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Assessing King Harshavardhana's Contribution to the Promotion of Buddhism in Indian History

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Abstract: *Harshavardhana* is a political character and a king of the *Vardhana* era of ancient India. *Harshavardhana* was a worshiper of Shiva in his early life, later converted to Buddhism under the influence of his sister *Rājyashrī* and the Chinese monk *Hiuen Tsang*. After converting to Buddhism, he played a role as a major patron of this religion. In this he followed Emperor *Ashoka* and played a leading role in the development of Buddhism. He busied himself in the spread of Buddhism and the welfare of the people. He built many monasteries, temples and *stupas*. He is also known to have built numerous *stupas* on the banks of the Ganges. He donated everything to *Prayāg* and returned to the palace receiving a garment from his sister-in-law *Rājyashrī*. He was also known in the society as a good writer. He established good relations with the Chinese emperor by exchanging royal duties. Seventh century Buddhism came to be known as *Harsha Yuga* Buddhism. The discussion paper presents how King *Harshavardhana* became a Buddhist king and how he is immortalized by patronizing Buddhism in Indian history.

Keywords: *Harshavardhana*, Buddhism, *Shīlabhadra*, *Nalanda*, *Ashoka*, *Stupas*, *Shashanka*.

1. Introduction

King *Harshavardhana* was a famous king. His life period was from 590 AD to 647 AD. His reign lasted from 606-647 AD. His father's name is *Prabhakar Vardhan*. He was a follower of Shiva in his early life but later converted to Buddhism under the influence of sisters and Chinese travelers. After his conversion to Buddhism, he played a leading role in promoting and spreading Buddhism in Indian history. He largely followed Emperor *Ashoka* in spreading Buddhism. As a result, he was able to make an important contribution to the propagation and expansion of Buddhism in a very short period of time. He was able to build several *Viharas*, monasteries and *Stupas* during the same period. The discussion article presents an assessment of his relationship with Buddhism, including those issues and patronizing Buddhism in Indian history.

2. Aims

Every research has one or more aims and objectives. No research can and should not be completed without purpose. There was no exception in the case of discussion articles. The content of the article is quite old and historical. So the article has several objectives. Namely: a. to give an idea about King *Harshavardhana*; b. to present theories and facts about his reign and rise to power; c. to give an idea of his

religious attitude; d. to present what kind of role Buddhism played and e. to give readers and subsequent researchers an idea of his late life.

3. Research Question

Before researching the discussion article, several questions arose. As a result, it has created interest in researching the subject. One of the historical dynasties of ancient India is *Pushyabhuti* dynasty and among the kings of this dynasty King *Harshavarshana* was an important king. At the same time he is immortalized in the history of Buddhism by patronizing Buddhism. The questions that motivated the writing of the essay are: a. Who was *Harshvardhan*? b. How was his family influence in *Harshvardhan's* life? c. Why and under whose influence did he accept Buddhism? d. What kind of welfare work did he do for Buddhism? e. Why is he immortal and will remain? and f. What was the contribution to the promotion of Buddhism in Indian history of *Harshvardhan* after all? The discussion article has been written in search of answers to these questions.

4. Methodology

The discussion essay is a historical essay. Theories and data have been collected from various historical sources to compose the essay. The task is quite difficult.

Because the content of this article is very old and data collection is very difficult, there is no doubt about it. However, every research work is quite difficult. But it depends more or less on the content. Basically quantitative method has been applied according to research formula to write the discussion article. In order to research using the said method, books published by different authors, articles, travel stories, relevant stories, written poems and songs, some anthropological data, archeological material and various theories and information have been used. As a result, it is possible to write the essay properly. More simply, the essay emphasizes context analysis, which is accompanied by a division into qualitative methods.

5. Ascended the throne and State expansion

Aryavarta's *Thanesvara Pushyabhuti* dynasty was founded in the early sixth century on the ruins of the vast Gupta Empire. King *Shashanka* built the *Gaura* kingdom with Orissa, Bengali Bihar. The period of which was from 600-625 AD. *Prabhakara Vardhana* was the first king of *Pushyabhutivansha*. 'After the death of King *Prabhakar Vardhan*, his eldest son *Rājyavardhan* ascended the throne (Hazra, 1984, p. 224-226).' But within a short time *Rajyavardhan* was killed by *Gaurarāja*

Shashanka and subsequently *Harshavardhana* ascended the throne.

When *Harshavardhana* occupied *Kanauj*, he turned his attention to the expansion of the kingdom. He successively conquered Punjab, Orissa, Bihar, and Bengal, Bangladesh. Also a part of Gujarat came under his possession. 'The whole of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa *kamboda* came under his empire (Mookherjee, 2006).' 'He also included Nepal and Kashmir in his kingdom (Hazra, 1984, p. 224-226).' Many inscriptions, edicts and coins are found during the reign of King *Harshavardhana*. Through which it becomes much easier to know the exact history of *Vardhan* dynasty. '*Harshacharita*' by *Pandit Banabhatta* is regarded as a reliable source.

