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Society in the Gupta Age

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Society in the Gupta Age

What was society like in the Gupta age? It was orderly and rich, but it was also unequal. A Chinese monk saw mild laws and low crime. The same monk saw people treated as untouchable. Caste grew stricter, and kings gave villages to Brahmanas.

1 Who was Fa-Hien?

Fa-Hien (also spelt Faxian) was a Buddhist monk from China. He came to India to find Buddhist books. His travel diary is one of our best eyewitness records of the Gupta age.



A gold coin of Chandragupta II, late 4th or early 5th century CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

When did he visit?

His whole journey is dated 399 to 414 CE. It ran from China through Central Asia, India and Sri Lanka. His Indian visit fell in the reign of Chandragupta II. So his diary shows the empire at its height.

Why does he matter as a source?

He was a foreigner with no stake in Gupta politics. He wrote what he saw, such as towns, laws and customs. But he cared most about Buddhism. So he often missed what did not concern monks.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Fa-Hien = eyewitness, journey 399 to 414, India visit under Chandragupta II”.

> **Quick check 1.** Fa-Hien travelled in India during the reign of Chandragupta II. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

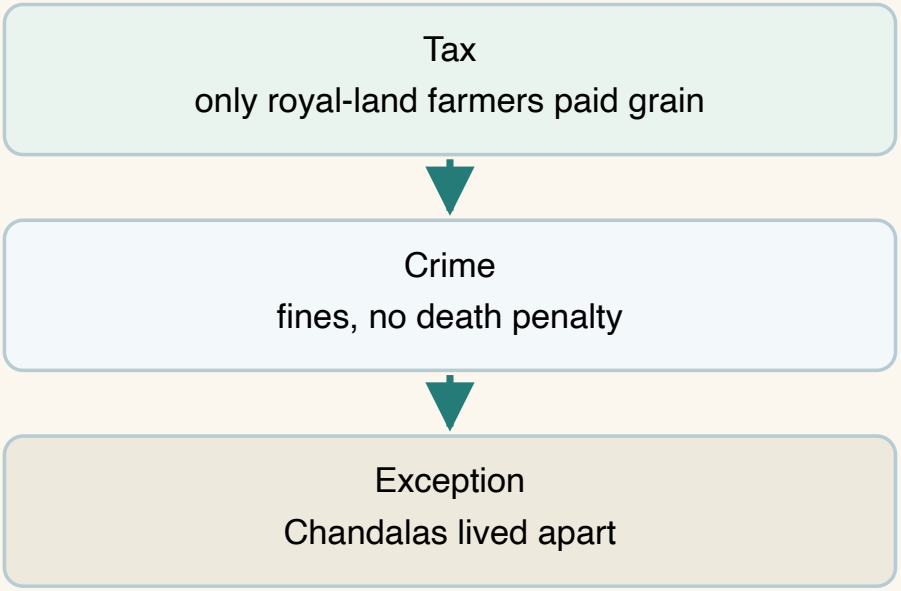
Sources: gutenberg.org; vajiramandravi.com

2 What was Gupta rule like?

Fa-Hien found the Middle Kingdom calm and well run. He gave a few clear details.

How were people taxed?

He wrote that people did not have to register their households. Only farmers on the royal land paid a share of the grain. Others could go or stay as they pleased.



Mild laws, with a hard exception. Original explanatory diagram.

How were crimes punished?

He saw no death penalty. Criminals were mostly fined, lightly or heavily. Even repeated rebels only lost their right hands. This is why notes say Gupta justice was mild.

Who ran justice?

The king was the chief judge. Officials such as the Uparikas and the Vishayapatis handled provinces and districts. Village disputes went to the headman and elders.

What is the memory hook?

Think “mild law = fines, no death penalty”.

Quick check 2. Fa-Hien saw the death penalty used often in the Gupta kingdom. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; vajiramandravi.com

3 Who were the Chandalas?

The Chandalas were a group treated as untouchable. Fa-Hien noticed them because they broke the calm picture.

What did Fa-Hien write?

He said most people avoided killing animals, drinking liquor and eating onions or garlic. The Chandalas were the exception. They lived apart from others.

How were they marked out?

When a Chandala entered a town or market, he struck a piece of wood. This warned others so they could keep away. It shows how strict the exclusion had become.

What do historians add?

Notes say the Chandalas lived outside the village. They worked in the meat trade. Their number grew in the Gupta age, and their disabilities became more visible.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Chandala = outside the village, wooden clapper”.

Quick check 3. Fa-Hien said the Chandalas lived apart from others. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; vajiramandravi.com

4 How did caste change?

Society was based on the four varnas. In the Gupta age the Brahmanas gained more power. Kings helped by giving them land.

