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## **A Study of the Harshavardhan Period: An Archaeological and Historical Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The great era in Indian history came to an end with the fall of the Gupta Empire in the last phase of the sixth century. After this, the Pushyabhuti dynasty emerged. Kannauj was the capital of Harshvardhan and due its good economically it had become a prosperous city. In North India, Harshavardhana was a skilled empire builder as well as an able administrator. Through the works of Banabhatta and the travelogue of Hiuen Tsang, we come to know about the political and economic situation during the Harsha period. The king was the highest official of administration and was considered a part of divinity. He considered the protection and upkeep of the people based on ancient scriptures as his highest task. Due to land grants given during the time of Harshavardhana, power went into the hands of big military officers and feudal lords. All the taxes related to land were collected by them who were in the form of different types of officers.

*Keywords* : Empire, Administration, Economic, Land Grants, Feudal, Collected.

### **Introduction**

Harsha Vardhana was an Indian emperor who ruled the Northern part of India during from 606 to 647 CE. He was a prominent ruler of the Vardhana dynasty and is known for his administrative skills, military conquests, and patronage of art and culture. The Harsha period, also known as the Early Medieval period in India, was characterized by significant internal and external economic and commercial activities. Harsha was also a patron of the arts, literature, and learning. He invited many scholars, poets, and intellectuals to his court and encouraged the translation of Sanskrit texts into other languages. His court was renowned for its cultural and intellectual vibrancy, and he was himself a poet and a playwright. Harshvardhan is one of the major kings of Northern India. Adequate material is available for historians to know the major events and economic aspects of the time of this emperor.

The sources which are considered to be the strongest about Harshavardhana include 'Harshacharita' written by Banabhatta, plays 'Nagananda', 'Ratnavani' and 'Priyadarshika' composed by Harshavardhana, travelogue of Hiuen Tsang, 'Madhuban' Nidhanpur donation letters of Harshavardhana, Pulakeshin's Articles like 'Aho Records' etc. are important sources. The initial article about Harsh Vardhan was written in 1906, since then many research papers related to his life have been published. First in 1922, K.M. Panikar threw light on Sri Harshavardhana, the king of Kannauj. After four years R. Of. Mukherjee published research work related to Harsh Vardhan. In which the social and economic condition of Harsh was described. Pro. R. S. Tripathi sir published a book titled History of Kannauj on Harshvardhan in 1937

After this R. C. Majumdar sir wrote about the history of the golden age of Harshavardhan in 1954. In which all aspects related to social, economic and religious were included. Not only this, Devahuti sir published a book named 'Harsh Ek Political Study' in 1970. B. N. Sharma's research work, we get to know about the political life of Harshvardhan and also get a description of his genealogy and also It is known that in this way Harshvardhan

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\*K.M.Panikar; Sri Harsha of Kanauj: A Monograph on the History of India in the First Half of the 7th Century A. D, London, Forgotten Books Publication, 2018,p.17

had made the small empire inherited from his ancestors so huge. Dr. Radha Kumud Mookerji and other scholars have also tried to show the political, economic and social successes of Harshvardhan through their studies.<sup>†</sup>

By studying the above details, we come to know that Harshvardhan was a great and glorious king of his era. He not only improved the form of his society but also paid special attention to the economic condition for the expansion of his kingdom. Established business relations in foreign countries. All these works show Harsha as a great and glorious king of the seventh century.

Sources of information :

Fortunately, the information related to the rule of Harshavardhana and its religious, political and economic matters is basically present in the writings, inscriptions, copper plates, coins, texts and other works of Hiuen Tsang and Banabhatta, the details of which confirm it well. To know the economic system of the Harsh period, the sources obtained from that period can be divided into three parts: -

1. Literary sources
2. Archaeological sources
3. Details of foreign travelers

Literary sources :

After the fall of the Gupta Empire, political instability once again prevailed throughout India. All the known kings of Pushyabhuti dynasty. The word 'Vardhan' came at the end of the name, hence this dynasty is often called Vardhan dynasty whose most famous king was Harshvardhan. The period of Harshvardhan was very rich from literary point of view and description of Harsh is found in the works of this period. Among the works in which the description of Harsh and his ancestors is found, it is known from Harshcharita, Kadambari, Aryamanjushrimulakalp and Harsh's Banskhedha, Madhuban and copper plate inscriptions that before his ascension, five kings had ruled, which is the main one.