6. Influence of Shiva and Buddhism in the family

People often acquire religion by birth. In this case, the family religion and the rituals of that religion affect human life in many ways. In this context it can be said that the religion of the father or mother influences the child more. Nothing exceptional happened in the case of King *Harshavardhana*. *Harshavardhana's* father was a follower of Shiva (Oldenberg, 1898, p. 309). King *Harshavardhana* was also a follower of Shiva in his early life (Harsabardhan, Vol. IX). Later he became

a devotee of Buddhism. His eldest brother and sister were Buddhists (Oldenberg, 1898, p. 309). During the reign of King *Harshavardhana*, *Hinayana* and Mahayana Buddhism prevailed there.⁶⁵³ He later became a follower of Mahayana Buddhism (Bondhapadhaya, 1989, p. 61).

7. Context of Adoption of Buddhism and Religious generosity

As mentioned above, King *Harshavardhana* was a follower of Shiva like his father in his early life. However, he later converted to Buddhism under the influence of the sister and Chinese traveler *Hiuen Tsang*. From this it can be understood that there is such a role of someone behind the conversion of people. This kind of influence is sometimes manifested and speech is not manifested. The first of which happened in the life of King *Harshavardhana*. Human life is affected by various ups and downs, setbacks. One has to go through many such changes on the way in life. King *Harshvardhan* was no exception.

Religious generosity is an important lesson for human life. This education basically starts from the family. However, even outside the family, many highly educated individuals can be seen expressing their religious generosity by combining their conscience and intelligence. Generosity towards paganism was one of the most

important aspects of King *Harshavardhana's* character. Through which he was able to become a great man. There are many kings and subjects in the world. Ancient India had more. If a deeper observation is made, it can be seen that religious generosity is not observed among all. This has been observed in some kings. King *Harshavardhana* is one of them.

8. Literary King and his developmental activities

If the history of various dynasties of ancient India can be investigated, it can be seen that the kings respected writers and philosophers along with governing the country. They used to organize various theoretical discussions or debates with writers and philosophers. Sometimes it was seen that the king himself liked to compose literature. *Harshavardhana* was such a king. 'He was a talented dramatist and poet (Beal, 1883, pp. 213-214).' He composed plays '*Nāgānanda*', '*Priyadarshikā*' and '*Ratnāvalī*'. By composing these three plays, he was able to gain another new identity. In earlier days there was not much entertainment. At that time, people used to practice different kinds of religious criticism, philosophy, literature, logic, etc. Many famous and king-subjects were also able to write such literature. As King *Harshavardhana* did it. '*Kādambarī* and *Harshacharita* writers

Bānabhatta, Mayurabhatta, poet Bhartrihari, Divākar, Haridatta, Jaisena etc. were his members (Beal, 1883, pp.213-214).’ King *Harshavardhana* used to convene meetings of Buddhist sages to listen to the discourses and provide suitable rewards to scholars who won the debates between the various sects.

Hiuen Tsang came to India during the reign of *Harshavardhana*. He writes that there were 100 *Samgharāms* of *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* Buddhism in *Kanauj* at that time. 10,000 monks lived in them (Joshi, 1967, p. 32). King *Harshavardhana* built many hospitals, guesthouses and roads for common people; He dug many ponds and planted trees (Joshi, 1967, p. 32; Beal, 1883, pp.82-83). It can also be said that he was known to be a very active king in the spread of learning. He has contributed to the development of knowledge as well as his contribution.

9. The king came to power and took the title

A review of the political history of ancient India shows that when a king came into political power, he adopted a title along with his name. He used to strengthen his identity through that title. Such a title can be said to be an expression of nobility. That's why the people of various dynasties in ancient India considered such a title very respectable. However, a closer look

will show that this practice is prevalent in the new format as in the past. This new format also conveys the same spirit and seriousness as in the past. Because even though many things change with time, its essence does not change much. King *Harshavardhana* preserved that continuity. He was titled '*Shīlāditya* (Beal, 1883, pp. 213-214)'.

10. Construction of Buddhist Vihara and Organized congregation

Buddhist *Vihara* is the name of a religious institution. Buddhists conduct their daily religious activities. So a religious emotion and feeling works with *Vihara*. Apart from this, several social activities are conducted in *Vihara*. *Vihara* plays an important role in the context of any country. Buddhist *Vihara* can be found in almost every country in the world. It's started with the cooperation of kings of different clans of ancient India. The kings of these dynasties built such *Vihara* in their kingdoms for various reasons. It was from that idea that the practice of establishing *Vihara* began in the whole of India and it is prevalent till now. And in continuation of this, activities like the establishment of Buddhist *Viharas* are being organized all over the world today. So it can be seen that in this aspect, King *Harshavardhana* was not behind in any part. 'He also developed Buddhism by

building numerous Buddhist *Viharas* (Beal, 1883, pp. 213-214).'

