



Ritual, power, and public kingship: The political assemblies of Harshavardhana in early medieval India

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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 Prayāga, 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 Prayāga 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 Prayāga, 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 Prayāga 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. Bāṇa'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 Prayāga 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 Prayāga 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.

The religious assemblies convened by Harshavardhana occupy a distinctive and transformative place in the history and culture of ancient India, not merely as episodic royal events but as enduring institutions that reshaped political authority, religious interaction, cultural production, and patterns of social integration. Their impact must be understood in a multilayered framework—political, religious, economic, intellectual, artistic, and transregional—because these assemblies functioned simultaneously as diplomatic forums, ritual performances, and engines of cultural synthesis.

At the most immediate level, the assemblies redefined the nature of kingship in early medieval India by integrating political sovereignty with moral authority. In a post-Gupta landscape characterized by fragmentation and regional assertion, Harsha's assemblies at Kannauj and Prayāga projected a new model of rulership that relied less on coercive expansion and more on consensual legitimacy. By gathering diverse religious communities—Buddhists, Brahmanical scholars, ascetics, and foreign pilgrims under a single ceremonial umbrella, the king demonstrated his capacity to act as a universal mediator. This was not merely symbolic; it had practical implications for governance. Religious groups in early India were deeply embedded in economic and social networks. Their endorsement of the ruler contributed to stability, and the assemblies functioned as platforms where such endorsement could be publicly articulated and ritualized.

The impact of these assemblies on religious culture was profound. Harsha's patronage, particularly his visible support of Mahayana Buddhism in events described by Xuanzang, revitalized Buddhist institutions at a time when Brahmanical traditions were regaining prominence in many regions. However, the significance of the assemblies lies not in sectarian preference but in their ecumenical character. Harsha did not suppress Brahmanical traditions; rather, he integrated them into the same ceremonial framework. Gifts were distributed to Brahmanas alongside Buddhist monks, and debates were encouraged rather than censored. This fostered a culture of inter-sectarian dialogue, where intellectual exchange could occur within a politically sanctioned environment. The assemblies thus contributed to a distinctive Indian tradition of religious pluralism, where competition coexisted with coexistence.

In the broader trajectory of Indian religious history, these gatherings helped shape the transition from classical to early medieval forms of religiosity. The emphasis on public congregation, ritual gifting, and royal patronage anticipated later developments in temple-centred religious practices, particularly in South India under the Cholas and in the Bhakti movement's emphasis on communal participation. Harsha's assemblies can therefore be seen as precursors to later mass religious events, where kingship and devotion intersected in public space.

The cultural impact of the assemblies is equally significant. They acted as catalysts for intellectual and literary production by bringing together scholars from different regions. The court of Harsha, as reflected in works like the *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, became a vibrant center of Sanskrit learning. The assemblies themselves likely facilitated exchanges of ideas that influenced literature,

philosophy, and religious discourse. Harsha's own literary contributions, such as the play *Nagananda*, reflect a synthesis of Buddhist and Brahmanical elements, suggesting that the intellectual environment fostered by these gatherings encouraged cross-pollination of traditions.

Artistic culture also benefited from the networks created through these assemblies. The movement of artisans, monks, and patrons across regions contributed to stylistic developments visible in sites such as the Ajantā caves. While not solely attributable to Harsha, the broader climate of cultural interaction fostered by such gatherings encouraged the dissemination of artistic motifs, iconographic forms, and narrative themes. The assemblies thus functioned as conduits through which aesthetic ideas travelled, contributing to the formation of a more interconnected cultural sphere.

Economically, the assemblies had a redistributive function that reinforced social cohesion. The large-scale distribution of wealth at Prayāga, where Harsha is said to have donated accumulated resources to religious communities and the poor, symbolized the ethical responsibility of the ruler to ensure the welfare of his subjects. Such acts were not merely charitable; they were embedded in the political economy of the time. By redistributing wealth, the king reaffirmed the legitimacy of taxation and tribute, demonstrating that resources collected by the state would ultimately return to society. This created a cycle of extraction and redistribution that strengthened bonds between the ruler and various social groups, including religious institutions that played key roles in local economies.

