THE GUPTA TEMPLE MOVEMENT

A STUDY OF THE

POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE EARLY HINDU TEMPLE

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

September, 1973

MASTER OF ARTS (1973) McMASTER UNIVERSITY
(Religion) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The Gupta Temple Movement: A Study of the Political Aspects
of the Early Hindu Temple.

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NUMBER OF PAGES: 69 .

SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis presents an analysis of the Vaisnava temple move-

ment of the Gupta age. The term "temple movement" is used here to

denote the spread of a uniform temple type throughout the Gupta Empire

at the time when the Gupta power was at its apex. Special reference

will be made to the political aspects of the movement: i.e., the

promotion of kingship and the celebration of the Gupta Empire.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents an analysis of the Vaisnava temple move-
ment of the Gupta age. The term "temple movement" is used here to
denote the spread of a uniform temple type throughout the Gupta Empire
at the time when the Gupta power was at its apex. Within the space of
a century, Visnu temples appeared in all regions of North India which
were under the control of the Guptas. The uniform character of the
temples and the sacred images they contained indicate that the temples
were the result of a centralised coordinated effort on the part of
the Guptas.

In addition to discussing the temple movement, this thesis
will explain the functions that the temple served in the Gupta age.
Of the three central functions of the temple, the religious, the
political, and the humanitarian, the thesis will concentrate on the
political. This angle of approach has been selected in order to give
the thesis a thesis; that is, an argument to set forth and defend
on the basis of the available material. The term "political" is used
here to refer to the Gupta governmental organisation, especially the
Gupta conception of kingship. This aspect of the Gupta temples has
not been extensively dealt with by scholars.[1] This thesis will point

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[1] The suggestion that the Vaisnative affiliations of the Guptas
might have served a political purpose has been made by some authors.
(See: Sharma, R.S., Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in
Ancient India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968, p. 237.) However,
I have not found the exact argument presented in this thesis in any
source.

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out the relevance of the political aspect of the temple movement and the close association of the temporal power structure with the religious activities of the Gupta age.

There are certain chronological limitations of this thesis which should be stated at the outset. Although the Gupta age in its broadest sense covers the years between 320 A.D. and 647 A.D., the temple movement, as defined above, dates from approximately c. 350 to 450 A.D. Therefore, we shall be concerned with the Gupta age from the time of the accession of Samudragupta (c. 330 A.D.), to the accession of his great-grand-son Skandagupta (455 A.D.). The reign of Chandragupta II (376-413 A.D.) will be of special importance in terms of the thesis because a good deal of the evidence dates from his period.

The evidence used in support of the thesis comes from various sources, both primary and secondary. Preference has been given to the primary source material because I am trying to get at what the temple movement meant in the eyes of the Guptas and their contemporaries. The primary source material comes from the inscriptions of the Gupta kings, the coins they issued, and the temples themselves.

From the time of Samudragupta onwards, the Gupta kings made extensive use of inscriptions written in Sanskrit and carved in stone. The precedent for this activity goes back to the rock edicts of Asoka. However, the language and content of the Gupta inscriptions differ from their Mauryan predecessors. The Guptas were promoting the use of Sanskrit as the language of the realm through the inscriptions.[1a] The

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[1a] I am not here referring to the term "Sanskritisation" —— the anthropological term.

occasion for an inscription was generally an act of benevolence on
the part of a king or minister, such as the construction or endowment
of a temple, or the erection of a religious image.

Due to the nature of the medium, many of the inscriptions
have survived the ravages of time as they were intended to do. Despite
the fact that they are very one-sided in their celebration of the
ruling monarch and his ancestors, these inscriptions provide us with
a great deal of information on the Guptas and the temple movement
in general. They depict the king as he would like to be seen by his
contemporaries and remembered by posterity.

The coins of the Guptas also present an idealised view of
the king. They are very helpful in establishing the Vaisnavite
affiliations of the Guptas because Vaisnavite symbols are frequently
used on the coins. Thus, the goddess Laksmi, wife of Visnu and goddess
of prosperity, was represented on many Gupta coins. Also, some examples
show the Gupta king in close association with Visnu. For instance,
the chakra-vikrama type of gold coin struck by Chandragupta II shows
the king receiving a chakra, or discus, emblematic of royal power, from
a divine figure who is apparently Lord Visnu himself.[2]

The Gupta temples and statues also serve as primary source
material for the thesis. Some of the temples are remarkably well pre-
served, while others are known only through the inscriptions about

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[2] Banerjea, J.N., Religion in Art and Archaeology, University
of Lucknow, Lucknow, 1968, p. 18.

them. Without the actual evidence of the temples themselves, it would be impossible to speak in exact terms about the temple movement. Cunningham, who was the first archaeologist to study the temples, relied on the evidence of the extant temples in establishing that the early Gupta temples represent a uniform type. In other words, if the temples had not endured we would know very little about them.

The archaeological evidence of the Gupta age can also be used in an interpretive fashion. That is, the evidence can be related to historical events of the time or related to the past. An example of this sort of interpretation is V.S. Agrawala's commentary on the Mahāvarāha statue at Udaigiri,[3] in which he attempts to explain the meaning of the work as an expression of the historical situation at the time it was executed. This sort of endeavor is called interpretative because it deals in speculation which goes beyond the apparent meaning of the work.

The thesis will begin with a broad discussion of the nature of kingship and the association between Visnu and kingship. In order to bring out the meaning of Vaisnavism for the Guptas, it has been necessary to discuss the relevant material regarding Visnu's association with kingship prior to the Gupta age. The primary source material indicates that the Guptas interpreted their actions in Vaisnava terms with Vaisnava symbols. To understand the full significance of this

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[3] Agrawala, V.S., Matsya-Purāna - A Study, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Fort Ramnagar, Varanasi, 1963, p. 333.

association, one must examine the character of Visnu and Vaisnavism as they existed prior to and during the Gupta age.

The sources which are used for the discussion of Visnu and kingship are mainly the Bhagavadgita and the Santi Parvan section of the Mahabharata. The references made in these texts to the subject of kingship help to establish the fact that Visnu had become the god who authorises a king by the epic period. The point is significant for the thesis because it indicates that the Guptas were drawing on pre-established traditions which related Visnu with kingship.

In order to elucidate Visnu's association with kingship, the story of Prthu will be retold in Chapter One. While the name Prthu is found in the Vedas, the fully embellished myth concerning his consecration as the first true raja of the world does not appear until the epic period. The concept of kingship promulgated in the story of Prthu represents a departure from the earlier vedic concepts, especially in regard to Visnu's role as the establisher and pervader of the king. From the evidence that will be assembled in the following chapters, it will be shown that the Guptas accepted the epic concept of kingship. Therefore, the story of Prthu is very relevant to the concerns of the thesis.

Chapter Three of the thesis, "Vaisnavism in the Gupta Age", will discuss the important features of Visnu worship and Visnu's relations with the Guptas during the time of the temple movement. Since the temples were a part of a larger movement known as Vaisnavism ,

it is necessary to place them in the religious context of the time.
Chapter Three will also review the evidence regarding the Vaisnavite
affiliations of the individual Gupta kings. It will conclude with a
discussion of the most popular avatāras of Visnu in the Gupta age.
The avatāras Varāha and Narasimha, the boar and the man-lion, were
very central to the temple movement since most of the Gupta temples
were dedicated to either one or the other of these incarnations of
Visnu.

Various aspects of the temple movement such as geographic
distribution and architectural uniformity will be discussed in Chapter
Four, " The nature and function of the Gupta Temple". The temples,
it will be argued, served three interrelated functions in the Gupta
age: the religious, the political, and the humanitarian. The religious
function is foremost in importance and the others are bound up with it.
It has been correctly stated that the evolution of the structural temple
"... took place mainly in connection with the necessities of Brahmanical
cults."[4] However, since Brahmanism was closely allied, if not actually
identified, with the Gupta state[5], there was a definite political aspect
to the religious developments of the age. This point will be taken up
in greater detail in the following pages.

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[4] Coomaraswamy, A., <u>History of Indian and Indonesian Art</u>,
E. Weyhe, New York, 1927, p. 97.

[5] Sinha, H.N., <u>The Development of Indian Polity</u>, Asia Publishing
House, Bombay, 1963, pp. 163-164.

In the case of the Gupta temples it is justifiable to speak of a temple's functions. The inscriptions indicate that the Guptas had intended the temples to serve certain purposes. This fact has been recognised by Dr. Sharma. He writes:

> The avowed purpose for which lands were granted
> to priests and temples was religious and spiritual.
> ... In practice the beneficiaries exclusively
> bore the burden of administration in the areas
> granted to them and exercised a salutory and
> stabilising influence over the rural communities
> by teaching them the duties of castes, prescribing
> penances, and presenting to them the divine
> image of their princely benefactors.[6]

I agree with Dr. Sharma's statement, but it is not an exhaustive assessment of the functions of the temple. The inscriptions also speak of the humanitarian function of the temple. A traveller or wandering holy man was generally welcomed as an overnight guest in the Gupta temples. And, they functioned as an alms distributing center for the poor and needy. When all these functions are taken into consideration, it is clear that the temple occupied an important spot in the organisation of the Gupta Empire.

In sum, this thesis consists of an analysis of the motivations of the Guptas in spreading the temple movement throughout their empire. Through a study of this nature, the complexity of the Hindu temple, as it emerged from an obscure past in the Gupta age, is better understood. It will be shown that Visnu is the major god of the movement

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[6] *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, op. cit., p. 303.

primarily because of his associations with dharma, stability, and

kingship. The temples dedicated to Visṇu stood as symbols of the

stability and order of the Gupta Empire. It is for this reason

that the uniform temple type appeared in all regions of the Empire,

and that temples were constructed immediately after a region came

under Gupta control.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF PRTHU

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the nature of the

institution of kingship in India prior to the Gupta age. Because the

Guptas were conscious of the traditions relating to kingship, including

rituals and sacrifices,[1] an examination of these traditions is the

logical starting point of the thesis. As a means of approaching this

complex topic, I have settled upon a discussion of the story of Prthu

and his wicked predecessor Vena. This discussion will accomplish two

purposes in regard to the thesis. First, it will bring out the nature

of kingship in ancient India, as represented by the primordial ideal of

king Prthu. Second, the story of Prthu is a natural introduction to a

discussion of Visnu's association with kingship, for Visnu played a

major role in establishing this king in the epic version of the story.

While Prthu is mentioned in Vedic literature,[2] he is not identified

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[1] The force of tradition in the lives of the Guptas is evident
from the inscriptions they caused to be carved. For example, Samudragupta
is described as 'the supporter of the real truth of the scriptures' in
No. 1, L. 5. He is also called the 'restorer of the aśvamedha sacrifice'
in No. 4, L. 1. Also, the traditional consecration and besprinkling of
a king are mentioned in No. 3, L. 13. These citations refer to inscriptions
contained in the Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. III, Inscriptions
of the Gupta Kings and their Successors, trans. J.F. Fleet, Indological
Book House, Varanasi, 1970. Hereafter cited as The Gupta Inscriptions.

[2] King Prthu is first mentioned in the Ṛg Veda (I: 112:15) where
he is said to have been aided by the Asvins when he lost his horse. In
the Atharvaveda (8, 10), he is named as the king who milked Viraj and
thereby established agriculture. In the Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa (5,3,5,4),
Prthu is called the first of men to be installed as king.

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with Visnu until the epic period. There is sufficient evidence to

prove that this story was known to the Guptas,[3] and therefore, it

serves as valuable background material for subsequent discussions.

