

UNIT 33 ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND POLITY : GUPTAS

Structure

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33.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you shall be able to know about:

- the administrative set-up of the Guptas,
- the economic conditions under the Guptas in relation to agriculture, crafts production and trade, and
- the various aspects of social life during this period.

33.1 INTRODUCTION

After having made you familiar with an outline of the political history of the Gupta period (Unit 32) we now take up certain other aspects of this period. There are a variety of sources which tell us about economic, social, administrative and cultural aspects of this period. These sources of information are: (i) inscription written on different materials like copper plates, stone, clay seals; (ii) coins issued by rulers of different dynasties; (iii) material from excavations; (iv) contemporary literature; and (v) accounts left by foreign travellers like Fa-Hien.

In this Unit we shall tell you about the administrative set-up adopted by the Guptas. It will also deal with the economic activities of the period and with different sources of state revenue. The Unit also discusses the social conditions during this period.

33.2 ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE GUPTAS

We have already mentioned in Unit 32 that the Gupta kings did not interfere in the administration of those regions where the kings had accepted their suzerainty. However, this does not mean that the Guptas were ruling only through their feudatories. They had an elaborate administrative system which was in operation in areas which were directly controlled by them.

33.2.1 King

The King remained the central figure of administration. However, there was a considerable change in the character of monarchy. We find that the Gupta monarchs adopted high sounding titles like: **Paramabhattaraka**, **Parama-daivata**, **Chakravarti**, **Paramesvara**, etc. For example, the Allahabad **Prasasti** of Samudragupta describes him as "equal to the gods: Dhanada (Kubera), Varuna (Sea-God), Indra and Antaka (Vama), who had no

antagonist of equal power. The word *Devadatta* (the King who has been given a divine status) in the **Smriti** scriptures, the Gupta monarchs too came to be considered a divinity on earth. However, in the spirit of **Smriti** literature and that of Kalidasa we find Skandagupta in his Bhitari Pillar inscription eulogized as a person who “subdued the earth and became merciful to the conquered people, but he became neither proud nor arrogant though his glory was increasing day by day.” His father, Kumaragupta, “followed the true path of religion”. Such references to the monarchy indicate that in spite of the supreme powers that vested in the King he was expected to follow a righteous path, and had certain duties:

- It was the King’s duty to decide the policy of the state during war and peace. For instance, Samudragupta was prudent enough to reinstate the monarchs of *dakshinapatha* in their original kingdoms.
- It was considered a prime duty of the monarch to protect his countrymen from any invasion.
- The King was to lead the army in case of war. This is demonstrated through the campaigns of Samudragupta and Chandragupta-II.
- The King was also expected to support the Brahmanas, Sramanas and all others who needed his protection.
- He was also supposed to venerate the learned and religious people and give them every possible help.
- As the supreme judge he looked after administration of justice according to religious precepts and existing customs.
- It was the duty of the King to appoint his central and provincial officers.
- The **Prayagprasasti** as well as the **Apratigha** type coins of Kumaragupta-I point to the appointment of successor to the throne by the reigning King.

An important political development of this period was the **continuity** of various kings in their regions once they had accepted the suzerainty of the Gupta King. And the Gupta King would not interfere with the administration of such regions.

33.2.2 Council of Ministers and Other Officials

The Gupta inscriptions are not very clear about the hierarchy of ministers. However, there is no doubt that the King used to take counsel of his ministers and issue written instructions to officials on all important matters.

The minister’s office was perhaps hereditary. For example, the Udayagiri inscription of the time of Chandragupta-II informs us that Virasena Saba, the minister for war and peace, was holding this office by inheritance. Though the supreme judicial powers were vested in the King, he was assisted by the **Mahanandanayaka** (Chief Justice). In the provinces this work was entrusted to the **Uparikas** and in districts to the **Vishayapatis**. In villages, the headman and the village elders used to decide the petty cases. The Chinese traveller Fa-Hien states that capital punishment was not given at all.

