

---

## UNIT 3 THE PUSHYABHUTIS AND THE RISE OF HARSHA\*

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Changing Political Scenario in North India
  - 3.2.1 New Type of Political Centres: the *Jayaskandhavaras*
  - 3.2.2 Kanauj as the New Political Centre
  - 3.2.3 Decline of Pataliputra
- 3.3 The Pushyabhutis
- 3.4 The Political Activities of Harsha
  - 3.4.1 Sources
  - 3.4.2 Political Activities of Harsha: An Overview
  - 3.4.3 The Extent of Harsha's Kingdom
  - 3.4.4 Xuan Zang's Account
  - 3.4.5 Harsha Era
  - 3.4.6 End of Harsha's Reign
- 3.5 The Changing Structure of Polity
  - 3.5.1 Titles of Kings
  - 3.5.2 Administration
  - 3.5.3 Political Structure
- 3.6 Aftermath: The Tripartite Struggle for Kanauj
- 3.7 Summary
- 3.8 Key Words
- 3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 3.10 Suggested Readings

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn:

- how the political scenario of north India changed in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE;
- the emergence of new types of political centres – the *Jayaskandhavaras*;
- why Kanauj became the new political centre of North India;
- Harsha's political activities;
- the extent of Harsha's 'empire';
- the changing political structure of north India; and
- impact of the rise of Kanauj: the Tripartite struggle.

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The political scenario in post-Gupta north India was characterised by the emergence of numerous ruling families like the Maukharis of Kanyakubja, later

\*Dr. Sayantani Pal, Associate Professor, Department of Ancient India History and Culture, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

Guptas of Magadha, Gaudas of West Bengal (Murshidabad Dist.), Maitrakas of Valabhi (Saurashtra peninsula), Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar, etc. Many of them were originally subordinates of the Guptas. But, with the decline of the political authority of the Guptas, they assumed independence. North India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century was, thus, an arena where multiple ruling powers, all rooted in their respective regional contexts, were constantly fighting with each other. In such a political scenario, the *samantas* (subordinates) emerged powerful. They kept control over outlying areas or fought battles in areas far away from the political centres of their overlords. The rise of local and regional powers has been regarded as the hallmark of this period. In this Unit we are introducing you to a brief history of the Pushyabhutis and how Harsha became the most important ruler and succeeded in establishing an empire.

---

## 3.2 THE CHANGING POLITICAL SCENARIO IN NORTH INDIA

---

In this period, we see that some regions became more powerful than others. For example, the places located in strategically sound areas, like those situated on elevated regions or those surrounded by hills or rivers; regions which were well connected by land and water routes for facilitating the movement of army or the easy transportation of supplies and provisions for the army, assumed more importance than the older *rajadhanis* (capitals). These new centres were called *Jayaskandhavaras* (literally meaning ‘camp of victory’) in epigraphs.

### 3.2.1 New Type of Political Centres: the *Jayaskandhavaras*

It was from these *Jayaskandhavaras* that the ruling dynasties issued land-grants to religious recipients like the *Brahmanas* or the monasteries and temples. Inscriptions of the early medieval polities are replete with references to various *Jayaskandhavaras* under different kings. From such references, the political conquests and the extent of the territories of the rulers may be inferred. As for instance, the Banskhera and the Madhuban copper plates of Harsha were issued from the *Jayaskandhavaras* of Vardhamanakoti and Kapitthika respectively. Both were probably located somewhere in Uttar Pradesh.

### 3.2.2 Kanauj as the New Political Centre

Kanauj, earlier known as Kanyakubja or Mahodaya, situated in the Kannauj district of present Uttar Pradesh assumed a lot of significance in the politics of early medieval North India. Located in the fertile plains of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*, Kanauj stood on an elevated area that could be easily fortified. Thus, despite the fact that it was situated in the plains, due to its favourable location, it could be easily fortified and was secure. Besides, Kanauj was rooted in a large agrarian expanse in the western Ganges plains. Land-grants could be made in plenty from this area. Naturally, the area attracted a large number of *brahmanas* who settled here and for subsequent centuries the *brahmanas* of Kanauj came to be widely esteemed in the royal courts throughout the country. Kanauj was also well-connected by routes going towards east into the Ganges plains as well as with those going to the south. Due to all these factors, it rose to power and became an important nodal point in the north. With this development we see a shift of focus from Pataliputra in south Bihar to Kanauj. The latter also came to constitute a central theme in the politics of post-Gupta north India.

