

# India at the Time of Harsha

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**H**arsha found himself ruling a large kingdom in northern India that was loosely connected by feudal ties, and was not a closely knit empire of the Mauryan variety. Why this was so can be seen by analysis of some of the institutions of this period.

## Administration

The accepted title of a great king in Harsha's days was *Parama-Bhattaraka Mahesvara* and *Maharaj-adhiraja*, 'the noblest, the great lord and the supreme king of kings'. It was inherited from the Gupta empire. Paramount sovereignty in the seventh century, however, did not connote what it did a few hundred years earlier. By Harsha's period titles like king were exaggerated since their claimants could hardly compare with the emperors of earlier centuries and their political sway was limited. These titles only imply the existence of lesser kings with considerable authority within the empire. The major part of the territory conquered by Harsha was ruled by such feudatories. The lesser kings of the period were known as *rajas* and *maharajas*. Independent in the internal administration of their territories they generally owed allegiance to a suzerain. The leading feudatories of Harsha were Bhaskaravarman of Kainarupa, Dhruvabhatta of Valabhi, Purnavarman of Magadha and Udit of Jalandhara. A small portion of the empire was under the direct control of Harsha and 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*, *Pramatara*, *Rajasthaniya*, *Uparika* and *Vishayapati* etc. were not paid



for their services to the state, but were compensated by way of being granted one-fourth of the royal revenues. Thus under Harsha revenues were granted not only to priests and scholars but also to the officers of the state, a practice the existence of which is supported by the paucity of coins belonging to this period.

The process of conquest, by which smaller chiefs were reduced to subordination and reinstated in their respective positions, provided they paid regular tributes and offered homage, contributed in large measure to the growth of feudal relations. Harsha established a big empire in northern India like Guptas and lesser kings and feudal lords were made to accept his suzerainty. In the areas administered by the *samantas*, the emperor realised annual taxes from them and not from the subjects.

Bana speaks of *samanta*, *mahasamanta*, *aptasamanta*, *pradhan-samanta*, *shatru-mahasamanta* and *pratisamanta*. Of these the *mahasamantas* were obviously a step higher than the *samantas* and *shatru-mahasamantas* were conquered enemy chiefs. *Aptasamantas* were probably those who willingly accepted the vassalage of the overlord. *Pradhansamantas* were the most trusted chiefs of the emperor, who never disregarded their advice. Probably *pratisamanta* was a vassal opposed to the king or merely a hostile vassal. In any case, it is clear that the usage of the term *samanta* was well established and there were as many as half a dozen varied types of vassals.

The *Kadambari* mentions five modes of saluting the king by the defeated kings, who were certainly reduced to the position of *samantas*. These included salute by bowing the head, bowing the head and touching the feet of the emperor, bowing the head and touching the palm of the feet of the emperor and finally placing the head on the earth near the feet of the emperor.

Defeated kings were made to render three kinds of services to king in the court. They held *chowries*. They served as door-keepers in the court and finally they served as reciters of auspicious words like 'success' (*Jaya*).

Normally, an important duty of these *rajas* and *samantas* was to render military aid to their overlord. The description of the march of Harsha shows that the army was made up of the troops comprising men and horses supplied by the *rajas*; and their number was so large that Harsha was amazed at the sight of the concourse.

Decentralisation of administrative authority was caused by increasing grants of land and villages with fiscal and administrative immunities to priests and temples. The practice of making land grants, which started in the Satavahana period, became fairly widespread at the time of Harsha. The fiscal concessions accompanying the land grants included the transfer of royal right over salt and mines, which were royal monopolies in the Maurya period and evidently signs of sovereignty. Now villages were granted in perpetuity to the beneficiaries, often with administrative rights. In gift villages, the inhabitants including the cultivators, and artisans were often asked by their rulers not only to pay the customary taxes to the donees but also to obey their command. The recipients of land grants in north India were empowered to punish thieves and other criminals. In central and western India from the fifth century onwards, they were also given the right to try civil cases. The vesting of magisterial and police powers together with fiscal rights in the priests evidently weakened the central authority.