There were some other high officials. For example, the **Mahapratihara** was the chief of the palace guards, the **Pratihara** regulated ceremonies and granted the necessary permits for admission to the royal presence. There existed an espionage system as in the earlier period. The landgrant inscriptions often mention **Dutakas** who were associated with the task of implementing gifts when gifts of land were made to brahmanas and others.

33.2.3 Army

The Guptas must have had a big army organisation. At the time of war the King led his army but ordinarily there was a minister called ‘Sandhi-Vigrahika’ (Minister in charge of peace and war) who was helped by a group of high officials. The official title **Mahabaladhikrita** occurs in many inscriptions. Officials like **Pilupati** (head of elephants), **Asvapati** (head of horses), **Narapati** (head of footsoldiers) possibly worked under him. The army was paid in cash and its needs were well looked after by an officer-in-charge of stores called **Ranabhandagarika**. Amongst other duties this officer was to look after the supply of offensive and defensive weapons such as battle-axes, bows and arrows, spear pikes, swords, lances, javelins, etc.

Land revenue was the main source of the state's income besides the fines. In Samudragupta's time we hear of an officer **Gopasramin** working as **Akshapataladhikrita**. His duty was to enter numerous matters in the accounts registers, recover royal dues from the sureties of servants, to check embezzlement and recover fines for loss due to neglect or fraud.

Another prominent high official was **Pustapala** (record-keeper). It was his duty to make enquiries before recording any transaction. The Gupta kings maintained a regular department for the proper survey and measurement of land as well as for the collection of land revenue. Kamandaka in the **Nitisara** suggests that a King should take special care of his treasury, for the life of the state depends solely on it.

Both Kalidasa and the author of the **Narada-Smriti** state that one-sixth of the produce should be claimed as the royal revenue. Besides this there was the **Uparikara** which was levied on cloth, oil, etc. when taken from one city to another. The organization of traders had to pay a certain commercial tax (**Sulka**), the non-payment of which resulted in cancellation of the right to trade and a fine amounting to eight times of the original **Sulka**. The King had a right to forced labour (**Visthi**), **Bali** and many other types of contributions.. The King's income from royal lands and forests was considered as his personal income. Besides this, the King's treasury had a right to treasure troves (treasures in the forms of coin-hoards, jewels or other valuable objects, discovered from below the earth accidentally), digging of mines and manufacture of salt.

33.2.5 Provinces, Districts and Villages

The whole empire was divided into **Desas**, or **Rashtras**, or **Bhuktis**. The inscriptions provide us with the names of certain **Bhuktis**. In Bengal we hear of Pundravardhara **Bhukti** which corresponded to north Bengal. **Tira-bhukti** corresponded to north Bihar. The **Bhuktis** were governed by **Uparikas** directly appointed by the King. In areas like western Malwa we find local rulers like Bandhuvarman ruling as subordinate to Kumaragupta-I but Parnadatta was appointed a governor in Saurashtra by Skandagupta.

The Province or **Bhukti** was again divided into districts or **Vishayas** under an official called **Ayuktaka** and in other cases a **Vishyapati**. His appointment was made by the provincial governor. Gupta inscriptions from Bengal show that the office (**Adhikarana**) of the district-head associated with itself representation from major local communities: the **Nagarasresthi** (head of city merchants), **Sarthavaha** (Caravan-leader), **Prathama-Kulika** (head of the artisan community and **Prathama Kayastha** (head of the Kayastha community). Besides them, were the **Pustapalas**—officials whose work was to manage and keep records. The lowest unit of administration was the village. In villages where there was a headman called **Gramapati** or **Gramadhayaksha**.

However, the Gupta inscriptions from north Bengal show that there were other units higher than the village. In some cases we find references to **Astakuladhikarana**. Different categories of villages mentioned as **Gramikas**, **Kutumbis** and **Mahattaras** sent representatives to these offices which on various occasions functioned above the level of the village.

