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Conquest and Extent of Empire of Harshavardhana



In 575 AD with the downfall of Gupta Empire, Northern India experienced a lot of political instability. Taking advantage of the situation many small dynasties proclaimed themselves

independent. War of territorial expansion broke out among various dynasties, Pushyabhuti dynasty of Thaneshwar was one among them.

By early 6th and mid of 7th century the Vardhana or Pushyabhuti Dynasty became the most powerful political power in North India. The most significant ruler of Vardhana dynasty was Harshvardhana. He made an effort to bring political unity in North India and was also successful in his initiative. The dynasty got its name from the founder Pushyabhuti. We get to know about this dynasty from Harshacharita written by Bana Bhatta. There is no authentic information related to origin of Pushyabhuti Dynasty. It is believed that they were feudal lord or court ministers of the Guptas. Taking advantage of inefficient powers, Vardhanas extended their power over East Punjab (Haryana) and declared Thaneshwar as their capital. Information about Harshavardhana's ancestry have been found from the inscriptions of Madhuban and Banskhedra and from the seals found in Sonapat and Nalanda.

There is no information about Pushyabhuti in any historical evidences except for the Harshacharita but the names of other 4 rulers who existed before Harshvardhana namely Narvardhana (505-530 AD), Rajyavardhana (530-555 AD), Adityavardhana (555-580 AD), and Prabhakarvardhana(580-605 AD) has been found. Prabhakarvardhana had two sons Rajyavardhana II and Harshavardhana and a daughter Rajyashree.

Prabhakarvardhana laid the foundation of power and dignity for Vardhana Dynasty. For his strength and countless effort towards glorifying his dynasty Prabhakarvardhana adopted the title of 'Parambhattarak' and 'Maharajadhiraj', but he lost his life after he was seriously ill. After his death Rajyavardhana II who was Prabhakarvardhana's elder son succeeded the throne. He was in deep distress after his father's death so, he decided to become a hermit and permitted Harshvardhana to take care of his throne. After giving power to Harshavardhana, Rajyavardhana went to Malwa and defeated the king of Malwa, Dev Gupta but, Dev Gupta and shashak conspired against RajyaVardhana and murdered him. In such condition Harshvardhana became the king of Thaneshwar, there were a number of powers who came up by the time Harshavardhana rose to power. King of Malwa and Gaud

were the small political competitor apart from that territorial expansion was also very necessary. Harshavardhan was very keen on expanding his territory so he adopted the policy of Digvijaya (victory) and Military conquests. Based on Chinese traveler Hieun-Tsang's writing some of the victories of Harshavardhana has been outlined.

East Campaign

The main aim of Harsha's east conquest was to defeat Sasanka. According to Harshacharita and Arya-manju-shri-mul-kalpa Harsha not only defeated Sasanka but at the same time he also took over other small kingdoms which came in the path of his victory. After the death of Sasanka in 619-20 AD Harsha took control of Gaud. Kamrupa in east was already influenced by king Harsha. Bhaskarvarman the ruler of Kamrupa already accepted the subordination of Harsha. As a result of Eastward Conquest Harshavardhan was blessed with friendship alliance of many kingdoms. Ruler of Magadha Pundravarmana also accepted Harsha's dominance. Along with Magadha even Nalanda accepted Harsha's hegemony. A seal has been found from there, Harshavardhana constructed a Vahara of bronze and gifted it to the villagers. Inscription of Bhitara (Faizabad) reveals that Ayodhya was under Harshavardhana rule, Harsha organized 'Mahamoksha parishad' in Prayag after every five years. The novel Ratnawali also tells about existence of Kosambhi bhukti.

Battle of Vallabhi

The empire of Vallabhi is located in Gujarat. Dhruvsena II was the ruler who was also known as Dhruv Bhatta. Harsha attacked and defeated him. The incident is mentioned in the writings of Jay Bhatta III. In the political outlook Vallabhi attracted both Harsha and Chalukya. Hence, Harsha went under friendly alliance with Dhruvasena II and married his daughter to him. As a result he secured his military force in the western boundary. Thus also restricted the expansion of Chalukya's in North. This was the most successful diplomatic step of Harsha.

Victory of Sindh

Sindh was the neighboring place of Harsha's kingdoms. So he wanted territorial expansion over Sindh. Banbhatta has given an elaborate description in Harshacharita about how Harshavardhana treated king of Sindh with lots of respect and honour and also extracted huge amount of wealth from him. This war policy of Harshavardhana helped him to win over the old enemy of Vardhana's, that was Sindh but, the contradictory information has been found in the writings of Hieun -Tsang who described Sindh as independent and powerful kingdom so, there is no authentic information about victory of Harsha over Sindh.