Harshcharita:

This is an important book written by Banabhatta. It is called 'Aakhyayika' written by himself. Apart from Harshcharita, what he has called Aakhyayika is Kadambari. From this book we get information about Harsha and his life history, the main ruler of Vardhan dynasty. The great poet Baan throws light on Harsha and his ancestors. Romila Thapar is of the opinion that Harsh had immense literary interests and talents. While performing administrative duties, he composed three plays, two of which are comedies written in the classical style, and the third has a deep religious theme.<sup>‡</sup>In the second, Chatrgi Gori Shankar also described the Bhriguvansh living in a village named Preetikoot of Vatsyayana Gotra and his childhood.<sup>§</sup>There are limited means to know the economic condition of India from Banabhatta's 'Harshcharita' on the basis of which things like agriculture, trade etc. are known.

Kadambari :

This is also the second work of Banbhat. It can be called the best novel of Sanskrit literature. Its study gives knowledge of the social and religious life of the Harsha period. The feudal environment is known from this text. 'Kadambari' is a poetic imagination that

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<sup>†</sup>Dr. Radha Kumud Mookerji; Harsha, New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publication, 2006, p.13

<sup>‡</sup>Romila thapar, A History of India, London, Penguin, 1990, p.130

<sup>§</sup>Gori Shankar Chaterjee, Harshavardhana, Allahabad, Hindustani Acedamy, 2008, p.365

brings the divine world to the surface. The original story of Kadambari is taken from 'Brihatkatha' which is preserved in 'Brihatkathamajari' by Kshemendra and 'Kathasaritsagar' by Somdev, but Banbhat has given that story a completely new and original form with his talent.

**AryamanjuSrimutrakalpa :**

This is a Mahayana Buddhist text containing one thousand verses. Under which the ancient history from the seventh century BC to the eighth century BC is described. It throws light on some events of Harsh period history. According to this text (725 AD to 727 AD), Harshvardhan expanded his empire till Shashank's kingdom. Harsha's opponent Shashanka has been described as a Buddhist iconoclast. In this book, Harsh has been described as being of Vaishya caste.

**Priyadarshika :**

This is a four- act play, it is said that this was the first of Harsh's plays to be composed. This play describes the love story of King Udayan of Vatsa and 'Priyadarshika', the daughter of the King of Anga. This is also an important book.

**Ratnavani :**

Digvijay is discussed in the play Ratnavali. King Vatsa of Kaushambi had taken a vow like Harshavardhana to become the emperor of the entire world. This play, which ends in four acts, is similar to 'Priyadarshika'. In this drama, there is a discussion about saving the life of Ratnavali, the daughter of the King of Sri Lanka, from a sinking ship by a businessman of Kaushambi. On this basis, there is information about India's trade relations with Sri Lanka in the seventh century.

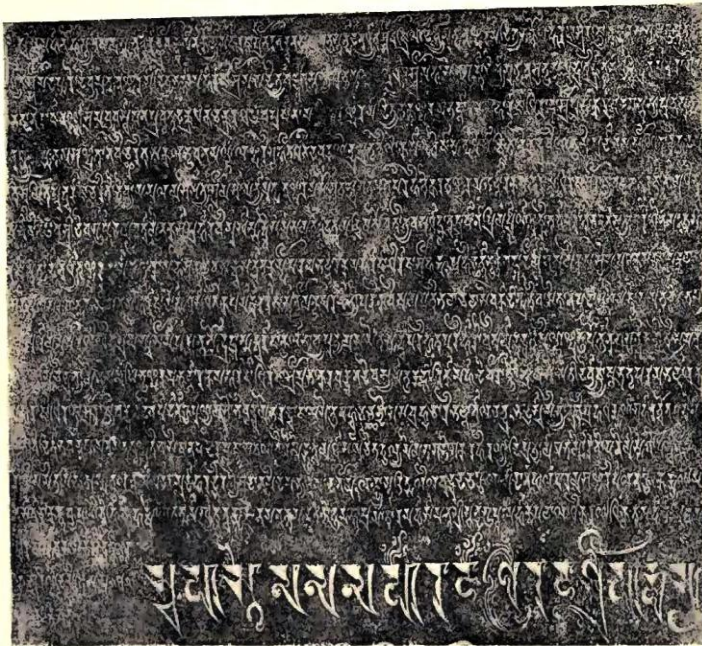
**Nagananda :**

It is a play written in five acts. We get information about Buddhism from the last two acts of this play. Lord Buddha has been praised in this play. This play must have been composed in the later period of Harsh's life. The hero of this play is Jimutavahana, the son of the king of Vidhadharas. He falls in love with Malayavati, the daughter of the king of Siddhas. Although Sriharsa has rather freely drawn upon the works of earlier poets, his writings are marked by individuality of treatment. The immense influence wielded by our poet on later rhetoricians, is amply attested by the numerous quotations from his dramas in illustration of various dramatic situations etc.

