
UNIT 15 GROWTH OF ART, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE: C. 300 CE TO 1206*

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will know:

- why is the Gupta period known as the “Golden Age” in the field of culture;
- the active patronage bestowed by the Gupta rulers to art, language and literature;
- unprecedented development of architecture, sculpture and painting in the Gupta phase;
- the great advancement and refinement attained by Sanskrit language during this time; and
- the outburst of literary activity and impressive standards set by literature of this era.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The Gupta period has often been referred to as “Golden Age” due to its cultural heritage. This applies to great accomplishments in the field of art, language and literature. The Gupta age, thus, stands out as a significant and noteworthy departure from previous historical periods, particularly in the cultural history of India due to impressive standards achieved by artistic and literary expressions of this time. The Gupta rulers worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses, patronised Sanskrit scholars and bestowed lavish prosperity on the artists. Under them, art and literature attained a level of excellence unlike under none of their predecessors. It is true that art and architecture had been promoted and encouraged by the Vakatakas, but it was under the Guptas that they became a widespread phenomenon. One can also logically surmise that the kings, nobility and other

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rich people had that kind of wealth that they could invest a substantial part of their income to financially support those engaged in literature and art.

In this Unit we will try to explain the cultural development and cultural legacy of the Guptas through the pointers of Art, Language and Literature. The Gupta sovereigns supported cultural pursuits on a large scale and its result is evident in the form of both literary and archaeological masterpieces that we will now throw light on.

15.2 GROWTH OF ART

In this section we will try to familiarize you with the remarkable progress of art in this period in the context of architecture, sculpture and painting.

15.2.1 Architecture

The Gupta period is known as the phase of Brahmanical resurgence. The Gupta kings were keenly interested in building temples and installing images of their devoted gods (*ishta-deva*) therein. The *Bhakti* ideology and increasing significance of image worship resulted in the building of free-standing temples with a cella or sanctuary called the *Garbhagriha* in which the image of the deity was housed. Many such temples are known from this period. The building medium was stone or brick. Initially, they were small structures with central shrines having roofs with spouts for easy drainage of water. The earliest of extant Gupta temples is Temple no.17 near the *chaitya*-hall at Sanchi. It is well-designed. It constitutes an enclosed cella in the form of a square chamber and columned portico or varendah in front. This plan became the basic idea for erecting the temples of later Gupta and post-Gupta period.

The Gupta temple-building activity represents evolution from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines which now reached a whole new level. It marks the formative phase of temple construction in India, but it was a significant phase that continued to influence temple-building right up to the medieval period. This age prepared the ground for immense possibilities for the future that laid the foundation of characteristic styles of Indian temple architecture.

The Gupta period reflects creative enthusiasm and deep sense and awareness of beauty. These are evident in the following surviving specimens:

- *Dashavatara* temple at Deogarh in Jhansi district (UP),
- Bhitargaon temple near Kanpur (UP),
- Vishnu temple at Tigawa (Jabalpur district, MP),
- Shiva temple at Bhumara (Satna district, MP) and Khoh (Bharatpur district, Rajasthan),
- Parvati temple at Nachna-Kuthara (Panna district, MP),
- temple dedicated to the Sun-god at Ashramaka (Satna district, MP) and Mandsaur (MP),
- Yaksha temple at Padmavati (modern Pawaya) near Gwalior (MP),
- temple at Bhitari (Ghazipur district, UP),

- a great temple complex and accompanying sculptures at Eran (Sagar district, MP) etc.

It is important to note that a temple in ruined state, but of immense artistic merit and value, has been found along the bank of the river Brahmaputra at the present Darrang district of Assam. It shows that temple building activity was not confined to the geographical heartland of the Guptas.

Some of these temples are adorned with beautiful relief sculptures that do not look awkward because they complement architectural scheme of the temple. The fragmentary Deogarh temple, dedicated primarily to Vishnu, attracts one's attention due to the conception of ornate sculptural reliefs such as:

- the *Nara-Naranaya* relief,
- the *Gajendramoksha* relief,
- "Vishnu on Shesha" relief etc.