In the Laws of Manu, the myth of Vena and Prthu is used as an

example of the importance of humility in a king.[4] The characters of

Vena and Prthu represent the polar opposites of kingship. Vena, son

of Anga in the dynasty of Svayambhuva Manu, is regarded by tradition

as the very embodiment of adharma.[5] His transgression of justice

appears to have been religious in nature, for he prohibited worship

and sacrifice.[6] He did so against the advice of the rsis and brahmanas,

and, when he continued to interfere with their religious practices,

they determined to kill him by means of 'blades of kusa grass inspired

with mantras!'[7]

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[3] Prthu is mentioned in an inscription of Samudragupta (No. 2,
L. 7). He is also mentioned in the Laws of Manu (VII, 42; and IX, 44);
the Mbh. (12, 29, 139; 59, 115); and, two of the earlier Puranas: the
Vayu Purana, (62, 104-93) and the Brahmanda Purana (68. 104-93). These
Puranas have been assigned to the 3rd to 5th centuries A.D. by Dr. Hazra,
Majumdar, R.C., ed., The Classical Age, op. cit., p. 298.

[4] "Through want of modesty many kings have perished, together
with their belongings; through modesty even hermits in the forest have
gained kingdoms.
        Through a want of humility Vena perished...
        But by humility of Prithu and Manu gained sovereignty...."
Manu, VII, v. 40-2. trans. G. Buhler, S.B.E. XXV. p. 222.

[5] Agrawala, V.S., Matsya Purana- A Study, op. cit., p. 79.

[6] Gonda, J., Ancient Indian Kingship From the Religious Point
of View, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1966, p. 131.

[7] Spellman, J., Political Theory of Ancient India, Clarendon
Press, Oxford, 1964, p. 15.

After Vena's murder, the world was left without a king and anarchy became the condition of state. As Spellman stresses, the political thinkers of ancient India viewed anarchy with horror and held that there can be no protection or safety without a king.[8] Therefore, the rsis quickly sought a replacement for Vena. They rubbed Vena's right arm and Prthu sprang from a wound of the dead king. From his appearance, it was apparent that Prthu was an extraordinary being, "resplendent in body, and glowing like the manifested Agni."[9] The people of the land were astonished at the sight of Prthu and they announced that they were pleased with him.[10]

Prthu was everything that his predecessor was not. His reign saw the re-establishment of dharma and the religious traditions that had been outlawed by Vena. Gonda considers Prthu "... the archetype and primordial model of any actual ruler,"[11] because of the idealized nature of his reign. Yet, certain elements of the myth make it clear that Prthu was a supernatural being capable of feats that go far beyond the powers of a human king. For example, it is said that when he went

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[8] Ibid., p. 107.

[9] Gonda, J., Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 131

[10] This myth is the origin of the two classic etymologies of the word rājā. The first suggests that the word is derived from the root ranji- 'to please', the second claims that it is derived from rāj- 'to shine'. Spellman, J., Political Theory of Ancient India, op. cit., p. 67.

[11] Gonda, J., Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 128.

to the sea its waves became solid, and when he went to the mountains
they parted to make way for him.[12] Also, the earth was magically
productive during his reign; corn grew without cultivation, cows gave
an abundant supply of milk, delicious fruits grew everywhere, etc.
This condition of productivity was the exact opposite of the earth's
barrenness during Vena's reign.[13]

In the Śanti Parva of the Mahābhārata, Visṇu is identified
as the god who establishes Pṛthu as king. The passage is very signifi-
cant because it clearly sets forth Visṇu's relationship with the earthly
king. Prior to this, Indra had been the major god associated with
kingship.[14] In this section of the epic, Yudhishṭhira is being

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[12] Ibid., p. 129.

[13] The supposition that the earth's productivity is linked to the
quality of the king's rule was widely accepted in ancient India. It
appears in Buddhist as well as Hindu sources. In the Rājovāda Jātaka
(n. 334), the story of Brahmadatta, the king of Banaras, is recounted.
This king disguised himself and went out into his kingdom to learn how
the people thought of him. He came upon the Bodhisatta who was eating
ripe figs. The Bodhisatta asked the king to eat a fig which the king
did. Then, the king asked why the fig was so sweet. The Bodhisatta
replied that it was due to the fact that the kingdom was ruled justly
by a good king. Then the king asked if it would lose its sweetness in
the reign of an unjust king. The Bodhisatta answered: 'Yes, Your
Excellency, in times of unjust kings, oil, honey, molasses and the like,
as well as wild roots and fruits, lose their sweetness and flavor, and
not these only, but the whole realm becomes bad and flavorless; but
when the rulers are just, these things become sweet and full of flavor,
and the whole realm recovers its tone and flavor.' The story goes that
the king decided to test the veracity of this supposition by ruling
unjustly. When he returned to the spot he discovered that the figs had
turned bitter. This story illustrates the close association that tradition
accorded the king and the earth. The earth, vegetation, and animals would
only co-operate with a just king. Therefore, a poor harvest could be
taken as an indication of poor government, and vice versa. Cf., Spellman, J.,
Political Theory of Ancient India, p. 211.

[14] Ancient Indian Kingship, p. 28.

instructed by Bhishma on the origins of kingship on earth. After
recounting the miraculous origin of Prthu, Bhishma speaks of the corona-
tion ceremony as follows:

> Then Viṣṇu and the deities of Indra, and the
> rsis and the Regents of the world, and the
> brahmanas, assembled together for crowning Prthu
> (as the king of the world). The earth herself,
> O son of Pandu, in her embodied form, came to
> him, with a tribute of gems and jewels.[15]

The tribute offered by the earth again serves to illustrate the
intimate relationship that was felt to exist between the king and nature.
Bhishma now turns to Viṣṇu's confirmation of the king:

> The eternal Viṣṇu himself, O Bharata, confirmed
> his power, telling him, 'No one, O king, shall
> transcend thee'. The divine Visnu entered the
> body of that monarch in consequence of his
> penances. For this reason, the entire universe
> offered divine worship unto Prthu, numbered
> among human gods.[16]

The account given in the Śanti Parva leaves no doubt that
the king is a divinely ordained individual who descends from heaven
for the benefit of mankind. Bhishma puts it as follows:

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[15] Mbh., Śanti Parva, Section LIX, trans. P.C. Roy, p. 132.
It is interesting to note that the earth was frequently represented
in her "embodied form" in Gupta art. On this point, see below, p. 36.

[16] Ibid., p. 133.

A person upon the exhaustion of his merit,
comes down from heaven to earth, and takes
birth as a king conversant with the science
of chastisement. Such a person becomes endued
with greatness and is really a portion of
Viṣṇu on earth. He becomes possessed of
great intelligence and obtains superiority
over others. Established by the gods, no one
transcends him. It is for this reason that
everybody acts in obedience to one, and it is
for this that the world cannot command him.[17]

The story of Pṛthu serves as a starting point for this thesis

because it brings out the salient features of the conception of kingship

in India prior to the Guptas. If we accept the broad dates of the

Mahābhārata given by Dr. Winternitz — not earlier than the 4th century

B.C. and not later than the 4th century A.D.,[18] — then we must accept

the fact that Viṣṇu succeeded Indra as the patron of kings either before

or during the time of the early Guptas. This point will be returned

to later in the thesis.

One aspect of the Pṛthu story I want to emphasise before passing

on to a discussion of Viṣṇu is the religious duty incumbent in the

office of king. It is an important point for the thesis because we

are concerned with the king's relationship with religion. The nature

of this duty is perhaps best illustrated in the oath of office which

[17] Ibid., p. 133. The first line of this quote is reminiscent
of the Bodhisattva Doctrine of Buddhism.

[18] Majumdar, R.C., general editor, The Age of Imperial Unity,
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1968, p. 251, hereafter cited as
The Age of Imperial Unity.

the gods and rsis administered to Prthu. It is given as follows:

> 'Do thou fearlessly accomplish all those tasks
> in which righteousness even resides. Disregarding
> what is dear and what not so, look upon all
> creatures with an equal eye. Cast off at a
> distance lust and wrath and covetousness and
> honour, and, always observing the dictates of
> righteousness, do thou punish with thy own hands
> the man, whoever he may be, that deviates from
> the path of duty. Do thou also swear that thou
> wouldst, in thought, word, and deed, always
> maintain the religion inculcated on earth by
> the Vedas. Do thou further swear that thou
> wouldst fearlessly maintain the duties laid
> down in the Vedas with the aid of the science
> of chastisement, and that thou wouldst never
> act with caprice. O puissant one, know that
> Brahmanas are exempt from chastisement, and
> pledge further that thou wouldst protect the
> world from an intermixture of castes.'[19]

Thus, in conclusion it can be said that political and religious

duties were mixed together in the institution of kingship in ancient

India. Prthu is sworn to maintain the religion of the Vedas, which

Vena had attempted to destroy. And, he is sworn to maintain the tradi-

tional social order which placed brahmans above reproach. These kingly

obligations are emphasised here in order to put the religous activities

of the Gupta kings into the perspective of the tradition.

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[19] Mbh., Santi Parva, Section LIX, trans. P.C. Roy, p. 132.

This raises the general question of the relationship that
existed between religion and politics in ancient India. In a sense,
all activities, including politics and trade, were religious since they
were regulated by sacred law. However, from the time of the Arthasastra
onward, politics was distinguished from religion. The distinction rests
on the difference between kshatriya-dharma and brahmana-dharma. The
duties of the warrior class were necessarily different from the duties
of the priestly class. Therefore, politics and kingship, which were
associated with kshatriya-dharma, were held to be distinct from the
religious duties of the brahmans. Yet, since the king was the protector
of brahmans and upholder of the traditional social order, he was
granted a religious status by the brahmans.

In the Gupta age, the religious status of kingship was
emphasised by the brahmans for a variety of reasons. These reasons
will be dealt with in the following chapters. The consequence of
the elevation of kingship to divine status was the close relationship
between religion and politics which is evident in the Gupta temple
movement.

CHAPTER TWO

VISNU AND KINGSHIP

In the preceding chapter the nature of Visnu's association
with kingship was touched upon. It was noted that this association
is a post-vedic phenomenon, and that prior to this association the
function of patron of kingship was performed by Indra or other vedic
gods.[1] This chapter will undertake an analysis of the character of
the god Visnu as he was conceived prior to the Gupta age.[2] This
analysis is a necessary prelude to the discussion of the temple move-
ment which centered around this deity.

Vaisnavism, devotion to Visnu as the Supreme God, did not
exist as a religion in the vedic age, or, if it did exist, no evidence
of its existence has survived.[3] However, Visnu is a recognised vedic
god and five hymns of the Rg Veda are dedicated to him. In the Vedas,

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[1] "Although the divine origin of kingship is set forth even in
some passages of the Later Vedic literature and some other texts which
are certainly earlier than the Gupta period, these works generally
connect the kingship with Prajāpati, Indra, Yama, Varuna, Kubera and
several other divinities; definite connection with Visnu is established
in the Mahābhārata and the Purānas only, which received their final
redaction in the Gupta period.' Jaiswal, S., The Origin and Development
of Vaisnavism, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967. p. 162, hereafter
cited as The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism.

[2] For a detailed account of this subject please see, Gonda, J.,
Aspects of Early Visnuism.

[3] Sircar, D., 'Vaishnavism', The Age of Imperial Unity, p. 431.

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he is a solar god, and this early association with the sun remained a

central part of his character as it developed in post-vedic times.

Visnu's most important feat in the Vedas is his recovery of the universe

by his three strides. The origin and evolution of this myth are dealt

with in depth by Bhattacharji in The Indian Theogony.[4] She points out

that the story of the dwarf incarnation of Visnu was not connected with

the feat of the three strides until the epic period.[5] In sum, the vedic

Visnu was a relatively minor god, unassociated with the idea of divine

incarnation.

