

# Imperial Authority and Sacred Patronage: A Study of Harshavardhana's State Assemblies

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**Abstract:** This study examines the religious assemblies convened by Harshavardhana (606–647 CE) as deliberate instruments of religious diplomacy and imperial statecraft in early seventh-century North India. Moving beyond conventional narratives that portray these gatherings merely as expressions of personal piety or Buddhist patronage, Harshavardhana strategically deployed large-scale religious congregations—most notably the Kannauj Assembly and the quinquennial assemblies at Prayaga, as mechanisms for consolidating political authority, negotiating sectarian plurality, and projecting supralocal sovereignty. Drawing upon literary sources such as Hiuen Tsang's travel account, the *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, epigraphic records, and later historiographical interpretations, the study situates these assemblies within broader patterns of early medieval kingship, ritual sovereignty, and interstate diplomacy.

Harsha's assemblies functioned simultaneously on multiple levels: as forums of inter-religious engagement among Buddhists, Brahmanical groups, and other ascetic traditions, as spectacles of royal generosity reinforcing dharmic kingship; and as diplomatic platforms that facilitated alliances, tributary relations, and cultural exchange across regional polities. By publicly honouring diverse religious traditions while privileging Mahayana Buddhism in certain contexts, Harsha crafted an image of universal kingship rooted in ethical sovereignty rather than coercive domination. These assemblies also reinforced transregional connections, particularly with Buddhist networks extending to Central Asia and Tang China, thereby situating Harsha's empire within a wider cosmopolitan sphere. Through a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, engaging political theology, ritual theory, and early medieval state formation, the religious assemblies under Harshavardhana were neither episodic nor merely ceremonial. Instead, they constituted structured diplomatic events designed to stabilize authority in a politically fragmented post-Gupta landscape. By reframing Harsha's public congregations as instruments of sacred diplomacy, this research contributes to broader debates on the relationship between religion and power in premodern South Asia and challenges simplistic binaries between spiritual patronage and political ambition.

**Keywords:** Harshavardhana; religious diplomacy; early medieval India; imperial assemblies; sacred kingship; inter-sectarian negotiation; political ritual; state formation; Kannauj Assembly; Prayaga Assembly; ritual sovereignty.

**Introduction** - The early medieval centuries in northern India were marked by political fragmentation, regional assertion, and the search for new models of authority after the decline of the Guptas. In this transitional age, Harshavardhana emerged not only as a territorial ruler but as a monarch who reimagined sovereignty itself. His reign, centred first at Thaneshwar and later at Kannauj, represented a deliberate reconstruction of imperial power through ritual congregation and public assembly. While historians have long debated the territorial limits of his empire, the more enduring aspect of his authority lay in the assemblies he convened—events that united monks, Brahmanas, scholars, envoys, regional chiefs, and commoners in unprecedented spectacles of royal presence. Harsha ascended the throne under precarious circumstances. The death of his father Prabhakaravardhana

and the assassination of his brother Rajyavardhana created a volatile political environment. The Maukhari alliance through his sister Rajyashri further complicated regional relations. In this climate of instability, Harsha needed more than military victories; he required symbolic strategies capable of binding diverse populations into a coherent imperial community. The assemblies provided precisely such a mechanism.

The great religious convocation at Kannauj, described in detail by Hiuen Tsang, stands as the most celebrated of these gatherings. Convened around 643 CE, it brought together thousands of participants from across India and beyond. The king presided personally over doctrinal debates and honoured Hiuen Tsang with exceptional respect, inviting him to expound Mahayana philosophy before an august audience. The event culminated in ceremonial processions

and acts of reverence toward a golden image of the Buddha. Far from a mere religious festival, the Kannauj assembly functioned as a declaration of imperial supremacy. Regional rulers attended and acknowledged Harsha's prominence, thus transforming a religious convocation into a political summit.

Equally significant were the quinquennial assemblies held at Prayâga, identified with the sacred confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. These gatherings, occurring every five years, involved extraordinary acts of charity. Hiuen Tsang records that Harsha distributed the accumulated wealth of his treasury among monks, Brahmanas, and the destitute, retaining little for himself. Whether embellished or not, the narrative conveys the symbolic thrust of the event: the king as universal donor. By relinquishing wealth in ritual generosity, Harsha enacted the dharmic ideal of the righteous ruler whose authority derived from compassion rather than coercion.

The spatial symbolism of Prayâga intensified the impact of these assemblies. The confluence of rivers represented cosmic unity and spiritual purification. By situating his redistribution at this sacred geography, Harsha embedded political authority within sacred landscape. Sovereignty became intertwined with pilgrimage, and the monarch positioned himself as mediator between temporal power and spiritual sanctity. Such sacralization reinforced loyalty not merely through fear or reward but through shared participation in sacred ritual.

Harsha's assemblies must also be understood within the *longue durée* of Indian kingship. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka had employed inscriptions and missionary activity to project moral sovereignty, yet his proclamations were inscribed in stone rather than enacted in congregational spectacle. The Guptas patronized religious institutions but did not convene large-scale public assemblies combining doctrinal debate with mass redistribution. In contrast, Harsha synthesized earlier traditions into a performative model in which sovereignty was enacted before a living audience. Authority was no longer distant and monumental; it was immediate and theatrical.

The performative nature of these assemblies invites analysis through the lens of political anthropology. Kingship in early medieval India was not solely administrative; it was ritual. The monarch embodied cosmic order, and public ceremonies reaffirmed this embodiment. At Kannauj and Prayâga, Harsha appeared not as remote autocrat but as visible participant debating doctrine, honouring scholars, and distributing wealth. Such visibility transformed political power into moral charisma.