It has a square chamber with the image of primary deity. Each of the four corners of this plinth has a subsidiary shrine that encased a secondary deity. This is one of the earliest evidences of *Panchayatana* (five-shrine) kind of temples which were built on a large scale in later times and reflected the expanding domain of gods and goddesses in Hindu pantheon. Many such temples have sculptural panels wherein the leading god is given central position with subsidiary deities surrounding him. And in many instances, the chief deity is larger in size and scale than his subordinate gods.

The high and elaborately carved *shikharas* (towers) on top were yet to register their appearance. But, the germination of this idea can be seen in the brick temple at Bhitargon and miniature depiction of temples on sculptural panels of the temple.

Alongside erection of structures, cave architecture was also in vogue. The breathtakingly beautiful paintings at the caves of Ajanta are known from this time. The cave temple at Udayagiri near Vidisha (MP) also belongs to this period. Twenty rock-cut chambers were carved inside the cave, two of which have inscriptions securely dated to the reign of Chandragupta II. These carvings are important because they are the earliest intact body of Hindu art in India. They constitute evidence of the fact that many Hindu iconographic ideas were already well established by early 5th century CE.

It needs to be kept in mind that prolific architectural activity, though centered primarily around the Brahmanical religion, was not confined to it. We have evidence of structural remains of magnificent *Stupas*, *Chaityas* and *Viharas* of the Gupta period from the Buddhist sites of:

- Sarnath (UP),
- Nalanda (Bihar),
- Rajgir (Nalanda district, Bihar),
- Jaulian and Mohra Maradu (both near Taxila in Pakistan),
- Pushkalavati (ancient Gandhara region of present-day Pakistan) etc.

The Dhamekh *stupa* at Sarnath is striking on account of a variety of geometric patterns and artistic designs. The earliest brick structure of the Buddhist University

at Nalanda founded by Kumaragupta I belongs to this era. The 300 feet tall Buddha temple at Nalanda is another fine architectural exhibit from this time. There is historical evidence that Buddhist *chaityas*, cave structures in western Maharashtra and monasteries at Kanheri, Bhaja, Junnar, Bedsa and Mahar (all in Maharashtra) were commissioned not only by the aristocracy but also by affluent guilds, merchants and artisans. Similarly, many *Stupas* and *Viharas* came up in *Andhradesha* (parts of the present Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka). The *Mani-naga* Jaina temple at Rajgir is also known from this period.

15.2.2 Sculpture

Gupta sculpture demonstrates master execution and high degree of skill. Prime contribution of this age lies in the development of perfect images: both Brahmanical and Buddhist. It looks to the viewer that the sculptor's chisel transformed stone into creations of permanent beauty and grace. It can be convincingly argued that a firm, intelligent and thorough understanding and grasp of fundamental principles and true aims of sculpture, a highly developed notion of beauty and expertise in steady hands characterizes the image-making activity of this period.

Innumerable sculptures of a host of Brahmanical deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Kartikeya, Ganesha, Surya etc. as well as Buddhist and Jaina figures such as the Buddha, *Bodhisattva*, *Tirthankara* etc. are known from this period.

Vaishnavism and Shaivism were popular sects, patronised by the Gupta kings, and sculptors made the images of their principal deities on a regular basis, which reveal an easy expertise in the handling of Puranic legends such as stories of the incarnations (*avataaras*) of Vishnu as well as the lesser Vaishnavite deities. Representations from the lives of Rama and Krishna found effective success in the temple sculptures at Deogarh. A human-size statue of Hari-Hara (syncretic union of Vishnu and Shiva) is found from MP. The two halves of the combined depiction are easily recognizable on the basis of differences in headdress and other features. A fine specimen of "Krishna Lifting Mount Govardhana"¹ is recovered from Arra (Varanasi district, UP). Epigraphic evidence from Eran documents brisk artistic activity from the time of Samudragupta till the Huna invasion around the beginning of 6th century CE. A large sculpture of *Varaaha* (boar incarnation of Vishnu) was found here. It has boar head and human body. He is shown rescuing and lifting the earth (in human form as goddess Prithvi) on his tusks from submersion in the ocean. This is the artistic manifestation of a Puranic tale². A double-sided image of Garuda atop a pillar was also recovered here. The two lions at his feet bear resemblance to the Mauryan Lion Capital and this shows that possibly, some earlier art traditions or at least their ideas continued in the Gupta period.

