

Guptas and Inclusive Sectarianism: An Epigraphic and Numismatic Study

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Abstract

Review Article

The fourth, fifth, and first half of the sixth centuries of the Christian era—the period known as the Imperial Guptas in India—present a religious landscape with intricate vertical and horizontal linkages. The Vedic rituals and gods are depicted in one section of this as standing at the pinnacle of several Brahmanical religious systems that are horizontally connected to one another. The non-Brahmanical systems are similarly depicted in a horizontal relationship with one another, but without the Vedic vertex, and running antagonistically opposite the Brahmanical ones, sharing in the new options provided by the prevalent element of folk and local cults involving the *Yaksas*, the veneration of sacred trees and rivers, etc. in the care of those who revere holy rivers and forests, etc. The Gupta kings used this perplexing substance to paint a harmonious scene on the canvas.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, *Panchmahayajana*, *Ashvamedha*, Buddhism, *Paramabhadgavata*.

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INTRODUCTION

In general, the kings and leaders of the Gupta era operated on three levels. They appropriated some aspects of divinity to their person in addition to using the mystique of Vedic rituals and symbolism to legitimise their rule. But for their own purposes, they adhered to one or another of the more common religions, most of which had Brahmanic roots. In their official capacities, they adopted a liberal attitude, permitting freedom as well as, occasionally, promoting religious practises and views that were not their own. On the basis of numismatic and epigraphic sources, the evidence pertaining to the Gupta kings will be examined in order, and all of this will be covered.

According to the story of I-Tsing, the first Gupta ruler Gupta or Sri Gupta constructed a shrine for Chinese Buddhist pilgrims east of Nalanda and gifted it with money from forty villages. However, as there is no reliable information regarding the king's personal religious beliefs, it is possible to assume that either he was a Buddhist himself or, he was a Vaishnava like his predecessors, that he did permit significant Buddhist

religious activities [1]. His son, Ghatotkacha, whose name is suggestive of one from the Mahabharata, is unknown. Little is known about the personal views of Chandragupta I, the third king of the dynasty, other than the fact that he is shown holding a crescent-topped standard on his coins, possibly as a reference to his name *Candra* (moon), and that Lakshmi is depicted sitting on a couchant lion on the reverse of his coins. He was definitely not a Buddhist. But one of the things that helped the Guptas become a significant force in northern India was his marriage to a Lichchhavis princess. In the fourth century A.D., the Lichchhavis may have switched to Jainism or remained Buddhists is unknown, but it is known that the Brahmana orthodoxy never unconditionally welcomed them into its fold [2]. However, it could be necessary to recognise their Brahmanic membership if the reverse device on the Chandragupta-Kumaradevi kind of coin is connected to the Lichchhavis.

¹ Allan, John, *Catalogue of The Coins of Gupta Dynasty and of the Sasanka, King of Guada*, London, Oxford University Press, 1914, p. xv.

² A.S. Altekar, *The Vakataka- Gupta Age*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, 1960, p. 217.

The Gupta empire and glory were created by the next ruler Samudra Gupta and his son Chandragupta II, respectively. According to the Allahabad pillar inscription [3], he was both the restorer of the long-abandoned Ashvamedha sacrifice [4] and one who was equivalent to the gods Dhananda, Varuna, Indra, and Antaka. On his official seal, he adopted the vahana of Visnu, Garuda (*garutmadanka*) [5]. On his Gaya copper plate, which marks the award of a hamlet as an *Agrahara* to a Brahmana Gopasvamin of the Bharadvaja *gotra* and of the *Bahvrca Sakha* in recognition of the religious merit of his parents and himself [6], this *Vahana* is depicted in relief. Another comparable copper plate inscription [7] from Nalanda details gifts given to a Brahmana by another hamlet. Although he clearly has a Vaishnava lean, he also shows respect for Shaivism and common cults like the veneration of holy rivers by mentioning Pasupathi in the Allahabad Pillar inscription [8] and depicting the *Ganga* on his coinage. He asserts in the Eran stone inscription [9] that he gave more gold than Brahmanical heroes like Prthu and Raghava. Samudragupta, as an individual, belonged to the Brahmanical fold in terms of his religious ideals, practices, symbols, and qualities. But according to one source, he assigned Vasubandhu, a renowned and learned Buddhist teacher from Peshawar, to instruct his son [10]. According to the Chinese source, he was happy to approve Meghavanna, the monarch of Sri Lanka from 352 to 379 A.D., building a *vihara* and a rest-house close to the Bodhi Tree in Gaya to house the monks and guests from the Island Kingdom [11].

