THE GUPTA TEMPLE MOVEMENT

A STUDY OF THE

POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE EARLY HINDU TEMPLE

By

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis presents an analysis of the Vaisnava temple movement 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 movement 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.\footnote{The suggestion that the Vaisnave 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.} This thesis will point
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.\textsuperscript{1a} The

\textsuperscript{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 Lakṣmī, wife of Viṣṇu and goddess of prosperity, was represented on many Gupta coins. Also, some examples show the Gupta king in close association with Viṣṇu. 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 Viṣṇu himself.²

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

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, 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

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 Bhagavadgītā and the Sānti Parvan section of the Mahābhārata. 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 rāja 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 avataras of Visnu in the Gupta age. The avataras Varaha 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." However, since Brahmanism was closely allied, if not actually identified, with the Gupta state, 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.

4 Coomaraswamy, A., History of Indian and Indonesian Art, E. Weyhe, New York, 1927, p. 97.

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 salutary 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.

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 Visnu 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, 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 Viṣṇu's association with kingship, for Viṣṇu played a major role in establishing this king in the epic version of the story. While Prthu is mentioned in Vedic literature, 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 Rg 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 Satapatha-brāhmana (5,3,5,4), Prthu is called the first of men to be installed as king.
with Visnu until the epic period. There is sufficient evidence to prove that this story was known to the Guptas, 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. The characters of Vena and Prthu represent the polar opposites of kingship. Vena, son of Aṅga in the dynasty of Svayambhuva Manu, is regarded by tradition as the very embodiment of adharma. His transgression of justice appears to have been religious in nature, for he prohibited worship and sacrifice. He did so against the advice of the rṣis 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.

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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 Purāṇas: the Vayu Purāṇa, (62, 104–93) and the Brahmanda Purāṇa (68, 104–93). These Purāṇas 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...


5 Agrawala, V.S., Matsya Purāṇa- A Study, op. cit., p. 79.


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. Therefore, the ṛṣis 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." The people of the land were astonished at the sight of Prthu and they announced that they were pleased with him.

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," 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

8 Ibid., p. 107.
9 Gonda, J., Ancient Indian Kingship, op. cit., p. 131

This myth is the origin of the two classic etymologies of the word rāja. 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. 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.

In the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata, Visnu is identified as the god who establishes Prthu as king. The passage is very significant because it clearly sets forth Visnu's relationship with the earthly king. Prior to this, Indra had been the major god associated with kingship.

In this section of the epic, Yudhishtira 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 Rajovada Jataka (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 coronation ceremony as follows:

Then Viṣṇu and the deities of Indra, and the rsis and the Regents of the world, and the brāhmaṇas, 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 Viṣṇu 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 Śānti 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:

\(^{15}\) Mbh., Śānti 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 Prthu 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 Prthu 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.'

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 traditional social order which placed brahmans above reproach. These kingly obligations are emphasised here in order to put the religious activities of the Gupta kings into the perspective of the tradition.

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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. This chapter will undertake an analysis of the character of the god Visnu as he was conceived prior to the Gupta age. This analysis is a necessary prelude to the discussion of the temple movement 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. However, Visnu is a recognised vedic god and five hymns of the Rg Veda are dedicated to him. In the Vedas,

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 Purāṇas 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 Viṣṇuism.

3 Sircar, D., 'Viṣṇavism', The Age of Imperial Unity, p. 431.
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*. 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. 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. 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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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 Viṣṇu, the deified ancient sage Narayana, and the deified Vṛṣṇi heroes Vasudeva and Baladeva-Sankarsana. The followers of Arjuna, of the Vṛṣṇi heroes Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Samba, of the Avatāras including Buddha before their identification with Viṣṇu, 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 Yadava clan, was known as the object of bhakti as early as the fifth century B.C. The merging of Vasudeva in the character of Visnu, which is evident in the Bhagavadgītā, 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 Vasudeva-Krishna with the Vedic deity Viṣṇu. This was accomplished by the time the Bhagavadgītā was composed, and henceforth the Vasudeva 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.

The Bhagavadgītā, which is generally dated in the first or second century before Christ, 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, Kṛṣṇa discusses his divine manifestations with Arjuna. Basically Kṛṣṇa 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 Vaishnavism 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 Bhagavadgītā 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.

