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Where is Harsha?

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Allahabad, or the Garden of Allah, was once known as the Site of Ritual Offerings. After all, the ancient town of Prayag (which translates from Sanskrit to "site of ritual offerings") was famous much before the Mughal emperor Akbar decided to build a fort there in 1583.

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.

Rewind thousands of years into antiquity, and you will find that Bharat had followed Ram, Sita and Laxman to Prayag that lay at the union of three sacred rivers—Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. Ram was staying there at the ashram of Rishi Bhardwaj when Bharat arrived. Unfortunately, Bharat had to reluctantly turn back when Ram refused to entertain Bharat's pleas to return to Ayadhya.

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.

Nine hundred years after Ashoka, a forty-two year old Chinese monk had also visited Prayag. He was accompanying a king no less accomplished than Ashoka or Akbar. The king's name was Harshavardhana—or Harsha—and the Chinese monk accompanying him was known as Hiuen-Tsang. The year was 644 A.D.

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 dipomatic 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.

Harsha was no less distinguished even though his capital was known by the unfortunate epithet of The City of Hunchbacked Girls. According to legend, an infuriated rishi had cursed the hundred daughters of the town's ruler thus turning them all into hunchbacks! Since then, the town (not far from modern-day Kanpur) had been known as Kanya-Kubja, which translates to "city of hunchbacked girls". Mercifully, by Harsha's time the town came to be called by a shortened version of the epithet: Kanauj.

Even though he was not heir apparent, Harsha transformed Kanuaj 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.

But at his core, Harsha was a spiritually inclined poet and artist, not conqueror. The king even wrote three Sanskrit plays during his lifetime. Born a sun-worshipper, he later became one of the greatest patrons of Shaivism and Buddhism, banning the slaughter of animals in his kingdom. He was one of the most generous benefactors of Nalanda, a university that accommodated over ten thousand students and monks. Nalanda possessed a library so vast that it continued to burn for three months after Bakhtiyar Khilji set fire to it in 1193. The great astronomer and mathematician Brahmagupta, who gave the world the very first rules for computing with zero, lived in Harsha's kingdom and times. This was a king and kingdom oozing art, culture, learning, reliaion and spirituality.

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.

By imperial decree, all the poor, destitute, orphaned and downtrodden from "all five indies" were invited to Prayag as guests of the king. Over half a million came. It is said that Harsha fed lakhs on each day of the assembly.

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.

Harsha then turned his attention to his personal belongings. His jewelry—necklaces, crown jewels, bracelets, amulets and rings—went first. Next were his clothes. Having thus reduced himself to a naked pauper, he smiled and requested his sister for an ordinary used garment. Covering himself with it like a commoner, he then proceeded to pray, thanking the Almighty for having given him the opportunity to be of use to others.

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 craff" 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.

Regarding the kingdom and its government, he wrote that the government was based on benign principles; that people were not subjected to forced labour; that taxes were moderate; that education began early and included the five shastras; that primary education was widespread and that the rulers as well as the citizens were ingrained with a deep sense of respect for learning and the learned.

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!

Millions of gallons have flowed through the sacred rivers at Prayag since the days of Harsha. Like clockwork, Prayag witnesses ever growing assemblies on the riverbanks every twelve years when the sun is in Aries and Jupiter is in Aquarius—or Kumbh.

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.

Rama, Gautama, Ashoka, Harsha and Akbar were able to leverage the sacred power of Prayag for the benefit of their people. The incredible power of Prayag is no less today. Over a hundred million visited Prayag in 2013 as against a mere half million in 644 A.D. On a single day, January 14, 2013, thirty million devotees took a dip to purify themselves of sin. Even a mere stone becomes all-powerful when millions of devotees pray to it. Imagine the power of a hundred million concentrated prayers!

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?