The province (*desha* or *bhukti*) was divided into a number of districts (*pradesha* or *vishaya*), each district having its own administrative offices. However, the local administration was, for all practical purposes, independent of the centre. The officers in charge of the districts (*ayukta*) and yet a higher provincial official (with the title of *Kumaramatyaya*) were the link between local administration and the centre.

Villages came under the control of rural bodies consisting of the headman and the village elders. The tendency was to introduce administration which was representative of local interests rather than an officially-inspired system.

Harsha maintained contact with public opinion both through his officers and by his own tours, which gave him the opportunity of supervising the administration. By the seventh century a centralized system identical with that of the Mauryas was found unworkable and it was replaced by the feudal administrative system.

#### Socio-economic Conditions

The land grants paved the way for feudal development in India. From the fifth century onwards, several inscriptions refer to the emergence of serfdom, which meant that the peasants were attached to their land even when it was given away. I-tsing (seventh century) states



most Indian monasteries possessing lands got them cultivated by servants and others, and adds that they provided the bulls and the fields and generally received one-sixth of the produce. He does not clarify whether the cultivators were provided with ploughs, seeds, manures and any other equipment for agriculture. Probably the tillers of the soil were not slaves or wage labourers, as in Mauryan times, but semi-serfs who tenanted land on condition of paying a share of their produce to the landlord. Hieun-Tsang describes the shudras as agriculturists, which suggests that they did not only cultivate the land as they did in the past but also occupied it temporarily. In all earlier sources only the Vaishyas are directly described as agriculturists and the Shudras as landless labourers and slaves. Apart from Hieun-Tsang, for the first time Asahya, a legal commentator of the seventh century, describes the Shudras as cultivators. Hence in the seventh century agriculture was carried on not by means of slaves and hired wage-earners, but by giving temporary tenancy to the vast masses of the people, especially the Shudras. This happened in old settled areas in northern India, and can be compared in some respects to the transformation of slaves to serfs in Europe.

In the tribal areas, agriculturists were placed under the control of the religious beneficiaries, especially the brahmins, who were granted land on a large scale from the fifth-sixth centuries onwards. From the sixth century, sharecroppers and peasants were particularly asked to stick to the land granted to the beneficiaries. The practice later spread to Madhyadesha, where two seventh century charters, forged in the name of Samudragupta, ask the artisans and peasants not to leave their villages granted to the beneficiaries and not to migrate to tax-free villages. The custom became fairly common in subsequent times, and the villages transferred to the grantees were called *sthana-jana-sahita*, *janata-samridha*, and *saprativasi-jana-sameta*. All this worked for a closed economy, which was fostered by the decline of trade and commerce.

Perhaps the major portion of land continued to be in possession of free peasants, who paid revenues directly to the state. Besides, having to pay a fixed portion of their produce as regular revenues to the state, the peasants were subjected to various impositions such as *udranga* (frontier tax), *Uparikara* tribute to the divisional officer called *Uparika*. The interpretation of some of these terms is not free from doubt. Moreover, the villagers had to make not only various types of contributions to royal troops and officials when they passed through their areas, but they had

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also to perform forced labour of all varieties (*sarva-vishti*) probably for military purposes. All this naturally caused depreciation in the position of free peasants.

The guilds of artisans and merchants played an important role in the municipal administration of towns. But they probably also began to lose their earlier importance because of the decline of trade and urban life. The weakening of commercial links with the western world perhaps stopped the movement of artisans and traders from one part of the country to the other. Immobile artisans, therefore remained attached to villages where they produced for local consumption. In course of time they, like the peasants, were also transferred to the recipients of village endowments.

The rise of the quasi-feudal mode of production modified the Varna-divided society. The decline of trade and towns diverted both shudra artisans and vaishya merchants to cultivation. The vaishyas and shudras thus approximated to each other.

