

# Some of The Utopian Periods From India's Past

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we will select a meaning of Utopia in line with a consensual definition. Not much has been discussed about Utopia in eastern cultures, especially in India. This paper will briefly touch upon the salient utopian features of cultures inside India. Focus will be placed on periods which were considered to be at the peak of civilizational achievement, prosperity and peace. The Utopian state of Indian societies of note will then be examined. Criteria used will include rules of society, the behavior of rulers and the citizens towards others, the benevolence of the elite, the material and mental conditions of the masses, etc. To study the Indian cultures, research will be conducted into stories contained in the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and many other literary works that have documented India's historical times.

## **Full Paper**

A survey of research indicates that Utopia has multiple meanings and interpretations, and has been defined differently by scholars. In this paper we will select a meaning of Utopia in line with a consensual definition. This paper will briefly touch upon the salient utopian features of cultures inside India. Focus will be placed on periods which were considered to be at the peak of civilizational achievement, prosperity and peace.

## **What is Utopia?**

Utopia is considered as a (non-existent) ideal society that is very different from current society. It means a 'good place' and was coined by Thomas More in 1516 CE in his book "Utopia". Merriam Webster defines utopia as, "a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions". A search of utopian societies of the past yields many mentions of Greek periods, and periods from the Old Testament, the Second Great awakening period in US and Europe (17th and 18th century CE), the land of Cockaigne mentioned in the medieval periods, Shangri-la in Tibetan lands, Datong the Chinese Utopia, Ketumati the Buddhist utopia. Little or no mention of utopian societies within India is found in western works or online.

Upon searching sources that document Indian history, there are plenty of mentions of utopian periods such as Ram Rajya, Gupta Dynasty, and the Vijayanagara Empire, etc. In popular culture and in entertainment avenues such as Hollywood and popular media forums, India's utopian period is absent from any mention. This paper will look into Indian History to evaluate some of the utopian periods from India's past

## **I. Rāma-Rājya**

Rāma was the King of Ayodhyā, a kingdom in north eastern India. He had an exemplary character, and was chosen by Sage Vishvāmītra to kill Tāḍakā and other unsavory characters, who were making life difficult for the general population, and for the sages who were doing research in *mathas*. He willingly obeyed his father's wishes to abdicate the throne, which was a birthright of his, and spent 14 years in forests. He showed courage and love for his wife Sītā, by waging a long war against Rāvaṇa who abducted Sītā by deceit.

When Rāma finally returned to Ayodhyā with his wife Sītā, he ascended the throne as King. His exemplary character which is considered an ideal for all humans to follow, made him a just, benevolent, fair, immodest, democratic king. Maharishi Vālmīki wrote the Rāmāyaṇa in poetry form, and is one of the longest ever written, at 24,000 verses. A later version from the 15th Century CE, called the Rāmācharitamānasa by Tulsīdas also sheds some light on the utopia that existed during Rāma’s rule.

Rāma led by example, setting a very high bar for the conduct of his citizens. Good virtues became something to strive for, and became commonplace. Love and kindness, mutual respect, charity, righteousness, generosity, and spirituality was seen everywhere. Education levels were high, and deceitful behavior was not to be found. Family life was blissful, and men and women did their duties and were loyal to each other. The loving and caring nature extended to animals and forests, and there was abundance of greenery and cultivation. There was an abundance of resources and prosperity reached a high peak. Poverty was eliminated, and every person, no matter their status, had access to swift justice. There were courtiers who assisted in applying principles of dharma (righteousness) to be fair to all that came for justice. High moral standards were encouraged, and citizens exercised self-discipline, rather than having to face punitive action or coercion from the authorities.

The Yuddha-Kāṇḍa of Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Sarga 128, has mentions of some descriptions of the utopia that existed during Rāma’s rule. All sections of society were performing their own duties, satisfied with their own work and bereft of any greed. While Rāma was ruling, the people were intent on virtue and lived without telling lies. The Utopia that existed during Rāma-Rājya is very unique, and is without a parallel, especially considering the time period of its occurrence. Western Indologists, a couple centuries ago, gave Rāma-Rājya a time period of around 700 BCE. But in the past few decades, after examining many pieces of evidence like archeo-astronomy, and other historical mentions in many Vedas, etc., the time period assigned to the Rāmāyaṇa by many current historians is between 5,000 BCE and 12,000 BCE.

A kingdom with such high morale, sense of duty, fairness and justice, is indeed very noteworthy, especially since the rest of the world was in a hunter gathering phase during that period. No wonder that the Rāmāyaṇa has been translated in many different languages, and has more than 50 different versions adapted to various countries around the world. Many countries in the world still follow the Rāmāyaṇa, and enact plays based on its story. Even after so many millennia, Rāma and his Rājya is remembered as an ideal to follow. A hard feat for any other Utopia to be followed even after an estimated 7 to 14 millennia. Rāma-Rajya has no parallel, and it can be considered the Utopia of all Utopias.

