupta rulers and their military exploits, and
- understand the process that led to the decline of Guptas.

32.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, after briefly discussing the political situation of the fourth century A.D. we go on to analyse the historical situation which led to the rise of the Gupta dynasty. The attempt here will be to give you a political outline of the period. We take into account the controversies relating to the succession of Gupta kings and at the same time discuss some of their achievements which made possible the formation and consolidation of the empire. Kings like Samudragupta, Chandragupta-II, Kumaragupta and Skandagupta figure very prominently in the history of the empire. The Unit also takes into account some of the problems faced by the Gupta kings and the factors responsible for the decline of Gupta rule.

32.2 POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In the beginning of the fourth century A.D. no large state structure existed in India. You have read in Blocks VI and VII that in the post-Mauryan period two large state structures had emerged in north India and in the Deccan. These were the Kushana state of the north and the Satavahana state of the Deccan. But although the Kushanas and Saka chiefs continued to rule even in early fourth century A.D., their power had become considerably weak, and the Satavahana state had disappeared before the middle of the third century A.D. This does not however mean that there was complete political vacuum. There was no major political power but there were minor powers and new families of rulers were emerging. It was in this situation that the Guptas, a family of uncertain origins, began to build up an empire from the beginning of the fourth century A.D. Before we take up the history of this empire, we present an outline of the political situation of this period by taking up different regions separately.

32.2.1 North-western and Northern India

Before the middle of the third century A.D. the rule of the Sassanians had been established in Iran and the Sassanian rulers started claiming overlordship over Kushana kings. The mighty Kushana kings of north-western India were reduced to the position of subordinates and the Sassanian authority also extended to Sindh and certain other areas.

However, a large number of coins which are based on earlier Kushana coins and are found in Afghanistan and Punjab suggest that several branches of rulers, some Kushana, continued to rule in the region. There are also the coins of Kidara Kushana and his successors, in Afghanistan, Kashmir and western Punjab and it is possible that some of these rulers were contemporaries of the early Gupta rulers.

In other parts of the Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, old coins again point to the existence of a number of republican states. These were states which were not ruled by a single king but possibly by several chiefs; it was only occasionally that one finds a chief claiming the status of the King of a clan. The Madras, mentioned in connection with the exploits of the Gupta ruler Samudragupta, were located in the Punjab; the Yaudheyas were extremely powerful with their centre in present-day Haryana and the Malavas were located in Rajasthan. There were many other republican states like these, and some of them are even mentioned in the Gupta records.

Several branches of the Nagas who became very powerful in Mathura and other centres after the decline of Kushana power in north India are also known. Some of the north Indian rulers who were defeated by Samudragupta were definitely of Naga origin.

32.2.2 Western and Central India

You have read in Block 6 that a branch of Kshatrapa rulers established themselves in Western India in the post-Mauryan period. The line of Chastana, to which the well-known Saka Kshatrapa Rudradaman belonged, continued to rule till 304 A.D. and then a new line of rulers began to rule. However, Kshatrapa rule came to an end towards the close of the fourth century A.D. when Gupta ruler Chandragupta-II conquered and annexed their territories.

In the region of ancient Vidarbha, the core of which was Nagpur in northeast Maharashtra, a new power had emerged by the middle of the third century A.D. This power was that of the Vakatakas, a new line of rulers started by Vindhyasakti. Vakataka power soon became formidable and a branch was also established at Vatsagulma (modern Basim in Akola district). The Vakataka family later on came into close contact with the Guptas, particularly after a matrimonial alliance was formed between the two families.