10 Nikhilananda, S., trans. The Bhagavad Gitā, 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 Uchchaisravas, born of the amrita;
A new element was added to the character of Visnu 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 adhharma, 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 doctrine 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


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 (Ny-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.


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 was still in the formative stage in the centuries preceding the Guptas. The Bhagavadgītā establishes the fact that Visnu had been identified with Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa 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

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), sṛjana (creation), and pradurpbhava (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.

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. The tremendous upsurge 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. 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.

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.


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. 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 and the available evidence pertaining to their devotion to Visnu. Following this will be a section on the worship of Visnu'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
princess. 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. Mookerji, citing Purānic 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.

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". 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.

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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.


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.\textsuperscript{11}

It is primarily due to the inscription about Samudragupta's life engraved on the Aśokan pillar at Allahabad 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.\textsuperscript{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 Maharāja, the illustrious Gupta; - who was the son's son of the Maharāja, the illustrious Ghatot kacha; - who was the son of the Maharāja, the illustrious Ghatotkach; - who was the son of the Maharājādhirāja, the glorious Chandragupta (I.), (and) the daughter's son of Lichchhavi, begotten on the Mahādevi Kumarādevi,\textsuperscript{13}

Another important verse of this inscription identifies Samudragupta with the acintya-purusa, the "inscrutable being", which is an epithet of Visnu.\textsuperscript{14} This passage has been translated by Fleet as

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 4.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 15.

\textsuperscript{13} The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 15-16. In a note to this verse, Fleet points out that the title "Mahādevi", used before Kumāradevi, 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.

\textsuperscript{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 destruction of evil; - who, being full of compassion, had a tender heart that could be won over simply by devotion [bhakty-avanati-] and obeisance; ...

Both Sircar¹⁶ and Jaiswal¹⁷ 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 Kṛṣṇa'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.


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.


²¹ The Gupta Inscriptions, pp. 11-12.
to his generosity to brahmans when he is called, "... the giver of many hundreds of thousands of cows".\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{23} The authority of the Vedas continues to be recognised;\textsuperscript{24} this is clear from the honorific references to the scriptures contained in the inscription. At the same time, the bhakti form of religious devotion to God, which may be non-aryan in origin,\textsuperscript{25} was also accepted as a part of orthodox religion. The inscription indicates that bhakti was directed towards the king who was considered a god dwelling on earth.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 14.

\textsuperscript{23} Najumdar, R.C., "Religion and Philosophy", The Classical Age, p. 370.

\textsuperscript{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." \textit{Ibid.}, p. 371.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Studies in the Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India}, p. 12.
The Allahabad inscription also enumerates the many military conquests made by Samudragupta. In fact, he won the title "Samudragupta", ('protected by the sea') through his conquests. When he died in 380 A.D., Samudragupta left behind a much larger kingdom than he had inherited. 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. In Majumdar's words:

Samudra-gupta had begun the work of conquest. To his son Chandra-gupta II fell the task of completing 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.

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


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 Viṣṇu is expressed by the epithet "Parama-bhāgavata" which precedes his name and the names of his successors in the inscriptions. 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. It may be significant that this title is not known in connection with Samudragupta or his predecessors. Sircar has suggested that this fact indicates that Samudragupta followed a different school of Vaisnavism than that of his son. Whether or not this interpretation is accepted, royal patronage of Vaisnavism seems to have increased under Chandragupta II and his successors.

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-bhāgavata".
34 Studies in the Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India, p. 29.
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 Kumāragupta 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 Kumāragupta bore the epithet "Parama-bhāgavata",40 he also gave prominence to the god Karttikeya, a Saivite deity.41 His

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 (garutmaḍāṅka) 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 Kumaragupta, the worship of Karttikeya probably gained in popularity. The Bilsad pillar inscription of Kumaragupta, 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 Śiva-liṅga was given by Kumaragupta'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.


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.
However, there is no evidence that Vaisnavism 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. We know that the temple movement continued unabated during his reign, and some of the most impressive Vishnu temples are dated in his lifetime.

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 religion, they were catholic enough not to have enforced their personal religion as the official religion of the empire.

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 shrine.

