

## The Political History of Northern India : Post Gupta Period

(500-700 A.D.)

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### Abstract

*The Post Gupta era is a period that witnessed the beginning of the regional identities that took deep roots in course of times. From the decline of the Guptas until the rise of Harsha in the early seventh century the political scene is full of confusion, chaos and confusion and there are few records to illuminate it. This was a period when petty regional kingdoms vied with each other to succeed to the past glory of the imperial Guptas. Northern India in fact was divided into three main kingdoms, those of the later Guptas of Magadha, the Maukharis, and the Pushyabhutis. All of these were the feudatories of the imperial Guptas.*

**Keywords : Guptas, Kingdoms, Regional, Imperial**

### The Later Guptas

By the middle of the 6th century a line of Gupta rulers with the same surname, but not connected in their official genealogy with the line, ruled in Magadha. The later Guptas doubtless served as feudatories under the Imperial Guptas. At early stage, the Later Guptas had established a stronghold in Magadha. The slow disintegration of the Gupta empire aroused the ambition of many potential feudatories, and a footing in Magadha was most important for achieving effective success against any other claimants to the throne of the Guptas. In fact the name ending 'Gupta' may have been chosen and cherished by the Later Guptas in an attempt to bring the family closer, in the eyes of the people, to the well-established Imperial Gupta dynasty.

Krishna-Gupta (480-502 A.D.) the founder of the dynasty and his two successors, Harsha-Gupta (502-525 A.D.) and Jivita-Gupta (525-545 A.D.) may be regarded as feudatories of rulers of the main Gupta line. The dynasty came into his own with the accession of Kumara-Gupta, who made his Kingdom more than a mere principality. He defeated Maukhari king Ishana-Varman of Kanauj and extended the Magadha dominion upto Prayag. However, Ishana-Varman's son Sarva-Varman killed Kumara-Gupta's son

Damodara-Gupta and annexed the Magadha Kingdom. Now Malaya was the chief centre of the Later Guptas until the rise of Harsha Damodara-Gupta was succeeded by Maha-Sena-Gupta, ruler of Malaya, who appears to have achieved noteworthy success at the beginning of his career. Probably to secure an initial advantage over the Maukharis, Maha-Sena-Gupta associated himself with the rising Pushyabhuti dynasty by giving in marriage his sister, Maha-Sena-Gupta, to Aditya-Vardhana, the grandfather of Harsha. Thus Maha-Sena-Gupta with the help of Pushyabhuti recovered his kingdom and won a victory over Kamarupa (Assam).

Maha-Sena-Gupta's two sons—Kumara-Gupta and Madhava-Gupta were sent to Thaneshvar to be companions of Harsha, however the third son Deva-Gupta remained in Malaya. Harsha's empire included Magadha which he entrusted to Madhava-Gupta. Thus actually two lines of Guptas came into existence, one of Magadha and the other of Malaya. The Guptas of Magadha continued to prosper by their friendship with Harsha. But the story of Malaya is different. The Gupta ruler of Malaya, Deva-Gupta continued his hostile policy towards the Maukharis. He attacked Maukhari king Graha-Varman and killed him. But Graha-Varman had married Rajyashri, the sister of Rajya-Vardhana and Harsha-Vardhana. Rajya-Vardhana marched on Malaya, killed Deva-Gupta and annexed the territory to his dominions. Thus the Malaya branch of the Later Guptas ended abruptly.

### **The Maukharis**

In the second half of the sixth century a city on the upper Ganga, before its confluence with the Jamuna, Kanyakubja (later known as Kanauj), rose to prominence as the capital of the Maukhari Kings. The Maukharis were a very ancient tribe whose branches were spread over different parts of the country. However, in the section, we have focused our attention to the Maukharis of Kanauj, who came to prominence in the sixth century A.D. The first three kings i.e. Mari-Varman, Aditya-Varman and Ishvara-Varman are given the simple title of *Maharaja*. Like their contemporaries, the later Guptas, the Maukharis doubtless served as feudatories of the Imperial Guptas.