32.2.3 The Deccan and South India

The decline of the Satavahana state of the Deccan was followed by the emergence of a number of new royal families in different parts of the Deccan. In coastal Andhra, there was a succession of families like the Ikshvakus, the Salankayanas and others. In Karnataka, the most important ruling family was that of the Kadambas. The Kadamba power was founded by Brahmin Mayurasarman whose Talagunda inscription gives some interesting details of the circumstances leading to the establishment of the kingdom and also some ideas regarding its extent. The ruling family of the Pallavas, which became a formidable power in Tamilnadu till the ninth century is known from their records to have started ruling from the middle of the third century A.D. The inscriptions of the early Pallava rulers were written in the Prakrit language and were in the form of copper plates. They are generally assigned to the period between century 250-350 A.D. Sivaskandarasman of this family, who ruled in the beginning of the fourth century A.D., was a powerful ruler and his kingdom included parts of Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Kanchi or Kanchipuram in the Chingleput district of Tamilnadu became the capital of the Pallavas and when Gupta ruler Samudragupta led an expedition to the south, he encountered Pallavan king Vismigopa at Kanchi. The above sketch does not mention many areas and many ruling families but only those who were comparatively important. It must however be noted that in many areas like Bengal, Orissa, forest regions of Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere kingdoms were emerging for the first time. This was a new trend and was very significant for the later course of political history.

32.3 THE RISE OF THE GUPTAS

The ancestry and early history of the Gupta family are little known, and have naturally given rise to various speculations. Names ending in Gupta, such as Sivagupta which occurs in a Satavahana inscription, are sometimes taken to suggest their ancestry. But these suggestions are rather far-fetched. Different scholars also place the original home of the Guptas differently: Some would place it in north Bengal, some in Magadha in Bihar and some in U.P. on the basis of the following arguments it may, at the moment, be suggested that the original core of the Gupta territory lay in eastern U.P.:

- Allahabad pillar inscription, the earliest inscription recording the achievements of an early Gupta ruler, Samudragupta, comes from this region.
- The nature of the coin-hoards of the Guptas, found in this region, suggests this
- The description of early Gupta territories in the *Puranas* may point to this.

It is possible that in the closing decades of the 3rd century A.D. the Guptas were subordinates of a branch of the later Kushanas ruling in north-western India. However, literary and archaeological sources indicate that they became independent in the second decade of the fourth century A.D.

Inscriptions tell us that Srigupta was the first king and Ghatotkacha was the next to follow him. Chandragupta-I was the first independent king with the title **Maharajadhiraja**. After declaring his independence in Magadha, he with the help of a matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis, enlarged his kingdom. We know about this alliance from a special category of coins. These coins have Chandragupta and his queen Kumaradevi engraved on the obverse and a seated goddess on the reverse with a legend **Lichchhavayah** (i.e. the Lichchhavis). These coins were made of gold, and this fact in addition to the fact that the Guptas followed the weight system of Kushana gold coins suggests that the Guptas had been in contact with the Kushana territories.

There are no concrete evidences to determine the boundaries of Chandragupta's kingdom. But it is assumed that it covered parts of Bihar, U.P. and Bengal.

Chandragupta-I is said to have also started a new era from 319-320 A.D. It is not clear from any records that he started this era, which came to be known as **Gupta Samvat** or Gupta era, but since Chandragupta-I is mentioned as a **Maharajadhiraja** he is credited with the founding of the era. It was during the times of his son Samudragupta that the kingdom grew into an empire.

32.3.1 Samudragupta

An inscription engraved (at a later date) on the Asokan pillar at Allahabad (known as **Prayagprasasti**) gives us information about Samudragupta's accession and conquests. Harishena, an important official of the state, had composed 33 lines which were engraved on the pillar. The inscription mentions that **Maharajadhiraja** Chandragupta-I in a highly emotional tone declared his son Samudragupta as his successor. This caused joy among the courtiers and heart-burning among those of equal birth. It can be presumed that other princes might have put forward their contending claims which were put to rest by this declaration. Further, the discovery of some gold coins bearing the name of Kacha has generated a controversy relating to this. The controversy has arisen because:

- i) in many respects Kacha's coins are similar to the coins of Samudragupta,
- ii) the name of Kacha does not appear in the official lists of Gupta rulers, as they are available in the Gupta inscriptions.

Various interpretations have been given in this regard:

- According to one interpretation Samudragupta's brothers revolted against him and placed Kacha, the eldest brother, on the throne. However he died in the war of succession.
- Another view mentions that these coins were issued by Samudragupta in the memory of his brother.
- A third view mentions Kacha as the initial name of Samudragupta and the later name was adopted only after the conquest of south.

