

# **HARSHAVARDHANA**

**(SOCIETY, ECONOMY & CULTURE)**

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

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## SOCIETY & ECONOMY

Both Bana and Hiuen Tsang portray the social life in the times of Harsha. The fourfold division of the society – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra-was prevalent. The Brahmins were the privileged section of the society and they were given land grants by the kings. The Kshatriyas were the ruling class. The Vaisyas were mainly traders. Hiuen Tsang mentions that the Shudras practiced agriculture. There existed many sub castes. The position of women was not satisfactory.

## SOCIETY & ECONOMY

The institution of *Swyamvara* (the choice of choosing her husband) had declined. Remarriage of widows was not permitted, particularly among the higher castes. The system of dowry had also become common. The practice of sati was also prevalent. Hiuen Tsang mentions three ways of disposal of the dead-cremation, water burial and exposure in the woods. The trade and commerce had declined during Harsha's period. This is evident from the decline of trade centres, less number of coins, and slow activities of merchant

## SOCIETY & ECONOMY

guilds. The decline of trade in turn affected the handicrafts industry and agriculture. Since there was no large scale demand for goods, the farmers began to produce only in a limited way. This led to the rise of self-sufficient village economy. In short, there was a sharp economic decline as compared to the economy of the Gupta period.

# CULTURE

The art and architecture of Harsha's period are very few and mostly followed the Gupta style. Hiuen Tsang describes the glory of the monastery with many storeys built by Harsha at Nalanda. He also speaks of a copper statue of Buddha with eight feet in height. The brick temple of Lakshmana at Sirpur with its rich architecture is assigned to the period of Harsha. Harsha was a great patron of learning. His biographer Banabhatta adorned his royal court. Besides Harshacharita, he wrote Kadambari. Other

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literary figures in Harsha's court were Matanga Divakara and the famous Barthrihari, who was the poet, philosopher and grammarian. Harsha himself authored three plays Ratnavali, Priyadarsika and Nagananda. Harsha patronized the Nalanda University by his liberal endowments. It attained international reputation as a centre of learning during his reign. Hiuen Tsang visited the Nalanda University and remained as a student for some time.

# CULTURE

## NALANDA UNIVERSITY

The Chinese travelers of ancient India mentioned a number of educational institutions. The most famous among them were the Hinayana University of Valabhi and the Mahayana University of Nalanda. Hiuen Tsang gives a very valuable account of the Nalanda University. The term Nalanda means “giver of knowledge”. It was founded by Kumaragupta I during the Gupta period. It was patronized by his successors and later by Harsha. The professors of the University

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were called *panditas*. Some of its renowned professors were Dingnaga, Dharmapala, Sthiramati and Silabadhra. Dharmapala was a native of Kanchipuram and he became the head of the Nalanda University. Nalanda University was a residential university and education was free including the boarding and lodging. It was maintained with the revenue derived from 100 to 200 villages endowed by different rulers. Though it was a Mahayana University, different religious subjects like the Vedas, Hinayana doctrine,



# CULTURE

Sankhya and Yoga philosophies were also taught. In addition to that, general subjects like logic, grammar, astronomy, medicine and art were in the syllabus. It attracted students not only from different parts of India but from different countries of the east. Admission was made by means of an entrance examination. The entrance test was so difficult that not more than thirty percent of the candidates were successful. Discipline was very strict. More than lectures, discussion played an important part and the

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medium of instruction was Sanskrit. Archeological excavations have brought to light the ruins of the Nalanda University. It shows the grandeur of this centre of learning and confirms the account given by the Chinese pilgrims. It had numerous classrooms and a hostel attached to it. According to Itsing, the Chinese pilgrim, there were 3000 students on its rolls. It had an observatory and a great library housed in three buildings. Its fame rests on the fact that it attracted scholars from various parts of the world. It was an institution of advanced learning and research.

# CONCLUSION

In the post-Gupta period many kingdoms came into existence. These kingdoms were not as large as the Gupta kingdom. The political fortunes of the dynasties which ruled these kingdoms fluctuated with time. During this political juncture the Pushybhutis under Harsha managed to bring almost the whole of northern India under their control. Harsha initially defeated some of the powerful king of his period like Sasanka of Gauda and Deva Gupta of Malwa. After consolidation of his empire Harsha Siladitya

# CONCLUSION

looks forward the wellbeing of his subject by introducing smooth and effective administrative apparatus with parental care of the King himself. It is also noticed that Harsha, in the latter year of his reign he accepted Mahayana form of Buddhism and patronize this sect vehemently. Under his supervision Buddhism witnessed her last glorious time in the history of India.

# CONCLUSION

Harsha also proved himself as a man of learning by patronizing Nalanda University and favouring learned personalities like Banabhatta and Hiuen Tsang in his court. Harsha died in the year 647 AD. He ruled over north India for 41 years. After Harsha's death, apparently without any heirs, his empire died with him. The kingdom disintegrated rapidly into small states.

(Concluded)