As a political centre Kanyakubja first appears in the *Harshacharita* as a seat of power of the Maukharis under Grahavarman who was married to the Pushyabhuti princess Rajyasri, the sister of Harshavardhana. When Harshvardhana became king he chose this city as his seat of power instead of Thaneshwar in Haryana, which was the capital of his predecessors. This choice of capital might have been due to the threatening activities of the Hunas who were making inroads into India from the north-west since the reign of Skandagupta in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Since Thaneshwar was closer to the north-west, Harshavardhana must have felt more secure at Kanyakubja as it was more centrally located to the east.

### 3.2.3 Decline of Pataliputra

Historians like R. S. Sharma are of the opinion that Pataliputra in the post-Gupta period was on decline due to decay of trade and commerce. This was part of the process of feudalisation of the state polity and economy. Tolls used to be collected from traders coming to this city from other places. Since trade declined, money in the form of coins had become scarce. Thus, officers, soldiers and other royal servants had to be given their salaries through the assignment of land. Therefore, in the post-Gupta times the cities lost their importance and the *Skandhavaras* acquired prominence. Thus, R.S. Sharma has remarked that Pataliputra largely represents the pre-feudal order whereas the emergence of Kanyakubja under Harsha typifies the advent of the feudal age in north India.

However, this view has its critics. A study of the economy of the various regions and localities does not point to an overall decline of trade, urban centres, and money economy in the period immediately following the Guptas. It was not a pan-Indian phenomenon. Rather, in some areas like south-eastern Bengal, western India etc. trade flourished, and there is an abundance of gold and pure silver coins. Besides, inter and intra-regional trade used to be carried on a large scale.

Kanyakubja became powerful after Harsha chose it as his capital and Banabhatta, his court poet, glorified it in his *Harshacharita*. This, on the other hand, contributed to the theory of “Tripartite Struggle” by the historians like H. C. Raychaudhuri and others. They believed that it was a struggle among three dynasties: the Gurjara-Pratiharas of Western India, the Palas of Bengal and Bihar and the Rashtrakutas of Deccan. The aim was to capture Kanyakubja which became the royal capital since it was chosen by Harshavardhana.

---

## 3.3 THE PUSHYABHUTIS<sup>1</sup>

---

A variety of sources inform us about the rise of the family of Pushyabhutis which first ruled from Thaneshwar in Haryana and later from Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh. These sources include the *Harshacharita*, accounts of Hiuen-tsang and some inscriptions and coins. Banabhatta informs us that the founder king of this dynasty at Thaneshwar was Pushyabhuti and that the family was known as Pushyabhuti *vamsha*. However, the inscriptions of Harsha make no reference to him. The Banskhera and Madhuvan plates and royal seals mention five earlier rulers among whom the first three are given the title of *Maharaja*. This may indicate that they were not sovereign monarchs. The fourth king Prabhakarvardhana has been described as a *Maharajadhiraja* which makes us

---

<sup>1</sup>This Section has been borrowed from EHI-02, Block-8, Unit-34.

infer that he was an independent monarch and had established matrimonial relations with the Maukharis by marrying his daughter Rajyasri with Grahavarman.

Thaneshwar, during this time (about 604 CE) was threatened by the Hunas from the western side. Banabhatta has described Prabhakarvardhana as “a lion to the Huna Deer”. According to him an army under Rajyavardhana was sent to defeat the Hunas but due to the sudden illness of his father he had to come back. With Prabhakarvardhana’s death the family had to face troubled times for a while. The Malava king killed Grahavarman and took Rajyasri prisoner. It appears that the Malava and the Gauda kings entered into alliance and even Thaneshwar was threatened. Rajyavardhana defeated the Malavas but was killed through treachery by Sasanka, the Gauda king. Now it was Harsha’s responsibility to seek revenge and in due course he was able to establish a strong empire.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).
  - i) Thansewar was the kingdom of the Maukharis. ( )
  - ii) Kanyakubja was located in the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*. ( )
  - iii) As the political centre of north India Kanauj replaced Ujjayini. ( )
  - iv) Tripartite struggle was fought between two powers. ( )
- 2) Why did *Jayaskandhavaras* become important in the post-sixth century CE polity of north India?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Write five sentences on the reasons for the decline of Pataliputra.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Write in 100 words about the Pushyabhutis.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 3.4 THE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF HARSHA