The evolution of Vaisnavism up to and including the Gupta age

consisted of a process of assimilation and synthesis of various religious

groups.[6] In this process, of course, all the elements which were

assimilated were not of equal value in the religion. A major step in

the evolution of Vaisnavism occurred in the pre-Christian centuries

with the identification of Visnu and Vāsudeva. The god Vāsudeva,

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[4] Bhattacharji, S., The Indian Theogony, Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 284-286.

[5] Ibid., p. 286.

[6] "We have to remember that the Vaisnavas effected a synthesis of different elements, among which prominent mention should be made of the worshippers of various divinities such as the Vedic Visnu, the deified ancient sage Narayana, and the deified Vrṣni heroes Vasudeva and Baladeva-Sankarsana. The followers of Arjuna, or the Vrṣni heroes Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Samba, of the Avatāras including Buddha before their identification with Visnu, and of such tribal gods as those of the Abhiras may be included in the above list." Sircar, D.C., Studies in the Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India, Motilal Banarsidass, DElhi, 1971, p. 40, hereafter cited as Studies in the Religious Life.

considered to be a deified hero of the Yādava clan, was known as the

object of bhakti as early as the fifth century B.C.[7] The merging of

Vāsudeva in the character of Visnu, which is evident in the Bhagavadgītā, (X, v. 37)

brought about a great advance in the popularity of Vaisnavism. The

consequence of the merger is discussed by D.C. Sircar as follows:

> The first step in the evolution of Vaishnavism
> was the identification of Vāsudeva-Krishna with
> the Vedic deity Visnu. This was accomplished by
> the time the Bhagavadgītā was composed, and hence-
> forth the Vāsudeva cult or Bhagavata religion was
> known also as Vaishnava dharma. It has been suggested
> with great plausibility that this identification
> was prompted by a desire on the part of the Brahmanas
> to bring this new and powerful religious sect within
> the pale of orthodox Vedic faith. But whatever may
> be the motive, the identification undoubtedly served
> this purpose.[8]

The Bhagavadgītā, which is generally dated in the first or

second century before Christ,[9] forms a part of the Mahābhārata. It is

an indispensable text for the study of Vaisnavism because it is the

earliest literary expression extant of the religion. In connection

with the topic of this chapter, Visnu and kingship, there are two

significant verses which I would like to draw attention to.

In Chapter ten of the Bhagavadgītā, Krsna discusses his divine

manifestations with Arjuna. Basically Krsna is proclaiming that he is

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[7] Sircar, D.C., "Vaishnavism", The Age of Imperial Unity, p. 432.

[8] Ibid., p. 435. It is interesting to note that Vaisnavism
continued to serve as a vehicle for bringing heterogeneous religious
groups into "orthodoxy" even in the Gupta age. See: Jaiswal, S., The
Origin and Development of Vaisnavism, p. 215.

[9] Ibid., p. 440.

manifested in the chief or best individual among the various groups of

gods, men, and semi-divine creatures. There is an apparent reference

to the institution of kingship in verse 38 of this chapter:

> I am the rod of those that chastise and the
> statesmanship of those that conquer. Of secret
> things I am silence, and of the wise I am the
> wisdom.[10]

or

> I am danda in the hands of those who control
> others, I am niti for the conquerors.[11]

The use of the two words danda, or the power of punishment vested in

the king, and niti, or statesmanship, diplomacy, or polity, are certain

indicators that Krsna is here identifying himself with the institution

of kingship.[12] Elsewhere in Chapter Ten, Krsna explicitly states that

he is manifested as the king among men.[13]

These passages of the Bhagavadgita are valuable for the purposes

of this study because they establish the fact that Vaisnavism was

associated with kingship prior to the Gupta age. This aspect of the

religion, it will be argued, made it appealing to the Guptas.

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[10] Nikhilananda, S., trans. The Bhagavad Gita, Ramakrishna-
Vivekananda Center, 1969, p. 251.

[11] Kane, P.V., History of Dharmasastra, Vol. III, Bhandarkar
Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1946, p. 22.

[12] Loc. cit.

[13] "Of horses know Me to be Uchchais-sravas, born of the amrita;
of lordly elephants I am Airavata, and of men I am the monarch."
(X. v. 27) trans. Nikhilananda. The Bhagavad Gita, op. cit., p. 247.

A new element was added to the character of Viṣṇu in the Bhagavad-
gītā with the concept of avatāra, or periodic incarnations of the Lord
on earth. The essence of the doctrine is contained in two verses of the
fourth chapter:

> Whenever there is a decline of dharma, O Bharata,
> and a rise of adharma, I incarnate myself. (IV, v. 7)

> For the protection of the good, for the destruction
> of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma,
> I am born in every age.   (Iv, v. 8)[14]

It has been pointed out that the doctine of avatāras as it is presented
in the Bhagavadgītā represents an early stage in its development.[15] The
ten major incarnations which were recognised in the Puranic period[16] are
not present in the Bhagavadgītā. As noted above, Kṛṣṇa seems to be
identifying himself with all that is good in the universe. He states:

> Whatever glorious or beautiful or mighty being
> exists anywhere, know that it has sprung from
> but a spark of my splendour.   (X, v. 41)[17]

The fully established list of avatāras did not exist in the
Hindu tradition until after the eighth century A.D.[18] In fact, as

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[14] The Bhagavad Gītā, trans. Nikhilananda, op. cit., p.126.

[15] Sircar, D.C., Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India,
op. cit., p. 42.

[16] These are: the fish-incarnation (Matsya-avatāra), the tortoise-
incarnation (Kūrma-avatāra), the man-lion incarnation (Nṛ-simha-avatāra),
the dwarf-incarnation (Vāmana-avatāra), Rama-with-the-Ax (Parasu-Rāma),
Rama (Rāma-candra), Kṛṣṇa, Rama-the-Strong (Bala-Rāma), Buddha, and Kalki.

[17] The Bhagavad Gītā, trans. Nikhilananda, op. cit., p. 252.

[18] Sircar, D.C., Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India,
op. cit., p. 42.

Dr. Jaiswal notes, the term "avatāra" is not used to denote these incarnations in the early works such as the Bhagavadgītā and the Nārāyanīya section of the Mahābhārata.[19]

On the basis of the evidence presented in this chapter, it is evident that the religion which came to be known as Vaisnavism in the Gupta age[20] was still in the formative stage in the centuries preceding the Guptas. The Bhagavadgītā establishes the fact that Visnu had been identified with Vāsudeva-Krsna perhaps a century or two before the Christian era. Also, it has been pointed out that the association of Visnu and kingship dates from this period. However, little is known of the popular side of the religion and its extent of influence. The reason for this paucity of information lies in the fact that the Guptas are the first dynasty we know of which adopted this religion. And, as Louis Renou puts it, "... it is only when an ancient Indian religion is adopted as the State religion that we have any real knowledge of it, for from then on there is evidence of it in public ceremonial, in inscriptions and on coins, in monuments, and in court poetry and panegyrics."[21]

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[19] The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism, p. 119: "The Bhagavadgītā and the Nārāyanīya take recourse to such words as janman (birth), sambhava (springing up, coming into being), srjana (creation), and pradurbhava (appearance) for expressing the idea of incarnation ...."

[20] "Literary and archaeological data establish this fact, and the cult designation Vaishnava is not found earlier than the Gupta period." Banerjea, J.N., Religion in Art and Archaeology, Lucknow, University of Lucknow, 1968, p. 4, hereafter cited as Religion in Art and Archaeology.

[21] Renou, L., Religions of Ancient India, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p. 100.

CHAPTER THREE

VAISNAVISM IN THE GUPTA AGE

General Observations

Under the patronage of the Gupta kings, Vaisnavism evolved from

a diverse background to become a major religious movement prevalent

throughout the Gupta Empire.[1] The tremendous upsurgence of the popularity

of Visnu and the increased use of Sanskrit as the language of the state

have led some scholars in the past to call the Gupta age a time of

Hindu renaissance.[2] This view has been attacked by Renou who contends

that while the Guptas certainly strengthened the faith one is not

justified in calling their age a Hindu renaissance because:

> No renaissance of Hinduism was possible because
> it never died out, or even diminished in strength;
> the fact is simply that at this period conditions
> were so favourable to it that the traces it left
> behind are unusually conspicuous.[3]

While the term "renaissance" may not apply, the Gupta age,

was certainly a period of exceptional religious, artistic, and literary

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[1] Sircar, D.C., "Viashnavism", The Classical Age, p. 424.

[2] Smith, V.A., The Oxford History of India, Oxford University
Press, London, 1970, p. 173.

[3] Religions of Ancient India, p. 101.

activity. The older Brahmanical religion underwent a transformation in this period, and a different type of orthodox religion came into being.[4] This "new" orthodox religion did not deny the authority of the Vedas, and the continuity of the tradition was maintained by the brahmans. Yet, elements which were not previously a part of the vedic tradition, such as temple worship, came to be accepted on a large scale during the time of the Guptas.

In the following chapter I shall discuss the nature of Vaisnavism in the Gupta age. I shall start with a brief discussion of the Guptas[5] and the available evidence pertaining to their devotion to Visnu. Following this will be a section on the worship of Viṣṇu's avatāras in the Gupta age. The purpose of this chapter in the thesis is to clarify the Gupta's relationship with Vaisnavism and to elucidate their possible motives in the propagation of the religion within their empire.

The Gupta Kings

The actual start of the Gupta Empire may have been the matrimonial alliance between Chandragupta and Kumāra Devī, a Lichchhavi

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[4] Majumdar, R.C., "Religion and Philosophy", The Classical Age, p. 370. The term "orthodox" is used here, without Western connotations, to stand for the religion practiced by the majority of people during the Gupta age.

[5] For a detailed account of the Guptas the reader is referred to Mookerji's The Gupta Empire, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1969, hereafter referred to as The Gupta Empire.

princess.[6] In addition to the territory gained through this alliance,

Chandragupta increased his kingdom through military conquest. However,

the exact extent of his territory is not known due to a lack of conclusive

evidence.[7] Mookerji, citing Purāṇic sources, holds that his territory

probably included the lands along the Ganges River as far as Prayāga

in the West and Magadha in the East.[8]

Chandragupta is recognised as the founder of the Gupta Empire

on the basis of his assumption of the title "Mahārājādhirāja", "king

of kings", in contrast to his predecessors who were called "Mahārāja",

or simply "great king".[9] In addition, it is widely assumed that the

Gupta era, founded on February 26, 320 A.D., commemorated the coronation

of Chandragupta. While he admits that this interpretation of the origin

of the Gupta era is probable, Majumdar reminds us that there is no

definite evidence to support this view.[10] In sum, Chandragupta's reign

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[6] "The matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis so enhanced his power that he was able to extend his dominion over Oudh as well as Magadha, and along the Ganges as far as Prayaga or Allahabad". Smith, V.A., The Oxford History of India, op. cit., p. 164.

[7] Mookerji, The Gupta Empire, p. 13.

[8] Loc. cit.

[9] Loc. cit.