**Archaeological Sources :**

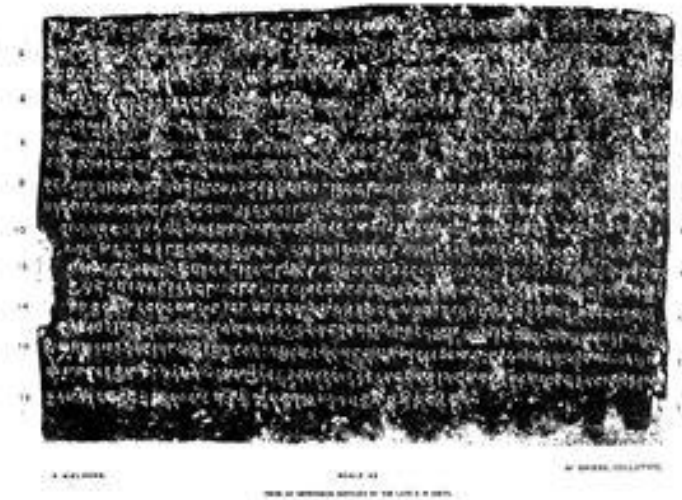
Harshavardhan was a patron of literature and was also a litterateur himself. Information about social, economic and religious life in the seventh century is also available from Vayu Purana, Bhagwat Purana, Markandeya Purana etc. Along with this, we get to know about the main rulers and their working system." Under archaeological sources, knowledge about Harsha is obtained from inscriptions and seals. Important information about Harsha period is found in various inscriptions: -

Article from Banskhedra :



Banskheda is a place situated in Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh, from where an inscription dated Harsha Samvat 22 i.e. 628 AD was found in 1894 AD. Many information is obtained from this record. This inscription reveals that King Harsha had donated the village named Markatsagar to two Brahmins named Balachandra and Bhattaswami.

Article from Madhuban:



An inscription of Harsha Samvat 25 i.e. 631 AD has been found from here. It is situated in Ghosi tehsil of Mau (Azamgarh) district of Uttar Pradesh. It describes the donation of a village named Somkunda by Harsha.

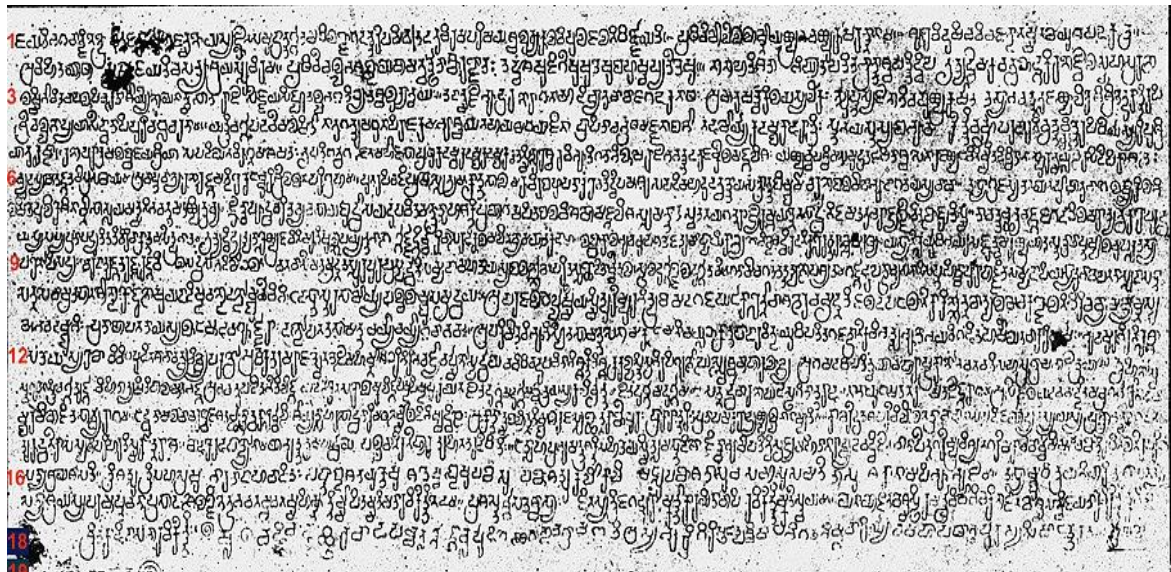
Devbaranark inscription:





Another important article of the Northern Gupta dynasty has been found from a place called Devbaranark in Shahbad (Ara) district of Bihar province. Cunningham discovered it in 1880 AD. The ruler of this dynasty Jivitgupta second had it engraved. In this, after Adityasen, the description of the three rulers Devgupta, Vishnugupta and Jeevitagupta II is found.\*\*

Aihole's article :



This article is about Chalukya king Pulakeshin II. Its date is 633-34 AD. This article describes the war between Harsha and Pulakeshin. It was composed by Ravikirti, the court poet of Pulakeshin.

Seals :

\*\* John Faithfull Fleet, History of Ancient India; Calcutta,1888, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum,vol.3,p.88



Seal of Harsha found in Nalanda (Bihar)

Two seals of Harsha are found in Nalanda (Bihar) and Sonipat. The first seal is of clay and the second is of copper. The genealogy from Maharaj Rajyavardhan I to Harshvardhan is engraved on these seals. Harsh's full name 'Harshvardhan' is revealed in the Sonipat seal itself. Most of the land area was considered his authority. 13 Dr. P.N. Mr. Bhargava says that there is considerable disagreement among scholars regarding the extent of

Harsha's empire. Hivan Tsang' has also written that Maharaj Shiladitya had conquered the nations from east to west. According to Banabhatta, Harsh was victorious in this war, and he made Lakshmi of Sindhuraj independent. Thaneshwar, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Orissa were prominent under the direct rule of Harshavardhana, but if the areas of his feudatories are also included, his empire extended at least from Jalandhar in the north to Narmada in the south and from Vallabhi in the west to Kamarupa in the east. Was extended till. According to Dr. V.C. Pandey, not only was Southern India outside Harshvardhan's empire, many states in Northern India were also outside his empire.

Foreign Sources :

Like archaeological and literary sources, descriptions of foreign travelers also play an important role in giving information about the time of Harsha, which is as follows:-

Hiuen Tsang and his travelogue :

Hiuen Tsang was a Chinese traveller. He visited India during the time of Harshvardhan. He gave details of the experiences he gained during his sixteen years of travel in his travelogue titled 'Si- U- Ki'. In this book, the culture, politics and economic condition of Harshvardhan period is described. The Chinese traveler also mentioned rice, wheat, ginger, mustard, melons and gourds among the produce of India. 'Mahashali- Chavan' was considered the best. It was produced mostly in Magadha. 'Land tax' was collected from the state on these crops and tax was also levied on the crops according to their yield.

I'tsing and his travelogue :

I'tsing was a Chinese traveller. The description of the history of Harsh period given by it is also very useful. Its description was translated into English by the Japanese Buddhist monk Takkusu, titled 'A Record of the Buddhist Renaissance'. After the death of Rajyavardhan, at the age of only sixteen, Harshvardhan ascended the throne of Thaneshwar in 606 AD. Therefore, the importance of the state increased in economic life also and now the people started compulsorily paying taxes to the king. 18 Not only this, but through taxes, the then

rulers increased their military power with strong funds and also provided public welfare in the society like construction of roads, wells, ponds etc. with the income of 'land tax'. Along with this, the then rulers never shied away from providing all possible help to the people during natural calamities with the money and grains received from land tax.

Conclusion :

The leading feudatories of Harsha were the Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa, Dhruvabhata of Valabhi, Purnavarman of Magadha and Uditia of Jalandhara. Only a small portion of the empire which was under the direct control of Harsha, the administrative hierarchy, was superficially akin to that of the Mauryas. The king was the centre of the administration, helped by the crown prince. Other princes were appointed as Viceroys of provinces. The female members of the royal family seldom figured prominently in the affairs of state. Ministers of various types and advisers assisted the king in the administration. During the post-Gupta period, a significant change took place in the matter of payment to officers employed by the state. At Harsha's time high officers i.e. Daussadha Sadhnika, Pramatarā, Rajasthaniya, Uparika and Vishayapati etc.