Besides agriculturists, there were certain other groups in the villages who followed such professions as carpentry, spinning and weaving, pot-making, oil extraction, gold smithery, and husbandry. All these groups must have constituted local institutions or bodies which looked after the affairs of the village. The village disputes were also settled by these (bodies) with the help of **Gramavridhas** or village elders.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×)?
 - a) The King no more remained a central figure under the Guptas.
 - b) The King was to lead the army in case of war.
 - c) **Mahadandanayaka** was the minister of revenues.
 - d) One-sixth of the produce was claimed as royal revenue.
 - e) The highest unit of administration was the village.

2) Write in about five lines about the revenue administration of Guptas.

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3) Write in about ten lines the powers and duties of the King.

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33.3 ECONOMY

You have read earlier that agricultural crops constituted the main resources which the society produced and that the major part of the revenue of the state also came from agriculture. This of course does not mean that agriculture was the only occupation of the people or that people lived only in villages. There were other occupations like commerce and production of crafts which had become specialized occupations and in which different social groups were engaged. This also means that, as in earlier periods, people lived in forests, in agrarian tracts, in towns and in cities, but certain changes had started taking place in the pattern of economic production and consequently in relations between different social groups. We shall highlight some of these changes in the course of this and the next section.

33.3.1 Agriculture

Let us begin with the pattern of agricultural production. The concern of the society with agricultural production is clear from the way various aspects associated with agricultural operations are mentioned in the sources of the Gupta period. Various types of land are mentioned in the inscriptions; land under cultivation was usually called **Kshetra**. Lands not under cultivation were variously called as **Khila**, **Aprahata**, etc., and inscriptions give the impression that uncultivated land was being regularly brought under cultivation. Classification of land according to soil, fertility and the use to which it was put was not unknown. Different land measures were known in different regions, although one cannot be certain what exact measure was denoted by a term. In some areas **Nivartana** was the term used for a measure of land whereas in the inscriptions of Bengal terms like **Kulyavapa** and **Dronavapa** are used. It is not possible to classify the regions precisely according to the crops grown, but all the major categories of crops—cereals like barley, wheat and paddy, different varieties of pulses, grams and vegetables as well as cash crops like cotton and sugarcane were known long before the Gupta period and continued to be cultivated. Of course, you should not assume that crops like maize or vegetables like potatoes or tomatoes were known to the farmers of the Gupta period.

The concern of the society with agricultural production is also reflected in the importance given to irrigation. In the earlier Blocks you have already read about the Sudarsana reservoir (**Tadaga**) in Saurashtra in Gujarat. Originally built in the Maurya period, this reservoir was thoroughly repaired when it was extensively damaged in the time of Mahakshatrapa

Rudradaman (middle of the second century A.D.). It was again severely damaged in the time of Skandagupta. Parnadatta, his newly appointed governor of Saurashtra and Parnadatta's son Chakrapalita, undertook the repair of the reservoir this time. Another method for irrigation was to draw water from wells and supply the water to the fields through carefully prepared channels. A mechanism, possibly known before the Gupta period, was to tie a number of pots to a chain; the chain with the pots reached down to the water of the well, and by making the chain and the pots rotate, it was ensured that the pots would continuously fill with water and empty it. This mechanism was known as **ghati-yantra** as **ghati** was the name used for a pot. This type of mechanism also came to be known as **araghatta**. In the **Harshacharita** of Banabhatta, which was of course written in the seventh century A.D. there is a very charming description of how cultivated fields, producing crops like sugarcane, were being irrigated with the help of **ghati-yantra**. In regions like Bengal, rainwater was collected in ponds and other types of reservoirs; in peninsular India, tank irrigation became gradually the norm. There were thus different systems of irrigation and the role of the state was only marginal in providing irrigation facilities to farmers. The farmers of course depended mainly on rainfall and the importance of rainfall is underlined not only in the **Arthashastra** of Kautilya but also in the texts written in the Gupta period.