Victory of Bengal

After the death of Sasanka in 620 AD, Harshavardhana started campaign. He conquered very large part of Bengal. Harshavardhana gained supremacy of Samtat, Tamralipti, Karnasuarna and Pundravardhan. After victory over Bengal, Harshavardhana issued copper inscription (Daanpatra).

Harsha and Pulekeshin II

After the battle with Vallabhis, war became inevitable between ruler of Chalukyan king Pulkeshin II and Harshavardhana. Both the rulers were very ambitious. Details regarding the battle is found in the writings of Hieun- Tsang and Aihole inscription of Ravikirti. Harsha as a result of his defeat had to agree on keeping his empire confined till river Narmada as it was considered the boundary line for both the kingdoms.

Expansion in Deccan India

Writings of Huen -Tsang tells that Harshavardhana controlled Jejakbhukti (Bundelkhand) Maneshwarpur (Gwalior), Gurjar and Ujjain.

Campaign of Kashmir and Nepal

Victory over Nepal and Kashmir by Harshavardhana is unsure but Banbhatta and Hieun-Tsang, both have written about supremacy of Harsha over these areas. According to Hieun-

Tsang, he carried tooth of Gautam Buddha from Kashmir to Kannauj and built a sangharam. As Harsha Samvat was prevalent in Nepal thus, it can be inferred that Nepal was under control of Harshavardhana.

Orissa campaign

By 640 AD Harshavardhana, brought Northern, southern Orissa and Kalinga under his control. After this victory of Harshavardhana, the entire northern India was under his control. Thus, he adopted the title of Shaklotarapathnath. Thus, after consolidating his empire, he began with his imperialist policies and after Gupta's he is considered to have established huge consolidated empire.

Extent of empire of Harshavardhana

Harshavardhana received the area of Delhi, Thaneshwar and eastern Punjab in legacy. Prabhakarvardhana despite winning a few battles was unable to add any new territory to his kingdom. Kannauj extended upto Northern areas of India. Harsha added Kannauj to his empire and extended the boundary of his territory.

The Banskhedra and Madhuban copper plates informs us that Ahichatra (Rohilkhand) and Shravasti (Bahraich) were also a part of his empire. Mat-Wa-Lin states Harsha adopted a title Magadhadhiraj in 641 AD which infers that he annexed Magadha in the same year.

Hieun –Tsang describes about Munger district was also annexed by Harsha and was donated to the Buddhist monks. Hiuen – Tsang also informs that Harshavardhana also annexed Odra (Orissa) and Kongodh (present Ganjam). The evidence of Harsha's control over Orissa is also proved by the donation of 80 villages of Orissa to the Buddhist monks which was later refused by them.

In south, the boundary of Harsha's empire extended upto the Narmada river, from where the boundary of Chalukyan kingdom began. Though it is quite difficult estimate the extent of Harsha's empire in South India. Moreover, several small parts of Vallabhi was also out of

control of Harshavardhana thus, it cannot be accepted that the entire area of Gujarat and Saurashtra was within his control. Whereas, western Malwa was under complete control of Harshavardhana. He probably gained victory over Sindh but could not annex it in his empire. As, the ruler of Sindh accepted the supremacy of Harshavardhana and secured his independence. The ruler of Kamrupa named Bhaskarvarman willingly accepted the supremacy of Harshavardhana. But it is not considered to be completely authentic as the relationship of Bhaskarvarman and Harsha was as a result of their common enemy named Sasanka, the ruler of Gaud. Also Bhaskarvarman did not attend Mahamokshaparisada as a subordinate ruler rather as a friend of Harsha.

Harshavardhana also maintained a cordial relation with the ruler of Kashmir. The contemporary ruler of Kashmir was Durlabhavardhana. As per the biography of Hiuen – Tsang the tooth of lord Buddha was willingly given by the ruler of Kashmir to Harshavardhana. Thus, it can be said that the ruler of Kashmir wanted to maintain a cordial relation with Harsha.

As a result of his military campaign Harsha established a huge empire. According to K.M Panikkar the boundary of Harsha's empire extended from Assam to Kashmir and from Himachal to Vindhya. Thus, he was the head of entire northern India. He also gained control over Nepal. According to Radha Kumudh Mukherjee there were a very few territories under direct control of Harshavardhana but a huge area was under his influence. Harsha did not have direct control but had his influence over Kamrupa, Kashmir, Nepal and Vallabhi. Thus the exact boundary of Harshavardhana cannot be clearly estimated. Few historians consider his empire to be extended over a large area whereas a few believed to be over a small part of India.