

The Age of Harshavardhan

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Introduction:

Many petty kingdoms arose on the ruins of the Gupta Empire and disintegration followed in the course of next fifty years but under Harsha (606-647) these disintegrating units were brought under the central authority and the task of rejuvenation of national life which was suspended due to the invasion of the barbarious Huns was resumed. The greatest achievement of Harsha was the restoration of the political unity of Indian by establishing a strong empire in Northern India.

Accession:

Harshavardhana ascended to the throne on the death of his brother Rajyavardhana (606 A.D.). Hivn Tsang mentions that Harsha was reluctant to accept the responsibilities of kingship. According to Hiuen Tsang, Harsha was invited to accept the throne of Kanauj by a great meeting of the nobles and dignitaries of the kingdom, probably because murdered king Rajyavardhana left no heir and Rajyasri; the widowed queen, played an important part in the affairs of the state. Soon after these events Harsha moved his capital from Thaneshwar to Kanauj.

Harsha's Conquests:

The dissensions among the petty States that rose consequent on the break-up of the Gupta empire created a situation that called for a sovereign, who, in accordance with the ancient Kshatriya ideal, could bring the entire country under the umbrella of one authority.

Harsha proceeded on a career of conquest to the east with a to avenge the death of his brother by defeating Sasanka. He was successful in his military enterprise, and conquered a great part of northern India.

Harsha, then with his army went from east to west subduing all who were not obedient. In about six years he brought the Five Indies Viz – Svarashtra (Panjab), Kanyakubja, Gauda (Bengal), Mithila and Orisa under his allegiance and became the Lord Paramount of the north.

Harsha's attempts to carry his arms beyond the Narmada completely failed and he sustained a decisive defeat in the hands of Pulakesin II, the Chalukya King of the south.

Towards the close of his reign Harsha undertook another military campaign to the east. After Sasanka's death, Harsha had consequently no difficulty in over running it. He conquered Magadha and carried his victorious arms through West Bengal as far as Kongoda (Gajan district), the southern limit of Sasanka's empire. Kumara Bhaskara Varman, the ruler of Assam was an ally of Harsha.

Harsha's administration:

Harshavardhana was unwearied in his efforts towards maintaining an efficient government in the country. He personally looked into the affairs of State and constantly travelled over different parts of his empire to see things with his own eyes. The result was that his civil administration was carried on benign principles, though it is obvious that degeneration had set in since the days of the Imperial Guptas.

The roads were evidently less safe, for the Chinese pilgrim himself was robbed by brigands more than once, and the Criminal code was more sanguinary. Mutilation of the nose, ears, hands or feet was penalty for serious offences, and ordeals by fire, water, weighment and poison seem to have been much in vogue.

Harsha and Buddhism:

Harsha offered daily to the Sun a bunch of red lotuses set in a pure vessel of ruby and tinged like his own heart with the same hue. His brother and sister were ardent Hinayana Buddhists. Harsha, perhaps because of his trials and hardships in his early years, developed strong learning towards Mahayan Buddhism after he had in contact with Hiuen Tsang.

Though the Chinese traveller counted nearly 2,00,000 Buddhist monks, Buddhism was clearly on the wane yielding place to Puranic Hinduism. Hiven Tsang says that Harsha forbade the killing of any living creature or the use of meat as food throughout his empire on pain of death. This seems to be an exaggeration of the king's attempt to minimize the slaughter of animals.

Assemblies of Kanouj and Prayaga:

Harshavardhana met Chinese pilgrim in West Bengal and being delighted in his company, held a special assembly at Kanouj in 643 AD, in his honour. It was attended by twenty tributary kings, four thousand Buddhist monks and about three thousand Jains and orthodox Brahmanas. A golden image of the Buddha of the stature of king Harsha was installed in a tower 100 feet high and a smaller image three feet in height was carried in procession everyday. It is said that the King carried in person the canopy upheld over the golden statuette of the Buddha. As the procession moven along, golden blossoms, pearls and other rare gems were scattered by the king on all

sides in honor of the Three Jewels the Buddha, Dhama and Sangha.

Kanoj assembly was followed by another at Prayaga (Allahabad) where every five years Harsha, in accordance with ancient custom, held distribution of alms. The ceremonial lasted for seventy five days during which the Buddha, the Sun and Siva were worshipped on different days. The proceedings were opened by a magnificent procession of feudatory princes and ended with a forty days distribution of alms to the poor and needy, to Buddhists, Brahmans and often sectarians comprehensively described as 'heretics' by Hiuen Tsang. At the end of it all Harsha had to borrow a secondhand suit from his sister for his own use.

Literature:

A religious and charitable man, Harsha was also a great lover and pattern of learning. He was himself a poet and a dramatist. He was the author of the Banskhera Plate and Madhuban charter perhaps in collaboration with Bana. He wrote two Buddhist poems. "Ashtamaha-srichaitya-stotra and "Suprabhata-stotra" and also three dramas-'Nagananda', 'Ratnavali' and 'Priyadasika'.

Harsha patronized, Bana, the author of 'Harshacharitra' Bhartrihari poet and grammarain, auther of Vokyapadiya belongs to this period. In wit, elegance and versatility he was typical of the culture of the period, as can be seen from his three satakas (centuries) on Policy, love and Renunciation.

His Religion :

Harsha did not inherit Buddhism. In his earlier days, Harsha was a devout worshipper of Shiva. But in his later years he embraced Buddhism, perhaps due to its brilliant exposition by Hiuen Tsang and the influence of his Buddhist gister Rajyashri. He showed his predilection for Mahayana Buddhism by his

forcible appropriation of the tooth relie of the Buddha from Kashmir and its subsequent enshrinement in a sangharama in Kanauj; by his annual summoning of the Buddhist monkas for discussion, by constructing Buddhist monastaries, and by his prohibition of slaughter of animals under severe penalties. Harsha emulated Ashoka by erecting hospices (punyasals) on the highways for the free supply of food and medicines to travellers and poor persons alike.

Buddhism though enjoyed royal patronage in Kanouj, could not make much headway in other countries. The factor as well as his heritage might have influenced Harsha to maintain an eclectic character of his religion when he officially honored Aditya and Siva.

His empire:

Harsha's empire according to Hiuen Tsang and Banabatta, the author of Harshacharita, extended almost all over the Northern India. United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Central India and Rajputana were under his direct administration. Gujarat, Malwa, Assam, Kashmir, from her provinces and sind had accepted his authority. Thus the whole of India was divided between the two great rules, Harsha and Palakshin II, with the river Narmada as the boundary between them. Harsh deserved his title. Sakaluttarpath-Natha (the master of the entire North).

An Estimate of Harsha:

After an eventful reign spanning about four decades, Harsha died at the end of 646 or early the next year. He had the difficult task of building up another empire after the disintegration of the Gupta empire and he did it with conspicuous success.

His rule was excellent and the Chinese pilgrim is loud in praise of it. With all his leanings towards Buddhism, Harsha

was not hostile towards other faiths and communities. Harsha's death marked the end of the Golden Age. It was the last of the great paramount kingdom of the north India.

The throne was usurped by his minister Arjuna who proved utterly incompetent to keep the vast empire together. The dominion of Harsha relapsed once more into a state of endless war among many petty states that now came into existence there.

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