The assemblies also had significant diplomatic implications. They provided opportunities for regional rulers, envoys, and foreign visitors to interact within a controlled ceremonial setting. The presence of Xuanzang at the Kannauj assembly is emblematic of the transregional connections facilitated by these events. Through such interactions, Harsha positioned his kingdom within a broader Asian network of cultural and religious exchange. The assemblies thus contributed to the circulation of ideas, texts, and practices between India and regions such as Central Asia and China, reinforcing India's role as a centre of Buddhist learning and pilgrimage.

From a socio-political perspective, the assemblies helped integrate diverse populations into a shared imperial framework. Early medieval polities often faced the challenge of governing heterogeneous regions with varying cultural and linguistic identities. By creating occasions where people from different backgrounds could participate in common rituals and witness royal generosity, Harsha fostered a sense of collective belonging. The assemblies functioned as moments of unity that transcended local identities, reinforcing the idea of a larger political community centred on the king.

The performative aspect of the assemblies further amplified their impact. Kingship in ancient India was inherently theatrical, involving rituals that communicated power and legitimacy. Harsha's assemblies elevated this theatricality to a new level. The ceremonial elevation of religious icons, the public honouring of scholars, and the dramatic distribution of wealth were carefully orchestrated acts that conveyed messages about the nature of authority. The king appeared not only as ruler but as benefactor, philosopher, and moral exemplar. This performative dimension ensured that the assemblies left a lasting impression on participants and

observers alike, embedding the image of Harsha as an ideal ruler in collective memory.

The long-term historical impact of these assemblies can be traced in subsequent models of kingship and public ritual. Later rulers adopted similar strategies of patronage and congregation, recognizing the value of public religious events in consolidating authority. Although the specific form of Harsha's assemblies was not replicated in its entirety, the underlying principle that political power could be reinforced through religious diplomacy and public generosity became a recurring theme in Indian history. This is evident in the grand temple festivals of the Cholas, the courtly rituals of the Vijayanagara Empire, and even in later Mughal practices of public darbar, where the ruler engaged with diverse constituencies in ceremonial settings.

The assemblies also contributed to the historiographical construction of Harsha's image. Accounts by Xuanzang and later historians emphasize his generosity, tolerance, and intellectual engagement, often portraying him as the last great emperor of northern India before the onset of regionalization. While such characterizations may be influenced by literary conventions, they underscore the enduring association between Harsha's rule and his assemblies. The events became symbolic markers of his reign, shaping how he was remembered in both Indian and foreign traditions.

However, the impact of these assemblies was not without limitations. Their effectiveness depended heavily on the personal charisma and active participation of the king. After Harsha's death, the absence of a strong successor led to the fragmentation of his empire, and the assemblies themselves did not evolve into permanent institutions. This suggests that while they were powerful tools of governance, they were not sufficient to ensure long-term political stability in the absence of centralized authority. Nonetheless, their cultural and ideological influence persisted, informing later conceptions of kingship and public ritual.

In a broader analytical sense, Harsha's assemblies illustrate the concept of "sacred diplomacy," where religious engagement becomes a means of political negotiation. By positioning himself as a patron of multiple traditions and as a facilitator of dialogue, Harsha navigated the complexities of a pluralistic society. The assemblies provided a space where differences could be acknowledged and managed within a framework of royal authority. This approach contrasts with models of governance that rely on uniformity or coercion, highlighting the adaptability of Indian political thought.

The cultural memory of these assemblies also reflects the importance of narrative in shaping historical significance. Texts like the *Harshacharita* and Xuanzang's travel accounts do not merely record events; they interpret them, emphasizing themes of generosity, wisdom, and inclusivity. Through these narratives, the assemblies acquire a symbolic dimension that transcends their immediate historical context. They become exemplars of ideal kingship, illustrating how power can be exercised through compassion and dialogue.

In conclusion, the impact of Harshavardhana's religious assemblies on the history and culture of ancient India was both immediate and enduring. They redefined kingship by integrating political authority with moral and religious leadership, fostered a culture of inter-sectarian dialogue, stimulated intellectual and artistic exchange, reinforced

economic redistribution, and facilitated transregional connections. Although their institutional continuity was limited, their ideological legacy shaped subsequent models of governance and public ritual. The assemblies stand as a testament to the capacity of ritual and diplomacy to transform political power into a shared cultural experience, securing Harsha's place as one of the most remarkable monarchs in Indian history. 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 theatre, 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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