The fourth king of Ishana-Varman's (A.D.550-560-5) career however was long and eventful. He added considerably to the family's prestige and earned for himself the higher ranking title of *Maharaj-adhiraja*. He followed an aggressive expansionist policy. After defeating the

Andhras, the Sulikas (Cholas) and the Gauda, he came in conflict with the later Guptas of Magadha. Kumara-Gupta successfully met Ishana-Varman. The seals and coins of this ruler indicate that he was a learned person, a just ruler, a brave warrior and a patron of education. Ishana-Varman was succeeded by his son, *Maharaj-adhiraja* Sri Sarva-Varman (A.D.560-5 to 585).

He annexed Magadha to his hereditary Kingdom, the capital of which was Kanauj and firmly established Maukhari supremacy in the *Madhya-desha*. Sarva-Varman was succeeded on the throne by his son Avanti-Varman (A.D.585-600). He inherited the extensive domain of his father and enjoyed full imperial titles (*Maharaj-adhiraja*). He appears to have been an unambitious ruler and had an uneventful reign. His son Graha-Varman succeeded Avanti-Varman, at least to the throne of Kanauj. He married Rajyashri of the Pushyabhuti family of Thaneshvar. The wicked king of Malaya killed Graha-Varman and imprisoned Rajyashri. The kingdom of Kanauj was combined with that of Thaneshwar and the nucleus thus formed was developed into an Empire by Harsha-Vardhana.

### **The Pushyabhutis**

The city of Sthanisvara, now Thaneshvar, in the watershed between the Ganga and the Indus, became the capital of a rising family of rulers descended from a certain Pushyabhuti. The first three rulers i.e. Nara-Vardhan, Rajya-Vardhana-I and Aditya-Vardhana are given the simple title *of Maharaja*. It shows that these rulers were initially feudal-lords under Gupta kingdom and subsequently they perhaps shifted their loyalty to the Huna kings. Aditya-Vardhana's son Prabhakara-Vardhana (A.D.583-605) also known as *Pratapa-Sila* was the first ruler of the dynasty to assume the title *Parama-bhattaraka maharaj-adhiraja*. He defeated Huns, Sindhu's kings, Gurjara's king, the lord of Gandhara, later's king and Malaya's king. His desire for conquest was eventually carried out by his younger son Harsha-Vardhana. Prabhakara-Vardhana was a devotee of the Sun. He had many wives, among whom Yashovati was the chief queen. She was mother of Rajya-Vardhana, Harsha-Vardhana and Rajyashri. Prabhakara-Vardhana had made a matrimonial alliance with the Maukharis by giving in marriage his daughter Rajyashri to Graha-Varman. As a result of this engagement, the Maukhari nobles, on the death of their last king Graha-Varman, requested Harsha, the reigning Pushyabhuti king to unite his kingdom with the Maukhari Kingdom and rule from

Kanauj. Prabhakara-Vardhana was succeeded by his elder son Rajya-Vardhana (A.D.605). But after a short period, he was killed in a battle with Shashanka of Gauda (Bengal). He was succeeded by Harsha-Vardhana, his younger brother who was actually elected to the throne by the *mantri-parishad* (Council of Ministers).

On the periphery of these three kingdoms were a number of small principalities continually fighting each other and seizing territory. This was particularly the case in Gauda (Bengal), Kamarupa (Assam) and the Maitrakas of Valabhi.

### Harsha's Conquests and Achievements

A graphic account of Harsha's family history is to be found in Bang's *Harsha-Charita*, supplemented and corroborated by Chinese visitor Hiuen-Tsang's description of Si-Yu-Ki in the 'Records'. The information is in some cases by inscriptions.

Harsha-Vardhana began his reign in A. D.606. He immediately sent a great army to avenge his elder brother's death and to rescue his sister Rajyashri who had been taken prisoner by king of Malaya. He succeeded in both. Rajyashri was the widow of Maukhari king Graha-Varman of Kanauj. Now the two important kingdoms— Kanauj and Thaneshvar—were united under Harsha-Vardhana.

