

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Guptas, Vakatakas and Vardhanas

Paper 1 · Unit 10

The Gupta empire, the classical age debate and the position of women: 15 marks in four years, which is far less than its textbook prominence suggests.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Guptas, Vakatakas and Vardhanas: polity and administration, economic conditions, coinage of the Guptas, land grants, decline of urban centres, Indian feudalism, caste system, position of women, education and educational institutions, Nalanda, Vikramashila and Vallabhi, literature, scientific literature, art and architecture.

A weightage warning

Begin with the strategic fact, because it changes how much time this unit deserves.

- Across the 2023 to 2026 papers, the Gupta unit produced **one 15-mark question**, on the position of women compared with the Mauryan period.
- By contrast the **Regional States unit scored 45 marks** and the eighteenth century 165, so the Guptas are examined far below their prominence in standard textbooks.
- The practical instruction is to prepare this unit **thoroughly but not lavishly**, and to be ready for the themes that do come, which are society, women and the classical age debate rather than dynastic narrative.
- **Overlap** helps, since Gupta material also serves the Themes in Early Indian Cultural History unit, the Early Medieval unit and any question on land grants or feudalism.
- Where the Guptas do appear, it is usually as a **comparator**, so questions ask about the Gupta period relative to the Mauryan or to the early medieval rather than about the Guptas alone.

Polity and administration

A looser structure than the Mauryan, and that looseness is the analytically interesting fact.

- **Chandragupta I** took the title maharajadhiraja and married the Licchavi princess Kumaradevi, and the dynasty dates its era from 319 or 320 CE.
- **Samudragupta's Allahabad pillar inscription**, composed by Harishena, is the principal record, listing conquests in the north, tributary relations in the south and diplomatic contacts abroad.
- That inscription distinguishes between **direct annexation in the Ganga valley, tribute-paying frontier kingdoms and southern rulers merely defeated and restored**, which is the clearest ancient statement of graded sovereignty.
- **Chandragupta II Vikramaditya** defeated the Western Kshatrapas around 409, gaining access to the western ports and the Arabian Sea trade.
- Administration was **decentralised** relative to the Mauryan, with provinces called **bhuktis** under uparikas, districts called **vishayas** under vishayapatis, and considerable local autonomy.
- **Feudatories** held real power, and the practice of granting revenue and administrative rights through land grants gave the polity a structure the Mauryas had not had.
- **Fa Hien**, visiting under Chandragupta II, described a mild administration with light taxation, few capital punishments and safe travel, and his account is favourable but limited to the pilgrim routes.
- **Skandagupta** repelled an earlier Huna attack in the mid fifth century and repaired the Sudarshana lake at Girnar, recorded in his Junagadh inscription, and the effort appears to have exhausted the treasury.
- **Huna invasions** from the late fifth century, and the pressure of Toramana and Mihirakula, together with feudatory assertion, brought the empire down by the mid sixth century.

Economy, coinage and the urban decline debate

The Gupta period sits at the centre of the Indian feudalism argument, so the economic evidence is where the historiographical stakes are.

- **Gupta gold coins**, called **dinaras**, are the finest Indian coinage in artistic terms, showing rulers hunting, playing the vina and performing the ashvamedha.
- Their **gold content declined** over the dynasty's course, which numismatists read as evidence of fiscal strain, and silver and copper issues were comparatively few.
- **Land grants** to Brahmins and temples expand substantially and are recorded on copper plates, transferring revenue and often administrative and judicial rights.
- **R. S. Sharma** built the Indian feudalism thesis on exactly this evidence, arguing that grants created intermediaries, tied peasants to the land, and caused a decline of trade, coinage and towns.
- **Urban decline** is attested archaeologically at several northern sites from about the third century CE, and the paucity of post-Gupta coinage is the second pillar of the argument.
- **Counter-arguments** from **B. D. Chattopadhyaya** and **Ranabir Chakravarti** stress agrarian expansion into new areas, continuing Indian Ocean trade and the emergence of new towns, so decline is regionally uneven at best.
- **Trade** with Rome contracted as the western empire declined, and that external shock is an alternative explanation for reduced coinage that does not require an internal feudal transition.
- **Trade evidence** is genuinely mixed, since Gupta period sites show reduced Roman material while the Indian Ocean trade eastward towards Southeast Asia expanded, so contraction in one direction accompanied growth in another.
- The position to take: land grants and intermediaries are documented beyond dispute, the consequences claimed for them are contested, and the evidence supports **regional variation rather than uniform decline**.

Society and the position of women

Asked in 2023 comparing the Gupta period with the Mauryan. That comparison is the one question this unit has produced, so prepare it fully.