What were land grants?

Kings gave villages and farmland to Brahmanas. So Brahmanas gained wealth and local power.

Why does it matter?

The grants show that caste was not only an idea. It was tied to land and money. This is one reason Brahmana influence grew.

What is the memory hook?

Think “land grants up, Brahmana power up”.

Quick check 4. Large land grants to Brahmanas show their rise in the Gupta age. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; vajiramandravi.com

5 The sati record

Sati was the death of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre. The Gupta age gives us the first dated record of it.

Where is the record?

It comes from Eran, in today's Madhya Pradesh. The record is dated to about 510 CE. It tells of a widow who died on her husband's pyre.

Is it proof of a common custom?

No. One record from near the end of the Gupta age does not show a wide custom. Historians treat it as the standard early dated inscription, nothing more. An earlier literary account is in Diodorus (Library of History, XIX.33-34). It tells of the widow of an Indian commander, Ceteus. It does not show how common the custom was.

What is the memory hook?

Think "Eran, 510 CE, early dated inscription".

> **Quick check 5.** The standard early dated inscription of sati comes from Eran, about 510 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: vajiramandravi.com; worldhistory.org

6 How did trade grow?

Towns, trade and guilds grew in this period. Guilds were groups of traders or craftsmen who worked together.

What do coins show?

The Guptas issued many gold coins, called dinaras. They also issued silver and copper coins. This points to busy trade.

What did Fa-Hien see in the cities?

He wrote that Vaishya householders set up houses for medicine and food in the cities. The poor and the sick could go there. This shows care for the needy in towns.

What is the memory hook?

Think “gold dinaras, guilds, charity houses”.

> **Quick check 6.** The Guptas issued gold coins called dinaras. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; vajiramandravi.com; gutenberg.org

7 What do exams ask?

Exams ask who the visitor was and which king he met. This UPSC question tests exactly that.

How do you answer it?

Fa-Hien’s whole journey is dated 399 to 414 CE. His Indian visit fell in the reign of Chandragupta II. The answer is (b).

What is the memory hook?

Think “Fa-Hien = journey 399 to 414, India visit = Chandragupta II”.

> **Quick check 7.** In the UPSC 2025 question, Fa-Hien visited in the reign of Skandagupta. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

For the question itself, see: A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, Fa-Hien, translated by Legge; UPSC CSP 2025, General Studies Paper I, Q15

Practice MCQs

1. What did a Chandala have to do when entering a town, according to Fa-Hien?

A. Wear a red cloth

B. Carry a lit lamp

C. Strike a piece of wood

D. Ring a brass bell

See answer ↓

2. Which punishment did Fa-Hien say was NOT used in the Gupta kingdom?

A. Fines

B. Cutting off the right hand

C. Forced labour on royal land

D. The death penalty

See answer ↓

3. In Fa-Hien's account, who had to pay a share of grain to the king?

A. All town households

B. Every Brahmana

C. Only traders

D. Farmers on the royal land

See answer ↓

4. What were the Gupta gold coins called?

A. Dammas

B. Tankas

C. Dinaras

D. Karshapanas

See answer ↓

5. Which Gupta-age record gives the first dated evidence of a widow burning on her husband's pyre?

A. The Allahabad pillar

B. Fa-Hien's travel diary

C. The Eran inscription of about 510 CE

D. The Mehrauli iron pillar

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is to strike a piece of wood. This told others to keep away. Fa-Hien wrote that the Chandalas lived apart from others. Notes add that they lived outside the village and worked in the meat trade. Memory hook: Chandala, wooden clapper. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The answer is the death penalty. Fa-Hien saw no capital punishment. Criminals were mostly fined. Repeated rebels lost their right hand. Memory hook: fines, not the gallows. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The answer is farmers on the royal land. People did not have to register their households. Only those who tilled the royal land paid a share of the grain. Memory hook: royal land, grain share. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The answer is dinaras. The Guptas issued many gold dinaras. They also issued silver and copper coins. The coins point to busy trade. Memory hook: Gupta gold, dinara. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is the Eran inscription of about 510 CE. It is found in present Madhya Pradesh. It is the first known record of the practice. Fa-Hien does not describe it. Memory hook: Eran, 510 CE. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** His Indian visit fell in the reign of Chandragupta II. ↑ 1
2. **False.** it is false. He saw fines and no capital punishment. ↑ 2
3. **True.** They struck a piece of wood to warn people. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Kings gave villages to Brahmanas in return for praise. ↑ 4
5. **True.** It is one record, not proof of a wide custom. ↑ 5
6. **True.** They also issued silver and copper coins. ↑ 6
7. **False.** it is false. He visited in the reign of Chandragupta II. ↑ 7

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