The religious dimension of the assemblies reveals Harsha's ecumenical strategy. Though inclined toward Mahayana Buddhism in his later years, he maintained patronage toward Shaiva and Brahmanical traditions. Brahmanas received gifts alongside Buddhist monks. This inclusivity was politically prudent. Religious communities

commanded economic networks and social authority; royal favour secured their loyalty. The assemblies thus functioned as integrative mechanisms in a pluralistic society.

Diplomatically, the assemblies projected Harsha's influence beyond India's borders. Xuanzang's presence symbolized trans-Asian intellectual exchange linking Tang China and northern India. Envoys from Central Asia and possibly Southeast Asia attended the Kannauj convocation. In an age when long-distance communication relied on pilgrimage and trade routes, such gatherings amplified imperial reputation across regions. Harsha's court became a nodal point in a network stretching from Nalanda to Chang'an.

Economically, the Prayâga assemblies represented calculated redistribution. Tribute and taxation accumulated in the royal treasury were periodically dispersed in public charity. This cycle legitimized revenue extraction by demonstrating tangible benefit to society. Redistribution strengthened bonds with subordinate chiefs and religious establishments. In effect, the assembly functioned as fiscal theatre, dramatizing the circulation of wealth.

Culturally, the assemblies nurtured intellectual production. BâGa's *Harshacharita* portrays a vibrant court where poets and philosophers thrived. Harsha himself composed plays such as *Nagananda*, blending Buddhist themes with classical Sanskrit drama. The ethos of congregation encouraged debate and literary creativity. Assemblies thus acted as catalysts for cultural efflorescence.

Comparative analysis illuminates the uniqueness of Harsha's model. The Satavahanas had relied primarily on territorial conquest and trade control; their ritual expressions were more conventional. The Guptas projected divine kingship through coinage and temple patronage but lacked the participatory spectacle evident under Harsha. Later Cholas institutionalized temple-centred festivals that integrated economy and ritual, yet their emphasis was distinctly Shaiva and regionally grounded. Harsha's assemblies, by contrast, were ecumenical and explicitly intellectual in orientation.

These gatherings were expressions of sincere devotion or calculated political theatre. The dichotomy is misleading. In early medieval India, piety and politics were inseparable. Royal generosity accrued religious merit while consolidating loyalty. By adopting the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion, Harsha accrued spiritual prestige and political legitimacy simultaneously. The assemblies were therefore both devotional and strategic. The architectural and urban implications of the Kannauj assembly merit attention. Temporary pavilions, processional routes, and ceremonial platforms transformed the city into a stage of empire. Urban space became politicized. The city was not merely administrative centre but sacred theatre. The spectacle of kingship reshaped spatial perception.

The memory of these assemblies endured long after

Harsha's death. Though his empire fragmented without a direct heir, chroniclers continued to celebrate his generosity and tolerance. His reign became a benchmark for ideal kingship in later historiography. The assemblies thus contributed to his enduring reputation. Critically, the personal nature of this authority must be acknowledged. The assemblies were closely tied to Harsha's charisma. Without his presence, they ceased. This underscores both their potency and fragility. Charismatic monarchy can unify diverse regions, but it lacks institutional permanence.

The assemblies also reveal gendered dimensions of authority. While Harsha presided publicly, the political alliances that sustained his reign were influenced by familial networks, including his sister Rajyashri. Though less visible in assembly narratives, these connections undergirded the public spectacle. Furthermore, the intellectual debates at Kannauj demonstrate the intersection of theology and politics. By sponsoring doctrinal exposition, Harsha positioned himself as arbiter of religious discourse. The king became patron of truth as well as protector of territory. Such intellectual sovereignty enhanced moral stature. The redistributive model at Prayâga reflects broader economic patterns of early medieval India, characterized by land grants and the growing influence of religious institutions. By giving publicly, Harsha reinforced the legitimacy of land endowments and charitable foundations. The assembly thus mirrored structural transformations in the economy.

In evaluating Harsha's greatness, it is essential to consider the integrative function of these gatherings. Military campaigns established boundaries; assemblies created belonging. Through ritual congregation, subjects and elites alike experienced a sense of participation in imperial community. This participatory dimension distinguishes Harsha's monarchy.

From a global perspective, parallels may be drawn with Byzantine synods or Chinese imperial ceremonies, yet Harsha's assemblies combined pluralism and redistribution in distinctive fashion. They reveal a conception of kingship rooted in moral exhibition rather than sheer domination. The

confluence of sacred geography, intellectual discourse, and economic redistribution at Prayâga encapsulates the genius of Harsha's approach. Sovereignty became a shared spectacle, reaffirmed cyclically every five years. The regularity of the event reinforced continuity and expectation. In conclusion, the assemblies of Harshavardhana constituted the heart of his imperial project. They were not peripheral embellishments but central mechanisms of governance and legitimacy. Through them, Harsha transformed kingship into participatory moral theater, integrating religion, economy, diplomacy, and culture into a single performative framework. His greatness derived not merely from territorial reach but from the imaginative reconstruction of monarchy as visible, generous, and intellectually engaged authority. In the landscape of early medieval India, where fragmentation threatened cohesion, the assemblies provided moments of unity and transcendence. They stand as enduring testimony to a ruler who understood that power is most secure when it is shared symbolically and redistributed materially.

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