The Shiva cult still revolved around phallic worship and we find beautiful *Ekamuhki Shivalinga* in the temples at Khoh and Udayagiri. However, we do find several images of Shaivite deities like Skanda from places like Udayagiri, Vidisha and Eran. Images of goddesses Lakshmi, Durga and Parvati are also known. That Sun worship was prevalent around the present region of Bengal is evidenced in the images of Sun-god found here.

¹ To save the Vrindavan people from the deluge sent by lord Indra who was enraged by their neglecting praying to him.

² It finds mention in the *Vishnu Purana*.

We highlighted in the previous sub-section the significance of Udayagiri cave complex from the vantage point of architecture. Here, it becomes relevant to bring out its importance from the perspective of sculpture. You have read that this site demonstrates that Hindu iconography had already evolved by the early 5th century CE. This is said because of the wide range of gods and goddesses carved in this cave complex:

- i) Two goddesses standing atop *makaras* (alligators), which are believed to be the precursors of the representations of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna riding an alligator and a tortoise respectively.
- ii) Two *dvarapaalas* (guardian figures) flanking the door of the facade.
- iii) Ganesha.
- iv) Durga in her Mahishasurmardini (killing the buffalo-demon Mahisha) form. It is a 12-armed image, suggesting the trend towards deployment of multiple body parts as representations of the manifold powers and functions of deities.
- v) Two depictions of Vishnu.
- vi) *Saptamaatrikas* (seven mothers): consorts of various principal gods who helped Shiva kill the multiple versions and forms of an *asura* (demon) named Andhaka. They are proof that some of the Puranic legends were well-developed by this time.
- vii) Large-scale image of Varaaha and accompanying scenes. It is strikingly similar to the Varaaha from Eran.
- viii) River goddesses Ganga-Yamuna on both side walls behind the Varaaha.
- ix) *Ekamukha* (one-faced) *Linga*.

Apart from the sculptures of Brahmanical gods discussed above, several stone and bronze images of the Buddha are discovered at various excavated sites like:

- Nalanda (Bihar),
- Mathura (UP),
- Sarnath (UP),
- Paharpur (Bihar),
- Ajanta (Maharashtra),
- Nagarjunakonda (Andhra Pradesh) etc.

They are the evidence of exemplary toleration granted by the Gupta emperors of Brahmanical faith to heterodox sects, religious freedom enjoyed by these sects and the peaceful coexistence of these sects with the Brahmanical religion. They also convey the idea that the Gupta period was a golden age for Buddhist art too. The rich Buddhist and Jaina devotees did not lag behind in installing awe-inspiring images of the Buddha, *Bodhisattvas* and Jaina *tirthankaras*. These pieces exhibit perfect combination of inner spirit, with stress on increased spiritual expression, and outer form. The workman of Gupta period introduced some new elements in fashioning the Buddha image and these innovations became the hallmarks of this period. For example:

- Curly hair as opposed to the shaven head of Kushana Buddha statue.
- Wide range of postures (*mudras*) including hand-poses.

- The Gupta sculptor is restrained by a conscious sense of morality. Drapery in the Kushana art was deployed to reveal the charm of the flesh. But, drapery in Gupta art was made to conceal the flesh. Nudity of any sort is completely eliminated.
- More spiritual calmness is noticed in the Buddha statue of the Gupta phase than that made under the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art of the preceding centuries.
- The Hellenistic influence visible in the Gandhara style was altogether abandoned in the Gupta times.

Among numerous Buddha images recovered from Sarnath the most extraordinary is that of the compassionate Buddha rested on a diamond seat in preaching (*dharmachakra pravarttana*) mode, giving his first sermon. It is noteworthy for its calm smile and serene contemplative attitude. The influence of this Sarnath style reached up to eastern and western India as well as Deccan. Another image worth mentioning here is of standing Buddha from Mathura.

