

Origin and Homeland of the Imperial Guptas – A Historical Outline

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the study of political history has undergone a fundamental change. It is no longer seen as a mere connected account of the military achievements of a succession of rulers. Instead the mass of information which was traditionally considered to be the core of political history, is now placed on a much wider perspective of the prevailing socio-economic conditions which must necessarily have determined political decisions and actions of the rulers. Historians are therefore looking into this larger and infinitely more intricate network of cause and effect of which political acts are but an inseparable part. For example, the origin of the Guptas has been the subject of a lively debate among the historians for quite a long time, but it is only recently that the hair-splitting disputes over the fragmentary evidence has given place to the awareness of this wider context in which the facts gathered over the last half century or more assume a newer dimension. From the following discussion it will be evident that the issue is far from settled. At the same time it will also reveal how an understanding of the problem both from geo-political as well as socio-economic points of view raises a new set of possibilities which help to integrate the question with the subsequent history of the Guptas in a far more significant and meaningful manner.

Keywords: Political, History, Rulers, Historian

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Guptas is shrouded in obscurity. For a long time many authorities on the Gupta history believed that the Guptas came from Magadha which was the original nucleus of their empire. The only evidence cited in support of this theory is however a statement of the 7th century Chinese traveller I-Tsing, according to whom king named Chi-li-ki-to met some Chinese priests at Bodhgaya, got a temple built for them close to a sanctuary called Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no. J. Allan, the numismatist, proposed the identification of Chi-li-ki-to with Gupta, the first king of the Gupta dynasty. J.F. Fleet, the epigraphist, rejected Allan's suggestion on the ground that I-Tsing places Gupta as Chi-li-ki-to five hundred years before his time, whereas he could not have existed more than four hundred years before I-Tsing wrote. Allan in turn waved Fleet's objection in view of the fact that I-Tsing made this statement on the authority of a tradition handed down from ancient times. Allan contended that lapse of time must account for this distortion in public memory. According to Allan, therefore, Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no was situated within the original Gupta territory and that if Chi-li-ki-to of I-Tsing was Gupta, the founder of the Gupta dynasty, then it is unlikely that we should have two different rulers of the same name within so brief a period.

However, the location of Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no itself is debatable. If Beal's translation is to be accepted it has to be identified with Sarnath. On the other hand Chavannes suggests that it was situated somewhere in Bengal, a view to which many historians such as R.C. Majumdar and B.G. Gokhale subscribe. Moreover, there is a dispute over the original name of the place of which Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no must have been a Chinese corruption. Chavannes, French sinologist restored it as 'Mrgasikhavana' while Foucher another French scholar contends that the Indian rendering should have been Mrgasthapana. In any case, neither of these locations associate Chi-li-ki-to, the supposed founder of the Gupta dynasty, with Magadha. And yet on the basis of this slender and highly questionable evidence alone, historians have for a long time, maintained that the Guptas had originally belonged to Magadha. It seems that the fact that Magadha was the nucleus of the first major agrarian empire of ancient India must have prompted these historians to somehow associate the Guptas with that region also.

In fact the political condition of India towards the close of the third century and the beginning of the 4th century A.D. was fraught with the same kind of possibilities for the establishment of an empire as the situation immediately

preceding the coming of the Mauryas. The whole of northern India was divided into a large number of small states, monarchial or republican. Yet S.R.Goyal, who has written the most detailed and incisive account of the Gupta political history in recent years, has argued that the initiative to form an empire could only rest, not with Magadha, but the upper Ganga valley. He has approached the problem from two points of view, the geo-political and the socio-economic. The main thrust of his argument is based on the fact that the rise of the Gupta empire coincided with a large-scale Brahmanical revival, and from this Goyal's derived assumption is that the Guptas must have to be connected with his process of far-reaching consequences both in terms of their area association, religious proclivities and caste.

Since five hundred B.C. various foreign people not only ruled but changed the texture of the population in the north-west India. In the third century A.D. it went under the hegemony of the Sassanians of Iran. The disintegration of the Kushana empire created a political vacuum in the north, which by the middle of the third century A.D. was occupied by small indigenous powers. Magadha during the post Kushana period was probably occupied by the Murundas who, by the end of the third century, were in all likelihood overthrown by the Licchvis of ancient lineage but low origin (vatya kshatriyas).

Thus the geo-political situation on the eve of the rise of the Guptas was the following: the Vakatakas had just established themselves as a strong power in the Deccan, but their ambitions in the north were unrealised; the Sassanians had made themselves almost paramount in the north-west; the kshatrapas were still ruling in the west with absolute control and the north was split up between the small republican states of eastern Punjab and Rajputana, the Nagas of Mathura-Padmavati region and the Maghas of Kaushambi. In other words, according to Goyal, most parts of north India were still under "foreign" yoke and the initiative to establish a powerful "national" empire could have been taken up only by the people of the upper Ganga basin. Thus if it can be proved that the Guptas were actually associated with the upper Ganga basin, it fits in perfectly with the case so assiduously built up by Goyal for the region.