This modified Brahmanical order spread from Madhyadesha into Bengal and South India as a result of land grants to the brahmins, many of them migrating from the north from the 5th-6th centuries, and naturally provided mainly for the brahmins and shudras. Although the Rajputs emerged as a significant factor in the politics and society of northern India, from the seventh century, in Bengal and peninsular India their place seems to have been taken by the landed brahmins. In the older inhabited areas, the traditional theoretical fourfold varna system did not fit in with the new feudal and social ranks created by unequal distribution of land and military power. From the sixth century, attempts began to square up feudal ranks with ritual ranks. The earlier texts regulate the economic life of the people on the basis of their varnas. But the *Brihatasamhita* of Varahamihira (6th Century) prescribes varying sizes of houses not only in the varna order but also according to the grading of ruling chief.

A striking social development from about the 7th century onward was the proliferation of castes. The kshatriya caste swelled up with the influx of the Huns and subsequently of the Gurjars, who joined their rank as Rajputs. The increase in the numbers of shudra castes and untouchables was largely due to the absorption of backward forest tribes into the settled varna society. Often guilds of craftsmen were



formed into casts. It has been suggested that transfers of land or land revenue gave rise to a new caste, that of the Kayasthas (scribes) who undermined the monopoly of brahmins as scribes. This explains the frequent derogatory references to them in subsequent Brahmanical writings. In the countryside in northern India, these emerged a class of village elders and headmen called *Mahattaras*, who had to be informed of the land transfers. Later they also ossified into caste.

Women were idealized in literature and art but in practice they had a distinctly subordinate position. Education to a limited extent was permitted to upper-class women but this was merely to enable them to converse intelligently and not to participate in public life. There are references to women-teachers and philosophers, but they tended to be a rarity. Law-givers almost unanimously advocated early marriage, some of them preferred even pre-puberty marriage. Celibacy was to be strictly observed by widows. The practice of Sati (self-immolation at the funeral pyre of the husband) gained approval of the jurists. But it seems this practice was confined to the upper classes. The first memorial of a Sati, dated AD 510 is found at Eran in Madhya Pradesh. Women were denied any right to property except for *stridhana* in the form of jewellery and garments. They themselves came to be regarded as property which could be given or loaned to anybody. Their perpetual tutelage was argued forcefully. The social philosophy demanding increasing subjection of women to man was a natural development in a patriarchal class-divided society based on developed notions of private property.

#### Cultural Conditions

From Harsha's time started the formation of regional cultural units such as Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan etc. The Gurjaras, who came in large numbers to India, founded various kingdoms in Rajasthan and Gujarat in the 6th century and paved the way for the formation of the future Gurjaradesa. Similarly the Rajputs, who emerged as a result of the improvisation of local tribes and the absorption of the Huns and other foreign elements into Brahmanical society in the sixth century, cleared the ground for the rise of Rajasthan. Faint beginnings of regional and cultural personality consciousness are found in other parts of the country. Bengal was divided into two main units, Gauda and Vanga, and later the whole region was named after Vanga. The identity of some kind of sub-national groups is recognized by Hsüan-Tsang, who mentions

several nationalities and Vishakhadatta, who speaks of the different regions whose inhabitants differ in customs, clothing and language. Thus the 6th and 7th centuries seem to have marked a watershed in the ethnic history of India. In the history of language and literature, 6th and 7th centuries are equally important. Although Sanskrit continued to be used by the ruling class at the higher administrative levels in keeping with growing paraphernalia and personal vanity of the landed classes, their language became verbose and ornate. The ornate style in prose and poetry became widely prevalent and we notice strings of adjectives, adverbs and similes not only in literature but also in inscriptions from about the 6th-7th centuries. Although the prose style of Bana was not exactly imitated, it did continue to serve as a model for the medieval period.