[10] He states that it might commemorate the coronation of Chandragupta's son, Samudragupta. Majumdar, R.C., "The Rise of the Guptas", The Classical Age, pp. 4-5.

and the man himself are obscure because we lack the inscriptions which are needed to complete his history.[11]

It is primarily due to the inscription about Samudragupta's life engraved on the Asokan pillar at Allāhābād that our knowledge of this king exceeds that of his father, Chandragupta. This inscription is of great importance for this thesis because it clearly expresses the neo-brahmanical doctrine that the king is actually a deity in human form.[12] This is alluded to in several verses of the inscription, and it is explicitly stated in Line 28 as follows:

> Who was a mortal only in celebrating the rites
> of the observances of mankind, (but was otherwise)
> a god, dwelling on earth; – who was the son of the
> son's son of the Mahārāja, the illustrious Gupta;
> – who was the son's son of the Mahārāja , the
> illustrious Ghatot kacha; – who was the son of the
> Mahārājādhirāja, the glorious Chandragupta (I.),
> (and) the daughter's son of Lichchhavi, begotten
> on the Mahādēvi Kumāradevi.[13]

Another important verse of this inscription identifies Samudragupta with the acintya-puruṣa, the "inscrutable being", which is an epithet of Viṣnu.[14] This passage has been translated by Fleet as

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[11] Ibid., p. 4.

[12] Ibid., p. 15.

[13] The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 15-16. In a note to this verse, Fleet points out that the title "Mahādēvi", used before Kumaradevi, may be translated as "great goddess". He states that this was the traditional title for the wives of paramount sovereigns. We may suppose from this title that the queen also enjoyed divine status.

[14] Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, p. 39.

follows:

> ... who, being incomprehensible [purushasy-
> a-chintyasya], was the spirit that was the
> cause of the production of good and the destruc-
> tion of evil; — who, being full of compassion,
> had a tender heart that could be won over simply
> by devotion [bhakty-avanati-] and obeisance; ...[15]

Both Sircar[16] and Jaiswal[17] have drawn attention to the fact that this

passage echoes the doctrine of divine incarnation propounded in the

Bhagavadgītā.[18] In addition, the emphasis on compassion and devotion

expressed in this passage are reminiscent of Krsna's statements in

the Bhagavadgītā.[19]

The inscription also indicates that Samudragupta was devoted to

religious observances and the sacred scriptures.[20] He is referred to as,

"... the supporter of the real truth of the scriptures..." and as a follower

of "... the path of the sacred hymns..."[21] There is an apparent reference

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[15] The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 14. The use of the term "bhakti" in connection with Samudragupta is an indication that the king was considered an object of devotion in the Gupta age.

[16] Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, p. 39.

[17] The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism, p. 157.

[18] "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma, I am born in every age." (IV. v. 8), trans. Nikhilanda, The Bhagavad Gītā, p.126.

[19] For example: Chapter X, verses 10 and 11.

[20] Majumdar, R.C., "The Foundation of the Gupta Empire", The Classical Age, p. 14..

[21] The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 11-12.

to his generosity to <u>brahmans</u> when he is called, "... the giver of
many hundreds of thousands of cows".[22]

In sum, the pillar inscription of Samudragupta offers some
interesting insights into the Vaiṣṇavism of his day. These insights
tend to support the view that Vaiṣṇavism had been absorbed into the
orthodox religion by the time of the Guptas.[23] The authority of the
<u>Vedas</u> continues to be recognised;[24] this is clear from the honorific
references to the scriptures contained in the inscription. At the
same time, the <u>bhakti</u> form of religious devotion to God, which may be
non-aryan in origin,[25] was also accepted as a part of orthodox religion.
The inscription indicates that <u>bhakti</u> was directed towards the king
who was considered a god dwelling on earth.

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[22] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 14.

[23] Majumdar, R.C., "Religion and Philosophy", <u>The Classical Age</u>,
p. 370.

[24] "Though in actual life the knowledge and practice of Vedic
religion was being gradually restricted to a few, this theoretical
admission of its superiority serves to keep up the link between the
old and the new. The Vedic texts continue to be studied with meticulous
care and reverence, and the Vedic sacrifices never cease to form a part
of the orthodox Brahmanical religion." <u>Ibid</u>., p. 371.

[25] <u>Studies in the Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India</u>,
p. 12.

The Allāhābād inscription also enumerates the many military
conquests made by Samudragupta.[26]   In fact, he won the title "Samudra-
gupta", ("protected by the sea,") through his conquests.[27]   When he died
in 380 A.D., Samudragupta left behind a much larger kingdom than he
had inherited.[28]   However, the entity known as the Gupta Empire was
not completed during his lifetime.   As Majumdar states, Samudragupta
laid the foundation upon which Chandragupta II built.[29]   In Majumdar's
words:

> Samudra-gupta had begun the work of conquest.
> To his son Chandra-gupta II fell the task of com-
> pleting it and assimilating into the organisation
> of the empire, not only the tribal states and
> kingdoms on the border but also the territories
> ruled by foreign hordes like the Sakas and the
> Kushānas.[30]

The above quote is important because it suggests the situation
faced by Chandragupta II when he assumed the throne.   The task he
undertook was the assimilation of various heterogeneous groups of
people, with divergent religious and cultural backgrounds, into the

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[26] The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 12-14.

[27] The Gupta Empire, p. 17.   He is called a king "... whose fame
was tasted by the waters of the four oceans", in the Mathura inscription
of Chandragupta II, The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 25.

[28] For the details of his conquests see: The Gupta Empire,
pp. 19-29.

[29] Majumdar, R.C., "Expansion and Consolidation of the Empire",
The Classical Age, p. 23.

[30] Loc. cit.

organisation of the Empire. In completing this task, he employed the assimilating ability of Vaisnavism with remarkable success.

The devotion of Chandragupta II to Visnu is expressed by the epithet "Parama-bhagavata" which precedes his name and the names of his successors in the inscriptions.[31] This epithet has been translated by Fleet as "a most devoted worshipper of (the god) Bhagavat", and he stresses that it is exclusively a Vaisnava title.[32] It may be significant that this title is not known in connection with Samudragupta or his predecessors.[33] Sircar has suggested that this fact indicates that Samudragupta followed a different school of Vaisnavism than that of his son.[34] Whether or not this interpretation is accepted, royal patronage of Vaisnavism seems to have increased under Chandragupta II and his successors.[35]

The most conspicuous evidence of Chandragupta's patronage of

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[31] The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 28 and p. 38 (used before Chandragupta II); p. 41 (used before Kumaragupta); also p. 54-5.

[32] Ibid., pp. 28-29 n.

[33] The title is conspicuous by its absence in the "Bhitari Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta", The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 52-8, in which all the Gupta monarchs are named but only those starting with Chandragupta II receive the epithet "Parama-bhagavata".

[34] Studies in the Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India, p. 29.

[35] Ibid., p. 40.

Vaisnavism is the temple movement which appears to have commenced in earnest during his reign. This topic will be dealt with in detail in Chapter Four. Here, I would simply like to point out that while temples existed in India prior to the Guptas,[36] Chandragupta II undertook a campaign of temple and monument construction which was virtually unprecedented. There is little doubt that his efforts on behalf of Vaisnavism were one of the major causes of the religion's popularity from the fifth century A.D. onward.

The earliest known date for Chandragupta's successor Kumaragupta I is 415 A.D. and the year of his death is given as 455 A.D..[37] His reign of forty years was characterised by peace and prosperity in the Empire.[38] Not only did he maintain the empire intact, but he also added some new conquests as evidenced by his celebration of the horse-sacrifice.[39]

While Kumaragupta bore the epithet "Parama-bhāgavata",[40] he also gave prominence to the god Karttikeya, a Śaivite deity.[41] His

[36] Bhattacharyya, T., The Canons of Indian Art, Firma Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963, p. 264.

[37] Majumdar, R.C., "Expansion and Consolidation of the Empire", The Classical Age, p. 23.

[38] Ibid., p. 24

[39] The Gupta Empire, p. 74.

[40] As in the inscription No. 112, The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 51.

[41] For the details regarding this deity please see: Chatterjee, A.K., The Cult of Skanda-Karttikeya in Ancient India, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1970.

favoritism toward this god is reflected in the coins he issued:

> He issued a new type of gold coin depicting
> Karttikeya riding on a peacock on one side,
> and the king feeding a peacock on the other.
> He also substituted the peacock for Garuda on
> the silver coins.[42]

Garuda had been a well recognised symbol associated with Viṣṇu since the time of the Bhagavadgītā.[43] In addition, the Garuda emblem (garutmadaṅka) had been used as the seal and the coin device for the Guptas since the time of Samudragupta.[44] Therefore, Kumaragupta's substitution of the peacock, Karttikeya's vahana, for Garuda must be considered a break with his family's traditions.

Under Kumarāgupta, the worship of Karttikeya probably gained in popularity. The Bilsad pillar inscription of Kumarāgupta, dated 415 A.D., records the construction of a temple to Svāmī-Mahāsena which is one of Karttikeya's names.[45] Saivism in general appears to have prospered in the forty years of Kumaragupta's rule. A Siva-liṅga was given by Kumarāguptu's minister Prithivīshena for the worship of Mahādeva in

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[42] Majumdar, R.C., "Expansion and Consolidation of the Empire", The Classical Age, p. 23.

[43] Bhagavadgītā, X. v. 30.

[44] Banerjea, J.N., Religion in Art and Archaeology, Lucknow, University of Lucknow, 1968, p. 18.

[45] The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 43. The inscription indicates that the temple included a muni-vasati, or rest house for saints, and a dharma-sattra, or almshouse for the poor.

436 A.D.[46]

However, there is no evidence that Viasnavism declined or was

neglected under Kumaragupta. On the contrary, Kumaragupta seems to

have been even-handed in his distribution of charitable endowments

to all the principal religions of his day.[47] We know that the temple

movement continued unabated during his reign, and some of the most

impressive Visnu temples are dated in his lifetime.[48]

Before leaving the subject of the Gupta kings and their support

of Vaisnavism, it should be stressed that there is no evidence to

indicate that they attempted to make Vaisnavism popular through

coercion. As Mookerji remarks:

> Although the Gupta emperors were orthodox Hindus
> or followers of Brahmanical religicn, they were
> catholic enough not to have enforced their
> personal religion as the official religion of
> the empire.[49]

The inscriptions of the Gupta kings bear testimony of their

tolerance for religions other than Vaisnavism. For example, Chandragupta

II accompanied his minister Virasena to the dedication of a Saivite

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[46] Ibid., p. 77. The source referred to by Mookerji is the Karmadandā Stone Linga inscription.

[47] Ibid., p. 76.

[48] The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 78: "... this shrine of the divine god Visnu, which blocks up the path of sin, -seeing the aspect of which, resembling the lofty peak of (the mountain) Kailasa, the Vidyadharas, accompanied by their mistresses, come and gaze into it with happy faces...."

[49] The Gupta Empire, p. 133.

cave temple at Udaigiri.[50] In addition, the inscriptions speak of endowments made to Buddhist[51] and Jain[52] establishments.

A summary of the preceding remarks on the Gupta kings may be made as follows. The history of the Gupta empire prior to Samudragupta is obscure because we lack the necessary historical evidence, (such as inscriptions, coins, literary works, etc.). With Samudragupta, the situation improves. The Allāhābād pillar inscription provides us with a mine of information on his religious attitude and his military exploits. For this thesis, the most significant statements in the inscription refer to the divine status of the king which is a neo-brahmanical doctrine in existence prior to the Gupta age.[53] The patronage of Vaisnavism increased under Samudragupta's son Chandragupta II, or, at least, our evidence of this patronage increases. A great national movement of temple construction swept the empire during his reign. On the basis of inscriptional evidence, it is reasonable to assume that the impetus of this movement came from the rulers rather than

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[50] The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 34-36.

[51] Ibid., p. 29; 45; and 260.

[52] Ibid., p. 65; and 258.

[53] The antiquity of this doctrine may be determined by its presence in Bhagavadgītā, which is generally dated between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D.

the people.[54] This movement continued through the rein of Kumaragupta I

whose final year, 455 A.D., is taken as the chronological limit of the

thesis.

While the Guptas did not force their faith on the masses, there

is little doubt that their personal adherence to Vaisnavism and their

active support of the temple movement served to strengthen the religion.

