

# Conquests and Expansion of Samudragupta: Pattern and Policy

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## ABSTRACT

The Gupta kingdom was enlarged enormously by Samudragupta following his policy of conquest and expansion. Infact he was opposite of Ashoka. Ashoka believed in peace and non-violence, but Samudragupta delighted in violence and conquest. The places and the countries conquered by Samudragupta can be listed under five heads. The first one includes princess of the Ganga -Yamuna doab who were defeated and whose kingdom were incorporated into the Gupta empire. The second one includes the rulers of the eastern Himalayan states and some frontier states such as Nepal, Assam, Bengal etc. who were made to feel the weight of Samudragupta's arms. Group three includes the forest kingdom known as atavikarajyas, they were brought under the control of Samudragupta. The fourth category includes the twelve rulers of the eastern Deccan and south India who were conquered and liberated. Last but not the least were the names of Shakas and Kushans. Samudragupta never knew any defeat and because of his bravery and generalship he is referred as the "Napoleon of India".

**Keywords:** Gupta, Ruler, Samudragupta, Conquered.

## INTRODUCTION

Samudragupta is proverbially known as the greatest conqueror of ancient India. Contemporary epigraphs, such as the Eran inscription, credits him with the overthrowing of the whole tribe of kings upon the earth" and modern historians like Vincent Smith described him with unconcealed admiration as the Napoleon of ancient India. And yet the only document that we have in support of such tall claims is the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta. R.C. Majumdar wrote with justifiable scepticism that the accounts of Samudragupta's conquests contained in the Allahabad Pillar inscription are, after all, a set of statements, unsupported by other evidence. This, however, is not altogether true, for contemporary records belonging to other dynasties, namely the Vakatakas, do partially corroborate and supplement the claims made on behalf of Samudragupta in the Allahabad inscription. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that it remains the only explicit testimony of Samudragupta's conquests on the basis of which contemporary Gupta political history is still reconstructed. It indeed contains plentiful information of his military achievements, since it is an eloquent eulogy of the emperor, composed by his court-poet Harishena, probably even under his own instructions. In other words, the claims made by Harishena need not be accepted at their face value. At least there is scope for doubt. We will, however, see that although the Allahabad Pillar inscription is, at one level, a very bald document-being apparently nothing but the glorification of the author's patron, it is nevertheless drafted with considerable skill and care which, if properly interpreted, reveals the patterns and policies behind Samudragupta's conquests. It also provides them with a rationale which, in the absence of more desirable corroborative evidence, at least makes Harishena's claims appear more plausible. Our primary concern will therefore be the recent re-interpretations of the Allahabad Pillar inscription to see how, in the face of a general paucity of evidence, a single document can be stretched to reflect the totality of the military career of arguably the greatest conqueror of ancient India.

According to S.R. Goyal, the two factors which were primarily responsible for giving shape to Samudragupta's plan to campaign may be described as geo-political and socio-religious. The first direct reference to an actual military encounter of Samudragupta occurs in the seventh verse of the Allahabad Pillar inscription, where it states that by the power of his arms Samudragupta uprooted the Naga kings and the Kings of the Kota family. The names of Nagasena and Ganapatinaga obviously suggest that they belonged to the Naga lineage, and even Acyuta, who is mentioned with them, was also perhaps a Naga, as his coir type reveals. Therefore, it can be said with a greater degree of certainty that the first stage of Gupta expansionism was dominated by their conflicts with the Nagas of Mathura, Padmavati and Ahicchatra.

The reasons for choosing the Nagas as the earliest adversary of Samudragupta, Goyal says, is not difficult to seek. The alluvial plains of India form pockets which are separated from each other by natural barriers such as hills and forests. Hence the important river basins, which are thus sheltered, acquire certain personalities of their own. Over a period of time they

tend to become local centres of political power which have been described as "provincial states" within a "national state" by B. Subbarao. These states, by their very nature, defy the central authority and are at war with each other. No wonder, therefore, that Kautilya and Manu declared that expansion through conquest is more than a legitimate business of the king: it is his duty. Significantly, the long Allahabad Pillar inscription nowhere mentions the causes which compelled Samudragupta to take military action against his political rivals. It was understood to be one of the elementary functions of the king.