A nearly six feet high Buddha image of bronze was found at Sultanganj near Bhagalpur (Bihar). It weighs over a tonne. Fa-Hsien mentions an over 82 feet high gigantic Buddha statue made of copper which has not been found. The Gupta artisans made images in iron, copper and bronze that shows their expertise in metallurgy and knowledge of advanced metal technology. There is adequate proof of widespread casting of images in bronze during this period. The best example of brilliance achieved in iron technology is the Mehrauli Iron Pillar (near Qutub Minar, Delhi). It is a solid shaft of pure iron, weighing around six tonnes. Dated around 4th century CE, it has remained rust-proof and corrosion-free even after 1500 years despite being exposed to sun, rain and storm. How it was produced is a mystery even today. It amply exhibits the exemplary standards of technological development under the Guptas. A pillar of this particular trait was not manufactured in any iron foundry in the West till about a century ago. These fine specimens are marvels of the impressive metallurgical skill of the Gupta workmen.

Three Jaina sculptures from Durjanpura near Vidisha are particularly noteworthy. The best preserved of them shows a central figure with hands in *dhyana-mudra*. The body type shows semblance to the previous Kushana ideal, but the ornamentation of the halo behind the head indicates the transition to the Gupta model. All three of them are securely dated on the basis of their inscriptions to the time of Gupta king Ramagupta and therefore, besides their artistic value they are also an important document of the Gupta history.

The Ajanta caves are renowned all over the world for their beautiful paintings. However, there are also sculptures in these caves which are equally vocal about the magnificence of Gupta art. For example, the image in Cave 9 of Naagaraja seated with his queen.

The unusual, larger-than-life size horse sculpture from Khairigarh (UP) is believed to represent a sacrificial horse used by Samudragupta for one of his *Ashvamedha* rituals on the basis of the extremely withered inscription accompanying it. The *Ashvamedha* ritual is also depicted in his coins. The sculpture is made of beige sandstone. The Khairigarh region was important in the context of the early Gupta-Lichchhavi alliance.

15.2.3 Painting

Painting in the Gupta era struck a new line of development like never before. The glory and splendour of Gupta painting is unmatched in ancient Indian history. We have the most celebrated examples of it from the Ajanta frescoes (Aurangabad district, Maharashtra) and cave paintings at Bagh (Dhar district, MP) and Badami/Vatapi (Bagalkot district, Karnataka), besides faint remnants at various other places. It looks that the site of Ajanta was chosen by great visionaries and appreciators of nature and its scenic beauty. Ajanta caves are located in a long horse-shaped hill overlooking a deep valley. They have been numbered at 29 out of which Cave no. 1, 2, 16, 17 and 19 have survived for us to assess the excellence of painting in the Gupta phase. Although these frescoes are dated to a vast time-range of 1st-7th centuries CE, most of them belong to the Gupta period.

The subject-matter of Ajanta frescoes can be divided into the following:

- i) Figures of the Buddha and *Bodhisattvas*
- ii) Scenes and incidents from the Buddha's life
- iii) Narratives from *Jatakas* (stories of previous births of the Buddha)
- iv) Representations from nature, such as flowers, trees and animals
- v) Mythological figures such as *Yakshas*, *Apsaraas*, *Gandharvas* etc.

The murals are replete with depictions of both religious and secular life. Although the central theme is religious, almost all aspects of secular domain find painted which look so life-like and natural. Flora and fauna have been painted freely in a masterly fashion. Opulent mountains, lush vegetation, forests and gardens, blooming flowers, luxuriant creepers, flowering trees, flowing streams, soaring birds, fighting or springing animals, roaming predators, monkeys jumping from branch to branch, naïve beings like deer and elephants have been painted which show how closely the painter has observed, grasped, perceived and understood the world and nature around him. If, on one hand, we get an insight into the affluence of rich people, on the other hand we also see scenes from the lives of mendicants and beggars.

The wide range of visually breathtaking depictions also include representations of meditative Buddha, *Bodhisattvas* Avalokiteshvara and Padmapani, kings and queens, princes and princesses, nobles, warriors, sages, hunters, butchers, beautiful and graceful women as *apsaraas*, *naayikas* etc., scenes from home, court and palace life, toilet and sports, processions and festivities, etc. that gives us an overview of the marvelously varied ideas and imaginations in the artist's mind. Both sculptures and paintings of beautiful women provide a graphic view of their fashion sense, ways of arranging hair, variety and designs of ornaments worn by them etc. The literary descriptions of feminine beauty often correspond to the representations of women at Ajanta.

