

History (Hons.) Semester II

Samudragupta: His Military Conquests and His Strategy

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Introduction: Samudragupta (A.D.335/340-375/380), the son of Chandragupta I and Kumaradevi, was the greatest military genius that the Gupta dynasty had ever produced and, in fact, he was one of the most celebrated and accomplished among the emperors of ancient India. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription, composed by his court poet Harishena and the coins, issued by the king himself, shed light on the eventful life and career of this renowned Gupta monarch. He was not only a conqueror but also multi-talented personality having great interest in literature and music. The rise and expansion of the Gupta Empire and the beginning of its prosperity are attributed to him, his military ability, his successful conquests and the intelligent policies and strategies he pursued.

Succession: Samudragupta succeeded his father Chandragupta I (A.D. 320 – 335/340) probably in 335 A.D. But there is a controversy among the scholars regarding his succession to the throne. According to the Allahabad *Prashasti*, Chandragupta I nominated Samudragupta (who was probably not his eldest offspring but his best fitted son to succeed him), for the throne. In this case, the principle of primogeniture was not followed. So this decision disheartened many of his aspirant kinsmen who caused troubles at the time of his accession and rose in revolt against the new incumbent. Kacha, who seems to have been the eldest son of Chandragupta I, spearheaded the agitation against Samudragupta and succeeded in occupying the Gupta throne. But this success of Kacha did not last long as he was defeated by Samudragupta. Kacha's historicity is yet to be established, as only some coins bearing his name have been found and no other evidence of his rule has been come to light so far. A few scholars, however, believe that Kacha and Samudragupta were identical persons and Kacha was the original name of Samudragupta and the latter assumed the name of 'Samudragupta' 'in allusion to his conquests' and his success in building up a sea-girt empire. Needless to say, all these views are speculative in character.

Samudragupta's Military Conquests: Immediately after his accession to the throne, Samudragupta decided to extend the boundaries of the Gupta Empire, to conquer and annex the multiple kingdoms and republics that existed outside its pale. The success of his military conquests prompted the renowned British historian Vincent Smith to dub him first as 'the Indian Napoleon'. The details of his military conquests are given below:

- A) Campaigns in the ‘Aryavarta’ or North India:** Samudragupta is famous for his numerous military campaigns (particularly in North and South India) and these conquests are known from a lengthy eulogy (*prashasti*) composed by his court poet Harishena and engraved on an Ashokan pillar at Allahabad. Twice he led his expeditions in the North; in the first, Samudragupta vanquished three kings and in the second, he defeated nine kings altogether. He seems to have advanced as far as the Chambal and all the kings of this region were killed and their territories were incorporated into the Gupta Empire. According to the lines 14 - 21 of the *Prashasti*, Samudragupta attacked and crushed the ruler of the upper Gangetic valley (probably the unnamed Kota king in the Bulandshahr area) and thereafter inflicted defeat on as many as nine kings in the northern part of India. The names of the defeated kings were Rudradeva (probably of Maharashtra), Matila, Nagadatta, Chandravarman (of the Susunia region of Bankura district, West Bengal), Ganapatnaga (of Mathura-Vidisha region), Nagasena (of Padmavati in Madhya Pradesh), Achyuta (of Ahichchhatra), Nandin and Balavarman. The identities of some of these rulers and their kingdoms are still in obscurity. But there is little doubt that most of these kingdoms lay in the state of present-day Uttar Pradesh and all these territories were annexed to the Gupta Empire.
- B) Campaigns in the ‘Dakshinapatha’ or South India:** Having completed his first North Indian expedition, Samudragupta turned his attention to South India which was divided into various petty principalities. There was definitely an economic motive behind his southern campaigns. At that time, South India was economically very important as its prosperous kingdoms and different trade centres continued maritime trade with Southeast Asia. According to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, Samudragupta penetrated into South India through Kosala (Chhattisgarh) rather than the coastal tracts across Midnapore, Baleswar and Bhadrak and became successful in defeating twelve kings. The South Indian monarchs who are mentioned in the *Prashasti* to have suffered reverses at the hands of Samudragupta included 1)Mahendra of Kosala, 2)Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara, 3)Mantaraja of Kairala or Kaurala,4)Mahendragiri of Pishtapura, 5)Svamidatta of Kottura, 6)Damana of Erandapalla, 7)Vishnugopa of Kanchi, 8)Nilaraja of Avamukta, 9)Hastivarman of Vengi, 10)Ugrasena of Palakka, 11)Kubera of Devarashtra and 12)Dhananjaya of Kusthalapura.
- C) Samudragupta vis-à-vis Forest, Frontier and Tribal States:** Having exterminated the kings of ‘Aryavarta’ for the second time, Samudragupta turned his attention to the kings of the forest kingdoms (*atavika-rajya*), located presently at Jabalpur of Madhya Pradesh and the Deccan. Line 22 of the Allahabad *Prashasti* gives the details of his expedition and claims that the kings of the forest kingdoms were relegated to servitude and at the same time, the defeated kings were appointed by the Gupta Emperor to look after the administration of their respective territories. With their subjugation, the Gupta Empire extended in the south as far as the river Narmada. Besides this, the *Prashasti* refers to a large number of tributary states, divided into two broad categories, viz., frontier kingdoms and tribal states, showed allegiance to the Gupta emperor. The frontier kingdoms were comprised of five principalities, viz., Samatata (Bengal), Davaka, Kamarupa (Assam), Kartripura (parts of present-day Punjab and Uttarakhand states) and Nepala. The *Prashasti* also refers to nine tribal principalities (covering many areas of the north-west India, including parts of Rajasthan and Punjab) which were forced to obey his order and to pay tribute and taxes to Samudragupta. These were: 1) the Malavas, 2) the Arjunayanas, 3) the Yaudheyas, 4) the Madras, 5) the Abhiras, 6) the Prarjunas, 7) the Sanakanikas, 8) the Kakas and 9) the Kharaparikas.
- D) Samudragupta’s Relations with Foreign Powers:** According to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, he established diplomatic relations with the foreign kings and enjoyed considerable control over a large number of neighbouring states which acknowledged his authority. Foreign kings,