The sources of the Gupta period suggest that certain important changes were taking place in the agrarian society. The inscriptions from Bengal refer to sale of land by district-level administration to individuals who bought them by paying cash and made gifts of purchased land to brahmanas who were expected to perform vedic sacrifices or to Buddhist or Jaina religious establishments. But land was not only purchased and gifted; the practice of gifting land to religious donees had become quite common by now. Even otherwise, remuneration for serving rulers in different capacities was received in the form of land by officials of different categories. Of course, all this was not absolutely new. But by now the number of ruling families had vastly increased and thus the number of persons who received land but did not cultivate themselves went on increasing. The virtues of giving land were highly praised and those who took away gifted land were threatened with many evil consequences. All this led to the appearance, in society, of a class of people who enjoyed superior rights over land and by virtue of these rights and by belonging to higher **varnas** had high economic and social status. Of course, landrights did not belong only to those who received land. The Gupta inscriptions refer to different types of village residents like **Gramikas**, **Kutumbis** and **Mahattaras** who must have been village landholders, and their participation in land transactions indicates that they too were important members of rural society.

Compared with the recipients of land from the rulers and the influential categories of landowners in villages, the condition of ordinary cultivators may be considered to have been rather bad. It is believed by some historians that because of the practice of land grants, the peasant population as a whole were reduced to a very low position in society. This is not entirely true. It was the ordinary cultivators, known by various terms such as **Krishibala**, **Karshaka** or **Kinass** who had low economic and social status. Among the actual cultivators there were those who filled the lands of others and received only a share of the produce. There were also slaves who worked on the fields of their masters. Even domestic female slaves were cruelly exploited, and a text like the **Kamasutra**, which was probably written in the Gupta period tells us how much hardship they had to go through at the hands of their masters.

There were other reasons why the condition of the ordinary cultivators declined considerably. One was that in many areas the appearance of small kingdoms of new rulers and their official and sections of people who did not take part in agriculture created great inequalities in society and imposed great burden on actual tillers of the soil. The number of taxes imposed by the state on the producers also increased in this period. Further, the practice of imposing **vishti** or unpaid labour was also in vogue, although we do not know for certain how much essential it was for agricultural production. All in all, the condition of the ordinary cultivators seems to have become worse than in the earlier periods.

33.3.2 Crafts Production and Trade

Crafts production covered a very wide range of items. There were items of ordinary domestic use like earthen pots, items of furniture, baskets, metal tools for domestic use and so on; simultaneously a wide variety of luxury items including jewellery made of gold, silver and precious stones; objects made of ivory; fine clothes of cotton and silk and other

costly items had to be made available to the affluent sections of people. Some of these items were made available through trade; others were manufactured locally. Descriptions of many luxury objects, of which no trace is generally found in archaeological excavations, may be found in the literary texts or inscriptions of the period. These sources also give us interesting hints regarding the status of different categories of craftsmen. For example, different varieties of silk cloth, called **Kshauma** and **Pattavastra** are mentioned in the texts of this period. An inscription of fifth century from Mandasor in western Malwa refers to a guild of silk-weavers who had migrated from south Gujarat and had settled in the Malwa region. Texts like **Amarakosha** and **Brihat Samhita** which are generally dated to this period, list many items, give their Sanskrit names and also mention different categories of craftsmen who manufactured them.

However, for an idea of the quantity and variety of objects manufactured in this period one has to go through reports of what have been found at various archaeological sites. Many important sites like Taxila, Ahichchhatra, Mathura, Rajghat, Kausambi and Pataliputra in the Ganges Valley and other sites in other geographical regions have yielded many craft products like earthen wares, terracottas, beads made of different stones, objects of glass, items made of metals, etc. It seems that in comparison with crafts production in the preceding Saka Kushana period, crafts production in the Gupta period suffered some setback. It has, however, not yet been possible to make a very satisfactory comparative study between these two periods from this angle.

