

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

Banabhatta : Harshacharita

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Of all the extant historical biographies of ancient times, mention may first be made of the Harsacarita of Banabhatta), the court poet-cum-historian of Harsa (AD 606-48) of Sthanvisvara (modern Thanesar in Haryana) and Kanyakubja (Kanauj). Bana himself calls his work an *akhyayika* as it has a historical basis. It consists of eight ucchavasas (chapters).

Personal Life of Banabhatta

In the first chapter, the author speaks of his own ancestry and lineage. According to the information supplied by him, he was the son of Citrabhanu in the Vatsyayana line of the Bhargava Brahmanas. His ancestral home was at Pritikuta, a village situated on the western bank of the river Sona within the limits of the kingdom of Kanyakubja. The first three chapters are devoted, of course, partly to the life and family of the author himself. He belonged to the family, which was famous for scholarly tradition. His inclination towards or interest in history was quite consistent with his family tradition.

Ancestry of Harshavardhana

Harsa's ancestors find mention in the third chapter of the Harsacarita. The author of the work informs us that it was Pusyabhuti who founded the kingdom of Srikantha with its capital at Sthanvisvara (in the late fifth or early sixth century AD). He has been described also as the founder of the royal Vardhana dynasty. His successors, Naravardhana, Rayavardhana and Adityavardhana (mentioned in Madhuvana copper-plate inscription of Harsa) do not find place in the genealogy preserved in the work. These kings who flourished probably between AD 500 and 580 were the feudatory chiefs. They might have acknowledged the supremacy of the Guptas and the Maukharis. The next king in the line of Puspabhuti, as mentioned in the work was Prabhakaravardhana who was blessed with two sons, Rajyavardhana and Harsavardhana and a daughter, Rajyasri.

Prabhakaravardhana (AD 580-605) was an eminent and powerful king. After having expanded the frontiers of his paternal kingdom by annexing to it the territories of the conquered kings he assumed the titles, Maharajadhiraja and Paramabhattaraka. His wars and conquests have been described in the fourth and fifth chapters. The information Bana provides about him in the former, of course, in the metaphorical style is useful to a historian. He says that he was "A lion to the

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Huna deer, a burning fever to the king of Sindhudesa, a troublers of the sleep of Gurjara king, a bilious pleague to that scent-elephant, the Lord of Gandhara, a destroyer of the pride of the Latas, and an axe to the goddess of fortune and glory of Malava.” He appears to have extended his political sway to the Huna territories in the Punjab, which marked the limit of the northwestern frontier of his kingdom. In the east it was conterminous with the Maukhari state of Kanauj and on the west and south it just covered portions of the Punjab and Rajaputana desert. He achieved partial success in subduing the king of Sindhudesa. However, the latter accepted the political hegemony of the former. Gandhara, which was then under the rule of Kusanas (a branch of those who had established themselves in the Kabul valley), could not be brought within the limits of the kingdom of Prabhakaravardhana. The Gurjaras of Bhinnamala and the king of Latadesa simply tendered their submission. Malawa was, of course, annexed to his kingdom, which can be substantiated by the fact that the two sons of the defeated Malava king, Mumaragupta and Madhavagupta, were sent to his court to confirm their acceptance of his overlordship, as stated in the text. In the fourth chapter itself, it is stated that Rajyasri was married to Grahavarman, the son of the Maukhari prince Avantivarman of Kanauj.

Circumstances leading to accession of Harsa to the throne

The fifth chapter is devoted to Prabhakaravardhana’s and his eldest son Rajyavardhana’s conflicts with the Hunas. The former has been called ‘Hunaharinakeshari because of his resounding victory over the Hunas. The Hunas, who were defeated by him with the help of his relative, Avantivarman of Kanauj (in Ad 575 or 582), were none other than the petty Huna chief of the northern Punjab with their metropolis at Sakala where they continued to rule after the dismemberment of the Huna kingdom in about AD 563 or 567. In order to strike another blow to the Hunas Prabhakaravardhana sent Rajyavardhana on a military expedition against them in the Uttarapatha. But before they could be finally subdued Rajyavardhana returned back to the capital on account of the illness of his father. His father had already expired and his mother had burnt herself to death on the bank of the Sarasvati River. We are further fold in the sixth chapter that Rajyavardhana because of being socked and terribly upset offered the throne to his younger brother, Harsa. The latter too was not willing to accept the throne and ultimately the former had to ascend the throne of Thanesar (in AD 605). No