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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. In addition, the inscriptions speak of endowments made to Buddhist and Jain 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 Allahabad 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. 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 inscriptive evidence, it is reasonable to assume that the impetus of this movement came from the rulers rather than

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.\textsuperscript{54} This movement continued through the reign 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{55} Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{56} Majumdar, "Religion and Philosophy", The Classical Age, p. 371.
Vishnu's avatars and the Gupta Kings

One of the important aspects of Vaisnavism in the Gupta age is the great popularity of the worship of Vishnu's avatars. The complex subject of avatars has been touched upon in the preceding chapter. This chapter will focus on the popular avatars of the Gupta age. The intimate connection between this subject and the subject of Gupta temples is evident since in almost every case the early Gupta temples were constructed to enshrine an image of one of Vishnu's avatars. The point I shall try to make in this chapter is that the popular avatars of the Gupta age were political as well as religious symbols, and that they stood as emblems of Gupta sovereignty in an analogous 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 the list of avatars 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 avatar, and literary, i.e. the number of references to a particular avatar in works which date from this period.

60 The Vishnu 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 avatāras of Visnu, only the boar incarnation, Varāha,
and the man-lion incarnation, Narasimha, are mentioned by name in the
extant Gupta inscriptions.63 However, at least three other avatāras are
mentioned in the inscriptions, although they are not identified as
incarnations of Visnu. These are: the dwarf incarnation, Vāmana;64
Kṛṣṇa;65 and, Rāma.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 avatāras of the Gupta age were
Varāha 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 Mahābhārata's statements regarding avatāras are indicative
of the unsystematised nature of the doctrine: "In a passage of the late
Narayaniya section of the Mahābhārata mention is made only of four
avitāras, viz. Boar, Dwarf, Man-Lion, and Man (Vāsudeva-Krishna). In
another passage of the same section, the deified beings Rāma Bhārgava
and Rāma Dāsarathti are added to the list making a total of six avatāras,
while a third passage gives the list of ten incarnations, by adding
Haṁsa, Kūrma, Matsya, and Kalki to the above six." Sircar, "Vaishnavism",
The Classical Age, pp. 420-421.

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

64 Ibid., p. 62.

65 Ibid., p. 223.

66 Ibid., p. 77.
the widespread popularity of these *avataras*. In addition to the inscriptionsal evidence, literary works which date from the Gupta age attest to the great popularity of both Varāha and Narasimha.

Although each of these avataras were worshipped over a large area of India in the Gupta age, Varāha appears to have been even more popular than Narasimha. This avatar 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.

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 avataras 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.


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 Satapatha-Brahmana. In later times, Visnu 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.

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. 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.

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71 Satapatha-Brahmana, 14. 1.2.

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


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. When this conquest was completed, sometime between 400 and 410 A.D., Chandragupta II added the provinces of Gujarāt and Kathiāwār 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.

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 Viṣṇu rescuing the earth is comparable to the historical act of Chandragupta rescuing India from foreign domination. 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 corroborating evidence.

Fairly conclusive evidence regarding the analogy of Varāha to Chandragupta II is found in a drama of the Gupta age entitled Mudrārākshasa by Viṣākhadatta.\(^81\) Outside of the internal evidence of the play itself,

\(^78\) However, the prototype of the goddesses is to be found in the Buddhist Yakṣī figures of the second century B.C. See: Coomaraswamy, A., Yakṣas, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1971, pt. 1, p. 36.

\(^79\) Matsya-Purāṇa – A Study, p. 333.

\(^80\) Agrawala includes among these elements the possible representation 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

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 Chandragupta II was intentionally associated with the Varāha-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 Brāhmaṇas. 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.

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

85 Aspects of Early Visnuism, p. 138.
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 visible 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.
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 three 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 Saka forces for control of the Malwa region.

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. 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.

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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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) Continuation 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 intercolumnation 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?"

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. 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, which scholars contend influenced the nature of the temple.


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. 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 consecrated.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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10 Ibid., p. 120.

11 Keith, A.B., op. cit., p. 254.
even and well-measured. 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.

In a symbolic sense, the vedi reflects man's age-old desire to bring heaven closer to earth. 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 extension 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 foundation 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


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. Stella Kramrisch has suggested that the sacrificial hut served as the prototype of the garbhagriha of the Hindu temple. 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.