### 3.4.1 Sources

Epigraphs, mostly in the form of eulogies and copper plate charters of the dynasties of this period make exaggerated claims of political conquests and other kingly qualities. Such *prashastis*, however, present a stereotypical account of the political conquests of the king. They claim that the king was a universal emperor (*chakravartin/sarvabhauma* king) who had conquered all quarters and, thus, accomplished *digvijaya*. The reference to political centres, the areas of land-grants recorded in the inscriptions as well as the find spots of the records may hint at the extent of territory under the dynasty. Apart from this, the *charita kavyas* (biographical poems) composed by the court poets for their patron kings emerged as a new source of historical information in this period. In such poems the patron king of the court poet is the hero and he passes through many vicissitudes and challenges which he overcomes finally. The earliest model of this kind is found in the *Harshacharita* (The Life of Harsha). It was the first formal *charita kavya*. In this *kavya*, the poet Banabhatta relates the account of Harshavardhana's rise to power. We are told that when the Pushyabhuti king Prabhakaravardhana was ruling, the formidable Hunas had attacked the north-western frontier of the kingdom. Both of the princes Rajyavardhana and Harshavardhana went to resist them. In the meantime Prabhakaravardhana fell ill and died. The situation worsened when the Maukhari king Grahavarman of Kanyakubja, their brother-in-law and the husband of their sister Rajyasri, was killed by enemies. These were Sasanka of Gauda and Devagupta of Malava. Rajyavardhana went to fight the enemy and died at the enemy camp. Later, Harshavardhana rescued his sister and since the Maukharis had no successor, the throne of Kanyakubja was offered to him by the ministers of the Maukharis. He accepted it and, thus, he became the joint ruler of the Pushyabhuti and Maukhari kingdoms. He made Kanyakubja his capital. Thus ends the poem. It may be noted that the aim of the poet was to tell the tale of Harsha's ascendancy to the throne. By portraying him as an upright and just person, by underlining the mutual love that both the brothers shared, Bana justifies Harsha for having succeeded to the throne even though, by doing this, he superseded his elder brother.

In the subsequent period rulers like Ramapala of Bengal and Bihar, Vikramaditya VI of the Western Chalukya dynasty, Kumarapala of the Chaulukya dynasty of Gujarat appear as the central characters of the *charita kavyas* like *Ramacharita*, *Vikramankadevacharita* and *Kumarapalacharita* respectively. This indicates how the *Harshacharita* had set up as an example and initiated a genre of literature that became widespread and were followed by rulers of different regions who wished to appear as heroes of poems.

Other source for the period concerned comes from the well-known account of the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang who travelled in India from 629-645 CE and spent much time at the court of Harsha.

#### Interpretation of Sources

Harsha was a patron of both Banabhatta and Xuan Zang. Their accounts project Harsha as the master of the whole of north India. By taking such accounts at face value, earlier historians projected Harsha as the last great 'Hindu' empire-

builder of post-Gupta period. Again, such views were strengthened by the epithet of *sakalottarapathesvara* (“the war-like lord of all the regions of the north”) attributed to Harsha by the successors of his arch rival Chalukya king Pulakesin II. Thus, in the scheme of periodization of Indian history, historians used to mark the end of an era with the death of Harsha in 647 CE, verily the end of the “Hindu” period. Thus, Vincent Smith, one of the earliest authors of a comprehensive volume of Indian history (*Early History of India*), talks of the ‘medieval Hindu kingdoms from the death of Harsha’ in which the Rajputs come to the forefront. The major criteria of this change were the break-up of a large empire as they believed that Harsha was the last emperor of pre-medieval period who had authority over vast portions of north India similar to that of the Mauryas or the Guptas. The beginning of the medieval period, despite the presence of the Rajputs, was perceived as largely a Muslim era.