- **Caste** hardened, with jati proliferation, the incorporation of tribal groups, and the increasing rigidity of the Dharmashastra prescriptions in Yajnavalkya and Narada.
- **Untouchability** deepened, and Fa Hien's description of chandalas living outside settlements and striking wood to announce their approach is the period's most cited evidence.
- **Women's position deteriorated** relative to the earlier period on almost every measure the sources allow, and the 2023 question expects that conclusion with evidence.
- **Marriage age fell**, with the Dharmashastras recommending pre-puberty marriage, and **upanayana and Vedic study were withdrawn** from women, which removed the earlier access to education.
- **Property rights** were limited to **stridhan**, though the Yajnavalkya Smriti did improve a widow's claim to her husband's property, so the picture is not uniformly negative.
- **Sati** appears in its first datable inscriptional record at **Eran in 510 CE**, which is the specific evidence to cite rather than a general statement about the practice.

- **Devadasi** attachment to temples develops in this period, and the institution's later degradation should not be read back into its origins uncritically.
- **Counter-evidence** exists and belongs in a balanced answer, since Prabhavatigupta ruled as regent for years, women appear as donors in inscriptions, and Kalidasa's heroines are not the passive figures the Dharmashastras prescribe.
- The comparison to state: Mauryan sources including the Arthashastra allow women property, remarriage and some occupational independence, while Gupta normative texts restrict all three, so the deterioration is real and is clearest in prescription.

Culture and the classical age question

Close with the label, since it is the standard framing and it deserves examination rather than acceptance.

- **Literature** peaks with **Kalidasa**, and the *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, *Meghaduta*, *Raghuvamsha* and *Kumarasambhava* are the works to name, alongside Shudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* and Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*.
- **Science** produced **Aryabhata's Aryabhatiya** of 499, **Varahamihira's** works, and the medical compilations, treated fully in the Themes unit.
- **Art** includes the Sarnath and Mathura Buddha images, the **Dashavatara temple at Deogarh**, the brick temple at Bhitargaon, the Sultanganj bronze Buddha and the Ajanta paintings under Vakataka patronage.
- **Temple architecture begins** in this period as a flat-roofed square shrine and develops through recognised stages towards the towered forms of the medieval period.
- **Classical age** as a label was applied by nationalist historians including **R. C. Majumdar** and it carried a political charge, since a Hindu golden age served the argument that decline came with later invasion.
- **Criticism** of the label is now standard, since the period saw hardening caste, the deterioration of women's position, and untouchability's deepening, so it was not golden for most people in it.
- **Vardhanas** complete the syllabus heading, with **Harshavardhana** ruling 606 to 647 from Kanauj, described by Banabhatta in the *Harshacharita* and by Hiuen Tsang, and checked on the Narmada by Pulakeshin II.
- **Regional bias** is the second criticism, since the achievements cited are largely northern and the label ignores contemporaneous southern and Deccan developments.
- **Nalanda** was founded under Kumaragupta I in the fifth century and is named in this unit's syllabus heading alongside Vikramashila and Vallabhi, so the monastic universities belong here as well as in the Themes unit.
- The balanced verdict: the Gupta period produced outstanding literature, science and art under conditions of political stability, and calling it classical says more about the historians who coined the term than about the age itself.

Last-mile revision

- Gupta era from 319 or 320 CE; Allahabad pillar by Harishena with three grades of sovereignty; Chandragupta II defeats the Kshatrapas about 409; Fa Hien under Chandragupta II.

- Dinara gold coins with declining gold content; bhukti under uparika and vishaya under vishayapati; Hunas from the late fifth century.
- Sharma's feudalism thesis from land grants and urban decline; Chattopadhyaya and Chakravarti for the counter-case.
- Women: marriage age falls, upanayana withdrawn, stridhan only, first datable sati inscription at Eran 510 CE; Prabhavati Gupta as counter-evidence.
- Kalidasa, Aryabhatiya 499, Deogarh Dashavatara temple, Sultanganj bronze; classical age label from Majumdar and its criticisms.

Common errors to avoid

- Over-preparing this unit. It produced 15 marks in four years while regional states produced 45.
- Accepting the golden age label uncritically. Caste hardened, women's position worsened and untouchability deepened.
- Claiming sati was widespread in the period. The first datable inscriptional evidence is Eran 510 CE and the practice was elite and regional.
- Attributing Ajanta's great phase to the Guptas. The patronage was Vakataka.
- Presenting Gupta administration as centralised like the Mauryan. It was markedly more decentralised and dependent on feudatories.

Mains Practice

Evaluate the status of women in the Gupta period as compared to the Mauryan period.

15 marks · 200 words · 2023