

CHAPTER
7

HISTORYMAKERS

Chandra Gupta II

“Sun of Prowess”

Section 1

“The inhabitants are rich and prosperous, and vie with each other in the practice of benevolence and righteousness.”—Faxian, on India under Chandra Gupta II

The Gupta Empire began in A.D. 320 and marked the start of India’s golden age. One historian, looking at the chaos seen in the Roman world and China at the same time, said it was “possibly the happiest and most civilized region in the world.” Samudra Gupta, his son Chandra Gupta II, and his grandson Kumara Gupta each ruled India for about 40 years. Chandra Gupta II helped the empire flourish. A skillful warrior, he expanded India until it reached its greatest extent. During his reign, he also saw many people complete great works of drama, poetry, and art, while scholars reached new heights in learning.

Chandra Gupta II came to the throne in 375. The new emperor proved that he had his father’s military ability. When he took the throne, the Gupta Empire stretched along the north of India from the mouth of the Ganges River at the Bay of Bengal to central India. In just over a decade, Chandra Gupta had conquered the land of the Sakas to the west. These victories gave the empire the important cities of Gujarat and Ujjain. Gujarat was one of several important ports on the Arabian Sea. By taking them, the Gupta Empire now had access to the rich trade of Southwest Asia and points west. Trade goods moved north from these ports to Ujjain. However, this ancient city was more than just an important trading center. It was one of the seven sacred cities of Hinduism.

With his conquests Chandra Gupta added a name—Vikramaditya, or “Sun of Prowess.” The name was linked to a legendary ruler of Ujjain who had fought the Sakas centuries before. Afterward, many stories about the great achievements of Vikramaditya were still remembered in northern India. Along with taking this legendary name, Chandra Gupta also tried to enhance his standing using images. The coins of his reign show him enjoying the favorite pastime of Indian kings—fighting lions single-handedly.

However, the emperor did not need such heavy-handed public relations work. His rule was a glorious time for India. The empire was at peace. The imperial treasury was full and growing richer

with increased trade. Royal officials received a fixed salary, which cut down on the chance that they would seek bribes.

Faxian, a traveler from China who spent several years in the emperor’s lands, was impressed by how content the people were. Under the previous Maurya Empire, secret police had roamed the land, keeping a watchful eye on the people. Under Chandra Gupta, people were largely left alone. This was even true in the realm of religion. Although the emperor was a devout Hindu, Buddhists were not bothered.

Chandra Gupta also supported the arts. The emperor himself backed Kalidasa, the leading playwright of India who produced plays for the imperial court each year. Fables and fairy tales from the period later traveled to other lands and influenced such works as *A Thousand and One Nights*. In addition, poets wrote intricate and complex poems that showed great creativity. One person actually wrote one that had a certain meaning when read left to right and another when read right to left. In science the Gupta Age saw remarkable achievements. Astronomers concluded that the earth was round and that it rotated. Mathematicians worked with negative numbers and quadratic equations. They also created two mathematical concepts that would later spread around the world: the idea of zero and the use of what are now called Arabic numbers. With all the achievements of his time, Chandra Gupta II was truly a “Sun of Prowess.”

Questions

- Making Inferences** Why would it help the empire to have only a few rulers who ruled for long periods of time?
- Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** How did Chandra Gupta’s conquests help his empire?
- Analyzing Primary and Secondary Sources** Why would a ruler like Chandra Gupta change his name and issue coins showing him fighting lions?