

India's Golden Age

The Gupta Dynasty, which ruled India from the early 300s CE to the late 500s CE, is remembered for achievements in math, astronomy, architecture, art, and literature. In particular, Gupta mathematicians developed the concept of zero and the number system we use today. You may have heard numbers referred to as “Arabic numerals”—the Arabs actually adopted them from India! Gupta astronomers understood that Earth was round and that it rotated on an axis. Buddhists living in the Gupta Empire built the Mahabodhi Temple, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site recognized for its architectural and cultural significance. Do you like to play chess? Thank the Gupta!

These types of achievements were only made possible by periods of stability and growth. During the Gupta Dynasty, things weren't always peaceful, but order was established by a series of strong rulers. The most celebrated ruler of this period was Samudragupta, who is often referred to as the ideal, or perfect, king.

It is believed that Samudragupta reigned, or ruled, India from approximately 330 to 380 CE. Much of what we know about him comes from what was written by a poet on a pillar. This upright, free-standing monument describes Samudragupta's accomplishments. Samudragupta's legacy is also remembered through engraved pictures on gold coins that survive to this day.

A Young and Confident King

Samudragupta was the son of King Chandragupta I and Princess Kumaredevi. His mother was of the Licchavi people who lived in northern India. The marriage of his parents united two powerful Indian states and formed the basis of the Gupta Empire. Samudragupta followed his father, King Chandragupta I as ruler. Even though Samudragupta was the king's son, tradition did not guarantee that he would be king. Rather, his father, with advice from his counsel, chose him over other possible candidates. These other choices, however, might have been his brothers.



An Ajanta Cave One painting of a Bodhisattva. This painting belongs to the Gupta period, about the 500s CE.

Evidence suggests that Samudragupta became emperor when he was only 15 years old. It is believed that he had to defend his empire from the other

contenders for the throne during the first years he ruled. Apparently, Samudragupta's military skills eventually gained the support of his opposition.

A Warrior

Samudragupta was considered a great warrior and military leader. He was muscular and was said to have hundreds of scars from battle wounds. Through his conquests, Samudragupta united what is now the northern part of India. He also conquered kingdoms in other parts of India and then allowed the kings to continue ruling while paying a tribute to him. This unusual "kindness when conquering" made him quite popular in those conquered kingdoms.

As conqueror, however, Samudragupta took over many kingdoms in brutal fashion by slaying their kings. He also annexed, or added, some kingdoms to his empire by taking control while allowing the king to live, but without any power. Altogether, he is believed to have killed nine kings and put another 12 under his control as he expanded the boundaries of the Gupta Empire.

A Musician, Poet, and Philosopher

This strong warrior also had a softer side. He was a gifted musician. A gold coin still exists showing him playing the harp. This coin was a departure from standard kings' coins that documented their bravery.

Samudragupta was a champion of writers and artists. He even wrote poetry himself. During his reign as emperor, scholars were honored. Some important scholars of the time included Harishena, Vasubandhu, and Asanga.

Samudragupta also supported the work of talented artists. He commissioned the creation of gold coins that are more than 80 percent pure gold and are very skillfully carved. Samudragupta founded the money system used throughout the Gupta era. Using gold he obtained from conquering other kingdoms, he minted and distributed coins.

Samudragupta hired skilled carpenters and artisans to create many buildings that enhanced his kingdom. While none of these buildings exist today, we are able to learn about the style he preferred through temples and cave architecture that have survived. Additionally, many iron and copper sculptures created by artists in his kingdom do still exist today.

Samudragupta valued religion. He enjoyed religious debates and personally took part in them. Samudragupta was a devout Hindu who appears to have been tolerant of other religions. He even had Vasubandhu, a Buddhist philosopher, as a member of his court. In addition, he allowed another king to

build a Buddhist monastery in another part of the Gupta Empire. This important temple is called the Mahabodhi Temple, and it is located at the site where the Buddha reportedly received his spiritual enlightenment. Samudragupta also brought back an ancient horse sacrifice ritual to celebrate a victory in battle. During the horse ceremonies, he gave out large amounts of money for charity.

A Revered Emperor

The Gupta era in India lasted from approximately 320 to 540 CE. The empire was powerful and wealthy. Art, literature, culture, and religious tolerance flourished. Scholars wrote papers on medicine, mathematics, grammar, astronomy, and even the art of love. All of these advancements in Indian life contributed to the Gupta era being referred to in history as “the golden age of India.”



Merchants during the Gupta Period.

It is said that all good things must come to an end. While Samudragupta’s son, Chandragupta II, succeeded his father as emperor with continued prosperity for India, the days of Gupta glory declined and eventually collapsed. Samudragupta’s grandson and his great-grandson could not defend the empire from attacks. Although the Gupta Empire was broken into smaller kingdoms, Samudragupta’s legacy has lived on as a reminder of India’s rich history.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Which statement about money during the Gupta dynasty is most accurate?
 - A. There was no money in circulation.
 - B. Samudragupta was greedy and used money only for his own needs.
 - C. Coins during the dynasty were crudely made and none survive today.
 - D. Samudragupta hired artists to make beautiful coins.
2. In all of recorded history, religious differences have played a large part in wars. How does this fact make Samudragupta unusual?
 - A. He was interested in religion, but not war.
 - B. He was interested in war, but not religion.
 - C. He was tolerant of different religions.
 - D. He mistreated those who did not agree with his religious beliefs.
3. Based on the passage, which of these statements would be a logical conclusion?
 - A. Samudragupta probably did not write very good poetry.
 - B. Samudragupta created an empire in which many people prospered.
 - C. Samudragupta learned to play the harp so that his father would choose him as the next king.
 - D. Samudragupta was more like his mother than his father.
4. Which statement is an opinion about Samudragupta?
 - A. He was the son of a princess.
 - B. He fought fiercely in battle.
 - C. He expanded the empire's borders.
 - D. He created a money system with coins.
5. Choose two characteristics of Samudragupta or his reign and explain why they made him an enduring hero in India. Use details from the passage to support your statements.