According to Hiuen-Tsang, Harsha kept sixty thousand war elephants and a cavalry of one hundred thousand horses. This presents a sharp contrast to the army of Chandragupta Maurya, who had nine thousand fighting elephants and a cavalry of thirty thousand horses. Although the number of the infantry is not given by Hiuen-Tsang, keeping in with his other figures it would come to nearly twenty millions, for the Maurya infantry numbered around six lakhs. How do we explain this contrast between the army of the larger Maurya empire and that of the smaller empire of the Harsha? Obviously regiments of Harsha's army were supplied by vassals and mobilized only in times of war.

In the course of the forty-one years that Harsha ruled, he included among his feudatories, kings as distant as those of Jalandhar (in the Punjab), Kashmir, Nepal, Valabhi, Gujarat, Malwa, Sind, Frontier Provinces and Assam. United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Central India and Rajputana were under direct administration of Harsha. Harsha was unable to extend his power in Deccan or Southern India. In fact, he suffered his one major defeat at

the hands of a Deccan Chalukya king Pulakeshin II. Thus Harsha finally found himself ruling a large kingdom in northern India.

Harsha was an energetic ruler who travelled frequently in order to keep himself accessible to his subjects. In the latter half of his reign he spent most of his time in camp, travelling from place to place. He was a man of considerable literary interests and talents and despite his administrative duties, he managed to write plays i.e. *Ratnavali*, *Priyadarshika* and *Nagananda* of which first two are comedies in the classical style and the third has a serious religious theme. He maintained a magnificent court where philosophers, poets, dramatists and painters flourished. Bana, the author of *Harsha-Charita* and *Kadambari*, was the court poet of Harsha. Maurya, the author of *Mayurashataka*, and Bhartrihari, the author of *Vakyapadiya*, a grammarian, also lived at the court of Harsha. Harsha was the chief patron of the University of Nalanda where about 10,000 students from all parts of India and abroad studied.

Harsha was, in the beginning, a devotee of Shiva. Probably owing to the influence of his sister Rajyashri and the Buddhist Saint, Divakara Mitra, he accepted Buddhism. Later on, he changed over to Mahayana Buddhism under the influence of Hiuen-Tsang. But he respected all religions and patronised them equally. Public worship respected all religions and patronised them equally. Public worship of the brahmins and the gifts at Prayag amply prove this. Free hospitals for men and animals were run by the state. Rest-houses (*Dharmashalas*) were opened for travellers and poor people who received free food and accommodation.

With a view to popularising and propagating the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, Harsha arranged at Kanauj a big assembly of 20 kings, 3,000 monks thoroughly acquainted with both Hinayana and Mahayana. 3,000 brahmins and *Nirgranthas* (Jainas) and about a thousand scholars from the Nalanda monastery participated in the assembly. It was presided over by Hiuen-Tsang. For three weeks all these members discussed the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, and they were once again, made popular.

Another great ceremony was held for 75 days at Prayag (Allahabad). The images of Buddha, Sun and Shiva were publicly worshipped and gifts of valuable articles and clothing were given to about 50,00,000 persons belonging to all faiths. Hiuen-Tsang writes that Harsha

actually gave away everything in the royal treasury and became a monk. Harsha repeated such emptying of the royal treasury once in every five years.

Events towards the end of Harsha's reign are described in Chinese sources. His contemporary, the T'ang emperor Tai-Tsung, sent an ambassador to his court in 643 and again in 647. On the second occasion the Chinese ambassador found that Harsha had died and that the throne had been usurped by an undeserving king. The Chinese ambassador rushed to Nepal and Assam and raised a force with which the allies of Harsha defeated the usurper, who was taken to China as a prisoner. The kingdom of Harsha disintegrated rapidly into small states. The three border states of Assam, Nepal and Kashmir resumed their independent rule. Northern India was divided among several Rajput dynasties. In the north, the object of political ambition at this time was to conquer and hold the city of Kanauj, which had become a symbol of imperial power, perhaps owing to its connection with Harsha and with Yashovarman (700-740 A.D.) who maintained this status for the city. Kanauj became a bone of contention between three powers. This was to exhaust all three of them, leaving the field open to their feudatories, which resulted in the founding of small regional kingdoms all over northern India.

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