**Some Verses from the Rāma-Rājya Period:**

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- While Rāma was ruling the kingdom, there were no widows to lament, nor there was no danger from wild animals, nor any fear born of diseases.

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- While Rāma was ruling the kingdom, people survived for thousands of years, with thousands of their progeny, all free of illness and grief.

सर्वेभ्योऽपि स्वधर्मं कृत्वा स्वकर्मणि सुखिनः ॥

सर्वेभ्योऽपि स्वधर्मं कृत्वा स्वकर्मणि सुखिनः ॥

सर्वेभ्योऽपि स्वधर्मं कृत्वा स्वकर्मणि सुखिनः ॥

- What this verse from Valmīki Rāmāyaṇa says is that all sections of society were performing their own duties, satisfied with their own work, and didn't have any greed. While Rama was ruling, the people were intent on virtue and lived without telling lies.

## II. Vijayanagara Empire

The Vijayanagara Empire, also referred to as the Karnata Kingdom, will be the second example of Utopia in India that we will discuss. The empire was located in southern India from 1336 to about 1614 C.E. The dynasty was initially created in 1336 C.E. by the five sons of Saṅgama, and later Harihara and Bukka became its kings. Even though the kingdom was busy protecting itself against Islamic invaders, their subjects were free to practice any religion they wished to. This open-mindedness allowed the Vijayanagara empire to be peaceful, and also made it an alluring place for visitors. A Persian visitor, Abdur Razzak, wrote that the empire was very successful in its trade and commerce, and that it supported several temples using these finances. Coins were made out of gold, silver, copper, brass, and each province was given a certain number of coins by the state. Foreign currency was also used throughout the empire.

The Vijayanagara rulers were lenient towards all religions, and had a goal to uphold Hinduism and had titles such as, “*Gobrāhamaṇa Pratipāla Āchārya*”. Caste system was based on the nature of the person, and his occupation, and was not birth based or rigid. Social position, based on importance and affluence, of various castes changed with changing fortunes and times. There was no caste based discrimination. Only later would the caste system in India become rigid and some discriminations crept into Indian society.

The kings of this empire viewed King Rāma as an optimal ruler, and Rāma-Rājya as an ideal to strive for, so they structured their kingdom in a similar fashion to Rāma's, based on justice, Dharma, strong ethics and compassion. Fairness, equal treatment, property rights, and other traits of a successful empire were followed strictly, and this led to a prosperous society with abundance of resources and a high standard of living for its citizens. No wonder the kingdom survived for about 300 years and is considered a key period of Utopia in India.

## III. Gupta Dynasty

The Gupta Dynasty spread across the northern, central, and parts of southern India. Though 320-550 C.E. is generally believed as its time period, recent information has come to light, which may place this kingdom at around 500-300 BCE. This time period is famous for its philosophy, architecture, science, and religion. Chandragupta, a key King of this empire, expanded this empire and soon became its glorious leader. His rule and this era blossomed into a period of prosperity and growth that soon famously made its mark in India's history as the 'Golden Age'. The artistic ingenuity during India's Golden Age created exceptional architecture, including palaces and temples such as Vittala temple, along with excellent sculptures and paintings.

The Gupta Empire learnt by watching the Kushāṇas, an invading tribe from Central Asia, and soon realized the benefits and strengths of maintaining an army, and Chandragupta I made use of this

knowledge. After marrying a Licchavi tribal Princess Kumaradevi, he soon received ownerships of mines full of iron, which later became a profitable trade tool. Due to Chandragupta's use of military strength and his marriage alliance, he was able to strengthen and expand the Gupta Empire. On an economic level, the empire belonged to an international commerce network. On a social level, the empire's law was generous and only fines were required for crimes. Advancement in sciences, paintings, textiles, architecture, and literature were also plentiful.

As a language, Sanskrit was greatly used and appreciated, and important texts were written. During the Golden Age of the Guptas, great advancements in mathematics, astrology, astronomy, medicine etc were made. The number zero was created, pi was accurately calculated, and the length of the solar system was calibrated. Additionally, the Gupta kings were great patrons of the arts, sciences, and literature.

Samudragupta, son of Chandragupta I, who inherited the throne next, was a military genius, and proceeded to expand his kingdom. During his rule, he is believed to have looked over Himalayas in the north to the mouth of Krishna and Godavari rivers in the South. The Gupta empire developed a prominent cultural identity and influenced other kingdoms and regions such as Burma, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. The Gupta styles of dance and music are still practiced across Asia today. In today's world, several types of Gupta architecture survive in the form of Hindu and Buddhist temples. New types of music and dance were created and they blossomed under the Gupta patronage; these are still in practice today. Free hospitals, monasteries, and universities were also established.