In addition, Vaisnavism which had a divergent background, became more

unified in the Gupta age.[55] The joining of vedic traditions with the

religions of Vaisnavism and Saivism, which is evident in the Gupta

inscriptions, reflects a turning point in the religious history of India.

It has been argued that the foundations of contemporary Hinduism were

laid in the Gupta age.[56] Therefore, the Guptas who played a dominant

role in the political history of India, also left their mark on the

religious history of the land.

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[54] However, this is not to say that the common people were
inactive in the movement. There is a lack of evidence regarding their
attitudes, and the testimony we have comes from the aristocratic and
literary strata of society. Cf. The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism,
p. 215.

[55] Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, p. 40.

[56] Majumdar, "Religion and Philosophy", The Classical Age, p. 371.

Visnu's avatāras and the Gupta Kings

One of the important aspects of Vaiṣṇavism in the Gupta age is the great popularity of the worship of Viṣṇu's avatāras.[57] The complex subject of avatāras has been touched upon in the preceding chapter.[58] This chapter will focus on the popular avatāras of the Gupta age.[59] The intimate connection between this subject and the subject of Gupta temples is evident since in almost every case[60] the early Gupta temples were constructed to enshrine an image of one of Viṣṇu's avatāras. The point I shall try to make in this chapter, is that the popular avatāras of the Gupta age were political as well as religious symbols, and that they stood as emblems of Gupta sovereignty in an analoguous fashion to the Garuda emblem. When this argument of the thesis is carefully set forth the conclusions I intend to draw should become more apparent.

As mentioned above[61] the list of avatāras did not reach its

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[57] Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, p. 41.

[58] See above: p. 20.

[59] The criterion of popularity employed here is basically archaeological, i.e. the number of temples and statues dedicated to an avatāra, and literary, i.e. the number of references to a particular avatāra in works which date from this period.

[60] The Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh is a possible exception, depending on which date is accepted for this temple. See, Table of Extant Gupta Temples.

[61] See above: p. 20.

final form until after the eighth century. In the Gupta age we find that the concept was in a confused state, though the central elements of the final doctrine were in existence.[62]

Among the avataras of Visnu, only the boar incarnation, Varaha, and the man-lion incarnation, Narasimha, are mentioned by name in the extant Gupta inscriptions.[63] However, at least three other avataras are mentioned in the inscriptions, although they are not identified as incarnations of Visnu. These are: the dwarf incarnation, Vamana;[64] Krsna;[65] and, Rama.[66] While it has to be admitted that the testimony of the inscriptions is fragmentary, their testimony is of immense value for this thesis because they are our best primary source.

There is substantial evidence, both archaeological and literary, to indicate that the two most popular avataras of the Gupta age were Varaha and Narasimha. The early Gupta temples and statues of these deities that have been discovered throughout Central India testify to

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[62] The Mahabharata's statements regarding avataras are indicative of the unsystematised nature of the doctrine: "In a passage of the late Narayaniya section of the Mahabharata mention is made only of four avataras, viz. Boar, Dwarf, Man-Lion, and Man (Vasudeva-Krishna). In another passage of the same section, the deified beings Rama Bhargava and Rama Dasarathi are added to the list making a total of six avataras, while a third passage gives the list of ten incarnations, by adding Hamsa, Kurma, Matsya, and Kalki to the above six." Sircar, "Vaishnavism", The Classical Age, pp. 420-421.

[63] The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 160-161 (Varaha); p. 188 (Narasimha).

[64] Ibid., p. 62.

[65] Ibid., p. 223.

[66] Ibid., p. 77.

the widespread popularity of these avatāras.[67] In addition to the inscriptional evidence, literary works which date from the Gupta age attest to the great popularity of both Varāha and Narasimha.[68]

Although each of these avatāras were worshipped over a large area of India in the Gupta age, Varāha appears to have been even more popular than Narasimha.[69] This avatāra is represented in two distinct manners which are directly derived from the two central myths associated with Varāha. These are known as: "varāha," the theriomorphic form; and, "nr-varāha," the man-boar form. In the first case, which is seen as early as 500 A.D., the boar stands on four legs and his body is covered with tiny human figures. This form of Varāha represents the time that the gods, rsis, asuras, and others took refuge in Visnu who assumed the form of a boar.[70]

It is the second form of Varāha, the nr-varāha or maha-varāha

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[67] See Table of Extant Gupta Temples, p. 62. It might be inserted here that according to Banerjea there are no representations of avatāras earlier than those of the Gupta age. The Development of Hindu Iconography, p. 412.

[68] I refer here to the Mudrārākshana of Visākhadatta and the Brhatsamhita of Varāhamihira.

[69] Shastri, A.M., India as Seen in the Brhatsamhita of Varāhmihira, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1969, p. 132. Hereafter cited as India as Seen in the Brhatsamhita.

[70] The Development of Hindu Iconography, p. 414.

which was popularised by the Guptas in temples and monumental statues. This representation of Varāha depicts him with the robust body of a man and the head of a boar; it appears for the first time in Indian art at Udaigiri, c. 400 A.D. The myth that inspired this figure was originally associated with Prajāpati in the Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa.[71] In later times, Visṇu assimilated Prajāpati's role as the god who assumed a boar form in order to raise the Earth from the bottom of the ocean. The Earth is represented anthropomorphically in the Gupta sculptures of this avatāra. She is seen as a buxom young damsel looking lovingly at the face of the boar.[72]

As with any powerful religious symbol, there are a number of possible interpretations of this avatāra. The orthodox interpretation equates the parts of the boar with vedic sacrifice.[73] . While this esoteric meaning may be present, it is also possible to relate Varāha to the political conditions of India at the time of its appearance (c. 400 A.D.). This interpretation has been argued by V.S. Agrawala,[74]

[71] Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa, 14. 1.2.

[72] The personification of the earth as an attractive woman was quiąte common in the Gupta age. It is present in the inscriptions as well as the art: The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 86.

[73] Rao, T.A.G., Elements of Hindu Iconography, Vol. I, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi,1968 , p. 144.

[74] Agrawala, V.S., The Matsya-Purāṇa - A Study, All-India Kashiraj Trust, Fort Ramnagar, Varanasi, 1963, p. 333 f., hereafter cited as Matsya-Purāṇa - A Study.

and the following remarks have been suggested in part by him.

The first known statue of Mahāvarāha was carved at Udaigiri during Chandragupta II's extended campaign against the last vestiges of foreign rule in Central India. Chandragupta II's opponent in this campaign was the Saka ruler of Gujarāt, Rudrasimha III.[75] When this conquest was completed, sometime between 400 and 410 A.D., Chandragupta II added the provinces of Gujarāt and Kāthiāwār to the empire and thereby extended the Gupta Empire from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. On the basis of this conquest, he assumed the title "Vikramaditya", the name of a legendary Indian king who expelled foreigners from India.[76]

With this historical background in mind, it is probable that Chandragupta II intended the Mahāvarāha statue to stand as a celebration of his conquest as well as a glorification of Visnu. As noted above, the Earth, which in ancient times was considered to be India, was frequently represented as a woman. Therefore, the mythical act of Visnu rescuing the earth is comparable to the historical act of Chandragupta rescuing India from foreign domination.[77] However, the argument need not rest on this supposition alone.

Flanking the statue of Mahāvarāha at Udaigiri are two sets of

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[75] What few details that are known of this campaign are given by Majumdar in The Classical Age, p. 19.

[76] Loc. cit.

[77] This deduction is based in part on the pre-established relationship that existed between the Gupta monarchs and Visnu. See above, p. 23 ff.

the river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamuna. This is the first known instance

of these goddesses in Indian art.[78] Geographically, the Gaṅgā and

the Yamuna rivers served as boundaries for the tract of land called

Aryavarta, or Antarvedi, in ancient India. Aryavarta was considered

the heartland of the Gupta Empire.[79] Therefore, it is reasonable to

assume that some reference to the empire was intended by these goddesses.

The importance of the river goddesses as doorway decorations in the

early Gupta temple type will be discussed in Chapter Four.

In sum, on the basis of the statue alone certain suggestive

elements[80] can be pointed out which associate Varāha with Chandragupta II

and the Gupta Empire. We may now turn to a literary source for coroborating

evidence.

Fairly conclusive evidence regarding the analogy of Varāha to

Chandragupta II is found in a drama of the Gupta age entitled Mudrārākshasa

by Viśākhadatta.[81] Outside of the internal evidence of the play itself,

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[78] However, the prototype of the goddesses is to be found in the
Buddhist Yakshī figures of the second century B.C. See: Coomaraswamy, A.,
Yakshas, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1971, pt. 1, p. 36.

[79] Matsya-Purāṇa - A Study, p. 333.

[80] Agrawala includes among these elements the possible represent-
ation of Chandragupta II below the river goddesses. Matsya-Purāṇa -
A Study, p. 334.

[81] This work has been translated by J.A.B. van Buitenen as
The Minister's Seal. It is included in his book Two Plays of Ancient
India, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968.

very little is known about the date of the play or its author. However, van Buitenen notes that all signs point to the play being composed in the reign of Chandragupta II, perhaps even at the Gupta court. He writes:

> ... there seems to me to be little reason not to accept the name Chandragupta in the final benediction of the play and not to take this name to refer to the great king Chandra Gupta II, Sun of Valor (c. 376-415). The name is preserved in the best manuscripts; moreover, the benediction makes a point of associating the king with the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu; it is known that the Gupta dynasty actively promoted the cult of this Incarnation.[82]

The final benediction of the play has been translated by van Buitenen as follows:

> But still this wish may be fulfilled:
>
> The self-begotten God did once assume
> The fitting body of a mighty Boar
> And on his snout did save the troubled Earth,
> Nurse of all beings, when she was deluged:
> Now, terrified by the barbarian hordes,
> She has sought shelter in our king's strong arms:
> May Chandragupta, our most gracious King,
> Whose people prosper and whose kinsmen thrive,
> For long continue to protect the land![83]

This quote is very valuable for the thesis because it corrobates some of our earlier remarks. A parallel was drawn here between the cosmic myth of Viṣṇu saving the endangered earth in his boar form and

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[82] Ibid., p. 38.

[83] Ibid., p. 271.

Chandragupta II's decisive victory over the Saka forces. Because of
the lack of material relating to the attitudes of the commonfolk of
the Gupta age, it is hard to say if they saw the parallel as clearly
as the courtiers of the Gupta court.[84]

In sum, there is sufficient evidence to assert that Chandra-
gupta II was intentionally associated with the Varâha-Avatāra of
Visnu. The fact that an Indian king would identify himself with a
mythical boar is plausible because the boar had a well established
relationship with fertility. The boar is considered to be the husband
of the earth in the Brāhmanas.[85] When the king's responsibilities
in regard to fertility are taken into consideration, the comparison
of Chandragupta II and Varāha appears appropriate.

We may state with assurance that Varāha served as a dual
symbol in the Gupta age. He referred both to the cosmic act of Visnu
rescuing the earth and to the historical fact of Chandragupta II's
reign. This consideration helps to explain the great popularity of
Varāha and his prominent place in the temple movement.

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[84] van Buitenen identifies Visākhadatta as a high courtier at
the Gupta court, Ibid., p. 39.

[85] Aspects of Early Visnuism, p. 138.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF GUPTA TEMPLES

In the preceding chapters the theoretical background of the
temple movement has been discussed. It has been shown that the Guptas
accepted the association of Visnu and kingship and employed some elements
of Vaisnavite mythology as political symbols. This chapter will relate
the foregoing remarks to the temple movement itself. The purpose
of this chapter is to elucidate the Guptas' motives in patronising
the temple movement and to discuss the nature of the temples they
constructed.