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sooner had Rajyavardhana ascended the throne he received the sad news that the king of Malawa or Avantidesa (who is identical with Devagupta of the Madhuvana and Banskhera charter) had attacked and killed Grahavarmana and imprisoned his wife Rajyasri and put her into the dungeon cell in Kanyakubja. He chalked out a plan to attack also Thanesvar. However, Rajyavardhana in order to avenge the death of his brother-in-law and the humiliation of his sister at once marched with his troops for Malawa leaving his younger brother Harsa in capital. He had successfully routed the Malawa army and defeated king Devagupta but he was himself treacherously assassinated by the king of Gauda called Sasanka (contemporary of Harsa) who had come all the way from his distant kingdom to assist his ally, king Devagupta of Malawa. This is the coalition of common enemies of Rajyavardhana which has been perhaps called by Bana 'Sasankamandala'. He says that "Sasanka threw Rajyavardhana off his guard by offering to marry his daughter to him as a token of submission and friendship and when he was weaponless, confiding and alone, the Gauda king dispatched him to his own quarters and killed there." Having thus avenged the defeat of Devagupta of Malawa the Gauda monarch Sasanka occupied Kanauj and released the widowed Maukhari queen, Rajyasri, from captivity in her own capital. Bana has, maintained sequence and coherence to a considerable extent in the narration of events.

Harsa was only sixteen years of age at a time when he heard the news of the tragic end of Rajyavardhana. He was bit reluctant to occupy the throw. But after being persuaded by the councilors of the state he agreed to take the reign in his hand, and ultimately ascended the throw of Thanesvar (in AD 606).

Military expedition of Harsa as mentioned by Banabhatta

The immediate task before him was to rescue his sister, who after having escaped from the prison had entered the Vindhya forest, and to relieve Kanauj from the control of Sasanka. When he was about to set out on his *digvijaya* (conquest) with a strong force, Hamsavega, a messenger of king Bhaskaravarman of Pragjyotisa (Assam), entered his court with gifts and message of friendship. A perpetual treaty of friendship between these two contemporary kings was concluded as stated by Bana in the seventh chapter of his work. The said messenger in the course of narrating the early history of Assam told Harsa the names of some of the prominent rulers of different dynasties including those of the

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predecessors of Bhaskaravarman of Varman dynasty who ruled over the kingdom concerned, as we find in the same chapter.

After the departure of Hamsavega from Thanesvar, Harsa entered the Vindhya forest and made a vigorous search for her sister, Rajyasri, and at last with the help of forest chiefs like Vyaghraketu, Bhukampa and Nirghata and a Buddhist monk, Divakaramitra, rescued her at the moment when she was about to immolate herself. He along with his sister returned to his camp on the bank of the Ganga, as described in the seventh and eighth chapters of the work. In these two very chapters, Bana has described in detail the life and culture of the tribal people of the Vindhya region with special reference to the *Sabaras*.

We are informed by Bana that Harsa made an elaborate preparation to wage war against the Gauda king Sasanka, who is described as ‘the vilest of Gaudas’ and the ‘vile Gauda serpent’. But he does not provide us with any detail of the war between the two. It seems that the friendly alliance between Harsa of Thanesvar and Bhaskarvarman of Kamarupa (one of the ancient names of Assam) struck fear in mind of Sasanka, and instead of facing an impending danger he withdraw from Kanauj which paved the way for Harsa to establish his rule there. He probably in the last phase of his life transferred his capital from Thanesvar to Kanauj and made it the seat of his power. Thus, he not only inherited the paternal kingdom but also got the Maukhari throne of Kanauj. The amalgamation of these two kingdoms helped him in consolidating his position and extending his authority and influence in all directions. Bana, while describing Harsa as a warrior and conqueror, informs us (in third chapter) that he conquered Sindhudesa and annexed it to his kingdom and thereby completed the unfinished task of his father. The river Indus formed the western boundary of his empire. In the same chapter we are further informed that kings of the states in the Himalayan region were also subjugated by him. They after acknowledging his political supremacy started paying taxes to him. His conquest of Malawa and its annexation to his kingdom finds mention in the seventh chapter of the author’s work. These initial successes he achieved as a king of Thanesvar. We do not get a clear picture of the extent of Harsa’s empire. However, it is true that he earned name and fame as the last great Hindu emperor of north India.

Politico-administrative and socio-religious information

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The information furnished by Bana in the second chapter of his work regarding the administrative system and military organization of Harsa is of considerable historical value. He has highlighted the feudal structure of his administration. It may be stated here that the increase in the number of Samanta, Mahasamanta and feudatory chiefs after the disintegration of the Gupta Empire had great bearing on the administrative system of Harsa. Bana has presented an enlarged picture of the feudal system that had already existed in ancient India prior to Harsa's time. The same system continued in the time of Harsa. According to Bana, there were different categories of Samanta, viz., Samanta, Mahasamanta, Apasamanta, Pradhanasamanta, Satrumahasamanta and Pratisamanta who offered their services to Harsa and his predecessors. The samantas ruling over the territories assigned to them used to pay taxes annually to the said kings. They used to render all kinds of services to the kings. Those who occupied high positions among the Samantas were designated Pradhanasamanta. Satrumahasamantas were conquered chiefs who had to obey the orders of the king. They were treated with some respect. All other Samantas had to offer their services in the kingly court and royal palace whenever needed. The loyal and faithful Mahasamantas used to accompany the kings while going on military expedition. Some of the feudatory kings in the time of Harsa also find mention in the work. Bana has also focused on the inter-state relations in the time of Harsa. The policies he followed towards kings are in perfect harmony with what we find in the Prayaga-prasasti of Samudragupta. In the same chapter Bana has provided the details of military strength of Harsa with special description of elephant force and cavalry.