Of these regional pockets of varying size, only a few could sustain an empire. The most important of such territorial bases was the vast Ganga basin. It has not only been the basis of an entire succession of north Indian empires including the Guptas, but, Goyal suggests, also determined to a large extent their career and course of expansion. For example, those whose source of strength lay in the north-west and had entered the Ganga basin through the Indo-Gangetic divide, had their natural area of expansion towards the east. The reverse was equally true. For Samudragupta, whose seat of power was in the eastern U.P. region, therefore, the logical direction of the enlargement of the empire, were both the east upto the Bengal Sea-coast and the west along the upper reaches of Yamuna and Ganga. Samudragupta decided to go for the west, and selected the Nagas, as his first opponent. Goyal thinks that his choice was conditioned by the contemporary geo-political situation. During the first half of the fourth century A.D., the political scene was dominated by the Nagas in the west, while in the east Samudragupta had no such avowed rivals.

It will not be inappropriate to look at the relative advantage of the Nagas, vis-a-vis the Guptas, as potential empire builders.

- a) The factors that led to the rise of the upper Ganga basin towards the end of the third century A.D., i.e., the political vacuum, offered the initiative for founding an empire in the north both to the Guptas and the Nagas.
- b) The Nagas were as much connected with the Brahmanical revival as the Guptas. In fact the Bharashiva Nagas of Padmavati claimed to have performed ten *ashvamedha* sacrifices. If that gave any edge to the political ambitions of the contemporary local dynasties, the Guptas and the Nagas had an equal share of it.
- c) The marriage of Bhavanaga's daughter with Gautamiputra, the son of the Vakataka king Pravarasena I, enhanced their prestige and brought about a realignment of the political forces in the north and central India, as much as the Gupta-Licchavi matrimonial alliance did for the east.

If Samudragupta nurtured any ambition of founding an empire in north India, the choice was made for him. He had to eliminate the Naga challenge, if he were to proceed any further. In other **words**, Samudragupta's hands were forced.

Another factor that conditioned the approach of the Guptas towards their neighbours was their religious leanings. It is generally believed that the Guptas followed a policy of religious toleration. Goyal however draws our attention to a subtle distinction that the Guptas maintained so far as their religious policy was concerned. He points out that the "Guptas were proud *paramabhagavatas*, while most of their rivals, particularly the early and the more important ones,—the Nagas and the Vakatakas—were staunch saivites. The Nagas are said to have carried the phallic emblem of shiva on their person and the Vakatakas proclaimed themselves as devotees of Mahabhairava.

Goyal claims that the political ideals of the Guptas was coloured by Vaishnavism. For example, the *Vayu Purana*, a work of the early Gupta period, declares that The *Chakravartins* are born in each age as the essence of Vishnu. Till the beginning of the Gupta epoch, the *Chakravarti* ideal was connected with the performance of vedic sacrifices, but to bring it upto the political ideal of the age, *Vayu Purana* gave it a Vaishnavite orientation. The most interesting evidence regarding this is provided by the *Chakravikrain* type of coins of Chandragupta II. The reverse of the coin contains a *Chakra* within which there is a standing male conferring three round balls to a haloed royal figure. The *chakra* has been interpreted as the *chakrapurusha* of Vishnu who is bestowing on Chandragupta II the three symbols of royal power: the kingly virtues of authority, energy and counsel. *Ahirabudhnya Samhita*, an important *pancharatra* text of the Gupta period, says that one who adores the *Chakrapurusha* becomes a sovereign. It was a new concept through which the *Bhagavatas* utilised the tenets of their religion to suit the political philosophy of imperialism of the Gupta period.

In some respect the Allahabad Pillar inscription is an unique document. In a long eulogy ostensibly devoted to the conquests of Samudragupta, with the exception of the seventh verse, it does not contain any other reference to what may be called a description of campaign. Instead, what follows is a list of conquered states and people, grouped into four categories, Harishena informs us of

- a) the twelve states of Dakshinapatha with the names of their kings who were captured and then liberated and reinstated;
- b) the names of the eight kings of *Aryavarta*, who were violently exterminated;

c) the rulers of the forest states who were reduced to servitude and the chief of the five border states and nine tribal republics who were forced to pay all kinds of taxes, obeying his orders and come to perform obeisance; and  
d) the *Daivaputra Shahi Shahanushahi*, the Shaka-Murundas, the dwellers of Sinhala and all the other islands who pleased the Gupta emperor by offering their own person to him, bringing presents of maidens and applying for charter bearing the *Gadura* seal for the enjoyment of their own territories.

Harishena does not mention the principle according to which he arrived at such a categorisation.

The unorthodox nature of Harishena's enumeration has given rise to speculation among the historians regarding the exact significance of the list. Vincent Smith argued that the basis of Harishena's categorisation must be the geographical plan of Samudragupta's campaign. K.P. Jayaswal had put it more emphatically when he proclaimed that in doing so Harishena was following "a geographical plan with accuracy". Another set of historians, for instance, Jouveau Dubreuil and B.G. Gokhale, claimed that the enumeration was made according to the chronological order of Samudragupta's conquests. Goyal refutes both these explanations.

