

Harsha and His Times

Harsha's Kingdom

The Guptas, with their seat of power in UP and Bihar, ruled over north and western India for about 160 years until the mid-sixth century. Then north India again split up into several kingdoms. The white Hunas established their supremacy over Kashmir, Punjab, and western India from about AD 500 onwards. North and western India passed under the control of about half a dozen feudatories who parcelled out the Gupta empire among themselves. Gradually one of these dynasties ruling at Thanesar in Haryana extended its authority over all the other feudatories. The ruler who brought this about was Harshavardhana (AD 606–47). As a result of the excavation of 'Harsha ka Tila' in Thanesar, some brick buildings have been discovered, but they cannot be taken to be parts of a palace.

Harsha made Kanauj his seat of power, and from there he extended his authority in all directions. By the seventh century Pataliputra fell on bad days and Kanauj came to the fore. How did this happen? Pataliputra owed its power and importance to trade and commerce, and the widespread use of money. Tolls could be collected from the traders who came to the city from the east, west, north, and south across four rivers.

However, once trade declined, money became scarce, and officers and soldiers were paid through land grants, the city lost its importance. Power shifted to military camps (*skandhavaras*), and places of strategic importance which dominated long stretches of land. To this class belonged Kanauj. Situated in Farrukhabad district of UP, it shot into political prominence from the second half of the sixth century onwards. Its emergence as a centre of political power from

the reign of Harsha onwards typifies the coming of the feudal age in north India just as Pataliputra largely represents the pre-feudal order. Fortification of places in the plains was far more difficult, but Kanauj was situated on an elevated area which was easily fortifiable. Located right at the centre of the doab, it was well-fortified in the seventh century. Therefore, to exercise control over the eastern and western wings of the doab, soldiers could be moved by both land and water routes.

The early history of Harsha's reign is reconstructed from a study by Banabhatta, who was his court poet and who wrote a book called *Harshacharita*. This can be supplemented by the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century and stayed in the country for about fifteen years. Harsha's inscriptions speak of various types of taxes and officials.

Harsha is called the last great Hindu emperor of India, but he was neither a staunch Hindu nor the ruler of the whole country. His authority was limited to north India excluding Kashmir. Rajasthan, Punjab, UP, Bihar, and Orissa were under his direct control, but his sphere of influence spread over a much wider area. It appears that the peripheral states acknowledged his sovereignty. In eastern India he faced opposition from the Shaivite king Shashanka of Gauda, who felled the Bodhi tree at Bodh-Gaya. However, Shashanka's death in AD 619 put an end to this hostility. Harsha's southward march was stopped at the Narmada river by the Chalukya king Pulakeshin, who ruled over a great part of modern Karnataka and Maharashtra with his capital at Badami in the modern Bijapur district of Karnataka. Apart from this, Harsha did not face any serious opposition and succeeded in giving a measure of political unity to a large part of India.

Administration

Harshavardhana's reign is an example of transition from ancient to medieval times. Harsha governed his empire on the same lines as did the Guptas, but his administration had become feudal and decentralized. It is stated that Harsha had 100,000 horses and 60,000 elephants. This appears astonishing because the Mauryas, who ruled over virtually the entire country except the deep south, maintained only 30,000 cavalry and 9000 elephants. Harsha could have had a larger army only if he was in a position to mobilize the support of all his feudatories in the time of war. Evidently every feudatory contributed his quota of foot soldiers and horses, and thus enormously added to the imperial army. The

vast numbers of the imperial army suggests a great increase in population.

Land grants continued to be made to priests for special services rendered to the state. More importantly, Harsha is credited with the grant of land to the officers by issuing charters. These grants allowed the same concessions to priests as were allowed by the earlier grants. The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang informs us that Harsha's revenues were divided into four parts. One part was earmarked for the expenditure of the king, a second for scholars, a third for the endowment of officials and public servants, and a fourth for religious purposes. He also tells us that ministers and high officers of the state were endowed with land. The feudal practice of rewarding and paying officers with grants of land seems to have begun under Harsha. This explains why we do not have very many coins issued by this king.

In Harsha's empire, law and order was not well maintained. Hsuan Tsang, about whose welfare, special care may have been taken by the government, was robbed of his belongings, although he reports that according to the laws of the land, severe punishments were inflicted for crime. Robbery was considered to be a second treason for which the right hand of the robber was amputated. It however appears that, under the influence of Buddhism, the severity of punishment was mitigated and criminals were imprisoned for life.

The reign of Harsha is historically important because of the visit of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who left China in AD 629 and travelled all the way to India. After a long stay in India, he returned to China in AD 645. He had come to study at the Buddhist university of Nalanda situated in the district of the same name in Bihar and to collect Buddhist texts from India. The pilgrim spent many years in Harsha's court and travelled widely in India. Under his influence Harsha became a great supporter of Buddhism and made generous endowments to it. The pilgrim vividly describes Harsha's court and life in those days, and this account is richer and more reliable than that of Fa-hsien, shedding light on the social and economic life as well as the religious sects of the period.