### 3.4.2 Political Activities of Harsha: An Overview

Harsha ascended the throne in 606 CE. He belonged to the Pushyabhuti dynasty based around Sthanvisvara (modern Thanesar in the Ambala district of Punjab). The claims of conquests made in the records of Harsha can be judged from the inscriptions of his contemporary kings like Sasanka, the king of Gauda (Murshidabad district of West Bengal) or Chalukya Pulakesin II. Both were his rivals. We shall discuss the political activities of Harsha in the following manner.

#### Early career

Prabhakaravardhana was Harsha’s father and the fourth king in the line. His two sons were Rajyavardhana and Harshavardhana. His daughter Rajyasri was married to Grahavarman, the king of Maukhari dynasty of Kanyakubja. It was an important marriage alliance which influenced the power balance in the 7<sup>th</sup> century North India. Gauda, the archrival of the Maukharis (earlier the Maukhari king Isanavarman claimed to have defeated the Gaudas) had formed an alliance with Devagupta of Malava.

#### Eastern campaign

The Gauda king Sasanka and the Malava king Devagupta had created trouble by killing Grahavarman: the Maukhari king and the brother-in-law of Harsha. They captured Kanyakubja. Rajyavardhana, Harsha’s elder brother died in the enemy camp. After rescuing his sister and Grahavarman’s widowed queen Rajyasri, Harsha was offered the throne by the ministers of the Maukharis since they had no successor. Harsha now occupied the throne of Kanyakubja and, thus, began to rule over both the territories of the Pushyabhutis and the Maukharis. He now took a vow to take revenge on Sasanka and invaded those kingdoms in the east which had refused allegiance to him. However, neither Banabhatta nor Xuan Zang give any information regarding the actual conflict between Sasanka and Harsha. Besides, Xuan Zang mentions that some years before 637-638 CE, Sasanka had cut down the Bodhi tree at Gaya. It was a sacred symbol of the Buddhists and Sasanka could not have performed such an act unless he was in occupation of the Gaya region. He also indicated that Harsha conquered Odra and Kongada (North, eastern and southern Odisha) by 643 CE. Thus, it appears that Harsha could not achieve any success in eastern India before the death of Sasanka in c. 637 CE.

## Western India

The kingdom of Valabhi in Saurashtra was being ruled by the Maitrakas who were vassals of the Guptas. The relationship between Harsha and the Maitraka dynasty is a little complicated. In the inscription of the Gurjara kings of Broach (Nausari grant of Jayabhata II, 726 CE) they claimed to have protected the Valabhi ruler who was overpowered by Harsha. Originally the Latas (southern Gujarat), Malavas and the Gurjaras occupied a strategic position in between the kingdoms of Harsha and that of Chalukya Pulakesin II situated to the north and south of the Narmada respectively. Thus, both Harsha and Pulakesin would attempt to bring three of them under control. Pulakesin II claims these three rulers as his vassals in his Aihole inscription. However, when Harsha occupied the Valabhi kingdom, peace must have been settled due to a matrimonial alliance between the two. Thus, Dhruvasena II Baladitya of the Maitraka dynasty married the daughter of Harsha and became his ally. This alliance, thus, weaned away Dhruvasena II from Pulakesin's influence. This might have been the reason for the celebrated conflict between Harsha and Pulakesin II.

### Conflict with Pulakesin II

The kingdoms of Harsha and Pulakesin II touched on the border of the river Narmada. In his Aihole inscription Pulakesin says that Harsha's joy (*harsha*) melted away through fear when his elephants fell in battle. From the account of Xuan Zang it appears that Harsha took the initiative but could not achieve any success against Pulakesin. Regarding the claim made by the successors of Pulakesin that he acquired the title of *Parameshvara* by defeating *sakalottarapathesvara* (Harsha). R. C. Majumdar suggests that the result of the battle was magnified in favour of Pulakesin by his successors. This is a fine example of the poet's intention to speak highly of the rivals in royal *prashastis* in order to glorify the achievements of their patrons.

### 3.4.3 The Extent of Harsha's Kingdom

Harsha appears to have been in occupation of parts of present UP, south Bihar and Odisha. He inherited Thanesar, parts of eastern Punjab and eastern Rajasthan. Besides Bhaskaravarman, the ruler of Kamarupa was his subordinate ally and Harsha also exercised influence on the kings of Jalandhar and perhaps Kashmir. In the south the Narmada was the boundary beyond which Pulakesin II was ruling.