Goyal argues that had Harishena followed a geographical principle, he would have mentioned the foreign potentates of the north-west—the *Daivaputra Shahi Shahanushahi*—after the republican tribes of the Punjab, Sinhala after the kingdoms of Dakshinapatha and the *pratyanta* states of Assam after the kings of West Bengal. On the contrary, he has grouped the north-west with Sinhala, the *pratyanta* states of the east with the tribal republics of west and central India. Harishena has not followed the geographical principle in the enumeration of various powers even within a particular list. For example in the first, he mentions Hastivarmana of Vengi after Vishnugopa of Kanchi, though the kingdom of the former was to the north of Kanchi. Such examples can be multiplied.

Similarly, Goyal argues, if the Allahabad Pillar inscription has to be chronologically interpreted, it would imply that Samudragupta led his two campaigns in the north, i.e. the seventh verse and the second list, one before and the other after his Dakshinapatha campaign. Many historians, such as, Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya and R.K. Mukherji subscribe to this view. To overcome the difficulty of explaining the repeated occurrence of the names of Acyuta, Nagasena and Ganapatinaga in both the places, H. Heras suggested that during the first time they were merely defeated and in the second exterminated. This, however, seems improbable, for it is unlikely that Samudragupta would undertake a campaign in the far south without even being secure at home. Goyal therefore points out that Harishena merely presented the end product of Samudragupta's military career rather than providing with descriptions of battle. As a result, it is possible to surmise that Samudragupta led not just two but quite a few campaigns in the north.

However, there is one thing which is common to all the four categories, namely the treatment the conquered powers received from Samudragupta. Therefore, Goyal argues, if there is one governing principle behind Harishena's enumeration, that is, policies adopted by Samudragupta towards the states brought under direct or indirect subjugation. That is how all the kings who were conquered and reinstated figure in the first list, irrespective of their geographical location or chronological order of defeat. It is however possible to speculate on the nature of such policies. For example, B.G. Gokhale suggests that the rationale behind the reinstatement of conquered states in the south is that from the beginning it was not organised in the nature of a serious campaign, but just a customary penetration of the army on the eve of the horse sacrifice. That looks improbable. On the other hand, it seems likely that the twin factors of the difficulties of governing a far-away country in those days of proper communication and the lure of Deccan wealth which could have been secured through a yearly tribute, must have contributed to Samudragupta's policy towards them. The policy of extermination for the northern kingdoms in the second list is easy to explain. It formed the core of his empire; Samudragupta could not afford to take risks. The forest kingdoms and the tribal republics of the third were made to pay taxes and brought under other kinds of servitude, but surprisingly their territory too was not directly incorporated within the empire. Goyal suggests that the differences between them and the Ganga basin regarding ethnic composition, socio-political tradition and economic system—explains Samudragupta's milder policy towards them. In other words, it is reasonable to conjecture that their complete absorption could have created problems for the nascent empire. Samudragupta's north-west frontier policy and overseas connections, as related in the fourth list, are obviously exaggerated by Harishena. Whatever little we get to know from other sources, tell us that these were merely in the nature of diplomatic relations in which Samudragupta clearly enjoyed a superior position. Thus we can safely argue that at least in this respect the Allahabad Pillar inscription give us as near-conclusive evidence as can be expected from a source of this nature.

Some of the analysis contained in this essay may appear a little unconvincing owing to the essentially speculative nature of their argument. For example, the latent religious content as a factor determining Samudragupta's conquests may certainly appear somewhat far-fetched and over-emphasised. But the point of this exercise, as we have mentioned earlier, is to see

how, in a situation of general paucity of evidence, historians coerce maximum information and meaning from a single set of sources, in the present case-practically one document. In such circumstances, the arguments are necessarily a little speculative but not inherently objectionable if they are logical and consistent and not in variance with the meagre information that can be gleaned from other available sources. Not only the Nagas and the Vakatakas, but throughout the Gupta history, their major adversaries have always remained of Shaivite commitment; the Huns, for instance. One can explain this as merely coincidental, but if not, it can be reasonably argued that there did exist a connection between these two apparently disjointed but consistent phenomena. So far as the discovery, as it were, of the principle governing the enumeration of the four categories of conquered state by Harishena go, it seems to be the only logical inference to derive from the inscription. Indeed, it is surprising how this obvious explanation escaped the notice of earlier historians. Political history of ancient India is sadly handicapped by way of sources, but it is not as miserable as it may appear from a superficial glance. At least there is wide scope for interpretative ingenuity.

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