Decorations on ceilings, pedestals, columns, facades, doorways and window-frames give evidence of the painters' extraordinary ability of conception and technique. It looks as if the artists left no stone unturned in turning these cave sites into the masterpieces of their genius, skill and craft.

The present ruined condition of Ajanta cannot conceal their unique charm. The brilliance of their colours has not faded even after 1500 years. They set a standard

and provided a norm for all contemporary painting of those times. Particularly, the depiction in Cave 1 of the *Bodhisattva* announcing his renunciation and in Cave 17, that of lord Indra and his entourage flying to greet the Buddha in Tushita heaven are a sight to behold.

The paintings in Bagh caves are also spectacular due to their vigorous execution and variety of decorative designs like patters and scrolls. Unlike their counterparts at Ajanta, they are more secular in nature.

We get references in literary sources that the ability to handle a brush masterfully was inculcated not only by professional artists but also by the men and women of upper classes.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Throw light on Gupta temple architecture or Gupta sculpture.

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- 2) Why the Ajanta paintings are called one of the best specimens of Gupta art?

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15.3 GROWTH OF LANGUAGE

What we refer to as “Classical Sanskrit” developed during the Guptas. Sanskrit had suffered a serious setback since the time of Ashoka due to his widespread patronage to Buddhism. But now it got a fresh lease of life under the Guptas. They made it the official language of their court and liberally encouraged its use. All their inscriptions are written in Sanskrit. Ignored earlier under the influence of the Buddhist and Jaina traditions that wrote their scriptures and literary works in vernacular dialects like Pali, Prakrit and *Ardhamaagadhi*, Sanskrit saw its revival under the Guptas. Due to the same, it became a widespread language in entire north India during this period. Even Buddhist scholars, particularly those of *Mahayana* Buddhism, started composing their texts in Sanskrit. Similarly, many works of Jaina faith such as *Nyaayavataara* and *Tatvaarthadhigama-sutra* were authored in Sanskrit in place of Prakrit. This shows upper hand of Sanskrit over other languages that previously dominated the linguistic landscape of ancient India. It replaced them in scriptures, inscriptions and coins.

Great poets, dramatists, grammarians and playwrights of Sanskrit are known from this period. Apart from proficiency in political science and studies related to military and warfare, ministers of the Gupta court such as Harisena/Harishena were also poets and authors of no less repute. Most of the poets in Samudragupta's kingdom enjoyed his patronage. Harishena wrote *Prayaga-Prashasti* (eulogy) in his honour. It is a pillar inscription on the details of his conquests, exploits and victories. Historians have also expressed the possibility of the composition of the Panegyric on the Mehrauli Iron Pillar by Virasena or Shaaba who was an accomplished poet and a favourite minister of Chandragupta II.

The Brahmanical religion found favour with the Gupta kings and under their protection and encouragement Sanskrit language proudly raised its head once again. Buddhism was denied royal patronage and it lost the status of state religion. However, one should not understand by this that it was persecuted. Had it been like that, we would not have got evidence of the construction of a large number of Buddhist structures and making of Buddhist images. It looks fairly obvious that it thrived alongside Brahmanical religion and the Gupta rulers were tolerant towards it.

Indian mind and talent blossomed forth and stupendous intellectual progress was achieved. Numerous well-known literary creations of great merit were composed. Poets like Kalidasa whose fame reached far and wide, celebrated dramatists like Vishakhadatta and Shudraka wrote their works in Sanskrit and enriched Sanskrit literature with their original contributions. Alongside them, popular Buddhist philosophers and writers such as Vasubandhu, Asanga, Dignaaga, Aryadeva and Jaina scholars like Siddhasena also flourished during this era.

Non-fictional works on a range of scientific subjects like astronomy, medicine and mathematics were also penned in Sanskrit. Certain *Puranas* and the Epics were finally compiled and given their form in which they have come down to us.

15.4 GROWTH OF LITERATURE

The zealous patronage of Gupta kings to Sanskrit led to an all-encompassing expansion of Sanskrit literature. An efflorescence of religious literature was witnessed. The intelligentsia of this time presented, explained and wrote precepts and doctrines of “neo-Hinduism”, philosophical thoughts, ethics etc. in the form of *Smritis*⁴, *Puranas*⁵ and Epics. These *shastras* (rulebooks/law-books) were

⁴ Law books in which social and religious norms were written in verse. They contain and prescribe rules, regulations and duties for general public as well as for the kings and their officials. These were composed between c. 200 BCE and 900 CE. They set out rules for marriage and property. They also prescribe punishments for persons guilty of theft, assault, murder, adultery etc.