such as the Daivaputra- Shahi-Shahanushahi (descendant of the ‘Son of the Heaven, King of Kings’, indicating a Kushana title), the Shaka-Murundas (the lord or king of the Shakas who ruled in the Laghman region of Afghanistan) and the ruler of Simhala, i.e., Sri Lanka are referred to in the Allahabad *Prashasti* as paying tribute to Samudragupta. A Chinese source tells us that king Meghavarna of Sri Lanka (A.D. 352-79) sent his presents to the emperor and sought his permission to build a monastery at Gaya.

Thus Samudragupta’s empire extended from the Himalayas in the North to river Narmada in the South, and from the Brahmaputra in the East to Chambal in the West. It is to be mentioned here that he personally took part in the battles and won those battles often leading from the front (*samgrameshu-svabhujavijitah*). According to his court poet Harishena, Samudragupta was a fearless fighter, a hero of hundred battles (*samarashata*). He was undoubtedly very successful in building up a vast empire and celebrated his conquests by performing a horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*).

Conquests: Samudragupta’s Strategy: Samudragupta was not only militarily very strong and efficient but also he was very intelligent and sensible person. His pragmatism and statesmanship was largely responsible for the success of his military conquests both in Northern and Southern India. At the time of his conquests, he kept in his mind the geographical location of the territories which helped him to determine his strategy or policy towards the unconquered states. He was prudent enough to realize the fact that it would be well-nigh impossible for a northerner like him to maintain an effective control over such distant kingdoms of South India from his base at Pataliputra. According to some scholars, he also gave an importance to the economic solvency of the unexplored kingdoms which played a pivotal role to lead any expedition against those states. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that his northern campaigns were completely different from his southern campaigns which is clearly reflected in the *Prashasti*. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription distinguishes his southern campaigns from the north and mentions that Samudragupta overwhelmed and captured (*grahana*) the South Indian Kings but graciously (*anugraha*) liberated (*moksha*) and reinstated them in their respective dominions in lieu of their offer of allegiance to him. So he focused on annexing those kingdoms which were situated at the proximity to his kingdom or placed on his borders. For the rest, only an acceptance of allegiance was required and thereby the defeated kings would continue to enjoy full autonomy in their respective domain by paying tribute or taxes to the victorious Gupta Emperor. At the same time, it was expected that being subordinate, they would not pose any threat, create disturbances or raise any revolt against the Gupta King or his Empire in near future. It clearly proves that Samudragupta at first considered the geographical location of the kings and their respective territories and thereafter he determined the plan of action against those kings and finally formulated the strategy of his conquest. According to the great historian H.C. Raychaudhuri, “In the north he played the part of a *digvijayi* of the Early Magadhan type. But in the south he followed the Epic and Kautilyan ideal of a *dharmavijayi* i.e., he defeated the kings but did not annex their territory” (*Political History of Ancient India*, p. 366). Thus it can be concluded that Samudragupta was very much satisfied with direct rule over a consolidated dominion in the Northern India and he was very much happy with an acknowledgement of supremacy from the rest – the policy which enabled him to create a vast empire and to give it solidarity.