With regard to religious beliefs and faiths of the people, Bana informs us that altogether twenty-one religious sects existed in India. He has referred to three popular cults of Hinduism, the Saiva, Sakti and Vaisnava, the Lokayatika sect, Buddhism, Jainism, etc., that had already flourished before the dawn of the seventh century AD. On the combined testimony of the data available in the third, fifth and eighth chapters of his work it can plausibly be concluded here that Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism were three popular forms of religion. Their co-existence is a proven fact. In the times of Harsa and his predecessors, Brahmanism and Buddhism flourished side by side, after having reigned for about for a decade Harsa passed away in AD 647 or 648.

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A long list of twenty-seven kings of different dynasties that ruled over different kingdoms in ancient India furnished by Bana in the sixth chapter of his work on the basis of his knowledge of the past history also deserves our notice. The list includes Somaka of Paurava dynasty, Nagasena of Naga dynasty of Padmavati (Pavaya), Vatsaraja Udayana (or Kausambi), rulers of Ayodhya, Sravasti, Videha, Kasi, Kalinga, Mathura, Asmaka, Sovira and of Pradyota dynasty, and Kakavarna of Sisunaga dynasty, Brhadratha of Maurya dynasty, Agnimitra, Sumitra and Devabhuti of Sunga dynasty, Brhadratha of Maurya dynasty, Agnimitra, Sumitra and Devabhuti of Sunga dynasty and rulers of Gupta dynasty that ruled over Magadha, and Ksatravarman of Maukhari dynasty. Even the killing of a Saka king at the hands of Candragupta II attracted the attention of Bana. Actually, his elder brother, Ramagupta, after being defeated by the Saka king agreed to surrender even his wife. Dhruvadevi, to him in compliance with his desire, but Candragupta in the guise of a woman killed that Saka king in his camp itself, which Visakhadatta in his *Mudraraksasa* has highlighted, already mentioned before. These are some of the additional historical information which Bana has supplied in his work.

Bana's Harshacharita as a historical work- An Estimation

Bana has not only provided the life history of Harsha but also a true picture of social, economic, political, religious and cultural life of the people of India in his time. Some other historical information of great value has also been incorporated in his work. His historical knowledge was superb. He has nowhere in his work lavished extravagant praise on his patron. Nor do we come across any exaggeration in his presentation of the subject matter. He has dealt with main theme of the work without much bias and prejudice. He has plainly stated the truth. Most of the facts stated by him are historically authenticated. However, it is undeniable that his work suffers from rhetorical descriptions and literary embellishment. The work after all belongs to a branch of literature called *kavya* (epic).

“Indeed, it is possible to prove by a diligent and critical examination of our sources that the Indians in the ancient and the early medieval periods possessed a sense of history, which at present appears to be imperfect and rudimentary, and that they developed a tradition of writing historical biography through its concrete evidence comparable to the lives of Plutarch is not available. Were the sense of

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history or the tradition of biography-writing completely absent in ancient India, the emergence of Banabhatta and Kalhana would not have been possible. The works of Bana and Kalhana among others represent the mature expression of historiography and historical biography and thus presuppose the continuity of literary and historical efforts and experiences of several generations.” Cowell and Thomas have spoken very highly of Bana and his work. They have observed that he in his Sanskrit work “has woven the story out of actual events.” His work, in fact, is “based on real events.” It contains “a living and contemporary picture wherein we can see something of the India of that time, just as we see in Arrian and Plutarch something of the India of Alexander’s time.” The work “has another interest from the vivid picture which it offers of the condition of Indian society and the manners and customs of the period.” Bana’s “descriptions of the court and village life abound with masterly touches which hold up the mirror to the time The court, the camp, the quiet village and the still more quiet monasteries and retreats, whether of Brahmans or Buddhists, are all painted with singular power and his narrative illustrates and supplements the Chinese travellers’s travel at every turn.” Devabhuti has also admitted that despite some defects typical of the courtly literature of the time, one can find a realistic picture of contemporary life and many valuable facts about Harsa’s character and achievements in Bana’s Harsacarita.