Kachagupta and Rama Gupta, two Gupta emperors, also appear to have been devotees of Vishnu. Son of Samudra Gupta and the second greatest Gupta ruler, Chandragupta II (376–414 AD), adopted the title Paramabhagavata and kept using the images of Garuda and Lakshmi on his currency [12]. A *dhvaja*, or pillar, honouring Vishnu was erected on Visnupada hill by Chandragupta II, who is known as the Chandra of the Mehrauli iron pillar. His Vaishnava sympathies are also confirmed by the legends on his coins. However, the Mathura pillar inscription describes the erection of two Siva-lingas, known respectively as *Kapilesvara* and

Upamitesvara after the names of two *Lakulisa* sect gurus [13]. Another epigraph has Amrakardeva, who was undoubtedly a Buddhist, giving 25 dinars and a hamlet to the Arya *sangha* of the vihara of Kakanadabota in exchange for lighting candles in the *ratmagrha* (jewel house), feeding Buddhist monks, and increasing his own and Chandragupta II's merit. During his reign, the Chinese traveller Fa-Hsien went to India and describes Buddhism and the Sangha's effects [14]. He said that there were two Sangharama in Pataliputra, one Hinayana and the other Mahayana, that were occupied by six hundred to seven hundred monks each. On the eighth day of the second moon, the capital city annually organises grand processions of the decked icons of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas [15]. It is also noteworthy that Chandragupta II's sectarian title, Paramabhagavata, is missing from the epigraphs documenting non-Brahmanical gifts, including those given by royal officers [16]. This demonstrates that people did not view mentioning the king's religion as obligatory and that the king was not offended by such omissions.

Among the Guptas, Kumaragupta I (415–455 AD) was the greatest coin-type innovator. He kept utilising the Garuda emblem and the depiction of Lakshmi sitting on his coins [17]. Coins of the Ashvamedha type were also in circulation [18]. Additionally, he produced other coins featuring Kartikeya riding a peacock (*Vahana*) [19]. We discover that a peacock has taken the place of Garuda on his new silver coins [20]. Other inscriptions make mention of the Dakini-filled temple of the holy mothers [21]. The Kalaikuri copper plate chronicles the gifts of land made to three Brahmana scholars by specific traders, writers, and record-keepers so they could carry out their daily sacrifices, the *Pancamahayajnas* [22]. The establishment of an image of the Jaina, Parsva, is described in an inscription at Udaygiri, which demonstrates the non-Brahmanical actions [23]. Similar to this, in 432 A.D. a Jaina woman named Sandhya built a Jaina shrine in Mathura [24]. The Aryasangha of the famous vihara of Kakanadabota (Sanchi) received twelve dinars as a permanent donation from a Upasika named Harisvamini, the wife of the Upasaka

³ D.C. Sircar, *Sanchi Stone Inscriptions*, Calcutta, 1956, p. 262.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-71.

⁵ D.R. Bhandarkar., *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, Ed., by Bahadurchand Chhabra and Govind Swamirao Gai, New Delhi, ASI, 1981, pp. 217-18.

⁶ D.C. Sircar, pp. 272-72.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.

¹⁰ A.S. Altekar, p. 155.

¹¹ A.S. Altekar, p. 155.

¹² Allan, John, pp. 24-60.

¹³ D.C. Sircar, pp. 277-79.

¹⁴ H.A. Giles, Tr. *The Travels of Fa-hsien (399-414)*, London, 1923, p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ D.C. Sircar, *Op. Sit.*, pp. 280-82.

¹⁷ Allan, John, pp. 61-133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-110.

²¹ D.C. Sircar, p. 405.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 352-55.

²³ J.F. Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Varanasi, 1963, pp. 258-59.

²⁴ *Epigraphia Indica.*, Vol. XI, p. 210.

Sanasiddha, for the daily supplication of one Bhiksu who was fresh to the Sangha out of the interest of investors [25].

Skandagupta (455–467 AD) was also a devotee of Vishnu personally [26]. Like those of his predecessors, his coins feature the Lakshmi figure and the Garuda standard [27]. He compares himself to Yudhisthira in the Supia [28] inscription for his sincerity and to Yudhisthira on the Bhitari Pillar for his power and heroism [29]. The Prakasaditya coins were most likely produced by Purugupta in 468 AD, who was also a Vaishnava. He was a short-lived king who reigned after Skanda Gupta, possibly for a few months [30]. He made use of Lakshmi and the Garuda standard.

In his Bhitari seal, Kumaragupta II (474–476 AD), whose coins include Garuda and Lakshmi [31] once more, assumes the title of Paramabhagavata [32]. Additionally, during this reign, Abhayamitra erected a statue of Lord Sasta (Buddha) [33].