The extent of Harsha's empire was, thus, not as large as earlier historians had thought. So there is no reason to project him as "the last great Hindu emperor" or to view his reign as marking the end of the ancient and the beginning of the medieval era. In fact, contemporary historians question the view that saw the end of an era as being marked by any event like the death of a king. The transition of one era into another should be based on historical processes which had a much greater impact on all aspects of society.

### 3.4.4 Xuan Zang's Account

Xuan Zang, the Chinese pilgrim travelled in India from 629 to 645 CE. He speaks about the prosperity of Kanauj under Harsha. He says that the king travelled frequently throughout his kingdom to understand the condition of his subjects. He presents Harsha as a follower of *Mahayana* Buddhism and he has

given a grand description of the Buddhist assembly at Kanyakubja during his reign. He also says that Harsha used to pay salary to his ministers and officials by land grants. However, the actual evidence of such secular grants has not come down to us. He also mentions that this patronage to the *Mahayanas* by Harsha was resented by the *Hinayanas* and the *Brahmanas*. Harsha almost exhausted the royal treasury by making lavish gifts to the Buddhists. How far this account is true is difficult to ascertain. But it definitely brings out the religious tension among different sects in this period who fought among themselves to secure royal patronage.

On the other hand, Xuan Zang himself says that at the Prayaga Assembly Harsha worshipped Buddha, Shiva and the Sun and distributed charity to the followers of all faiths. Besides, the Banskhera and Madhuban copper plates of Harsha record his grant of land to *Rigvedin* and *Samavedin Brahmanas*. Inscriptions also suggest that the early Pusyabhuti kings worshipped Surya while Rajyavardhana was a devotee of the Buddha. Harsha has been represented as a devotee of Shiva in these inscriptions. Moreover, among three plays attributed to Harsha — namely, *Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali* and *Nagananda* — the first two begin with an invocation to Brahmanical gods. This data might indicate that the Chinese pilgrim was actually biased in favour of Buddhism and wanted to present Harsha as its great patron.

### 3.4.5 Harsha Era

Alberuni who came to India in the 11<sup>th</sup> century records that Harsha Era was in use in Mathura and Kanauj. This era commenced from 606 CE: the date of Harsha's ascendancy to throne. The Banskhera, Madhuban and the newly discovered Kurukshetra Varanasi copper plates of Harsha as well as the Shahpur image inscription of Adityasena are probably dated in this Era. Previously, the Guptas who ruled a large part of north India had also introduced the Gupta Era. This indicates that the rulers wished to commemorate themselves to posterity by initiating an era in their name.

### 3.4.6 End of Harsha's Reign

From the Chinese sources we learn that the T'ang emperor Tai Tsung sent an embassy to the court of Harsha in 643 and again in 647 CE. On the last occasion they found Harsha was no longer alive and his throne had been usurped by someone. With the help of forces from Nepal and Assam the usurper was defeated and taken as a prisoner to China. This event shows the growing interest of the Chinese in the politics of North India.

---

## 3.5 THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF POLITY

---

The elaborate titles assumed by the Gupta rulers as well as names of administrative units were followed by many powers of the subsequent period.

### 3.5.1 Titles of Kings

The common titles used by the kings claiming a sovereign status were:

- *Maharajadhiraja*,
- *Parameshvara* and



- *Parama-bhattaraka*.

Ideally, they should have a *samantachakra* (circle of feudatories). The subordinates used titles like *maharaja*, *samanta*, *mahasamanta*, *ranaka* etc. The titles and designations in the land-grant charters suggest different tiers, ranks and functionaries in the administration of the kingdoms.