The construction of temples was a major endeavor of the Guptas.
This fact can be explained by an examination of the function of the
temple in the Gupta age. A temple actually served several interrelated
purposes. It calls attention to the god whose image is enshrined in
the temple, which, in almost every case, was Visnu or an _avatāra_ of
Visnu. It serves as a place where worship, in the form of offerings,
can be made to the deity. This may be called its religious function.

In addition to this function, and allied with it, the temple
stood as a visable symbol of the Gupta Empire. This symbol was derived
from the close association between Visnu, the supporter of kingship
and protector of the earth, and the Gupta kings. It has been shown in
the preceding chapter that the Guptas actively promoted this association.

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Therefore, the construction of temples served a political function.
It might be said that temples "secured" an area under Gupta domination.
There is evidence that temples were constructed in areas which had
just come under Gupta control or were in the process of conquest by
the Guptas.[1]

A third function of the temple in the Gupta age was humanitarian
service. That is, the temples were frequently endowed with a sum of
money to distribute alms to the poor, feed the needy, and provide
temporary shelter for travellers and holy men. The inscriptions tell
us that there were three main religious offerings performed in the
temples: sattra, the giving of alms and refuge to the living; bali,
the offering of ghee, grain and rice to the gods; and, charu, the
offering of rice, barley, and pulse for deceased ancestors.[2] The
sattra offering was a type of social service undertaken for the benefit
of the poorer members of society, travellers, and wandering holy men.

These threee aspects of the temple, the religious, the political,
and the humanitarian, combined to make temple building a major endeavor
of the Guptas. We shall now turn to the geographical extent of the
temple movement.

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[1] Examples of this practice are Samudragupta's construction of
a Viṣṇu temple at Eran, just after this town had been taken from
Rudrasena I; and Chandragupta II's monument at Udaigiri which was
probably constructed while he was still battling the Śaka forces for
control of the Malwa region.

[2] The Gupta Inscriptions, p. 116.

Geographic Distribution and Uniformity of Temples

Today, only a fraction of the total number of temples erected

in the Gupta age remain standing. In the course of time the majority

of the original structures have either collapsed or been dismantled

for building material.. Most of the surviving examples of Gupta

temples are located in the province of Madhya Pradesh, in the ancient

regions known as Bundelkhand and Malwa.[3] However, during the Gupta

age, temples were found throughout the empire. Agrawala describes the

extent and uniformity of the temples as follows:

> The whole of North and Central India was filled
> in the course of several centuries of activity
> with shrines of brick and dressed stone masonry.
> The farthest limits of the movement itself are
> traceable in the east up to Dahparbatia on the
> Brahmaputra in Assam, in the north-west up to the
> Panjab and Sind, in the west up to the coastal
> regions of Saurashtra, and in the south up to
> the Krishna Valley. But the influence of the
> art of Madhyadesa [the Gupta's homeland] is
> patent in every detail of sculpture and
> architecture, whether to the west or to the south.[4]

In terms of architecture, the early Gupta temples exhibit a

decided uniformity in style and construction. Cunningham, who was

the first to systematically study these temples, noted that there

are at least eight common architectural characteristics of the early

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[3] Agrawala, P.K., Gupta Temple Architecture, Prithvi Prakashan,
Varanasi, 1968, pp. 19-20, hereafter referred to as Gupta Temple
Architecture.

[4] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Gupta style temple. In Cunningham's words, the common characteristics are:

> (1) Flat roofs without spires. (2) Prolongation
> of the door lintel beyond the ends of the jambs.
> (3) Statues of the river goddesses Ganges and
> Yamuna guarding the entrance door. (4) Contin-
> uation of the architrave of the portico as a
> moulding all round the building. (5) Pillars
> with massive square capitals ornamented with
> half-seated lions back to back, with a tree
> between them. (6) Bosses on the capitals of the
> peculiar form, like beehives with short side
> horns. (7) Deviation in plan from the cardinal
> points. (8) Of the facade, the intercolumination
> in the middle being wider.[5]

The fact that these characteristics were present in virtually

all the early Gupta temples regardless of their location indicates

that the temple movement was a coordinated centralised effort. It

is probable that the uniformity of the temples represents an effort

on the part of the Guptas to unify their country.

The Originality of the Gupta Temples

At this point, the question of the originality of the temple

type that the Guptas popularised arises. It is profitable to examine

the temples to determine to what extent they were "new" phenomena

in Indian religious history. This examination is necessary for the

thesis because it helps to answer the question, "Why did the Guptas

settled on the construction of temples rather than columns or stupas?"

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[5] Cunningham, A., _Archaelogical Survey Reports_, Vol. X, p. 60.
Cited in _Gupta Temple Architecture_, pp. 20-21.

An exhaustive study of the evolution of the Hindu temple would

exceed the bounds of this thesis and distract the reader from the

central argument.[6] On the other hand, the question of the originality

of the Gupta temples cannot be excluded altogether from this thesis,

because it has direct bearing on the nature of the temple movement.

Therefore, the following discussion will focus on the two major elements,

the vedic and non-vedic,[7] which scholars contend influenced the nature

of the temple.

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[6] For a detailed discussion of the evolution of the Hindu
temple the reader is referred to: Brown, P., Indian Architecture –
Hindu Buddhist Period. op. cit., pp. 62-66.

[7] These terms are used here in preference to the alternatives:
Aryan and Dravidian, Indo-European and "indigenous," etc. These terms
imply a theory. Therefore, the less weighty terms, "vedic and non-vedic"
have been used here.

Vedic Antecedents

The Vedic rituals require no permanent places of worship.[8]
Yet, there is a distinct relationship between the sacrificial altar
of the Vedas, the vedi, and the Hindu temple. This relationship is
based on a fundamental similarity of purpose shared by the vedi and
the temple. The vedi was a central component of the Vedic sacrificial
cult because it functioned as the sacred locus of the sacrifice.
Corresponding to later customs regarding temples, the site for the
vedi was carefully selected and marked off.

> The outline of the vedi is carefully marked out
> on the ground; to do this a spade is taken — or
> in other cases, the magical wooden sword — and the
> earth is lightly touched with it, with the words,
> 'The wicked one is killed'. By this all impurity
> is destroyed; the magic circle is traced out, the
> site is consecreated.[9]

The shape and construction of the vedi varied according to the sacrifice
it was intended for.[10] Sometimes two vedis are required for a sacrifice,
but Keith maintains that this requirement is an artificial duplication
of later tradition.[11] Varāhamihira states that an altar should be square,

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[8] Keith, A.B., The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1970, p. 254.

[9] Hubert, H. and Mauss, M., Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967, pp. 26-27.

[10] Ibid., p. 120.

[11] Keith, A.B., op. cit., p. 254.

even and well-measured.[12] Therefore, it appears that later tradition

settled on the square-shaped vedi, which may be related to the plan of

the garbhagriha in early temples.

The vedi, like the temple, served as a meeting place of man

and god, or gods. But, in the case of Vedic sacrifice, the gods were

visitors rather than residents of the sacred area. A special section

of the vedi was reserved for the deities who were invoked to come and

attend the ceremony.[13]

In a symbolic sense, the vedi reflects man's age-old desire to

bring heaven closer to earth.[14] Every element of the vedi has a symbolic

significance, the sum total of which is a microcosmic re-creation of

the universe. This is apparent in Boner's discussion of the fire-altar:

> The bricks of the altar represent the material
> elements of the Purusa. Being set according to
> the cardinal points, they stand for the extention
> of the universe in all directions of space, the
> vault of the sky being its roof. Besides, being
> in a determined number, 1000 and its multiples,
> they represent the great Year, recurrent time
> and the ever renewed round of birth and death.
> Thus the structure of the altar embodies the
> physical aspect of the universe in space and time,
> while the tongue of flame at its center, the god
> Agni, is the heart of the altar. Through the
> vertical ascent of the flame, man, the small

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[12] Shastri, A.M., India as Seen in the Brhatsamhita of Varāhamihira op. cit., p. 173.

[13] Hubert and Mauss, Sacrifice ..., p. 27.

[14] "Vedi was the (Goddess?) Earth itself, where the kindling Fire, the messenger of the Gods united the Earth with Heaven. The terrestrial fire brought its worshippers to a close relation with the celestial fire. The fire god as representative of all gods came down on the altar to consume the oblations." Bhattacharyya, T., The Canons of Indian Art, op. cit., pp. 414-415.

purusa, identifies himself with the great Purusa,
the father of the universe.[15]

The concepts of the temple as a representation of the universe

and the body of Purusa, which are at the forefront of temple symbolism

from the later Gupta age onwards, are probably descendent from the

conception of the vedic altar.[16]

Therefore, it may be said that the vedic altar laid the founda-

tion for the Hindu temple, for this statement is both literally and

figuratively true. A raised platform, a type of vedi, serves as the

base of the temples from the early Gupta age onwards. And, the

symbolic conception of the vedi as a man-made representation of the universe

and meeting ground of man and god survives in the Hindu conception of

the temple.[17]

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[15] Boner, A., Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture,
Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1962, p. 22. M. Eliade includes a good discussion
of the symbolism of the Vedic altar in Cosmos and History - The Myth
of the Eternal Return.

[16] The temple as a symbol of the macrocosm seems to be an idea
associated with the Sikhara type temple more than the early Gupta type.
Kramrisch discusses this aspect of temples at length in The Hindu Temple,
Vol. II, p. 357.

[17] The main difference between the vedi and the temple,
according to Boner, is the question of accessibility. She states
that the temple is "descended in a parallel line from the Vedic altar".
It is also a symbol and magic embodiment of the universe: "But here
(the temple) the central nucleus, the point which contains the potency
of the supreme Principle, is not concealed in a block of masonry, but
is accessible in the hollow of the innermost shrine." Boner, A.,
Principles, op. cit. p. 24.

Another possible antecedent of the temple is the edic initiation hut. This temporary structure had an important role in the soma sacrifice. It served as the place of purification through _tapas_ for the sacrificer.[18] Stella Kramrisch has suggested that the sacrificial hut served as the prototype of the _garbhagriha_ of the Hindu temple.[19] The womb-like atmosphere of the hut was intentional, for the purpose of the hut was to serve as a vehicle for the rebirth of the sacrificer. The _garbhagriha_, 'womb house' of a temple, shares the womb-like atmosphere with the Vedic hut, but, in the case of the temple, the purpose of the structure is _puja_ instead of _tapas_.

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[18] The details of this rite are dealt with by Keith in _The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads_, pp. 200-204.

[19] Kramrisch, S., _The Hindu Temple_, _op. cit._ pp. 158 ff.

Non-vedic Antecedents

Holy sites, sometimes surrounded by a railing and covered by
a domed roof, are known to have florished in India in the pre-Christian
centuries.[20] These early shrines are well illustrated in the bas-reliefs
at Sanchi. It is probable, as Coomarswamy contends, that these shrines
were associated with the yaksa cult of ancient India. In his book
on yaksas, Coomaraswamy notes that the essential element of a yaksa
shrine is a stone table or altar situated by a tree sacred to the
yaksa.[21] They appeared in numerous spots frequented by men:

> The haunt or abode (bhavanam) of a Yaksa, often
> referred to as a caitya or avatana may be outside
> a city, in a grove, on a mountain or at a ghat,
> or by a tank; or at the gates of a city; or within
> a city, or even within the palace precincts. These
> shrines are constantly spoken of as ancient,
> magnificent, famous, or world-renowned.[22]

Yet, there is some doubt as to the designation of these shrines
as temples. A caitya may mean no more than a sacred tree, and not
necessarily a structure of any kind.[23] However, pointing to literary

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[20] Brown, P., Indian Architecture Buddhist and Hindu Periods,
D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private LTD. Bombay, 1971, p. 63.

