

KING HARSA

King Harsa also known as Harsa Vardhan was born in 590 CE and was an Indian emperor who ruled Northern India over the span of fifty seven years. He was born the second son to Prabhakar Vardhan. His elder brother, Rajya Vardhan, was the king of Thanesar and his younger sister was named Rajya Sri (Panikkar 10). He was born into a royal family classified as the Rajput clan. At the height of his power he managed to build an empire that rivaled the empire of the Guptas (Kulke & Rothermund 109). At the end of his reign Harsa's kingdom included the Punjab, Bengal and Orissa and stretched from the Himalayas to the banks of the Narmada River (Kulke et al. 109). After the collapse of the Gupta Empire near the beginning of the sixth century C.E., a new imperial dynasty was not established in North India but small republics and small monarchical states sprung up instead (Panikkar 2). His reign seemed to mark a transition from the ancient to the medieval period, when decentralized regional empires continually struggled for hegemony (Kulke et al., 109). Harsa united the small republics from Punjab to Central India, and they, at an assembly, crowned Harsa king in April 606 AD when he was merely 16 years old.

Of all the ancient Indian kings, King Harsa of Kanauj who ruled from 606 to 647 is the most documented in history (Lorenzen 212). This documentation about the life and times of king Harsa is thanks in large part to Bana, a poet and great Sanskrit writer, who wrote the famous biography, *Harshacharita*, and also, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who wrote about India during Harsa's reign (Kulke et al. 110).

Prabhakar Vardhan became ill and died while Harsa's brother, Rajya Vardhan was in battle. Prabhakar's queen, Yasovati, wished to die on the funeral pyre of her husband and Harsa took over the administration of the kingdom until his brother returned (Panikkar 12). Rajya Vardhan returned victorious only to find that he must fight another battle. Rajya Sri, the sister of Rajya Vardhan and Harsa, was married to Grahavarman or Graha Varman. The king, Graha Varman Mukhari, had been overthrown and viciously murdered by King Deva Gupta of Malwa. After killing the king of Mukhari, the king of Malwa threw Rajya Sri into prison (Panikkar 17). Harsa's brother, Rajya Vardhan, then the king of Thanesar, was enraged by this assault on his family. He launched a military attack on the Malwa king and won the battle. However, Sasanka, king of Gauda in Bengal, who was really in secret alliance with the Malwa king, enticed Rajya Vardhan by false civilities and then treacherously murdered him (Panikkar 18).

Upon the murder Harsa's brother, Rajya Vardhan, Harsa was immediately declared king and took the throne at the young age of 16. However, it is documented by Bana and Xuanzang that at first Harsa was hesitant to take the throne but after some persuasion he did accept the Crown (Panikkar, 14). Despite Harsa's age when he came to power, he proved himself to be a powerful yet gracious king. After his appointment as king, Harsa joined the kingdom of Thanesar with the kingdom of Kanauj and moved the capital from Thanesar to Kanauj (Schmidt 28).

After learning about the murder of his brother, Harsa was determined to wage war on the double-crossing king of Gauda and killed King Deva Gupta of Malwa in battle (Sen 253). Harsa defeated Sasanka, the ruler of Bengal, but was unable to kill him. Harsa allowed the king of Gauda, Sasanka, to rule his state as a vassal initially; however,

Sasanka revolted but it was only the death of Sasanka that resulted in his land being shared between Harsa and his friend Bhaskara (Panikkar 17). After receiving half of Sasanka's land, Harsa now had the whole of Northern India under his rule. However, the whole of Northern India did not satisfy Harsa (Panikkar 22).

Harsa led an army into the Deccan and Southern India pursuing his ambition of extending his power but he was stopped by Pulakeshi II, the Chalukya king of Vatapi in Northern Karnataka (Panikkar 22). Pulakeshi defeated Harsa's army on the banks of the river Narmada in 636 AD. This battle was the most impressive demonstration of maneuvers utilizing elephant warfare because both Harsa and Pulakeshi had huge elephant corps at their disposal (Sen 256). A truce was established and Harsa decided to retreat back to Kanauj. The end result was that the river Narmada was marked as the southern boundary of Harsa's kingdom. He brought Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under his control. His last military campaign resulted in the successful conquer of Dhruva Sena and Ganjam, a part of the modern Orissa state (Schmidt 28). After this monumental achievement Harsa stopped fighting and engaged in a more peaceful lifestyle.

It was during this time that Harsa's faith shifted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Harsa was an open minded ruler and supported many faiths including Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. "The generous vagueness of Hindu religion allowed room for every sort of opinion and hence dogmatic intolerance and sectarian persecution never very much disgraced Hindu history" (Panikkar 34-35). Harsa's ancestors including his father, Prabhakar worshipped Aditya and other Hindu deities. In his earlier days Harsa was a devout worshipper of Siva (Sen 259). However, according to Bana, in his later years Harsa himself was a Buddhist. Although he followed Buddhism Harsa never gave

up his Hindu faith (Panikkar 35). The Buddhists rank Harsa as one of the great Buddhist rulers of India. “The high standard of classical Sanskrit culture at his court and the generous patronage bestowed on Hindu and Buddhist religious institutions alike seemed to show that the glory of the Gupta age had been revived once more” (Kulke et al. 109-110).

Harsa was reportedly a very charitable king. It seems that Harsa donated the accrued wealth of his kingdom every four years to his subjects as well as making numerous endowments to the University of Nalanda (Panikkar 35). All of the charitable donations made by king Harsa to the University of Nalanda lead to the erection of a huge wall that surrounded the entire university campus in order to create a defense against possible attacks. Harsa also built a large number of temples, monasteries, and other houses of religious worship (Panikkar 36). According to the Chinese Pilgrim Xuanzang Harsa also built numerous stupas in the name of Buddha.

In 641, following Xuanzang’s visit, Harsa was at the height of his political power and sent a mission to China which established the first diplomatic relations between China and India (Sen 261). The Chinese reciprocated by sending a diplomatic representative of their own whose trip is written about in inscriptions at modern Rajgir. These were the first of a total of six missions exchanged, three from each side, over the course of eight years (Sen 261).

“Harsa had a literary and artistic talent and was also a patron of learning” (Sen 260). He created three Sanskrit dramas, *Nagananda*, *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* as well as a grammar and some poetry. *Nagananda* was a Buddhist drama. *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* are plays that are illustrative of the court life of the time in which the

blessings of Siva, Visnu and Indra are called upon (Sen 260). They are classed among minor classics of India. Harsa also had a great respect for other scholars and men of great intellect, so much so that he spent a quarter of the revenues from his kingdom on rewarding these men (Sen 261).

Harsa died in the year 647 after ruling Northern India for 57 years. Harsa is thought to have been unmarried and after Harsa's death, not having any heirs, his empire died with him. The large kingdom very quickly broke up into smaller kingdoms. The years after Harsa's death are very blurry in the history books, but it marks the conclusion of a period that began with fall of the great Gupta Empire.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.bookrags.com/biography/harsha/>

<http://www.bookrags.com/research/harsa-ema-02/>

<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/King+Harsha>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harsha>

<http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-history/ancient-india/harshavardhan.html>

<http://www.civildserviceindia.com/subject/History/prelims/harsha-administration.html>

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