

BANABHATTA
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BANABHATTA

Harshacharita

Of all the extant historical biographies of ancient times, mention may first be made of the Harshacharita of Banabhatta, the court poet-cum-historian of Harsha (AD 606-47) 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.

ANCESTRY OF HARSHAVARDHANA

His inclination towards or interest in history was quite consistent with his family tradition.

Ancestry of Harshavardhana

Harsha's ancestors find mention in the third chapter of the Harshacharita. 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

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Vardhana dynasty. His successors, Naravardhana, Rayavardhana and Adityavardhana (mentioned in Madhuvana copper-plate inscription of Harsha) 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 Harshavardhana and a daughter,

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Rajyasri. Prabhakarvardhana (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 *paramabhataraka*. 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.

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He says that he was “A lion to the 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 north-western 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

ANCESTRY OF HARSHAVARDHANA

Rajputana 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 Kushanas (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

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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 over lordship, 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 HARSHA 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

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO ACCESSION OF HARSHA TO THE THRONE

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 told in the sixth chapter that Rajyavardhana because of being shocked and terribly upset offered the throne to his younger brother, Harsha.

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO ACCESSION OF HARSHA TO THE THRONE

The latter too was not willing to accept the throne and ultimately the former had to ascend the throne of Thaneshvar (in AD 605). No 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 Thaneshvar.

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO ACCESSION OF HARSHA TO THE THRONE

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 Harsha 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 Harsha) who had come all the way from his distant kingdom to assist his ally, king Devagupta of Malawa. This is the coalition of

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO ACCESSION OF HARSHA TO THE THRONE

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,

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Rajyasri, from captivity in her own capital. Bana has, maintained sequence and coherence to a considerable extent in the narration of events. Harsha 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 throne. But after being persuaded by the councilors of the state he agreed to take the reign in his hand, and ultimately ascended the throne of Thaneshwar (in AD 606).

(To be continued)