Congregation is an important and sacred function for any religion. Through this action, religion needs to be reformed in various ways. And reforms are done through religious meetings out of necessity. There is no doubt that Buddhism has improved a lot through the reformation. It was done by King *Ajatashatru*, *Kalashoka* and Emperor *Ashoka*. In that sequence, King *Harshvardhan* also used to organize religious meetings. However, *Harshavardhana's* meeting style is not completely like that of the said kings. Again it is said that King *Harshavardhana* converted to Buddhism under the influence of the Chinese monk *Hiuen Tsang*; 'Therefore he organized a special religious meeting in his favors (Bondhapadhaya, 1989, p. 61).'

Thousands of Buddhist monks, Jain and Brahmin scholars attended the meeting.

11. Installation of Buddha statue and charitable activities

The Buddha statue is a place of great respect for Buddhists. Buddhists worship the Buddha statue. They also feel peace within themselves. If in the beginning there were many stories about the Buddha image. There are various stories about the origin of the Buddha statue. But

everything is overshadowed by people's respect and love. That respect and love might spread in some other way. However, 'at the end of a special meeting held by King *Harshavardhana* in honor of the Chinese nobleman *Hiuen Tsang*, a large golden Buddha image was installed and the subtleties of Buddhism were discussed (Bondhapadhaya, 1989, p. 61).'

After the festival, King *Harshavardhana* took *Hiuen Tsang* to *Prayag*, Allahabad, and on the occasion he built a large *Vihara* complex on the banks of the Ganges.

The word donation is common in all religions and philosophies. Charity can make people great. Through giving, one's mind is purified and self-peace is felt. All religions encourage charity. Buddhism also practices charity in the same way. King *Harshavardhana* was a similarly charitable nobleman. Whose donation has greatly encouraged the new generation of that time and this time. It is said that, 'every year *Harshavardhana* organized the *Prayag Mela* or '*Mahamoksha Parishad*' at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna (Bodhapadhaya, 1989, p. 61).'

Buddha images were worshiped at this place and donations were made to the Buddhist monks. After worshiping Buddha again, Sun and Shiva Statues were also worshiped there. Finally, *Harshavardhana* used to donate freely to the masses. It is known that, 'He used to donate the entire

wealth accumulated in five years (Beal, 1883, pp. 214-222).' *Hiuen Tsang's* account also finds support for *Harshvardhan's* donation work. He says that *Harshavardhana* used to spend most of the day in various religious activities and meditation (Oldenberg, 1898, p. 308). From this it can be understood that King *Harshavardhana* was a king full of religious feelings. He has conducted various activities for religious welfare. He especially encouraged charity.

12. Chief Patron

The history of various dynasties of ancient India reveals that the king did some religious welfare work. But it cannot be said that he did not reverse it. There are examples. But if all those things are left out, it can be seen that the kings have done welfare work in various ways. But it depends on time and condition. Many times there is desire but not ability. However, good work should be done while it is possible. That is where the fulfillment of life depends. For example, it can be said that 'King *Harshavardhana* was the main patron of *Nalanda* University (Bapat, 1956, p. 204).' At that time *Nalanda* was the best place to study Buddhist scriptures. Not only Buddhism but also other scriptures were taught. "Famous philosopher *Shīlabhadra* was the principal of *Nalanda* University (Bodhapadhaya,

1989, p. 61)." Students from different countries of the world came here to study. This means that *Nalanda* gained name and fame all over the world. Another reason for its fame is the accommodation and food provided for the students. According to *Hiuen Tsang*, it is said that 'King *Harshavardhana* built a *Vihara* and a brass temple in *Nalanda* (Bodhapadhaya, 1989, p. 61).' At that time, about 10,000 thousand students were studying in *Nalanda*. This shows that *Nalanda* University was established as one of the best universities in the world. Special emphasis was given to the study of Buddhism among other subjects. And that is why the university gained so much fame among the people of the world. By whose patronage King *Harshavardhana* was able to occupy a place of honor in history.

13. Death

Birth and death are inevitable facts. That is, if you are born, you have to accept death. Its opposite has not yet been created on earth. Everyone has to accept this fact. Power and wealth cannot prevent death. King and subjects all have to accept death. Even every creature on earth has to accept death. Such a moment came in the life of King *Harshavardhana*. '*Harshavardhana* died probably in 646 or early 647 AD (Joshi, 1967, p. 33).' The expansion and expansion of Buddhism, almost extinct in

his kingdom, was largely made possible by King *Harshavardhana*. This is why King *Harshavardhana* has been immortalized in the history of Buddhism. As long as there is Buddhism in the world, people will remember King *Harshavardhana*.

14. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion it can be said that, King *Harshavardhana* was able to establish himself as a Buddhist and a Buddhist king. Because he abandoned his own religion Shiva Dharma and adopted Buddhism. Not only did he remain silent by accepting Buddhism, but he also made many important contributions to the propagation and spread of Buddhism. Through which he has made an important contribution to the political history of ancient India as well as immortalized in the history of Buddhism. King *Harshavardhana's* name will be remembered as long as Buddhism exists in the world. He was able to give birth to the composition of this history. So it can be said that the name of King *Harshavardhana* will occupy a special place in the history of ancient India and in the history of Buddhism.

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