At the same time, Goyal argues, that Brahmanical revival was a unifying force which encouraged "nationalism". From the post-Kushana period, the idea of universal empire comprising of the *Chakravarti-kshetra* started to revive and the *Puranas*, the vehicle of Brahmanical revival, endorsed this by declaring that the *Chakravartins* were the essence of Vishnu. The idea must have politically caught on, for most of the contemporary ruling families such as the Bharashiva Nagas, the Vakatakas and the Guptas performed many vedic sacrifices and duly advertised it. The area association of this Brahmanical revival was also significant for it is expected that the dynasty which would eventually spearhead this movement would be produced by the region in which this faith had its maximum adherents. From the Mauryan to the pre-Gupta period, north, north-west on the one hand, and the Magadhan region on the other, had been under the influence of Buddhism. The greatest upholder of Brahmanism in the post-Kushana period was that upper Ganga basin.

The social milieu of the period also lent itself to the brahmin domination in the political sphere. *Manusmriti*, which was completed towards the beginning of the Gupta dynasty, declared that a brahmin who knows the *vedas* deserves to be made a king. This new principle was concomitant with an actual change in the social background of the ruling dynasties, the Shungas and the Kanavas, the Satavahanas, the Kadambas and the Vakatakas were all brahmins. The brahmins started gaining increased importance in all state departments. Kamandaka and Katyayana insisted that ministers and leaders of the army should be recruited from among the brahmins. In short, by the end of the third beginning of the fourth century A.D. brahmins came to acquire a political force.

This set of circumstances can only reinforce Goyal's suggestion that the Guptas originally belonged to the brahmanically oriented upper Ganga basin, if it can be definitely shown that the Guptas were also brahmin by caste. The Gupta epigraphs are however strangely silent about their social background. Only the copper-plate inscription of Prabhavati Gupta mentions that she belonged to the Dharanagotra, which must have been the gotra of the Guptas since her husband Vakataka Rudrasena. His gotra was Vishnuvridha. Dasarathasarma has pointed out that *Skanda Purana* refers to the brahmins of Dharanagotra, living in Dharmaranya in eastern U.P. Goyal concludes that this means that the Guptas, who also belonged to the same region, must also have been brahmins. This reasoning appears to be a little far-fetched, particularly in view of the fact that in an atmosphere of obvious glorification of the brahmins the Guptas should themselves maintain such discreet silence, if they were actually brahmins. Goyal however adduces more arguments in favour of his theory, the strongest among them being that the Kadambas, who were definitely known to be brahmins, gave one of their daughters in marriage to a Gupta king and such a matrimonial arrangement could not have been agreed upon unless the Guptas themselves were brahmins too for *pratiloma* marriage was extremely uncommon in those days. In any case, even though the brahmin lineage of the Guptas cannot be conclusively established, the possibility can hardly be overlooked. If however, the Guptas were brahmins it completes Goyal's case for the Gupta association with the eastern U.P.

This, however, is only the backdrop of Goyal's suggestion that there are overwhelming indications that the Guptas originally came from eastern U.P. But he actually presents concrete archaeological and literary evidence too, i.e. the basic substance of traditional political history writing, which also supports his conclusion. He points out that the Chandragupta Kumaradev—type of coins—the earliest of the Gupta gold coin series—were mostly discovered in eastern U.P. Fourteen hoards of Gupta gold coins have been discovered from U.P. while Bengal and Bihar had yielded only two each. The hoards of Bengal and Bihar contain later Gupta coins, while U.P. hoards provide a cross section of Gupta coins from Chandragupta I to Kumaragupta I, showing early Gupta association with that region. A region-wise distribution of the Gupta inscriptions also point to a similar direction. Of the fifteen inscriptions of the first hundred and fifty years of the Gupta rule, eastern U.P. has yielded eight, Bihar two and Bengal five. And even there, all the Bengal inscriptions are land-grants and the two Bihar inscriptions are, in all likelihood, spurious. The U.P. inscriptions however show the emotional attachment of the early Gupta rulers with that place. For example, provenance of the Bhitari Pillar inscription of Skandagupta—a *pratissth sashana* and the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta—a *digvijaya prashasti* would lead to indicate the rulers' preference for their home-province.

The contemporary *Puranas* also appear to conform to this view. Pargiter's translation of a verse from the *Vayu Purana* is the following: "Kings born of the Gupta race will enjoy all these territories, namely, along the Ganges, Prayaga, Saketa and Magadha". The corresponding passage in the *Vishnu Purana* is slightly but significantly different, which, in Majumdar's translation, reads : "The territory along the Ganges (upto) Prayaga will be enjoyed by the people of Magadha and the Guptas". Goyal says that as the Gupta kingdom came into existence as the result of the amalgamation of the Gupta and the Licchavi states, the implication of the statement of the *Vishnu Purana* is that the Licchavis were the people of Magadha. If that is so, the nucleus of the Gupta kingdom had to be the region between Magadha and Prayaga.

This discussions will show, as we had mentioned earlier, that Goyal has not been able to prove conclusively that eastern U.P. was the original home of the Guptas. It is partly due to the nature of the evidence which prevents any such definitive statement. Nevertheless that huge potential of eastern U.P. being the original home of the Guptas is certainly indicated. This itself is an advancement on our present state of knowledge and it is achieved through an understanding of a context which was hitherto believed to be outside the domain of pure political history, even though Goyal's use of term "foreign" for all those people who were not indigenous to the current political boundary of India is arbitrary and his characterisation of either the revival of Brahmanism or the founding of the Gupta empire as "national" is wholly anachronistic. However, if the reasoning that has gone into shaping Goyal's conclusion is found acceptable, it opens up immense possibilities of viewing the subsequent political developments in an altogether new perspective. The value of this controversy on the original home of the Guptas, therefore, does not lie in the establishment of the facticity of their original home, but in the originality of the approach towards the problem.

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