### 3.5.2 Administration

Very little data is available regarding the administration in Harsha's reign. The various official designations seem to have continued from the days of the Guptas. Xuan Zang says that taxes were not heavy and the king took one-sixth of the farmer's produce as his grain share. According to him there was no regular corvee but then he goes on to say that it was moderate and that the taxes were light. Devahuti feels that he is probably referring to labour in lieu of taxes. Harsha was a strong ruler and inspired confidence and loyalty in his ministers. Xuan Zang mentions that he was an industrious king. His day was divided into three periods out of which one was devoted to the affairs of the kingdom and two to religious affairs. While the affairs of the state may imply more secular aspects of administration, religious affairs may point to opening of hospitals for the needy; provision of free rest houses on highways; distribution of charity; arrangement of philosophical debates; fruit bearing or shady trees; establishment of educational establishments etc. He also kept in close touch with the common man through tours of inspection in which he travelled incognito. He was familiar with his extensive empire and that added to his proficiency as an administrator. For example, he knew the local geography and the temperament of the people belonging to varied terrains and that helped him in choosing the right governors. Harsha was in the habit of convening personal audiences with his tributary leaders and this ensured seamless administration. In 643 CE there were about 20 such tributary leaders. Harsha was on friendly terms with neighbouring countries who he asked to extend facilities of travel and residence to Xuan Zang. He also had diplomatic contacts with the Chinese emperor.

The highest title in Harsha's reign was *param bhattarakamaharajadhiraja*, "the noblest supreme king of kings". The use of such high sounding titles became a norm from the Guptas onwards. As soon as the kings became universal conquerors and achieved foremost position among the rivals, such titles became common. The epithet *sakalottara path esvara* (the lord of the entire north) bestowed upon Harsha by his rival Pulakesin II further strengthens the authenticity of such a high sounding title.

The lesser kings were known as *rajas* or *maharajas*. They were independent in their territories but owed allegiance to the sovereign.

Unfortunately, the two main authorities – Bana and Xuan Zang – do not tell us much about Harsha's administration. The inscriptions of Harsha and Pulakesin II and his successors and other contemporary kings do give us some details of administration. The king was the supreme head of the government. He appointed the ministers and important officers of the state. He led the armies in battle. He ruled according to the ideals laid down in the *Dharmashastras*.

The king was assisted in his administration by a council of ministers. In his council were included feudatories, *samantas*, princes and high officials. There

was special staff of officers to manage the royal palace. There were departmental heads that were directly under the control of king. In Harsha's time civil and military departments were not clearly separate. As a result, some of the top civil officers functioned in the capacity of military officers also. The provincial and district administration did not differ much from that of the Guptas. This is evident from the names of the administrative divisions and those of the officers mentioned in the inscriptions of Damodarapura of Kumaragupta I, Faridpur inscriptions of Dharmaditya and Samachardeva and seals of Basadha are also found in the inscriptions of Harsha and in the descriptions of Bana.

### 3.5.3 Political Structure

The above discussion on the political activities of a famous king like Harshavardhana brings out difficulty in forming an idea about the innumerable early medieval kingdoms and the extent of their respective areas on the basis of available sources. The contours of their kingdoms were rather fluid. Matrimonial alliances as well as conflicts were common among the lineages. B. D. Chattopadhyaya has shown that in early medieval India lineage ties were central to political formations and there were actually no dichotomy between lineage and states.

The *prashastis* (eulogies) of this period are indicative of a hierarchical political structure. Inscriptions of the subordinate kings refer to their overlord. The phrase commonly used in this connection is *tatpadanudhyata* literally meaning "meditating at his feet". This phrase is also used by kings in connection to their fathers. However, when used by a subordinate in connection to his overlord, it meant 'favoured by his feet', thereby claiming a sort of closer association with him than others.

It is also an issue how far the term 'feudatory' or 'vassal' is applicable to subordinate rulers who were obliged to offer allegiance or military service. There used to be no contract between the overlord and subordinates as was the case in Western European feudalism. The actual evidence of the ruler granting land to his feudatory (secular or non-religious land grants) are very few. Therefore, the increase in the number of land grants from the 6<sup>th</sup> century could not have been a contributing factor to the emergence of 'feudal polity'.

---

## 3.6 AFTERMATH: THE TRIPARTITE STRUGGLE FOR KANAUJ

---

Harsha is credited to have established Kanyakubja as the symbol of royal power in north India. In the subsequent period we see repeated attempts by rulers to position themselves as kings of Kanyakubja. In the early 8<sup>th</sup> century Yasovarman, the hero of a Prakrit poem *Gaudavaho* posed himself as the ruler of Kanyakubja. The title of the poem *Gaudavaho* (in Sanskrit *Gaudavadha* means the defeat and death of the king of Gauda) suggests rivalry between Gauda and Kanyakubja. According to D. C. Sircar, it began as early as the reign of the Maukharis, when in his Haraha inscription, dated 554 CE, Ishanavarman claimed to have defeated the Gaudas. This legacy of the rivalry between these two powers continued with Harsha representing Kanauj and Sasanka representing Gauda and ultimately ended up with the conflict between the Palas of Bengal and Bihar (represented as Gaudesvara in the north Indian sources) and the Gurjara-Pratiharas of Kanauj.