The Chinese account shows that Pataliputra was in a state of decline, as was Vaishali. On the other hand, Prayag and Kanauj in the doab had become important. The brahmanas and kshatriyas are reported to have led a simple life, but the nobles and priests led a luxurious life. This indicates differentiation in the ranks of each of the two higher varnas. The majority in each of them may have taken to agriculture. Hsuan Tsang calls the shudras agriculturists, which is significant. The earlier texts represent them as serving the three higher varnas. The Chinese pilgrim notes the living conditions of the untouchables such as scavengers, and executioners. The untouchables lived outside the villages, and

ate garlic and onion, and when they entered the town, they announced their entry by shouting loudly so that people might keep away from them.

Buddhism and Nalanda

The Buddhists were divided into eighteen sects when the Chinese pilgrim was in India. The old centres of Buddhism had fallen on bad days. The most famous centre was Nalanda, which maintained a great Buddhist university meant for Buddhist monks. It is said to have had as many as 10,000 students, all monks. They were taught Buddhist philosophy of the Mahayana school. Although all the mounds of Nalanda have not been dug, excavations have exposed a very impressive complex of buildings. These were raised and renovated over a period of 700 years from the fifth century onwards. The buildings exposed by excavations do not have the capacity to accommodate 10,000 monks. In AD 670, another Chinese pilgrim, I-tsing, visited Nalanda, and he mentions that only 3000 monks lived there. This is reasonable because, even if the remaining mounds are excavated, the buildings cannot have been sufficiently spacious to have accommodated 10,000 monks. According to Hsuan Tsang, the monastery at Nalanda was supported from the revenues of 100 villages. I-tsing raises this number to 200. Nalanda thus had a huge monastic establishment during the reign of Harshavardhana.

Harsha followed a tolerant religious policy. A Shaiva in his early years, he gradually became a great patron of Buddhism. As a devout Buddhist he convened a grand assembly at Kanauj to widely publicize the doctrines of Mahayana. The assembly was attended not only by Hsuan Tsang and the Kamarupa ruler Bhaskaravarman, but also by the kings of twenty states and by several thousand priests belonging to different sects. Two thatched halls were built to accommodate 1000 persons each. However, the most important construction was a huge tower in the middle of which a golden statue of the Buddha, as tall as the king himself, was placed. Harsha worshipped the image and gave a public dinner. The discussion in the conference was initiated by Hsuan Tsang who dilated on the virtues of Mahayana Buddhism and challenged the audience to refute his arguments. However, nobody came forward for five days, and then his theological rivals conspired to take the pilgrim's life. Hearing of this plot, Harsha threatened to behead anybody causing Hsuan Tsang the slightest harm. Suddenly the great tower caught fire and there was an attempt to assassinate Harsha. Harsha then arrested 500 brahmanas. He banished most of them, and also executed a few. This would indicate that Harsha was not as

tolerant as he is painted. After Kanauj, he held at Prayag a great assembly which was attended by all the tributary princes, ministers, nobles, etc. On this occasion, an image of the Buddha was worshipped, and discourses were given by Hsuan Tsang. At the end of it, Harsha made huge donations, and according to a tradition, he gave away everything except his personal clothing. Hsuan Tsang speaks of Harsha in glowing terms. The king was kind, courteous, and helpful to him, and the pilgrim was able to visit the various parts of the empire.

Banabhatta gives us a flattering account of the early years of his patron in his book *Harshacharita* in an ornate style which became a model for later writers. Harsha is remembered not only for his patronage and learning but also for the authorship of three plays: *Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali*, and *Nagananda*. Bana attributes great poetical skill to him, and some later authors consider him to have been a literary monarch. However, Harsha's authorship of the three dramas is doubted by several medieval scholars. It is held that they were composed by a person called Dhavaka in the name of Harsha for some consideration. Harsha may have composed some pieces, but the proverb goes that royal authors are only half authors. In both ancient and medieval India, various achievements, including high literary attainments, were ascribed to a king in order to boost his image. The practice of praising the patron initiated by Harishena in the time of Samudragupta became common and well established under Harsha. Evidently, the object in such cases was not only to win the favour of the king but also to validate and exalt his position in the eyes of his rivals and subjects.

Chronology

(AD)

5 C	Foundation of the Buddhist structural complex at Nalanda. Establishment of white Huna supremacy over Kashmir, Punjab, and western India.
6 C	The Guptas ruled over north and western India for about 160 years until the middle of the century.
606–47	The reign of Harshavardhana.
629	Hsuan Tsang left China for India.
645	Hsuan Tsang's return to China.
670	The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing visited Nalanda.
7 C	<i>Harshacharita</i> by Banabhatta and Hsuan Tsang's account.