[21] Commaraswamy, A., Yaksas, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi,
1971, p. 17.

[22] Ibid., p. 17.

[23] Ibid., p. 18.

evidence gathered from Buddhist and Jain sources, Commaraswamy states:

> On the whole, then, we may be sure that in many
> cases Yakṣa shrines, however designated, were
> structural buildings. What were they like? The
> passages cited in the present essay tell us of
> buildings with doors, and arches; and of images
> and altars within the buildings.[24]

On the basis of the evidence that Coomaraswamy has carefully

assembled, it is possible to point to certain similarities between the

ancient yakṣa shrines and the early temples of the Guptas. They are

each permanent sacred spots containing an object of veneration (a

tree or an image); they are located in the towns, cities and country;

and, they also serve as resting places for travellers.[25]

Moreover, both Gupta temples and yakṣa shrines are associated

with the bhakti cult. In this respect, the yakṣa cult practices may

have influenced the Vaiṣhnava temple practices as they were standardized

in the Gupta age.

> Apart from these questions of terminology it will
> be evident that the facts of Yakṣa worship correspond
> almost exactly with those of other Bhakti religions.
> In fact, the use of images in temples, the practice
> of prostration, the offering of flowers (the typical
> gift, constantly mentioned), incense, food, and cloths,
> the use of bells, the singing of hymns, the presenta-
> tion of a drama dealing with the Līlā of the deity,
> all these are characteristic of Hindu worship even in
> the present day.[26]

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[24] Ibid., p. 18.

[25] "Yakṣa caityas, etc., are constantly described as places of
resort, and suitable halting or resting places for travellers; Buddhist and
Jaina saints and monks are frequently introduced as resting or residing
at the haunt of such and such a Yakṣa ceiya." Ibid., p. 23.

[26] Ibid., p. 28.

One other element of the yaksa cult which left its imprint on the temples of the Gupta age is the presence of the river goddesses on the sides of the doorway to the cella. Ganga and Yamuna are first seen in human form flanking the colossal statue of Mahavaraha at Udaigiri. As they are depicted riding their respective vahanas, they are almost identical with the yakshi figures that adorned the railings of Buddhist stupas as early as the second century B.C.[27]

In conclusion, it may be said that the early Gupta temple type was not a total innovation of the Guptas. Many elements which were part of the vedic and non-vedic traditions may have been incorporated into the Hindu temple. If this is the case, then the temple movement can be said to conform to a pattern in Indian art and religion which is conservation of previous traditions. Coomaraswamy speaks of this pattern as follows:

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[27] In the list of eleven decorative elements used to enhance the doorway to an early Gupta temple, there are a few others that may have previously been associated with the Yaksa cult. The list includes: the projecting image in the center of the lintel (dvara-lalata-bimba) attendant figures (pratihari) occupying the lower one fourth portion of the jamb, auspicious birds on wing (mangalya vihaga), usually flying geese, auspicious tree (Srivriksha), stylised Svastika, Full Vase (purna-kalasa), amorous couples (mithunas), foliated scrolls (patralata), rosettes (phullavali), dwarfish figures (pramathas), and Ganga and Yamuna standing on their vehicles. (Agrawala, P.K., Gupta Temple Architecture, o.c., p. 66.) Of these, the pramathas, the mithunas, and the Srivriksha are recognised yaksa motifs appearing at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravaiti.

> The force of tradition is strong, and Indian art
> like other arts has always by preference made
> use of existing types, rather than invented or
> adopted wholly new ones. The case is exactly
> parallel to that of religious development, in
> which the past always survives.[28]

The originality of the Gupta temples lies in their political function discussed above. The possible antecedents we have noted served both religious and humanitarian functions.[29] Yet, neither the vedic nor the non-vedic antecedents had the clear association with a political order that the Gupta temple had. Of course, the political symbolism is but one aspect of the temple and it is bound up with the religious aspects. In a sense, the Gupta temple is a celebration of a totality: the Earth (India), the Empire (again, India), and the Cosmos (embodied as Visnu).[30] This aspect of the temple distinguishes it from the religious sites and structures which may have influenced the temple type.

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[28] Yaksas, p. 29.

[29] The humanitarian aspect is evidenced mainly in the Yakṣa shrines where alms and refuge were granted. However, generous gifts were also made following certain vedic sacrifices.

[30] For the universal symbolism of Viṣṇu, see: The Development of Hindu Iconography, p. 572. In this totality, it may be noted, the king served as the symbol and embodiment of the state. Cf. Sinha, H.N., The Development of Indian Polity. Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963, p. 222.

CONCLUSION

The story of Prthu, retold in Chapter One, was included in this thesis because it expresses the prevailing concept of kingship in the Gupta age. In the story is contained the etiological myth explaining the origin of the divine nature of the king. The concept of kingship accepted by the Guptas exceeded that of earlier Indian dynasties in regard to the divine nature of the king.[1] The rationale for this concept is largely contained in the Prthu story, especially in regard to Visnu's participation in the institution of kingship.

Some scholars have argued that the Guptas were influenced in their concept of kingship by the ideas of foreign invaders like the Kusanas.[2] Kanishka, for example, called himself "Son of God", and he is depicted on his coins with a nimbus around his head.[3] However, there are distinct differences between the Kusana concept of the king as the "Son of God" and the Gupta view of Visnu's participation in kingship.[4] In addition to this, there is no real need to seek out foreign influences,

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[1] Ghoshal, U.N., A History of Indian Politcal Ideas, The Ancient Period to the Period of Transition to the Middle Ages, Oxford University Press, London, 1959, p. 397.

[2] Ibid., p. 295 and p. 398, and Sinha, H.N., Sovereignty in Ancient Indian Polity, op. cit., p. 166.

[3] Ghoshal notes that from the time of Chandragupta I onwards, the Gupta emperors are likewise represented with a nimbus around their heads. Ghoshal, op. cit., p. 397.

[4] The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism, pp. 161-162. She uses the story of Prthu as evidence in her argument.

because the idea of the king's divinity can be traced in Indian texts which predate the foreign invasions.[5]

In the subsequent chapters of the thesis the Gupta concept of kingship was related to their patronage of the temple movement. Evidence was assembled which proves that Samudragupta identified himself with Visnu, and that his illustrious son associated himself with Visnu's avatāra Varāha. With the association established, the political aspect of their support of Vaisnavism and the temple movement becomes apparent.[6] They were, in fact, consciously and intentionally furthering the interests of the Empire through the temple movement. It is for this reason that temples of a uniform type covered the entire geographical extent of the empire. This is evidenced by the fact that temples were constructed in areas which had just been conquered or were in the process of conquest.

It has been emphasised throughout this thesis that the distinction between religion and politics is not as valid in the case of Gupta India as it is in Western religious history. From the vedic period onward, Brahmanism was a determining force in the political history of

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[5] Varma, V.P., Studies in Hindu Political Thought and its Metaphysical Foundations, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1959, p. 248. This author posits the view that Buddhism influenced the elevation of the king to divine status by lowering the status of the vedic gods. Loc. cit.

[6] This view is shared by R.S. Sharma in his Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968, p. 237.

of India.[7] Therefore, the political aspects of the temple movement must be understood in the context of the times. It was suggested in the last chapter that the Gupta temple may be viewed as a celebration of a totality, a cosmic whole comprised of terrestrial and celestial elements. The distinctions that might be made between the secular and the sacred are not applicable in the case of the Gupta temples.

The question of why the Guptas undertook their activities on behalf of Vaisnavism and the temple movement can be answered in several ways. One view is that Vaisnavism was used by the Guptas to assimilate or "brahmanise" the popular cults that existed throughout the Empire.[8] According to this interpretation, temples represent an effort to unify the masses into a common religious movement based on the concept of a personal god accessible to all through devotion. This view is partially correct, but it fails to take into consideration the widespread religious tolerance of the Guptas and their support for religions other than Vaisnavism. If they were systematically working to "brahmanise" the people, it is not logical that they would support rival religions at the same time.

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[7] "Brahmanism, as developed on the basis of the Vedic religion, may be regarded as the bedrock of Arthasastra polity; what is dharma (righteous) and what is adharma (unrighteous) is learnt from the three Vedas". Ibid., p. 178.

[8] The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism, p. 151.

Another view would hold that the religion was an effort to increase the allegiance of the people to the king.[9] This view points to crises that India underwent prior to Gupta supremacy with the barbarian invasions, and concludes that this situation lead to the centralisation of royal power and the apotheosis of kingship.[10] The brahmans sanctioned and encouraged this exaltation of kingship, it is argued, because they identified their interests with the state. This view would allow for a straight political interpretation of the temples. Although the crisis period had actually passed before the temple movement spread throughout the empire, the memory of the barbarians was still fresh in the collective memory of the people. This interpretation is, however , also partially correct. It fails to be exhaustive because it does not consider the religious function of the temple movement.

In sum, it has been shown in this thesis that no single explanation is adequate to explain the Guptas' association with Viasnavism and the temple movement.

The fact that the Guptas were devoted to Visnu can be explained through an examination of the god's character. Visnu came to be recognised as the Lord who stabilizes creation,[11] and works for order in the universe.

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[9] This view is suggested by Sinha, The Development of Indian Polity, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

[10] Ibid., p. 165.

[11] The Indian Theogony, p. 358.

This aspect of Visnu's character, allied with the concept of Visnu's avatāras and the associations Visnu had with kingship, made Visnu the obvious choice as patron of the Empire.

Certain aspects of Viṣṇu's character can be seen in the Gupta temples themselves. The aspect of order and stability can be seen not just in the evenness and sturdiness of the stone structures, but also in the ground plan of the temple. The fact that the garbhagriha is square in shape in all the early temples may have symbolic significance. The symbolism of the square has been dealt with in depth by Stella Kamrisch in The Hindu Temple.[12] She describes the nature of the temple as follows:

> All is order in the residence of God on earth,
> in the symmetry of the structure and its plan.
> Square in shape, it is the Vastupurusa, the
> place of all the gods. The Vastupurusa, Existence,
> the Asura, the unruly, expansive, is kept in check,
> cosmic order covers it and makes it the time-table
> of its movement every day, every year, in all
> the cycles of the aeon.[13]

The asuric, or disorderly, forces were active in the historical period under consideration in the form of the mlecchas, or barbarian invaders. There was a widespread fear that they would take over the country and destroy the sacred law and the order of society.[14] With

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[12] The Hindu Temple, Vol. II, p. 358.

[13] Loc. cit. The conquest of asuric forces by the temple may be traced back to the preparations made for a vedic sacrifice, wherein the vedi was constructed over the asuric forces.

[14] The Development of Indian Polity, pp. 158-159.

this background, it is not unlikely that the Guptas intended their temples to Viṣṇu to stand as symbols of their conquest of disorder and as reminders to the people that country around the temple was under their continuing protection.

