

SOCIAL AND LITERARY DIMENSIONS OF THE GUPTA PERIOD AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE PRESENT

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Abstract

The Gupta period, a period between the 4th and 6th century C.E., is also known as the "Golden Age" of ancient India because of the extensive development in the fields of Mathematics, Philosophy, Literature, Science, and Astronomy during the rule of the Gupta Empire. Scholars like Kalidasa, Aryabhatta, Varahamihira, Vatsayana, etc, achieved such success in their respective fields that their works are relevant even in the present times. A glory period for Hinduism, the Gupta empire reached its zenith under the rule of Chandragupta II or "Vikramaditya" and left a treasure that didn't only benefit India but the whole world. This paper discusses how the developments in various fields during the reign of the Gupta Empire are still relevant to the populace and how, even in times when scientific development is touching unprecedented heights, those developments are not only influencing but also proving to be a root cause of the further developments. Though this paper encompasses the social and literary fields, the main focus remains on the historical study of culture, society, and literature, and their contemporary influence. In simpler words, this paper utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to History and English Literature to analyze the impact of the developments carried out during the Gupta period on the contemporary world.

Keywords

Gupta period, Kalidasa, Vatsayana, Literature, Historical Study

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The Gupta period (320 CE-350 CE) is a period that is known as the “golden age” in Ancient Indian History. This period witnessed immense developments in the fields of art, literature, and science, and produced a genius that is still revered around the world. Scholars like Kalidasa, Aryabhatta, Varahmihira, and Vatsayana were the product of this same age. Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, etc, were the rulers under whom the empire remained politically stabilized and an environment came into existence under which intellectual endeavors could be sustained. This period is also known for the upheaval of Brahminism, but the tolerance for other religions was also there.

‘As Hinduism rose’ ‘at’ an unprecedented rate, social elements like caste became more rigid. The practice of untouchability got more power and the marginalized sections got further cut off. This is an evil that still lurks in Indian society ‘a’ some places. The dominance of the male gender over the females also became more severe and the overall standing of women in society lowered in comparison to earlier times.

Scientifically speaking, the discoveries of Aryabhatta and Vatsayana are still relevant. And so is literature. Authors like Rabindranath Tagore and Girish Karnad followed the style of Kalidas’s works to reimagine the Indian myths. Even Goethe’s poem was influenced by Kalidas’s poetic work *Abhijnanshakuntalam*.

The Gupta period didn’t only show the peak development during its existence, the peaks it reached continued guiding the path of the creative adventurers in the field of science and literature even in the distant ages. Its societal elements formed the foundation of the present social structure and its culture still lives in the traditions of Indian society accessed through the memories of the shared past.

As the elements of the Gupta period keep on influencing the present, it is necessary to know the fields they are influencing the most. With a brief exploration, it becomes clear that the terrains of Social structure and Literature are affected the most by the features of the development during the Gupta period.

Social Impacts

The Societal terrain in any period consists of components like religious dominance, division in castes, prominent gender, status of education, economic prowess, etc. These elements always tend to leave a mark on future periods in the form of traditions that get followed without any questions. A similar thing happened during the Gupta period as well. The religion that was most revered in this period was Hinduism, the caste most favored was Brahmins, the gender that was branded a second place in the hierarchy was female gender, the educational development was profound, and economic prosperity was at its all-time high. Among these elements, caste, religion, and gender show relevance in the contemporary period which still harbors some of its elements even after such a longer foreign rule.

“By Gupta times *candalas* had become so strictly untouchable that, like lepers in medieval Europe, they were forced to strike a wooden clapper on entering a town, to warn the Aryans of their polluting approach.” (Basham 146) This quote in *The Wonder That Was India* is pretty adjacent to what India has gone through in recent times. Though the urban culture has gone through a re-establishment of higher and lower hierarchies as the cities have transformed into service-based hubs, the rural areas have still not forsaken this ancient tradition of untouchability. In literature, we get a number of references to this age-old practice that is still in effect. In Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, the narrator describes this evil in the starting itself. “Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows or buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away.” (Valmiki 2)

How similar are conditions in contemporary India to the Gupta period? Is it really the time that decides the leanings of a society or the benefits of the selected few that hold the power? In the Gupta period, the upper castes, especially the Brahmins were used to dictate the rules as they were endowed with education, and in recent times the case is almost too similar. The intellectual property is still in the hands of the upper section of the society

As for religious tolerance, the times in the Gupta period might have been better than the present as there are facts that serve as evidence that the dominant religion of the Gupta period was quite tolerant towards other religions like Buddhism and Jainism.

“The new form of devotional Hinduism made a very vigorous appeal to the ordinary man, and the persistent tendency of Hinduism to assimilate, rather than to attack, was always at work.

As early as the Gupta period Buddhist monks often took part in Hindu processions. The Buddhist family, which gave its chief support to the local monastery, would at all times rely on the services of *brāhmaGs* at births, marriages and deaths.” (Basham 267)

“The record of Fa-hsien shows that India had changed much since the days of Megasthenes, some 700 years earlier. The mild ethics of Buddhism and Jainism had gradually leavened Indian society, which was now more gentle and humane than in the days of the Mauryas. In place of the old sacrificial Brahmanism, Hinduism had appeared, in form not very greatly different from that of recent centuries.” (Bashan 67)

The above quotations explain well how Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted together without the enmity they showed towards each other in history. This is in stark contrast to the present as both religions remain at proving the other wrong.

Another aspect of social elements is the situation of women during that period. As the societal inclusion of women fell during the Gupta period, which mimics most parts of contemporary India, the subject of sexuality is something that remained in complete contrast to the present. Vatsayana's exploration of sexuality in *Kamasutra* exemplifies this particular subject.