What is more significant is that from this period the *Apabhramsha* began to differentiate into proto-Hindi, proto-Bengali, proto-Rajasthani, proto-Gujarati, proto-Marathi, etc. The pace of linguistic variation quickened in the country from 7th-8th centuries onwards mainly on account of lack of inter-regional communication and mobility. Contacts were mainly confined to the march of soldiers and migration of monks and brahmins from northern India into the peripheral areas for enjoying land-grants. The migrating brahmins from mid-India enriched the vocabulary of the regional languages. They also helped develop and systematize local dialects into languages through the introduction of writing and eventually the composition of grammar based on Sanskrit.

The emergence of regional languages was paralleled by that of regional script. From the 7th century onwards, regional variations became so pronounced that one has to learn several scripts to be able to read inscriptions. Obviously the regional script was reduced by regional insulation and the availability of the locally educated scribes to meet the needs of local education and administration.

#### Art

Art and architecture were ushered in a new age that was marked by regional styles in sculpture and construction of temples. Although the origin of regional styles from the 7th century is attributed to regional psychology and consciousness, the reasons which operated in the origin and formation of regional languages also applied to this case. However, at Harsha's age, all over the country iconography prominently displayed



...and Durga appear as supreme deities, lording attendants. The supreme Mother Goddess is clearly established as an independent divinity in iconography from this time and is represented in a dominating posture in relation to several minor deities. The pantheons do not reflect so much syncretism as forcible absorption of tribal and lower order deities. The reality of unequal ranks appears in the Shaivite, Jain and Tantric monastic organizations, in which as many as five pyramidal ranks are enumerated. The ceremonies recommended for the consecration of the *Acharya*, the highest in rank, are practically the same as those for the coronation of the prince.

### Religion

The religious rituals and practices underwent important changes from the early centuries of the Christian era. Domestic worship and the *mahayajnas* did not hold ground beyond the 2nd century AD. With the growing practice of offering and surrendering land, other property and services to the lord and then receiving fiscal rights, land and protection in return as *prasad* or favour, there grew the *pūja* system. With the *pūja* was interlinked the doctrine of *bhakti* or complete self-surrender of the individual to his god, which became a distinctive feature of religion in India from the 7th century onwards. *Bhakti* reflected the complete dependence of the tenants or semi-serfs on the landowners in Medieval times. This explains the new stress on the doctrine of *bhakti* in Vaishnavism, Shaivism and to a degree, in Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism had split into two major sects, Hinayana and Mahayana. Burma, Cambodia and China had by now developed into centres of Hinayana. In India, the Mahayana branch had practically driven out the Hinayana except in a few restricted areas. The 5th century saw the coming of a new and curious cult which began with the worship of female deities, associated with fertility cult, they became the nucleus of a number of magical rites which in a later form are called Tantricism. Buddhism was influenced by Tantric rites and in the 7th century a new branch of Buddhism emerged with its centre in eastern India called Vajrayana Buddhism. The Vajrayana Buddhists gave female counterparts to the existing male figures of the Buddhist pantheon, and these counterparts were termed *Taras* (or Saviouresses).

In reality, Hindus were divided into two main sects, i.e. *Vaishnavas*

and *Shaivas*, each claiming Vishnu or Shiva as the supreme deity. The former, worshippers of Vishnu, were more prevalent in northern India, whereas the worshippers of Shiva were found in large numbers in southern India. Tantric beliefs made an impression on Hindu worship as well and in Brahmanism there developed the Shakti cults with their basic belief that the male can be activated only by being united with the female. The gods, therefore, acquired wives and the wives were worshipped in their own right, for example, *Lakshmi*, the wife of Vishnu and *Parvati*, *Kali* and *Durga*, the various manifestations of the wives of Shiva. This cult appears to have been based on the persistent worship of the Mother Goddess, which has remained an enduring feature of religion in India. Since this could not be suppressed, it was given a priestly blessing and incorporated into the regular ritual in the guise of the Shakti cult.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Muslim-Turkish rule introduced certain significant changes in the social, economic and political organization of the country. But many features such as feudal state organization, reversion to closed economy, proliferation of castes, regional identity in art, scribe and language, *pūja*, *Bhakti* and *tantra*, which developed in medieval times and continued later, can be traced back to Harsha's time of sixth and seventh centuries.