The famous Ajantā paintings were a contribution from the Gupta dynasty, and so was the famous Iron pillar at Mehrauli, Delhi. To this day metallurgists are unable to figure out what technology could have produced such a long lasting iron pillar that has not rusted, in spite of being exposed to the elements. Especially since the iron pillar is between 1700-2700 years old, and there is no parallel to anything like it in the world.

The Gupta kings repelled attacks from Sakas and Hunas, tribes from Central Asia. King Vikramaditya from this dynasty established the new Indian Calendar, called the Vikram Samvat, which is still in use today. The Gupta Period was probably one of India's most notable utopian periods, with a large number of discoveries in the sciences, technology and engineering, development of art forms, various forms of literary masterpieces, advances in mathematics, astrology, astronomy, philosophy, religion, architecture.

Some historians are beginning to put forward arguments that it was one of the Gupta Kings that repelled Alexander the Great, when he attacked India, and not Chandragupta Maurya as is commonly believed. The Gupta king is believed to have defeated Alexander, and made him return to his home in Greece

#### **IV. Chola Empire**

The Chola dynasty, also called Cola, was a Tamil Empire in South India. This dynasty began in Kaveri River Valley. Uraiyur was its most ancient capital. Interestingly enough, King Karikalan who is said to be an ancestor through small Deccan and Andhra families called Chola or Coda, claimed a connection with the Uraiyur family.

Throughout its history, the dynasty had a few run-ins with foreigners such as Chinese, but it stood tall. The empire composed extensive Tamil classical literature and erected astonishing monuments that belonged to the Saṅgama period. The period also saw a renewal of Shaivism (worship of the god Shiva) and the growth of Vaishnavism (worship of the god Vishnu). Its economy was headed by a revenue administration, villages had large autonomy and self-administration, and irrigation was highly organized and successful under the Cholas.

The Cholas were imposing warriors, spreading their empire with military advancements,. It had expert politicians who were busy negotiating agreements and trading gifts with rulers from many areas. They were able to do a lot of maritime conquests and spread their empire far and wide, and significantly increase the amount of trade their kingdom did with many countries in Southeast Asia, a key ingredient for the prosperity of any kingdom or nation. The Chola dynasty generously and dedicatedly ruled their people. Much research exists to reaffirm this point. During this time, the majority of Southeast Asia began to practice Hinduism, and the kingdom's influence on Vietnam is well known. Throughout this dynasty, people learnt ancient scriptures and the Vedas; religious texts composed in Sanskrit.

The Cholas themselves were honored by the people as they were rumored to be descendants from the Sun. For the first time in the history of India, the entirety of South India was under a single leadership. As a whole, the Cholas were excellent in international trading and trading over the seas, and managed to extend their power over to China and Southeast Asia. The empire's architecture evolved into something that is marked even today as one of great significance. They also are noted for many quasi democratic reforms they brought about. Local states had a large amount of autonomy in managing their economy and trade, without much interference from the King. This was a key to a successful and prosperous economy. Few dynasties before the Cholas had attempted this before.

The Tanjore Temple, also known as the Brihadeeswara or Tanjavur temple, is decorated with images of gods and goddesses. Along with these images, numerous other temples and sculptures were carved, especially the Chola Bronzes, heralded an era of magnificence and excellence, which was never before achieved in India. With time, the history of this empire has inspired many. The beauty and prosperity of the Chola dynasty has influenced many Tamil authors to produce literary and artistic works during the last several decades. The royal Chola family had several architectural triumphs including its many temples (and bronze sculptures) and that legacy it has passed down to future generations. The peak of this empire's influence was attained during the 10th through the 12th Century CE. It is believed that the Cholas were around for a long time, and they have a mention in Ashoka's records, as early as the 4th Century BCE.

Cholas were able to expand their kingdom and reach as far as the Philippines and Vietnam, due to their strong navy. They rebuilt an ancient port at Kaveripattinam. The original port at this location is now believed to be built around 15,000 BCE.

## **V. Conclusion**

The world is Eurocentric and tends to cover golden periods in world history with a positive bias towards civilizations from the western world, especially Europe. India has had some great periods that lasted for hundreds of years. These Indian utopian periods should get more credit than they presently do. International media and educators should cover these golden periods also. These utopian periods in India saw very high levels of prosperity, very fair justice systems and prevalence of property rights, there were compassionate kings who were humble and dedicated their lives to serve their citizens, there was trade

with faraway places via sea routes. During these periods patronage of great scientists and philosophers took place, resulting in huge advancements. And some of these Utopian periods lasted hundreds of years. The Rāma-Rājya period of Utopia in India, is possibly one of the best golden periods in the history of the world.

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