

Art and Architecture: The Gupta period

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Objective:

- why is the Gupta period known as the “Golden Age” in the field of culture;
- unprecedented development of architecture, sculpture and painting in the Gupta phase;
- the active patronage bestowed by the Gupta rulers to art and architecture .

Keyword: Architecture/ Sculpture/ Caves/ Temples/ Shiva cult

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.

While the older Gupta monarchs were Buddhists who preserved Buddhist architectural traditions, temple building rose to prominence under the patronage of the later Gupta rulers who were Hindus. Similarly, during the Gupta period, Buddhist and Jain art achieved their pinnacle.

Gupta Architecture

- The beginning of the Gupta Empire in the 4th century A.D. is considered the “Golden Period of Indian Architecture.”
- Temple construction gained prominence under the sponsorship of the later Gupta rulers, who were Hindus.
- While the early Gupta kings were Buddhists who conserved Buddhist architectural traditions, temple building rose to prominence under the patronage of the later Gupta rulers, who were Hindus.
- The Gupta kings were Brahmanical rulers, especially in the later phases. They, on the other hand, displayed exceptional tolerance for all other religions.
- Vishnu was worshipped in the northern and central parts of India, Shiva in the southern section, and Shakti in the eastern part of India, as well as on the Malabar coast or in the south-west.

Cave Architecture

- The architectural development of caves remained consistent during the Gupta period.
- The utilisation of mural paintings on the cave walls, on the other hand, became an extra element.
- The caves of Ajanta and Ellora have some of the best examples of mural art.
- Ajanta is a group of rock-cut caves near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, amid the Sahyadri ranges on the Waghora River.
- There are 29 caves in all, 25 of which were utilised as Viharas (residence caves) and 4 of which were used as Chaitya (prayer halls).
- Between 200 B.C. and 650 A.D the caves were constructed.
- The Buddhist monks inscribed the Ajanta caves under the patronage of the Vakataka rulers, one of them was Harishena.
- The figures in these caves were painted with frescoes and exhibited a high level of naturalism. The colours were created from local plants and minerals.
- The paintings’ outlines were painted in red, and then the insides were painted.
- The absence of blue in the paintings is one of the most remarkable elements.

Ajanta caves

- Another famous cave architecture site is Ellora Caves.
- It is almost 100 kilometres from the Ajanta caves in Maharashtra's Sahyadri hills. It consists of 34 caves, 17 of which are Brahmanical, 12 Buddhist, and 5 Jain.
- These caves were built by numerous guilds from Vidarbha, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu between the 5th and 11th centuries A.D. (they are newer than the Ajanta Caves).
- As a result, in terms of topic and architectural styles, the caves represent a natural diversity.

Ellora caves

- A set of nine Buddhist caves formed around the 6th century A.D. on the bank of the Bagh river in Madhya Pradesh.
- It has a similar architectural style to the Ajanta caves.

Bagh caves

- These are Buddhist caves located in Gujarat's Junagadh region. Although there are no caves here, three separate places can be located.
- KhapraKodiya, Baba Pyare, and Uparkot are the three sites found.
- The presence of a 30-50 ft high fortress known as "UparKot" in front of the prayer hall is a distinctive feature of the Junagadh caves.

Stupas

- The development of stupas slowed during the Gupta period.
- However, the Dhamek stupa in Sarnath, near Varanasi, is an excellent example of a stupa built during this time.

Dhamek Stupa

- The Dhamek Stupa is a huge stupa in Sarnath.
- After reaching enlightenment, the Buddha is claimed to have given his first sermon to his first five students, led by Kaundinya, revealing his Eightfold Path leading to nirvana at the Dhamek Stupa.

Sculptures

- Sarnath School of Sculpture, which sprang up near Sarnath, was added to the list.
- Many Buddha pictures in Sarnath have plain translucent drapery covering both shoulders and a sparsely ornamented halo around the head, whereas the Mathura Buddha images retain the folds of the drapery and the halo around the head is lavishly embellished.
- Sultanganj Buddha is a notable example (7.5ft in height).
The Shiva cult still revolved around phallic worship and we find beautiful EkamuhkiShivalinga 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.

Temple Architecture

- The beginning of Indian temple architecture may be traced back to the Gupta dynasty.
 - There were manuals created on how to build temples.
 - For the first time, the sanctum or cella (garbhagriha) of a temple with a single entrance and a porch (Mandapa) appears.
1. The Dashavatara temple (Deogarh Jhansi) and the brick temple at Bhitargaon Kanpur are famous examples of the square temple with a low and squat tower (shikhara) above; pillared approach, a high platform at the base.
 - The "Curvilinear tower," or "Shikhara," was the most remarkable achievement of this stage.
 - Temple construction in the "Nagara Style" is regarded to be the third stage's triumph.

2. The Kapoteswara temple in Cezarla (Krishna district) is a rectangular temple with an apsidal back and barrel-vaulted roof above.

3. Circular temples with shallow rectangular projections on the four cardinal faces; the Maniyar Math shrine in Rajgir, Bihar, is the sole monument that exemplifies the form.

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

-avatara temple at Deogarh in Jhansi district (UP),

- Bhitragaontemple 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),

-Yaksa temple at Padmavati (modern Pawaya) near Gwalior (MP), temple at Bhitari (Ghazipur district, UP),

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

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.

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.

CONCLUSION

Between 320 to 550 CE, the Gupta Empire ruled over northern, central, and southern India. The achievements in the arts, architecture, sciences, religion, and philosophy are well-known during this time period. Chandragupta I (320-335 CE) began the Gupta Empire's rapid development and quickly established himself as the empire's first autonomous ruler. It signalled the end of 500 centuries of regional power dominance and the resulting unrest, which began with the Mauryas' fall. It marked the start of a period of overall wealth and expansion that lasted for the following two and a half centuries and was known as India's Golden Age.

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