All items were not available at all places; the movement of items for trade from one place to another, therefore, continued as in the earlier periods. You have read in Blocks VI and VII that India had extensive trade links with Central, West and Southeast Asia and with the Roman world in the preceding period, and trade routes connecting different regions within the country had been developing over centuries. That commercial activities continued in the Gupta period are evident. Like their Kushana predecessors the Gupta rulers too minted coins of different types, and the gold coins of the Gupta rulers show excellent qualities of craftsmanship. The Guptas also issued coins in copper, silver and lead. These coins were obviously used for purposes of commercial exchange and in some regions of the Gupta empire at least, the merchants held a high position in society. For example, two types of representatives of merchants—the **Nagarasresthi** and the **Sarthavaha**—were associated with the administration of the district headquarters in north Bengal. The seals of the Gupta period, found at Vaisali in north Bihar, suggest that the merchants constituted an important section of the population of the city of Vaisali. Literary texts of the period too show that in cities like Pataliputra and Ujjayini commercial activities were carried on briskly and people from different countries were present in them. Merchants were important communities also in these cities.

There were organizations which facilitated the functioning of both craftsmen and traders. The ancient term which was generally used for these organizations was **Sreni**, and the State was expected to provide the guilds protection and to respect their customs and norms. Similarly, members of the **Sreni** were also expected to follow the norms of the organization; otherwise, they were liable to punishment. The term **Sreni** is often interpreted as guild but there are different interpretations of the term and in terms of many details, we are still not quite sure what the **Srenis** were really like.

Although Crafts production and commercial activities were brisk in the Gupta period, there are two points we should especially remember:

- I) There were many types of craftsmen and they were not all identical either in wealth or in social status. For example, there was vast difference between a goldsmith and his family with a shop in a city like Ujjayini and a family of basketmakers in a village. This is reflected to some extent in the **Dharmasastras** written by the brahmanas in this period. The **Dharmasastras** assign different ranks to different groups of craftsmen, although in their scheme the craftsmen and artisans held a status lower than that of the brahmanas, kshatriyas and vaisyas. The **Dharmasastras** also suggest that each group of craftsmen formed a **jati** or caste. For example, the **Kumbhakaras** or potters formed one caste, the **Suvarnakaras** or goldsmiths formed another caste and so on. Although the system of caste was not really so simple, generally the trend among craftsmen was that persons following one craft formed a **jati** or a caste.
- II) Crafts production and commercial activities perhaps started declining from the Gupta

period onward in most regions and according to some historians, this resulted in the decline of towns and cities and in greater dependence of society of agricultural production. You will be reading more about these changes in Block 9.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Fill in the blanks:

- a) Land under cultivation was usually called (**Khila/Kshetra**).
- b) The practice of gifting land to religious donees (had become/was not at all) common during the fifth-sixth Century A.D.
- c) The ordinary cultivators (flourished/suffered) during this period.
- d) Sudarsana lake was repaired during the time of (**Skandagupta/Purugupta**).

2) Mention the methods adopted for irrigation during this period in about ten lines.

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3) Discuss in about five lines the sources which refer to crafts and craftsmen.

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33.4 SOCIETY

You have already read that according to the scheme of society conceived by the brahmanas, society was divided into four **varnas** (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra), with each **varna** performing the set of functions prescribed for it and enjoying whatever rights were given to it. This was the ideal social order and the state was expected to preserve it. This means that when even a small state emerged in some corner of the country, the King of that state was expected to recognize this as the ideal social order. The Brahmanas came to exert considerable influence on the kings from the Gupta period and this is quite clear from the way they received land from the kings and others. The kings, officials and others gave land not only to individual brahmanas but also some times incited big groups of brahmanas to come and settle in remote areas. Thus, the number of brahmana settlements variously called **Brahmadiyas, Agraharas** and so on started increasing and they started spreading, among other things, the idea of a **varna**-divided social order.

However, **varna** order was an ideal order and there were many groups in society whose **varna** identity could never be determined. Secondly, it was assumed that the **varnas** would perform their duties; in reality, they may not have done so. These suggest that real society was different from the ideal society and this was also recognized by the **brahmana** writers of the **Dharmasastras**. They therefore tried to determine the status of various castes or **jatis** in society by giving fictitious explanations of their origins. They suggested that various **jatis** or groups originated through **varna-samkara** or inter-marriages between various **varnas**. The various foreign ruling families of the pre-Gupta period, of Greek or Siythian origin,

were given the semi-kshatriya status (**vratyā Kshatriya**) because they could not be considered to be of pure **Kshatriya** origin; similarly, fictitious origins were thought of for tribal groups who came to be absorbed into the Brahmanical society.

