

In order to save the town from frequent flooding, Akbar commanded his architects to raise bunds along the riverbanks. He then ordered the construction of a fort called Illahabas that would not only give him military superiority but also protect the Akshayavat, a sacred tree that millions of Hindus worshipped. Prayag would eventually be known by the name of the fort, Illahabas—or Allahabad.

Many centuries later, Gautama Buddha had visited Prayag in order to preach there. Three centuries after the Buddha, Emperor Ashoka had arrived in order to build stupas there.

Hiuen-Tsang was no ordinary monk. Having defied the Chinese Emperor Taizong's orders, he had clandestinely left China and travelled to India. He would spend the next seventeen years travelling across the subcontinent, studying at Buddhist centers of learning and chronicling his experiences. Upon his return he would carry Harsha's letters establishing diplomatic relations with China and would spend several years translating sacred Buddhist texts into Chinese. In effect, Hiuen-Tsang was monk, scholar, diplomat, traveller and translator, all rolled into one convenient package.

Even though he was not heir apparent, Harsha transformed Kanauj into a vibrant capital renowned for its poets, artists, musicians and philosophers. An enemy king had murdered Harsha's elder brother and taken his sister captive. What started out as Harsha's quest to liberate his sister and avenge his brother's death soon morphed into a conquest of the whole of northern India. Harsha's empire would eventually stretch from the Brahmaputra delta in the east to Kathiawar in the west and from Punjab in the north to the Narmada River in the south.

One day Harsha invited Hiuen-Tsang to witness a grand assembly on the riverbanks of Prayag, probably a Kumbh Mela of the time. What Hiuen-Tsang observed was an act of charity so vast in scope that it metamorphosed king into beggar.

Over the next seventy-five days, Harsha entirely gave away his treasury's accumulated surplus. Gold, precious stones, grain and other commodities were distributed to Brahmins, Buddhists and beggars alike. Harsha's charity was like that of a man possessed. Harsha retained only horses, elephants and military equipment required for defense and public order.

Evidently, the Chinese monk was deeply moved by what he saw in Prayag. Hiuen-Tsang would later write about a glorious kingdom: that its citizens were upright and honourable; that in money matters they were "without craft" and that in administering justice, they were considerate; that they were neither deceitful nor treacherous in conduct and were faithful in their oaths and promises; that there was much gentleness and sweetness in their behavior and that criminals were few.

Does that sound like the India of today? Does Harsha's government sound like those of today? Corruption, inefficiency and tardiness seem to characterize modern Indian administration, a far cry from the descriptions of Hieun-Tsang!

Unfortunately the Kumbh—or pitcher—has a legacy of deceit. As per legend, the Devas and Asuras fought each other for a pot of nectar even though they pretended to cooperate with one another while churning the ocean. Vishnu, having transformed himself into the seductress Mohini, grabbed the pot from the Asuras and ran. A chase followed and Vishnu passed the pitcher to his flying mount, Garuda. In the struggle that followed, a few drops of nectar fell in four places—Prayag, Nasik, Hardwar and Ujjain. Supposedly since that day, the Kumbh Mela has been held every three years, duly rotating between these four places, with the one in Prayag being the most important.

But India continues to remain an impoverished nation reeling under illiteracy, malnourishment, unemployment and social backwardness. Our most sacred rivers—the ones that can wash away our sins—are treated like toxic dump sites. And where is the efficiency, respect, honesty, goodness, and charity that Hiuen-Tsang described in his writings?

Pray, where is Harsha?