There is no solution to the controversy as each view has arguments in favour of against. We could only say that since the number of Kacha coins found so far is somewhat limited his hold over the throne would have been for a very short duration. Also that Samudragupta, inspite of Chandragupta's abdication, did face problems in relation to accession to the throne but ultimately he emerged victorious.



1. The Prayagprasasti of Samudragupta

32.3.2 Expansion and Consolidation

For the expansion and consolidation of the Gupta power Samudragupta adopted an aggressive policy of conquests. This initiated a process which culminated in the formation of the Gupta empire. However, we have to take note here of the fact that in certain regions—particularly in the South—he let the kings, whom he had defeated, rule over their regions. Of course, they accepted his suzerainty and paid tributes. Such a policy adopted in relation to the far-flung areas might have paid dividends in solving problems of communication and effective control, hence bringing about stability for the time being. Let us briefly discuss the aggressive campaigns taken by Samudragupta in various regions. We may mention again that we come to know about all the campaigns of Samudragupta only from one record, the **Prayagprasasti** of Harishena.

1) Campaigns in Aryavarta:

Some historians are of the view that Samudragupta carried his victorious campaign of Aryavarta at one time. However, some other historians, assuming that the **Prayagprasasti** mentions the conquests of Samudragupta in a chronological order, have opined that there were two campaigns in north India. This is because the **prasasti** first mentions three Aryavarta kings, then it goes on to mention his southern campaign and again mentions nine Aryavarta kings. It appears that taking advantage of the war of succession, which Samudragupta had to face, certain rulers attempted to establish their dominance. It might be in this context that Samudragupta defeated Achyuta, Nagasena and Kota-Kulaja. There are no details regarding these conquests or regarding the identity of the specific regions over which they ruled. However, historians have identified Achyuta as ruling over Ahichchatra, Nagasena over Gwalior area and Kota-Kulaja or ruler of the Kota family in east Punjab and Delhi. Though differences continue to prevail over these identifications it is clear that Samudragupta, after defeating them, established firm control not only over the Ganga Valley but also over some adjacent regions.

2) Campaign in South:

The **Prayagprasasti** mentions twelve rulers from **dakshinapatha** or south India who were defeated by Samudragupta. These were:

- Mahendra of Kosala (Raipur, Durg, Sambalpur and Bilaspur districts)
- Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara (Jeypore, forest region of Orissa)
- Mantaraja of Kaurata (Probably Sonpur area in Madhya Pradesh or Plain country to the north-east of Mahendra hill)
- Mahendragiri of Pishtapura (Pithasuram, East Godavari district)
- Svamidatta of Kottura (Ganjam district)
- Damana of Erandapalla (Chicacole or West Godavari district)

- Vishnugopa of Kanchi (Chingleput district)
- Nilaraja of Avamukta (Godavari Valley)
- Hasti-varman of Vengi (Cellor in the Krishna-Godavari delta)
- Ugresena of Palakka (Nellore district)
- Kubera of Devarashtra (Yellamanchiti in Visakhapatnam district), and
- Dhananjaya of Kushthalpura (possibly in North Arcot district in Tamilnadu)

However, again there are differences among historians as to the specific identifications of these kings and their kingdoms. The **Prayagaprasasti** says that Samudragupta showed favour to be **Dakshinapatha** kings by first capturing them (**grahana**) and then releasing them (**moksha**). He pursued a completely different policy with regard to the kings of **Aryavarta** or north India. He not only defeated them but also annexed their territories which became integrated into the Gupta empire. The north Indian kings defeated by Samudragupta were: Rudradwa, Matila, Nagadatta, Chandravarma, Ganapatinaga, Nagasena, Archyuta, Nandi, Balavarma and others. It is impossible to identify all of them, but it is certain that they were ruling in different parts of northern India. Some of them were obviously Naga rulers who had been powerful in several regions before the Guptas. Rulers like Chandravarma who ruled in West Bengal represented new ruling families. The **Prasasti** further says that Samudragupta reduced all states in the forest regions to the position of servants. In another category are mentioned the frontier kingdoms like Samatata (in southeast Bengal), Kamarupa (Assam), Nepala (Nepal) and others and the republican states of the Malavas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Abhiras, etc. They paid him tributes of all kinds, carried out his orders and paid him homage. Rulers of another category of states acknowledged his sovereignty in a different way. They pleased him by "self-surrender, offering (their own) daughters in marriage, and a request for the administration of their own districts and provinces". This means that they remained independent but their independence had to be approved by Samudragupta. In this category were included the foreign rulers of north-western India like the later Kushanas and the Saka chief and residents of different island countries including Simhala or Sri Lanka.

