

THE GURJARA PRATI HARAS(PART-1)

B.A.(HISTORY) PART-2 PAPER-3

**DR.MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HOD
PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, VKSU, ARA (BIHAR)**

Introduction

- The *Gurjara Pratiharas* were one of the most powerful dynasties of early medieval India. They occupied western India, an area frequented by Arab travellers. The Gurjara Pratihara dominion was known as *al-Juzr* to the Arabs, who regarded them as one of the three most powerful Indian ruling dynasties, the other two being the *Palas* and the *Rashtrakutas*. This dynasty saw its fortunes rising under Nagabhata I (730–760 A.D.) who successfully defeated Arab invaders. Bhoja or Mihira Bhoja (c. 836-885 A.D.) was the most well-known king of this dynasty. The Pratiharas were known chiefly for their patronage of art, sculpture and temple-building, and for their continuous warfare with contemporary powers like the

Introduction

Palas (8th century A.D. - 12th century A.D.) of eastern India and the Rashtrakuta Dynasty (8th century A.D.- 10th century A.D.) of southern India. All these powers came to be engaged in a conflict known as the “tripartite struggle” for the possession of the city of Kanauj in the Ganga-Jamuna doab, the region between these two important rivers in northern India. In this conflict the Pratiharas ultimately emerged as the most successful, establishing their authority over the city and the area.

Rise Of Gurjara Pratiharas

In 647 A.D., the fall of the *Pushyabhuti Dynasty* based at Kanyakubja (modern Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh) under Harshavardhana (606-647 A.D.) led to chaos and political instability. Many kingdoms rose and fell, and those which came to dominate were those of the Pratiharas, the Palas of eastern India and the Rashtrakutas of southern India. Kanyakubja was ruled at the time by the *Ayudha dynasty* (c. 9th century A.D.).

According to epigraphic evidence, the Pratiharas were descendants of Lakshmana of the solar race of the great epic, the Ramayana. Some scholars opine that they were a branch of the Gurjara race.

They are mentioned in the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II, the records of Hieun Tsang and the Harshacharita of Bana. It is known

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from the Rashtrakuta record that the Pratiharas belonged to the Gurjara stock. It is also held by some scholars that the Gurjaras were central Asiatic nomads who accompanied the Hunas into India. Some others are of the opinion that the Gurjaras were of indigenous origin. Another opinion is that the Pratiharas were a tribe of the land called Gurjaradesa. The expression Gurjara-Pratihara family of the Gurjara country was possessed by the Pratiharas since the time of Vatsaraja. Whatsoever may be the fact that the Gurjaras came into prominence about the second half of the 6th century A.D., they took advantage of the downfall of the Gupta Empire to establish their political authority. Their most important kingdom was that founded in the heart of Rajputna near Jodhpur and gradually advanced towards the South and took hold of Avanti and later on conquered Kannauj. The Avanti branch of the Pratiharas has become famous by their success over the Arab

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Muslims. The Gurjara Pratihara dynasty was founded by Nagabhata I in the region of Malwa in the eighth century A.D.

He belonged to a Rajput clan. Later one of his successors, Vatsaraja extended his rule over to a large part of North India and made Kannauj in western Uttara Pradesh his capital. Vatsaraja's policy of expansion brought him in conflict with Dharamapala, the Pala King of Bengal and Bihar. Soon, the Rashtrakuta king Dhruva from south India jumped into the fight. And thus began what is known as 'Tripartite Struggle' i.e. struggle among three powers. It continued for about the next hundred and fifty years under various succeeding kings with ups and downs. The Gurjara-Pratiharas, however, could continue to maintain their hold over Kannauj till the last. One of the important kings of this dynasty was Mihira Bhoja (ninth century). He was highly praised by an Arabian scholar Sulaiman for keeping his empire safe from robbers.

Pratihara Kings

- **Nagabhata I**

He was the first significant king of the dynasty and because of his achievements that included the defeat of the Arabs, his line came to overshadow other Gurjara-Pratihara families. He fought against the Rashtrakutas, though unsuccessfully. He was succeeded by his nephew Kakustha, who in turn was followed by his brother Devaraja. These two ruled in the period c. 760-775 A.D.

- **Vatsaraja**

Able to defeat the Bhandi or Bhatti clan, Vatsaraja (775-800 A.D.) gained sway over most of central Rajasthan. He then dabbled in Kanyakubja politics, defeated the Palas and secured the throne for his Ayudha nominee. Dhruva Rashtrakuta dealt him a serious blow, capturing the insignia of royalty that Vatsaraja had captured from the Palas, and drove him to seek shelter in the deserts of Rajasthan.

Pratihara Kings

- **Nagabhata II**

Vatsaraja's son Nagabhata II (800-833 A.D.) tried to restore the lost fortunes of the dynasty. He subdued the kingdoms of Sindh (now in present-day Pakistan) and those in eastern India and later defeated the Palas. His further conquests were over the kings ruling different portions of Gurjaradesha in western India, including the Arabs. Nagabhata engaged in conflict with the Rashtrakutas over the control of Gujarat and was eventually defeated by the Rashtrakuta Govinda III (793-814 A.D), losing thereby south Gujarat and Malwa. After a time, able to regain his strength, he managed to recover some of his lost territories. He also captured Kanyakubja, ending the Ayudha rule. This city now became the Pratihara capital. He was succeeded by his son Ramabhadra (833-836 A.D), whose rule saw some territorial recovery.