⁵ A category of Hindu texts attributed to Vyasa. They are dated to the Gupta and post-Gupta period. There are 18 *Mahapuranas* and numerous *Upapuranas* (supplements or appendices to the *Puranas*). Their content indicates that these were heterogeneous, encyclopedic works of various hands encompassing multifarious topics. For example, the range of topics covered by the *Agni Purana* (c. 8th-11th centuries CE) include ritual worship, cosmology and astrology, mythology, genealogy, law, politics, education system, iconography, taxation theories, warfare and organization of army, theories on proper causes for war, martial arts, diplomacy, local laws, building public projects, water distribution methods, trees and plants, medicine, design and architecture, gemology, grammar, metrics, poetry, food and agriculture, rituals, geography and travel guide to Mithila (Bihar and neighboring states), cultural history etc.

authored for education, edification and culturing of the masses. Many digests on moral and social conduct such as *Vishnu Smriti*, *Narada Smriti*, *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, *Katyayana Smriti* and *Brihaspati Smriti* were composed during Gupta times.

The *Puranas* initially belonged to the bardic literature. In Gupta and post-Gupta periods they came in the hands of Brahmin authors who added to the histories of royal dynasties the portions glorifying, praising and venerating the *Trideva* (Trinity): Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. The most important of the 18 *Maha-Puranas* were given their final form during this period. They were:

- i) *Markandeya Purana*,
- ii) *Brahmanda Purana*,
- iii) *Vishnu Purana*,
- iv) *Bhagavata Purana* and
- v) *Matsya Purana*.

Some of the finest compositions in Sanskrit come from this phase. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are believed to have been redacted around 4th-5th century CE. The *Mahabharata*, the authorship of which is traditionally ascribed to Vyasa, was expanded from the original 24,000 verses to 100,000 verses. It acquired the status of *Pancha-Veda* (fifth Veda). There is much common material in this Epic and other *shastras*. For example, some portions of the *Manusmriti* appear identically in the *Shantiparva* of the *Mahabharata*.

The greatest Sanskrit poet Kalidasa – one of the “nine luminaries/gems” (*navratnas*) of the court of Chandragupta II – wrote dramas like *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvashiyam* and poetic works such as *Raghuvamsham*, *Ritusamhaara*, *Kumarasambhavam* and *Meghadutam* which show the unsurpassed and unrivalled literary standards achieved during this time. They are unmatched in their verbal and metrical perfection. It is said that Kalidasa was acquainted with the various branches of Brahmanical learning. He is believed to have acquired knowledge of the entire Vedic corpus, philosophical systems like *Yoga* and *Sankhya* along with fine arts like drawing, painting and music.

If, on the one hand, his story of Shakuntala and her ultimate reunion with her lover – king Dushyanta – is his best creation that remains the supreme achievement of ancient Indian literature and stagecraft, on the other hand his *Meghadutam* (Cloud Messenger) came to be reckoned as the most fascinating poetry that was ever written in Sanskrit. The *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam* has been touted as one of the best 100 literary compositions of the world. It was also one of the earliest Indian literary pieces to be translated into European languages, the other being the *Bhagavadgita*. It is interesting that the *Bhagavadgita* is a part of the *Mahabharata* which was redacted also in the Gupta period, as mentioned earlier.

The *Meghadutam* was lyrically composed in over 100 stanzas. In this literary marvel the exiled Yaksha conveys thorough the cloud his love, conjugal devotion and pain of separation from his beloved wife. It is adorned with human sentiments and striking figures of speech. The similes used by him appeal to the reader/listener on the merit of their imagination, variety and appropriateness. In

describing feeling, passion and emotion he stands unmatched. In *Raghuvamsham* he extols the all-round victories of Rama and is said to be indirectly pinpointing some Gupta conquests too. The *Kumarasambhavam* is a tale about the courtship of Shiva and Parvati and the birth of their son Skanda. The *Ritusamhaara* elucidates six seasons and this piece is full of the elements of *shringaara* (decoration and ornamentation). Among other things, his *Malavikagnimitram* gives a complete definition of *naatya* and the attributes of a proficient dancer.