"Sexuality was not looked on as a mere vent for the animal passions of the male, but as a refined mutual relationship for the satisfaction of both parties. The sophisticated townsman for whom the *Kâmasûtra* was written was advised to consider the satisfaction of his mistress as well as his own, for she was as passionate as himself, and it was even said by some that her pleasure in sex was greater than his. Loveplay was manifold and thoroughly classified; thus the *Kâmasûtra* defines no less than sixteen types of kiss. There was much tenderness in lovemaking, though it often culminated in very violent embraces; it was a favorite poetic convention to describe lovers of both sexes, whether married or single, as displaying the tokens of their passion to their confidential friends, in the form of the marks of nails and teeth." (Basham 172)

This shows that women's sexuality and the drive to indulge in sexual acts were not frowned upon in the Gupta period. They were, in fact, respected and Vatsayana even made sure to prioritize women's satisfaction. This is in absolute contrast to contemporary society, where talking of sexual acts is taboo and the impact of traditions is such that a woman's sexual demands are used to judge her character.

Overall, subjects like religion, caste system, and gender subjugation in the Gupta period were the same to some extent, except for the liberal view of sexuality in the Gupta period. Religion still plays an important part in society, caste still exists with roots quite deep into the social structure, and women are still considered as the weak gender that needs protection.

Literary Developments

Literature is something that is always influenced by something or another. The previous experiences shape the literature through time and enrich it with different elements which are the result of accumulation of lessons from the past. This suggests that literature is never devoid of history. The literature we see today has a big influence on the literary developments that took place during the Gupta period. A L Basham describes the development in literature during the Gupta period in the following words:

"In the Gupta period, however, there developed a style of ornate prose narrative, which was very different from the simple Pali stories, and was classed as *kavya*. The chief writers in this genre were Dandin, Subandhu and Bana, all of whom lived in the late 6th and early 7th centuries." (Basham 444)

Kalidasa, the greatest of the Indian poets and dramatists, belonged to this era. He wrote a number of dramatic works but only three survived, namely, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvasi*, and *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. A L Basham says:

“As in English literature so in Sanskrit, the greatest poet was also the greatest dramatist. Three plays of Kâlidasa have survived: “Malavika and Agnimitra”, a comedy of harem intrigue, its scene set in the Úunga period; “Urvaû Won by Valour” (Vikramorvasi), telling the ancient story of the love of Purûravas and Urvaû (p. 405ff); and “The Recognition of Sakuntala” (*Abhijnanasakuntalam*). At all times the last has been reckoned Kâlidasa’s masterpiece, and merits special consideration. The plot is set in the days of legend, when gods and men were not so far apart as they later became.” (Basham 437)

The works of Kalidasa are revered in India as the works of Shakespeare in the West. Kalidasa reevaluated the mythical elements of India through his poetry and drama. The same elements are found in writers like Rabindra Nath Tagore in contemporary India. The influence of Kalidasa’s literature didn’t halt there. His works influenced the most recent writers as well. Namita Gokhale has utilized this original classic *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in her book *Shakuntala: A Play of Memory* where she has adapted the character of Shakuntala in a girl belonging to Hills with the same name.

Another work that invokes *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is Ishita Ganguli’s play *Shakuntala Awaits*. In this play, the playwright modernizes the settings and turns the main characters, Shakuntala and Dushyant, into modern-day characters who navigate the changing landscape of the globalized world. More than following Kalidasa through the point of view of the story, she follows his style of using mythical elements in the creation of literature.

With these points in consideration, it can be concluded that the literary aspects of the Gupta period were so profound that even the contemporary world, which has developed so far, cannot remain without being influenced by them. The literary elements of that period had such quality that they didn’t only influence, they actually enriched the literature.

Conclusion

The Gupta period defines Indian history in more than one way. It was a time of unparalleled intellectual and cultural growth which has not become irrelevant even in the contemporary period. This era saw the development of literature, science, and philosophy under stable political leadership and allowed scholars such as Kalidasa, Aryabhatta, and Vatsayana to leave a permanent mark on Indian civilization for the ages to come. While its advancements fueled the search for knowledge and thirst for creativity, its social constructs and literary elements served as the torch bearer for the coming generations.

In this period, the caste system got more rigid and the subjugation of the women intensified. The evil practice of untouchability, as evidenced by historical accounts, still thrives in a lot of parts of contemporary India. There, caste discrimination even after being legally abolished remains a social reality. Mostly these parts belong to the rural section of India. Similarly, gender roles that were reinforced during this time continue to affect society and their survival during the time when modernity is traversing at its top pace suggesting how deep-rooted they are in Indian culture. Curiously, the era's more liberal attitudes towards sexuality, as seen in Vatsayana's Kama Sutra, contrast sharply with today's more conservative nature surrounding the subject.

Despite its societal contradictions, the Gupta period's literary contributions remain a treasury of artistic excellence. The works of Kalidasa, the greatest of India in terms of literature, are not limited by some specific time period. From Rabindranath Tagore to contemporary Namita Gokhale, they have influenced a lot of generations. His ability to interweave mythology with poetic imagination continues to inspire reinterpretations and ensures that his legacy is not merely preserved but constantly rejuvenated.

The tolerance for religious diversity that characterized the Gupta Empire provides an interesting point to brainstorm. In contrast to the religious polarizations of today, this period really witnessed a coexistence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. This harmony seems increasingly difficult to attain in the modern era. The past of the Gupta period, then, serves as both a mirror and a lesson. It is a lesson that urges us to understand historical missteps while drawing inspiration from its moments of progress.

Ultimately, the Gupta period was not just a golden age confined to its own time, it was a foundation upon which much of India's cultural and intellectual identity was built. Its influence, both luminous and complex, continues to affect the present and hopes for a better understanding of its legacies.

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