Pratihara Kings

- **Bhoja or Mihira Bhoja**

Grandson of Nagabhata II, he ruled for nearly 50 years. Though initially defeated by the Palas, Rashtrakutas, and the Kalachuris, he managed to gather his forces and launch a counterstrike. He defeated the Palas, and possibly even the Rashtrakutas with the help of his Chedi and Guhila feudatories. He managed to annex many parts of the Pala Empire in eastern India and recovered territories in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, thus extending his empire to a considerable extent.

Pratihara Kings

- **Mahendrapala I**

Mahendrapala I (885-910 A.D.) maintained the empire established by his father Bhoja and made fresh conquests in the east. He lost to the king of Kashmir and ceded to him some territories in Punjab. His death was followed by a civil war between his son Mahipala and his half-brother Bhoja II.

- **Mahipala I**

Mahipala I (c. 912-944 A.D.) managed to secure the throne but was defeated by the Rashtrakutas, which enabled the Palas to take advantage of the situation and retake some of their former territories from the Pratiharas.

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Mahipala tried to recover from these losses and did regain some lost lands but his plans of conquest were checked in the later years once more by the Rashtrakutas.

- **Mahendrapala II** (c. 944-948 A.D.) and his successors did not contribute anything significant in their reigns. These kings ruled more like petty kings not much involved in the affairs of the day.

War With Rival Powers

The expansion of the Gurjara-Pratihara kingdom involved constant conflicts with other contemporary powers such as the Palas and the Rashtrakutas known as the “*tripartite struggle*”. Much of it had to do with the control over Kanyakubja as since the days of **Harsha**, Kanauj was considered the symbol of sovereignty of north India and control of Kanauj also implied control of the upper Gangetic valley and its rich resources in trade and agriculture.

The Ayudhas ruling Kanyakubja were deemed to be weaklings, and the Palas intervened in their politics, supporting one candidate to the throne, and treating the 'king' there as a feudatory. The Pratiharas, enemies of the Palas, thus had the excuse to attack Kanyakubja (also known as Mahodaya at the time) and support their own candidate to kingship, and fight the Palas on their behalf as Vatsaraja did.

War With Rival Powers

The Pratiharas met more than their match in the Rashtrakutas, who frustrated their attempts to control the upper Gangetic valley and Malwa. The enmity had begun over the control of Malwa and Gujarat as early as the middle of the eighth century AD when the Rashtrakuta and Gurjara-Pratihara empires were both just founded. The Rashtrakuta emperors Dhruva (780-793 A.D.) and Govinda III (793-814 A.D.) defeated them. Al-Masudi refers to the Rashtrakuta-Pratihara enmity that was the characteristic feature of the epoch.

The Rashtrakutas would however never stay to control the north; they would come and go, creating much nuisance for the Pratiharas and all that they had achieved. Historian KM Munshi refers to the Rashtrakutas coming “like a whirlwind from the south” and destroying the Pratihara gains. He observes: “With indomitable energy the Pratiharas would then restore the imperial fabric, but equally often the Rashtrakutas, having subdued the south, would march northward to destroy what had been built” .

War With Rival Powers

Dhruva's victory over Vatsaraja enabled the Palas to assert their prominence once more and to install their own nominee on the Kanyakubja throne. However, despite defeats by the Rastrakutas, Nagabhata II and later Bhoja rebuilt their empire with Kanyakubja becoming and remaining the Pratihara capital. The Rashtrakutas continued to engage with and defeat successive Pratihara kings well into the 10th century A.D.

Geographical considerations also dictated the hostilities between these far-flung kingdoms. The control over the areas connected by the Ganges river, "the highway of traffic linking up all the country from Bengal to mid-India" was crucial for any kingdom in order to achieve greater prosperity in terms of commerce and economy. Similarly, the need to control south-western trade routes and seaborne commerce led the Pratiharas to retain control of Gujarat.

War With Rival Powers

Geographically far off from their base areas in the south, the Rashtrakutas could not afford to stay for long in the north. Much of their campaigns were of the nature of raids, and carried out for the sake of prestige, for obtaining booty, the desire to garner imperial glory and establish their own pre-eminence over the predominant dynasties in India.

Decline of Gurjara Pratihara

Several feudatories of the empire took advantage of the temporary weakness of the Gurjar Pratiharas during war of succession and they declare their independence, notably the Paramaras of Malwa, the Chandelas of Bundelkhand, and the Kalachuris of Mahakoshal. The Rashtrakuta emperor Indra III briefly captured Kannauj, and although the Pratiharas regained the city, their position continued to weaken in the 10th century, partly as a result of the drain of simultaneously fighting off Turkic attacks from the west and the Pala advances in the east. The Gurjar-Pratiharas lost control of Rajasthan to their feudatories, and the Chandelas captured the strategic fortress of Gwalior in central India, 950 A.D. By the end of the tenth century the Gurjar Pratihara domains had dwindled to

Decline of Gurjara Pratihara

a small state centered on Kannauj. Mahmud of Ghazni sacked Kannauj in 1018 A.D, and the Pratihara ruler Rajapala fled. The Chandela ruler Gauda captured and killed Rajapala, placing Rajapala's son Trilochanpala on the throne as a proxy. Jasapala, the last Gurjara ruler of Kanauj, died in 1036 A.D. With this the Gurjara-Pratihara went into the historical horizon of India.

Map of Gurjara Pratihara Empire



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