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

Non-vedic Antecedents

Holy sites, sometimes surrounded by a railing and covered by a domed roof, are known to have flourished in India in the pre-Christian centuries. 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 yakṣas, Coomarswamy notes that the essential element of a yakṣa shrine is a stone table or altar situated by a tree sacred to the yakṣa. They appeared in numerous spots frequented by men:

The haunt or abode (bhavanam) of a Yakṣa, 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.

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. However, pointing to literary


21 Commaraswamy, A., Yakṣas, 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 alters 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 Vaiṣṇava 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 presentation of a drama dealing with the līlā of the deity, all these are characteristic of Hindu worship even in the present day.26

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 sāṅts 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 yakṣa 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 Mahavarāha at Udaigiri. As they are depicted riding their respective vahanas, they are almost identical with the yakṣi 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:

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 Yakṣa 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 yakṣa motifs appearing at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati.
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{30} This aspect of the temple distinguishes it from the religious sites and structures which may have influenced the temple type.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Yakṣas}, p. 29.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{30} For the universal symbolism of Viṣṇu, see: \textit{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., \textit{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 Kusānas.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 Kusāna 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,

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 Vaishnavism, 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

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. 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. 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.

\(^9\) This view is suggested by Sinha, *The Development of Indian Polity*, op. cit., pp. 163-164.


\(^11\) *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 Visnu'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. 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 Aśura, 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.

The aśuric, 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. With


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

14 The Development of Indian Polity, pp. 158-159.
this background, it is not unlikely that the Guptas intended their temples to Visnu 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

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<tr>
<th>Site &amp; Temple</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Udaigiri. the 'False Cave', Also called 'the Chandragupta Cave'</td>
<td>An inscription dated 401-402 A.D. (No. 3). Dedicated to Varaha.</td>
<td>It is considered 'the earliest Brahmanical sanctum that has survived'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Udaigiri. the 'Tawa Cave'. So called because the large stone on top of the cave resembles a tawa, or griddle for baking cakes.</td>
<td>And undated inscription records that Chandragupta II came in person to Udaigiri. Dedicated by Virasena, a minister, to Sambhu, an epithet of Siva.</td>
<td>The interior ceiling is decorated with a large lotus flower, 4'6&quot; in diameter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanchi. Temple No. 17.</td>
<td>No inscription. It is dated c. 400-425 A.D. by most authorities. Buddhist temple. Main object of worship uncertain. Typical early Gupta style.</td>
<td>It is considered to be the oldest structural temple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigowa. Temple of Kankali Devi.</td>
<td>No inscription. It is generally dated slightly later than the Sanchi temple. Dedicated to Narasimha.</td>
<td>While similar to the Sanchi temple, it is more ornate. The first standing Hindu temple (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eran, or Airikina Narasimha Temple.</td>
<td>No inscription. This is the oldest temple at Eran. It is probably contemporaneous with the Kankali Devi. Dedicated to Narasimha.</td>
<td>The enshrined statue of Narasimha is 7' in height.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deogarh. Varaha</td>
<td>No inscription. The original temple at this site was modified in the late Gupta age, but the statue of Varaha dates from the early Gupta age.</td>
<td>The enshrined statue of Varaha is 5'8&quot; in height. Very similar to the Udaigiri Varaha statue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITE &amp; TEMPLE</td>
<td>FEATURES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darra, the Darra Temple</td>
<td>No inscription. Very archaic construction in comparison with the ones mentioned above. Dated early Gupta. Considered P.K. Agrawala to be a Siva temple.</td>
<td>The ceiling is decorated with a large lotus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahua.</td>
<td>No inscription. Though in appearance it is a typical early Gupta temple, it may have been built in the late Gupta age. Dedication uncertain.</td>
<td>In this temple the first evidence of a sikhara can be seen in its heavy roof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eran. The Varaha Temple.</td>
<td>Inscription of Toraman, c. 500 A.D. Dedicated to Varaha in his four-legged form.</td>
<td>The enshrined statue of Varaha is 11' in height. The inscription appears on the boar's chest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deogarh. The Visnu Temple. Also called the Dasavatara Temple.</td>
<td>'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 Ramayana.</td>
<td>This is the earliest Sikhara temple. It represents a marked change from the early Gupta temple type.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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