This interpretation of the temple movement appears to be the most plausible explanation of the phenomenon. It is borne out by the evidence presented in the preceding chapters and it is consistent with what we know of the spirit of the Gupta age. However, it will be recalled that the political function of the temple is allied with the religious and humanitarian functions. Therefore, this thesis has concentrated on one aspect of a totality in order to shed light on an important chapter in the religious and political history of India.
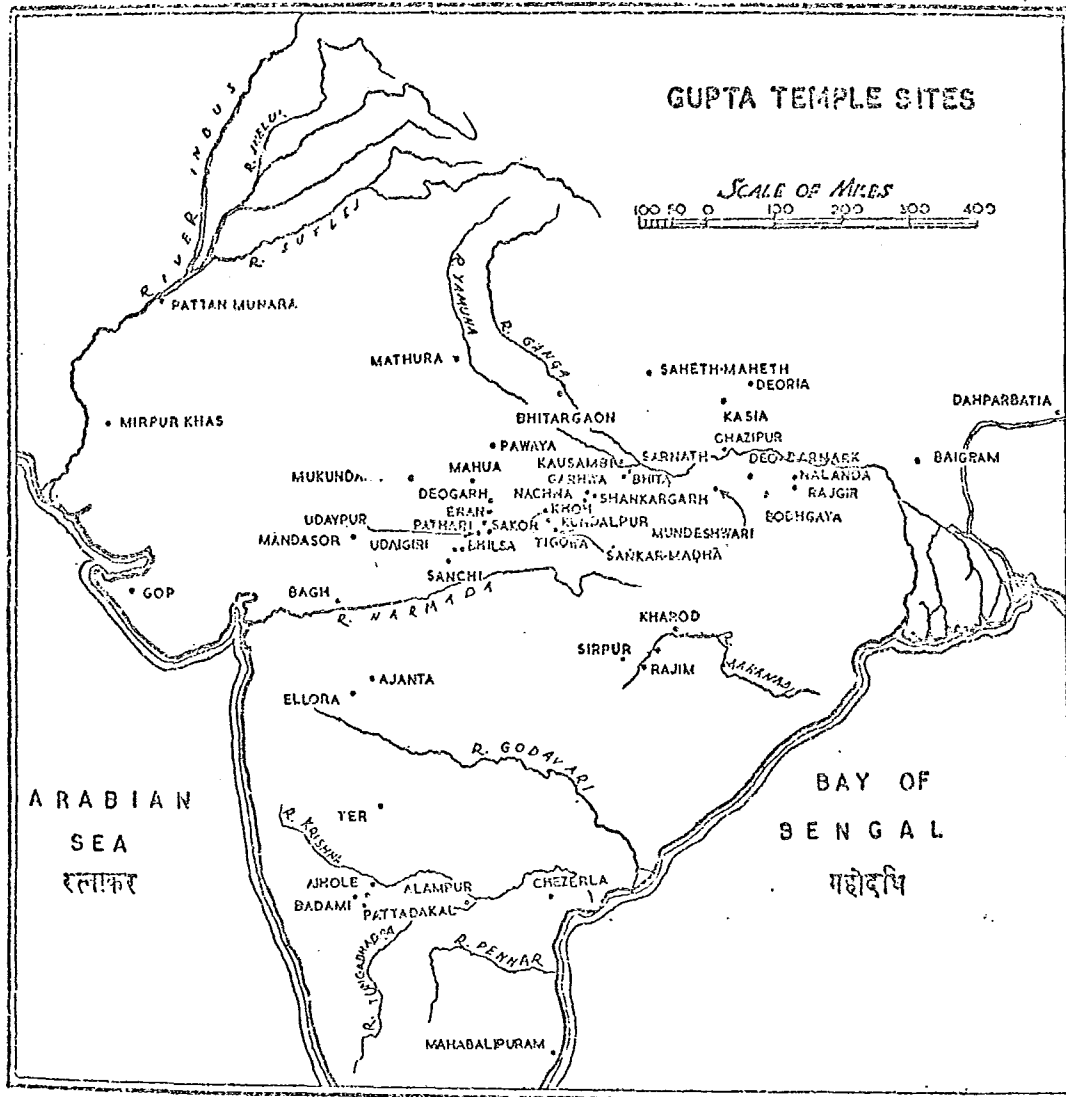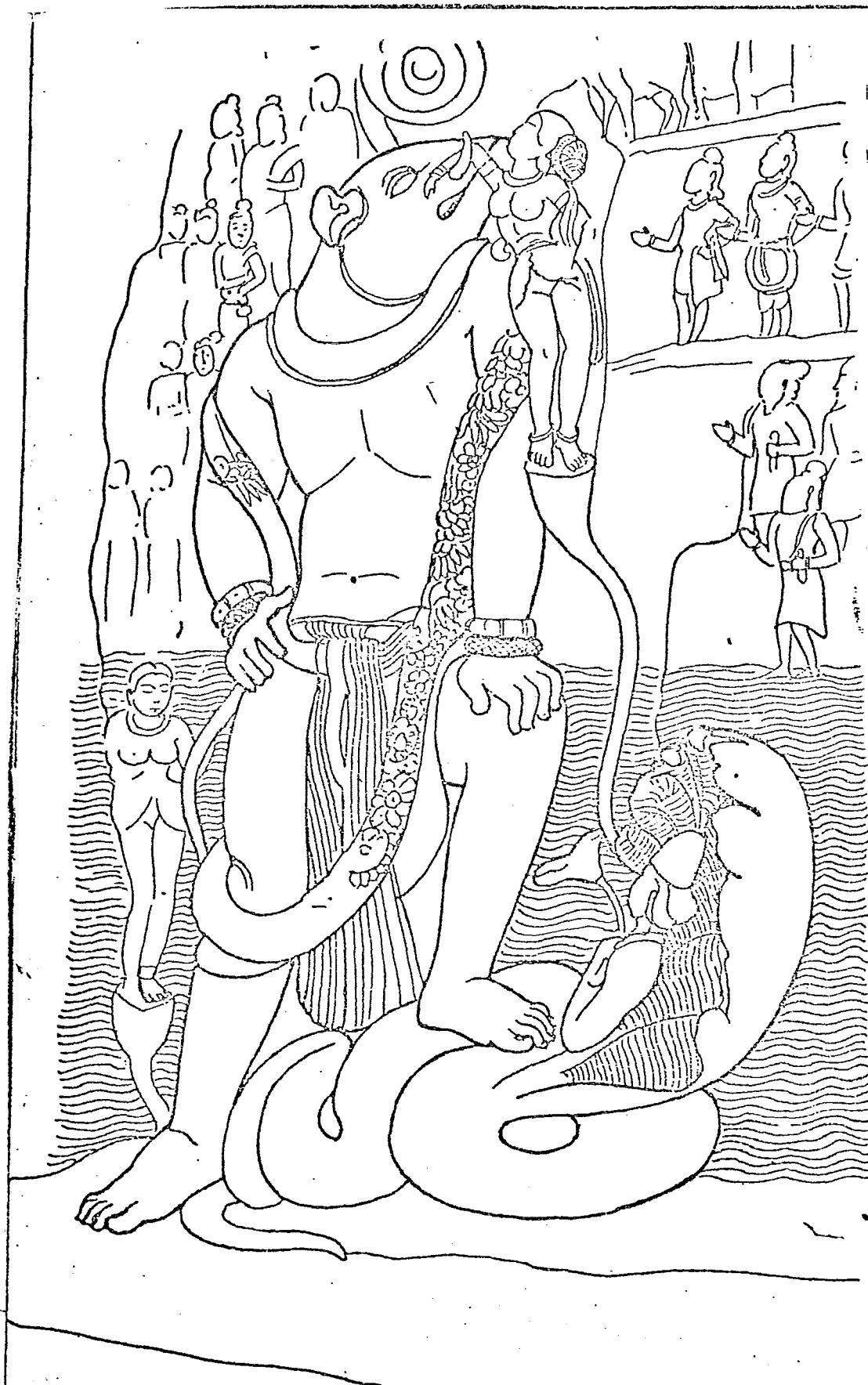
EXTANT GUPTA TEMPLES

SITE & TEMPLE	FEATURES	REMARKS
Udaigiri. the 'False Cave', Also called 'the Chandra-gupta Cave'.	An inscription dated 401-402 A.D. (No. 3). Dedicated to Varāha.	It is considered 'the earliest Brah-manical sanctum that has survived'.
Udaigiri. the 'Tawa Cave'. So called be-cause the large stone on top of the cave re-sembles a _tawa_, or grid-dle for baking cakes.	And undated inscription records that Chandragupta II came in person to Udai-giri. Dedicated by Virasena, a minister, to Saṁbhu, an epithet of Śiva.	The interior cei-ling is decorated with a large lotus flower, 4'6" in diameter.
Sanchi. Temple No. 17.	No inscription. It is dated c. 400-425 A.D. by most authorities. Buddhist temple. Main object of worship uncertain.	It is considered to be the oldest structural temple. Typical early Gupta style.
Tigowa. Temple of Kankali Devi.	No inscription. It is generally dated slightly later than the Sanchi temp-le. Dedicated to Narasiṁha.	While similar to the Sañchi temple, it is more ornate. The first standing Hindu temple (?)
Eran, or Airikina Narasiṁha Temple.	No inscription. This is the oldest temple at Eran. It is probably contemporan-eous with the Kankali Devi. Dedicated to Narasiṁha.	The enshrined Statue of Nara-siṁha is 7' in height.
Deogarh. Varāha	No inscription. The origin-al temple at this site was modified in the late Gupta age, but the statue of Varah dates from the early Gupta age.	The enshrined statue of Varāha is 5'8" in height. Very similiar to the Udaigiri Varāha statue.

SITE & TEMPLE	FEATURES	REMARKS
Darra. the Darra Temple	No inscription. Very archaic construction in comparison with the ones mentioned above. Dated early Gupta. Considered P.K. Agrawala to be a Siva temple.	The ceiling is decorated with a large lotus.
Mahua.	No inscription. Though in appearance it is a typical early Gupta temple, it may have been built in the late Gupta age. Dedication uncertain.	In this temple the first evidence of a sikhara can be seen in its heavy roof.
Eran. The Varāha Temple.	Inscription of Toramana, c. 500 A.D. Dedicated to Varāha in his four-legged form.	The enshrined statue of Varāha is 11' in height. The inscription appears on the boar's chest.
Deogarh. The Viṣṇu Temple. Also called the Dasavatāra Temple.	'Inscription of the time (c. 400-440) of Bhagavata Govinda-(gupta), son of Chandragupta II and governor in Malwa during his elder brother's reign.'* It stands on a large basement, embellished with scenes from the Ramayāna.	This is the earliest Sikhara temple. It represents a marked change from the early Gupta temple type.

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* Other scholars hold that no Sikhara temple can be dated earlier than the sixth century A.D., but on the basis of this inscription (which I have not been able to locate). P.K. Agrawala dates this temple with those of the early Gupta age, p. 88.

GUPTA TEMPLE SITES

SCALE OF MILES

100 50 0 100 200 300 400

RIVER INDUS

R. JHELUM

R. SUTLEJ

R.

PATTAN MUNARA

R. YAMUNA

R. GANGA

MATHURA

SAHETH-MAHETH
DEORIA

DAHPARBATIA

MIRPUR KHAS

BHITARGAON

KASIA
GHAZIPUR

BAIGRAM

PAWAYA

MUKUNDA

MAHUA

KAUSAMBI

SARNATH
DEO-BARNARK
NALANDA
RAJGIR

DEOGARH

GARHWA

BHITA

NACHNA

SHANKARGARH

ERAN

KHOH

BODHGAYA

UDAYPUR

PATHARI
SAKOR
KUNDALPUR

MANDASOR

UDAIGIRI

EKILEA
TIGOWA

MUNDESHWARI

SANKAR-MADHA

GOP

BAGH

SANCHI

R. NARMADA

KHAROD

SIRPUR

MAHANADI

AJANTA

RAJIM

ELLORA

R. GODAVARI

ARABIAN
SEA
रत्नाकर

BAY OF
BENGAL
महोदधि

R. KRISHNA

TER

AIHOLE
ALAMPUR
CHEZERLA

BADAMI
PATTADAKAL

R. TUNGABHADRA

R. PENNAR

MAHABALIPURAM

Mahā-Varāha Image, Udaigiri Cave; C. 400 A. D.

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