Budhagupta, who lived between 477 and 500 A.D., was a Vishnu follower, as evidenced by his employment of the Garuda and Lakshmi standards on coins as well as the title *Paramabhagavata* on the Nalanda seal [34]. The copper plate grants from Damodarpur, which are found among the inscriptions from his time, show that a Brahmana who requested government land so that the Agnihotri sacrifice [35] could be performed more easily received it. It refers to *Pancamahayajna-pravartana* [36] as the goal of the donation. A plot of land was given in another Damodarpur plate to promote the establishment of decent Brahmanas for the benefit of one of Nabhaka's parents [37]. The third plate relates to a plot of land that city trader Rbhupala [38] purchased with the intention of constructing two Siva "name-linga" temples, one for Kokamukhsvamin and the other for Svetavarahasvamin. According to a copper plate inscription at Nandpur [39], a *Visayapati* requested permission from the Ayuktakas to give a Brahmana a plot of land from the Nandavithi Agrahara so that he might properly carry out his

Pancamahayajnas [40]. But in addition, Buddhagupta carried on Skandagupta's and Kumaragupta I's use of the peacock vahana of Kartikeya on his silver coins [41]. Buddhagupta is listed as one of the patrons of Nalanda vihara in the journey diaries of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang [42].

In contrast, Narsimhagupta used the title Paramabhagavata in his inscription on the Nalanda seal [43] in 500 A.D., and his coins feature the Garuda standard and the goddess Lakshmi [44]. His name is a reference to Visnu's Narasimha incarnation. He was a sponsor of the Buddhist University in Nalanda [45], though, if he is the same Baladitya recorded by Hiuen-Tsang. The construction of "a vast and outstanding temple at Nalanda by a Baladitya" [46] is also mentioned in a later inscription from Nalanda. Tathagataraja, one of the final Gupta emperors, was said by Hiuen-Tsang and his biographer Huili to have been a supporter of the Nalanda Vihara [47]. The finding at Nalanda of a seal from Visnugupta, one of the last monarchs of the dynasty, whose gold coins feature the customary Garuda and Lakshmi, shows that the Buddhists in Nalanda continued to have patronage [48].

Vainyagupta, who lived around 570 AD, used Lakshmi on the reverse [49] design for his coins and used the name *Paramabhagavata* for his seals, but the latter feature a bull [50].

Whether or not it was a result of the imperial Gupta's impact, it is crucial to note that Vaishnavism typically influenced the Gupta era's prominent royal lineages, as well as the majority of local chiefs and feudatories throughout India. However, very few Gupta kings declared their personal loyalty to Buddhism or Jainism, despite the fact that both of these religions continued to exist in a flourishing state in every way.

CONCLUSION

The information provided reveals the religious plurality practised during the Gupta era. Additionally, it

²⁵ J.F. Fleet, Op. Sit., p. 260.

²⁶ D.C. Sircar, pp. 321-24.

²⁷ Allan, John, pp. 119-129.

²⁸ D.C. Sircar, Op. Sit., pp. 317-318.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 323.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 406-409.

³¹ Allan, John, p. 140.

³² D.C. Sircar, p. 329.

³³ Ibid., pp. 328-29.

³⁴ *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. XII, pp. 112-115.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

³⁷ D.C. Sircar, pp. 332-34.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 336-39.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 382-84.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 385.

⁴¹ Allan, John, p. 153.

⁴² Thomas Watters., *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, 2 Volumes, London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1904-

1905, Vol. II, p. 165.

⁴³ *Memories of The Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 66, Calcutta, Government of India Press, 1942, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Allan, John, p. 137.

⁴⁵ Thomas Watters, Vol. II. pp. 164.

⁴⁶ *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XX, pp. 37-46.

⁴⁷ Thomas Watters, Op. Sit. Vol. II, p. 164.

⁴⁸ D.C. Sircar, p. 340.

⁴⁹ *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 1933, p. 784.

⁵⁰ Allan, John, p. 144.

supports the widespread consensus regarding the Gupta's cultural influence on modern India. The majority of the Gupta monarchs were identified as followers of the Bhagavata school of Vaishnavism, however, almost all of them belonged to one of the Brahmanical cults or sects. They displayed their devotion by using symbols and slurs in epigraphs and on coins. These rulers had liberal outlooks and patronised other faiths in addition to tolerating them. Heterodoxy was not persecuted, despite having few royal patrons, Buddhism and Jainism continued to thrive and actively contributed to the Gupta era's artistic quality.

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