Many of the claims made by Harishena, the composer of *Prayagaprasasti*, are highly exaggerated but many of the claims are also genuine. The military foundations of the Gupta empire were laid by Samudragupta; his successors built upon these foundations.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Fill in the blanks:
 - a) At the beginning of the fourth century A.D. there were (Many/no) small kingdoms in North India.
 - b) Chandragupta-I had a matrimonial alliance with (Sakas/Lichchavis)
 - c) The **Prayagaprasasti** refers to the victories of (Pravarsena/Samudragupta).
- 2) Discuss in about ten lines the efforts made by Samudragupta for the expansion of Gupta empire.

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- 3) List five minor powers in north India at the beginning of fourth century A.D.

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32.4 CHANDRAGUPTA-II

The Gupta inscriptions mention Chandragupta-II as Samudragupta's successor. But on the basis of literary sources, some copper coins and inscriptions it is suggested that the successor was Samudragupta's other son Ramagupta. Visakhadatta's drama **Devi Chandraguptam** mentions that Chandragupta-II killed his elder brother Ramagupta. He did this because Ramagupta was facing defeat at the hands of the Sakas and in order to save the kingdom, he had agreed to surrender his wife to the Saka king. Chandragupta protested, and went to the Saka camp in the disguise of the queen Dhruvadevi. He was successful against the Saka king but as a result of the subsequent hostility with his brother he killed him and married his wife Dhruvadevi. Certain other texts like the **Harsacharita**, **Kavyamimansa**, etc. also refer to this episode. Some copper coins bearing the name Ramagupta have also been found and inscriptions on the pedestals of some Jaina images found at Vidisa, bear the name Maharaja Ramgupta. Similarly, Dhruvadevi is described as mother of Govindagupta (Chandragupta's son) in a Vaisali seal. We can say that Chandragupta ascended the throne at a time when there were problems emerging again and he had to lead military campaigns to establish Gupta supremacy once again. He entered into matrimonial alliances with the Nagas by marrying princess Kuberanaga whose daughter Prabhavati was later on married to Rudrasena-II of the Vakataka family. Though there is no record like the **Prayagaprasasti** to describe the events of his reign we do get information about Chandragupta's campaigns and successes from certain inscriptions, literary sources and coins: He defeated the Saka king Rudrasimha-III and annexed his kingdom. This brought an end to Saka Kshatrapa rule in western India and added the regions of Gujarat, Kathiawad and west Malwa to the Gupta empire. The details of Chandragupta-II's campaigns against the Sakas are not known. His matrimonial alliances with the Vakatakas and the Nagas must have been of tremendous significances in his preparations for the campaigns. Two inscriptions at the Udayagiri caves near Sanchi and one inscription at Sanchi, all referring to Chandragupta II and to his subordinate rulers and military officials, also suggest that he was present in eastern Malwa for some time preparing for the campaigns. One inscription describes him as "desirous of conquering the whole earth". That his conquest of the territories of the Sakas was complete is proved beyond doubt because:

- We no longer find any Saka coins minted after this period, although Saka coins were being minted without a break for almost four hundred years previously.
- The Guptas, from the time of Chandragupta, started minting Saka-type silver coins—for this region. They only added their own distinct symbols on these coins; otherwise, the coins were like Saka coins in circulation till then. This definitely shows that the Saka areas came within the control of Chandragupta-II.
- The success of Chandragupta-II against the Sakas seems to have developed later on into the tradition of Sakari Vikramaditya, that is, of 'Vikramaditya, who was an enemy of the Sakas'.
- 'King Chandra' whose exploits have been mentioned in the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription, which is located in the Qutab-Minar complex in Delhi is identified by many scholars with Chandragupta-II. According to this inscription Chandra crossed the Sindhu region of seven rivers and defeated Valhikas (identified with Bactria). Some scholars identify Chandragupta-II with the hero of Kalidasa's work **Raghuvamasa** because Raghu's exploits appear comparable with those of Chandragupta.
- The Mehrauli inscription also mentions Chandragupta's victory over enemies from Vanga (Bengal).

On the basis of these evidences it can be suggested that Chandragupta-II was able to extend the frontiers of the Gupta empire to western, north-western and eastern India.

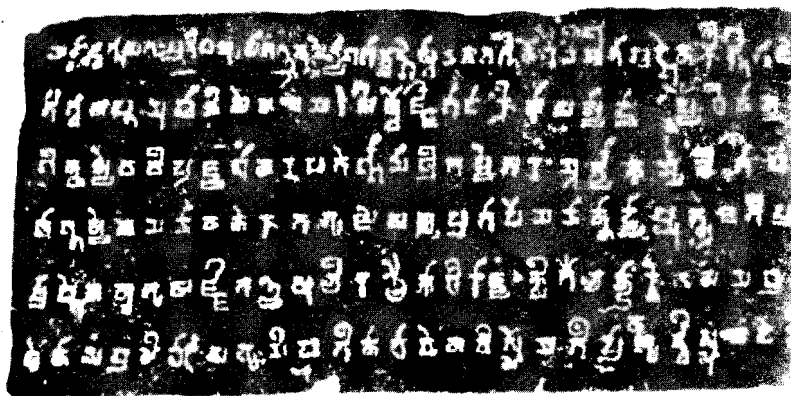
An important incident which took place during this period was the visit of Fa-Hien, a Chinese pilgrim, who came to India in search of Buddhist texts. In his memoirs he has given a vivid description of the places he visited and certain social and administrative aspects related to them. However, he does not mention the name of the King in his accounts. But he

speaks highly of the King of Madhya-desa, the region which was directly ruled by the Gupta monarch in this period, under whom the people were prosperous and happy.

Chandragupta-II is also known for his patronage to men of letters and he ruled till about 415-16 A.D.



2. The Mehrauli Iron Pillar



3. Inscription on Iron Pillar

32.5 KUMARAGUPTA-I

Chandragupta-II was succeeded by his son Kumaragupta. We get information about him from certain inscriptions and coins.

For example:

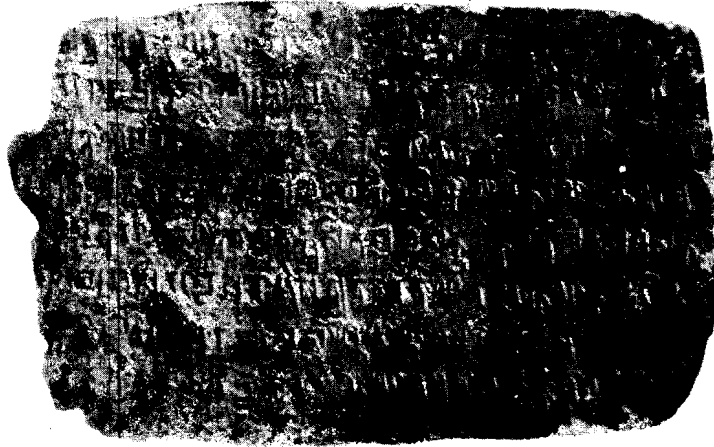
- The earliest known inscription of his period is from Bilsad (Etah district) which is dated 415 A.D. (Gupta Era 96).
- The Karamdanda (Fyzabad) inscription of Kumaragupta's minister (436 A.D.) mentions his fame having spread to the four oceans.
- A stone inscription from Mandsor (436 A.D.) mentions Kumaragupta as reigning over the whole earth.
- The Damodarpur Copper Plate inscriptions (433 A.D. and 447 A.D.) refer to him as **Maharajadhiraja** and show that he himself appointed the governor (**Uparika**) of

Pundravardhana bhukti (or province) being the biggest administrative division in the empire.