Even in the *Rajatarangini* Kalhana claims that Yasovarman was defeated by Lalitaditya Muktapida of the Karkota dynasty of Kashmir. The veracity of the varied claims of majestic conquests put forward by the respective court poets can never be ascertained. However, such representations of heroes of poems posing themselves as conqueror of Kanauj nevertheless indicates the growing importance of Kanyakubja in the political scenario of 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century North India.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the characteristics of a *charita kavya*?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 2) Write five sentences on the conflict between Harsha and Pulakesin II.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 3) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).

- i) Xuan Zang travelled in India from 629-645 CE. ( )  
ii) Harsha was a Buddhist according to his inscriptions. ( )  
iii) Harsha Era commenced from 606 CE. ( )  
iv) *Sakalottarapathanatha* was a title given to Harsha by his own family. ( )

---

### 3.7 SUMMARY

---

The rise of Harsha amply reflects the rise to importance of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*. No doubt that it obtained much fame in the influential accounts of Banabhatta and Xuan Zang. The epithet *sakalottarapathanatha* applied to him by his rivals — the Chalukyas of Deccan – further emphasized its significance. The above discussion, however, would indicate how this claim is grossly exaggerated.

Even, putting aside such claims the emergence of Kanauj in the post-Gupta polity cannot be denied. Kanauj commanded an impressive agrarian hinterland which was important in the growth of a town. This also reflects the changing political economy in which exploitation of agrarian resources became essential for the innumerable local, supra-local and regional dynasties that were to dominate the north Indian political arena for subsequent years to come.

---

### 3.8 KEY WORDS

---

- Jayaskandhavara** : Literally “Camp of victory”, it implies a temporary camp situated at a strategic location.
- Tripartite struggle** : The struggle among three powers, namely the Palas of Bihar and Bengal, the Gurjara-Pratiharas of western India and the Rashtrakutas of Deccan for capturing Kanyakubja in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE.
- Charita Kavya** : Biographical poem.
- Sakalottarapathesvara:** The war-like lord of all the regions of the north, signifying the sovereign ruler of *Uttarapatha* (north India).
- Samantachakra** : Circle of feudatories.
- Tatpadanudhyata/ padanudhyata** : Literally meaning “meditating at his feet”, it is often used to refer to the son and successor of the king or the favourite *samanta* (subordinate).

---

### 3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

---

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) i) x      ii) √      iii) ×      iv) ×
- 2) Your answer should explain the meaning of the word *Jayaskandhavara*, its difference from the *rajdhani*s (capitals). You must highlight the changing economic scenario in which religious land-grants became important and also the strategic location and connectivity of the *Jayaskandhavaras*. See Sub-section 3.2.1
- 3) See the explanation given by R.S. Sharma regarding post-Gupta economy and state whether you agree with his view. The decline of Pataliputra, should, however, not to be seen as a general phenomena of the decline of urban centres in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. See Sub-section 3.2.3
- 4) See Section 3.3

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should begin with the meaning of the term *Charita Kavya*. You need to explain when and why did this particular genre of literature originate and assume importance. See Sub-section 3.4.1
- 2) Your answer should begin with the identities of these two rulers. You need to explain the factors leading to their conflict regarding the common boundaries of their kingdoms, control over the powers occupying strategic locations like the Latas, Malavas and Gurjaras. See Sub-section 3.4.2
- 3) i) √    ii) ×    iii) √    iv) ×

---

### 3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Chakravarti, Ranabir (2010). *Exploring Early India up to c. A.D. 1300*. Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd.

Cowell, E. B. and Thomas, F. W. (trans.) (1993). *The Harsha-Charita of Bana*. Delhi: Motilal Banarssidas.

Devahuti, D. (1999). *Harsha: A Political Study*. Oxford University Press.

Sharma, R.S. (2005). *India's Ancient Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Singh, Upinder (2009). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India from the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman.



ignou  
THE PEOPLE'S  
UNIVERSITY