Bhasa wrote 13 plays. Another great poet Bhairavi belonged to this period. He wrote *Kiratarjuniyam*. Vishakhadatta is known for his *Mudrarakshasa* whose plot revolves around the tactfulness and schemes of the canny Chanakya. As mentioned earlier, Vatsyayana wrote *Kamasutra*: a treatise on pleasure (*kama*). Shudraka, believed to be of royal lineage, composed the *Mrichchhakatika* (the Little Clay Cart). Its theme is the love affair between the poor Brahmin Charudatta and the beautiful, cultured, accomplished and wealthy courtesan Vasantasena. The life of the royal court is amply reflected in these Sanskrit poems and plays, with the only possible exception of the *Mrichchhakatika*.

This period also witnessed development and refinement of Sanskrit grammar on the foundation prepared by Panini (c. 6th-4th century BCE) and Patanjali (c. 2nd century BCE). The lexicographer Amarsimha – another pride of Chandragupta Vikramaditya's court – penned the most popular Sanskrit dictionary *Amarakosha* (also called the *Namalinganushasana*). It has remained an indispensable lexicon of Sanskrit till our times. It is memorized by students and scholars to this day in learning Sanskrit.

Besides high intellectual taste, Indians of the Gupta age also possessed scientific spirit of enquiry and pursued scientific subjects. Great push was given to scientific studies. "Zero" and the subsequent evolution of the decimal system are credited to be the path-breaking discoveries of this period. Brahmagupta, Aryabhatta and Varahamihira were, in truest sense, the earliest and foremost mathematicians and astronomers of the world. Varahamihira wrote *Brihat Samhita* that deals with astronomy, astrology, botany, natural history and physical geography. His *Panchasiddhantika* throws light on five astronomical theories (*siddhanta*), two of which bear thorough familiarity and close resemblance with Greek astronomical practice. The two creations by him on horoscopy – *Laghu-Jataka* and *Brihaj-Jataka* – were widely consulted from the Gupta period onwards.

Aryabhatta wrote *Aryabhattiyam*: a famous work on geometry, algebra, arithmetic and trigonometry. He belonged to Pataliputra. He was an expert in various kinds of calculations. He carefully studied and scanned the methods and works of Greek astronomers as well as his Indian predecessors in the field. But, he did not follow them blindly. He evolved his own concepts and established his own facts. In his words, "I dived deep in the ocean of astronomical theories, true and false, and rescued the precious sunken jewel of true knowledge by means of the boat of my own intellect". In his *Surya Siddhanta* he has analysed and explained the causes of solar and lunar eclipses. He calculated the size of the Earth nearly accurately. Contrary to the existing beliefs, he was the first to find out and declare that the Earth revolves round the Sun and rotates on its axis. He also threw considerable light on the variations in planetary motions and relevant information on the Sun, the Moon etc. He was also the first to evolve "sine" functions and utilize them in calculations. His pioneering efforts resulted in the making of astronomy as a separate discipline. Earlier it was a part of mathematics. He was also the first to use the decimal place-value theory.

The notable creations on medicine include *Charaka Samhitaa* and *Sushruta Samhitaa*. An all-round progress in literature and knowledge-production was manifest during this time. The *Hastyayurveda* by Maharshi Palakapya is the first systematic and meticulous exposition of veterinary science.

This period became a milestone in the evolution of philosophical ideas. The continuing philosophical debate was now centered on the following six schools/systems of thought:

- 1) *Nyaaya* (analysis)
- 2) *Vaisheshika* (individual characteristics)
- 3) *Sankhya* (enumeration)
- 4) *Yoga* (application)
- 5) *Mimamsa* (enquiry)
- 6) *Vedanta* (last portion of the *Vedas*).

The Jaina preachers of this period, Bhadrabahu II being the most prominent among them, also began authoring commentaries on their sacred treatises that were called *Niryuktis* and *Churnis*.

In sum, one can assert that this phase was also a benchmark in the history of classical literature. Sanskrit developed an ornate style which was different from the simple, archaic Sanskrit.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the contribution of Kalidasa to Sanskrit literature.