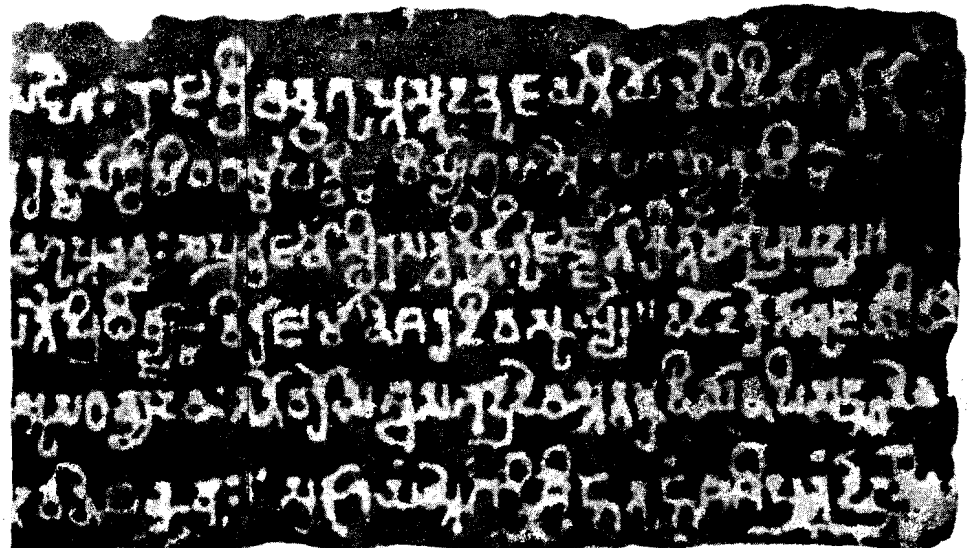
- The last known date of Kumaragupta is from a silver coin dated 455 A.D. (Gupta Era 136).

The wide area over which his inscriptions are distributed indicates that he ruled over Magadha and Bengal in the east and Gujarat in the west. It has been suggested that towards the last year of his reign the Gupta empire faced foreign invasion which was checked by the efforts of his son Skandagupta. He maintained cordial relationship with the Vakatakas which had been established through matrimonial alliances earlier.

4. Kumaragupta's Inscriptions.



a) Damodarpur



(b) Tuman

32.6 SKANDAGUPTA

Skandagupta, who succeeded Kumaragupta-I, was perhaps the last powerful Gupta monarch. To consolidate his position he had to fight the Pushyamitras, and the country faced Huna invasion from across the frontiers in the northwest. However, Skandagupta was successful in throwing the Huns back. It appears that these wars adversely affected the economy of the empire, and the gold coinage of Skandagupta bears testimony to that. In comparison to the gold coins of the earlier rulers the types of gold coins minted by Skandagupta were limited. In addition to following the earlier system of weights, he introduced a new, heavier weight system for gold coins but generally his coins had less gold in them than earlier coins.

Moreover, he appears to have been the last Gupta ruler to mint silver coins in western India. However, the Junagadh inscription of his reign tells us about the public works undertaken during his times. The Sudarsana lake (originally built during the Maurya times) burst due to excessive rains and in the early part of his rule his governor Parnadatta got it repaired. This indicates that the state undertook the task of public works. The last known date of Skandagupta is 467 A.D. from his silver coins.

Gupta Rulers after Skandagupta

It is not very clear in what order the successors of Skandagupta ruled. Skandagupta himself may not have been the rightful heir to the throne and therefore he had to fight other contenders to the throne. This may be the reason why a seal inscription traces a line of Gupta rulers after Skandagupta from Kumaragupta-I and his son Purugupta and not Skandagupta. Secondly, it is probable that the division of the Gupta empire into many parts already began towards the close of Skandagupta's reign. Thus an inscription from western Malwa, recorded in the last year of Skandagupta does not refer to him but to some other rulers beginning with Chandragupta-II.

