



## Background

Harshavardhana, also known as Harsha, was a prominent ruler of the 7th century CE. He belonged to the Pushyabhuti dynasty and ruled over a vast region of North India after the fall of the Gupta Empire. His capital was **Kannauj**, and his empire included much of northern and north-western India.

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## Administration under Harsha

### 1. Central Administration:

Harsha's administration reflected continuity from the Gupta period with certain modifications. He was the **head of state** with **absolute power**, yet he delegated responsibilities to ministers and officials. The king took personal interest in governance, military campaigns, and welfare activities.

The central government was composed of several high officials. The most important among them was the **Mahasamanta**, a powerful feudatory, and the **Mahapratihara**, who played both civil and military roles. There were also **foreign ambassadors**, such as the Chinese traveler Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang), who noted the presence of multiple ministries dealing with internal and external affairs.

### 2. Provincial and Local Administration:

The empire was divided into **provinces (bhuktis)**, which were further divided into **districts (vishayas)** and then into **villages**. Each administrative unit had its own set of officers, such as the **Uparika** (provincial governor) and **Vishayapati** (district head).



Local administration was often entrusted to local bodies and feudal lords. The concept of **Samantas** (feudatories or vassal chiefs) was significant. These Samantas were responsible for maintaining order in their regions, paying tribute, and sending troops when required.

### 3. Military Administration:

Harsha maintained a large standing army that included cavalry, infantry, elephants, and chariots. Xuanzang mentions that the army was well-organized, and military officers held land grants in return for their service.

Harsha also convened **assemblies of feudatories** and ensured their allegiance through military power and diplomatic marriages. However, his southern expansion was halted by Pulakesin II of the Chalukya dynasty.

### 4. Revenue and Economy:

Land revenue was the chief source of income. Harsha issued **land grants** to Brahmins and religious institutions, which were tax-exempt. Xuanzang notes that taxes were relatively light, and the people were not heavily burdened.

There was a flourishing trade in agricultural products, textiles, and precious metals. Trade guilds and merchant communities had a significant influence in urban centers.

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## Religion under Harsha

### 1. Personal Religious Inclination:

Harsha was initially a **devout Hindu**, possibly a worshipper of **Shiva** or **Surya**, but he later became a **patron of Mahayana Buddhism**. His conversion is often associated with the



influence of Chinese monk Xuanzang, who spent time in Harsha's court.

Though he adopted Mahayana Buddhism, Harsha remained tolerant of other religions and supported religious institutions of various faiths.

### **2. Patronage of Buddhism:**

Harsha built **monasteries, stupas, and viharas**, particularly in regions like Nalanda. He also sponsored Xuanzang's stay and travel in India, providing him with security and funds.

One of Harsha's greatest religious contributions was the **Kanauj Assembly**, which he organized to discuss Buddhist doctrines. This grand assembly attracted scholars, monks, and dignitaries from various countries and sects.

### **3. Religious Tolerance:**

Despite being a Buddhist patron, Harsha was known for his **religious tolerance**. He provided patronage to **Hindu temples** and **Jain establishments** as well. Xuanzang records that Harsha's empire was religiously diverse and peaceful.

### **4. Charitable Activities:**

Harsha was known for his **philanthropic nature**. Every five years, he held a grand **religious and charitable assembly at Prayaga** (modern-day Allahabad), where he distributed wealth, food, and clothing to the poor, scholars, and religious heads. These assemblies symbolized the blend of statecraft and dharma (righteousness).



## Conclusion

Harsha's reign marked the **revival of political unity in North India** after the decline of the Gupta Empire. His administration combined elements of centralization and feudalism, and his religious policy reflected broad-mindedness and pluralism. His support of Buddhism helped revive monastic institutions like Nalanda, and his rule is remembered as a bridge between ancient and medieval India in terms of governance, religion, and culture.

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