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- 2) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (X)?

- i) The earliest of extant Gupta temples is the Deogarh temple. ()
- ii) The Gupta period marks a mature phase of temple construction in India. ()
- iii) The Shiva temples of Gupta period are found at Bhumara and Khoh. ()
- iv) Bhitargaon temple has the *Nara-Naranaya* relief, the *Gajendramoksha* relief and “Vishnu on Shesha” relief. ()
- v) The Buddhist University at Nalanda was founded by Samudragupta. ()
- vi) The representation of Hari-Hara shows syncretic union of Vishnu and Shiva. ()
- vii) The Varaaha from Eran and Udayagiri have striking similarity. ()
- viii) Curly hair of the Buddha statue was a feature of the Kushana style. ()
- ix) The Jaina sculptures from Durjanpura belong to the reign of Chandragupta II. ()
- x) Ajanta frescoes are the best specimen of Gupta painting. ()

- xi) Ajanta paintings do not include narratives from *Jatakas*. ()
- xii) Even Buddhist scholars, particularly those of *Mahayana* Buddhism, started composing their texts in Sanskrit in the Gupta period. ()
- xiii) The *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam* and the *Bhagavadgita* were translated into European languages. ()
- xiv) Aryabhatta wrote *Brihat Samhitaa*. ()
- xv) *Charaka Samhitaa* and *Sushruta Samhitaa* were notable creations of the Gupta period on mathematics and astronomy.

15.5 SUMMARY

We have seen that the reign of Gupta rulers is characterised by a high watermark of glory and splendour in the cultural sphere. Under them India entered a new epoch of culture and civilization. Indian intellect blossomed best and was at full display. This is reflected in the unprecedented growth of art, language and literature which gives a fair idea of the multifaceted cultural accomplishments of this time. The ideas and faculties of human mind operated freely and it led to the creation of innumerable literary and artistic masterpieces that we have discussed in this Unit.

Temple architecture began and traditions of image-making evolved systematically. Definite types and styles were developed, techniques were perfected and ideals of beauty were laid down with precision. Gupta sculpture reached a new level that shows expertise of combining depth of insight with greatest skill. The Buddhist and Brahmanical images of beauty, charm, grace and refinement clearly showcase rhythmic quality and mastery over depicting human expressions. Foreign influence visible in the Gandhara school of art was completely shaken off and the sculpture acquired true “Indian” character. The Ajanta frescoes show unique refinement of beauty and taste, harmony of form in the context of postures and attitudes of human figures, and excellent reproduction of various scenes from both religious and secular life. The Ajanta painters have left evidence of consummate skill in delineating animal as well as human figures. A panorama of the lives of a range of categories of people comes to light by looking at these paintings. The use of Pali and Prakrit was discouraged and discarded in favour of Sanskrit. With the rise of the Gupta rulers to power, Sanskrit got a favourable ambience to grow and develop. They were ardent admirers and patrons of Sanskrit and the intellectual urge that characterized this age can be seen in the authoring of myriad fictional and non-fictional accounts in this language. Kalidasa was truly a gem of this period and the impressive progress in scientific disciplines is evidenced in the writings of Varahamihira and Aryabhatta.

15.6 KEY WORDS

Bodhisattva : any person who is on the path towards Buddhahood (the condition or rank of the Buddha/enlightenment/supreme state of life). It also means the “awakened one”. In *Mahayana* Buddhism it means a sentient person who is able to reach *nirvana* but delays it due to his compassionate heart for his fellow suffering beings.

Brahmanical : of or pertaining to the Brahmins/*Brahmanas*, their doctrines, precepts, ethos or worship.

Fresco : the technique of painting on a moist plaster surface with colours mixed in water or a limewater mixture; a picture painted in this way.

Mural : a large picture painted or affixed directly on a wall or ceiling.

Tirthankara : the Jaina preachers who acquired supreme knowledge.

Growth of Art, Language and Literature: c. 300 CE to 1206

15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-section 15.2.1 or 15.2.2
- 2) See Sub-section 15.2.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 15.4
- 2) i) X, ii) X, iii) √ iv) X, v) X, vi) √ vii) √ viii) X, ix) X, x) √ xi) X, xii) √ xiii) √ xiv) X, xv) X

15.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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