Some of the successors of Skandagupta, mentioned in inscriptions, were: Budhagupta, Vainyagupta, Bhanagupta, Narasimhagupta Baladitya, Kumaragupta-II and Vismigupta. It is unlikely that all of them ruled over a vast empire, as Chandragupta-II and Kumaragupta-I had done in an earlier period. The Guptas continued to rule till about 550 A.D. but by then their power had already become very insignificant.

32.7 DISINTEGRATION OF THE GUPTA EMPIRE

In this section we deal with some of the factors that contributed towards the disintegration of the Gupta empire.

1) Huna Invasions

From the time of Kumaragupta-I the north-west borders had been threatened by the Hunas a Central Asian tribe which was successfully moving in different directions and was establishing pockets of rule in northwestern, northern and western India. But their attacks were repulsed during that period. However, towards the end of the fifth century A.D. the Huna chief Tormana was able to establish his authority over large parts of western India and in central India. Mihirakula, his son, further extended the dominions. Thus, the Huna attacks caused a major blow to the Gupta authority particularly in northern and western regions of the empire.

2) Administrative Weaknesses

The policy adopted by the Guptas in the conquered areas was to restore the authority of local chiefs or kings once they had accepted Gupta suzerainty. In fact, no efforts were made to impose a strict and effective control over these regions. Hence it was natural that whenever there was a crisis of succession or a weak monarchy within the Gupta empire these local chiefs would reestablish their independent authority. This created a problem for almost every Gupta King who had to reinforce his authority. The constant military campaigns were a strain on the state treasury. Towards the end of the fifth century A.D. and beginning of sixth century A.D. taking advantage of the weak Gupta emperors, many regional powers reasserted their authority, and in due course declared their independence (You would read about these powers in Unit 34).

Besides these, there were many other reasons which contributed to the decline of Guptas. For example, it has been argued that the Guptas issued landgrants to the Brahmana donees and in this process surrendered the revenue and administrative rights in favour of the donees. Further, it is believed that the **Samanta** system in which the **Samantas** or minor rulers, who ruled as subordinates to the central authority, started to consolidate itself in the Gupta period. This is also believed to be the reason why Gupta administrative structure became so loose. There is diversity of opinion as to how the system originated and regarding the details of the system, but the presence of many **Samantas** within the empire does show that they wielded power almost independently of the Gupta authority.

There is no doubt that divisions within the imperial family, concentration of power in the hands of local chiefs or governors, loose administrative structure of the empire etc. contributed towards the disintegration of the Gupta empire.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss in about ten lines the military campaigns of Chandragupta-II.

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- 2) Discuss in about ten lines the factors which brought about the disintegration of Gupta empire.

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- 3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong?

- a) The Huna invasion during Kumaragupta's time was checked by Skandagupta.
- b) Fa-Hien came to India in search of Jaina texts.
- c) Ramagupta is said to be Chandragupta-II's elder brother.
- d) Sudarshan lake was repaired during Skandagupta's rule.

32.8 LET US SUM UP

In the beginning of the fourth century A.D. north India was divided into many small kingdoms and chiefdoms. These kingdoms in different regions often fought with each other. It was in such a political situation that the Gupta dynasty gained power and gradually established an empire. The kings of this dynasty undertook extensive military campaigns in different regions. It was under Samudragupta and Chandragupta-II that the imperial power was properly consolidated. The Guptas remained a strong force till the time of Skandagupta but after him the process of disintegration started. Various factors like foreign invasion, dissension within the ruling family, reassertion of power by local chiefs, administrative weakness, etc. hastened the process of disintegration.

32.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) Many b) Lichchhavis c) Samudragupta
- 2) Compare your answer by reading Sub-sec. 32.3.2
- 3) Yaudheyas, Malavas, Nagas, Madras, Later Kushanas. See Sub-sec. 32.2.1.

- 1) Compare your answer with the contents in Sec. 32.4
- 2) See Sec. 32.8
- 3) a) ✓ b) × c) ✓ d) ✓