The **Dharmasastras** also speak of **apadharma** or conduct to be followed during periods of distress. This means that the **varnas** take to professions and duties not assigned to them when they found it necessary to do so. In matters of profession also the **Dharmasastras** thus recognized that the real society was different from their ideal society. These changes of course originated much before the Gupta period, but with the spread of the Brahmanas to different parts of India, the social structure came to be very complex. The new society had to absorb many social groups thus, the actual social structure came to vary from region to region, although certain ideas were common to them:

- The Brahmanas came to be recognized as the purest and therefore the highest **varna**. Since they were associated with Sanskrit learning and performed priestly functions, they came to be closely connected with royal power. Even when the rulers were supporters of Buddhism, Jainism or a particular religious sect, they continued to patronize brahmanas, particularly those of high learning. This remained one of the major reasons for the economic prosperity and prestige of the brahmanas.
- Ideally, although there were four **varnas**, these were various groups who were kept out of this scheme. They were the **antyajas** or untouchables. They were considered impure; even their touch was considered impure and their physical presence in areas where higher **varnas** lived and moved was not allowed. The **Chandalas**, the **Charmakaras** and similar groups were considered impure and outcasts. Thus, in the brahmanical order of society, the condition of a number of social groups remained miserable throughout.
- The position of woman of higher **varnas** was low. Although we hear of personalities like the Vakataka queen Prabhavatigupta who wielded considerable power, not all women were so privileged. The brahmana texts set down norms which women were expected to follow and women were expected, in the family, to function mainly as an ideal wife and ideal mother. In many Brahmana texts, women were even considered, for various reasons, to be of the same category as the Sudras. It is significant that although brahmanas were given land grants regularly, we do not come across evidence of land being given to Brahmana women.

Another aspect of social life was that there existed great difference between the ways of life of the rich city-dwellers and people living in villages. The ideal city-dweller was the **nagaraka**, i.e. the urbanite who, because of his affluence, lived a life of pleasure and refined culture. There are interesting descriptions of this way of life not only in Vatsyayana's **Kamasutra** but also in other literary texts of the period. Of course, it would be wrong to presume that all classes of people who lived in cities could afford this way of life.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×)?
 - a) The Brahmanas exerted considerable influence on kings from the Gupta period.
 - b) The real society, during the Gupta period, was different from the ideal society.
 - c) **Antyajas** were the highest in **varna** scheme.
 - d) The life of the city-dwellers and the villagers was the same.
- 2) Discuss the changes in the **varna** system in about ten lines.

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33.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, after going through the various aspects of Gupta administration, economy and society we find that considerable changes had taken place when compared to the earlier periods. An important aspect related to kingship was the continuity of various kings in their regions once they had accepted the suzerainty of the Gupta King. There was considerable concern towards agricultural production and this is reflected from the way irrigation got priority during this period. The practice of gifting land to religious donees had become quite common and the brahmanas exerted considerable influence over the King. There was differentiation amongst the cultivators and compared to the rich, the condition of ordinary cultivators declined considerably. Similarly, the wealth and social status of different types of craftsmen also varied. Though commercial activities continued during this period it appears that there was a decline in crafts production. The **varna** system continued in society. However, various foreign ruling families were assimilated in the **varna** system. At the same time various groups were kept out of the **varna** scheme and were considered untouchables. There was also a considerable decline in the position of women in society.

33.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) (a) × (b) √ (c) × (d) √ (e) ×
- 2) See Sub-sec. 33.2.4
- 3) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 33.2.1

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) (a) **Kshetra** (b) had become; (c) suffered (d) Skandagupta.
- 2) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 33.3.1
- 3) Check your answer by comparing with the first two paragraphs of Sub-sec. 33.3.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) (a) √ (b) √ (c) × (d) ×
- 2) Check your answer by reading Sec. 33.4