Ancient Indian History UPSC CSE
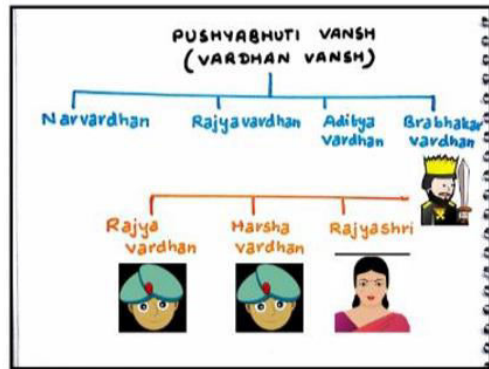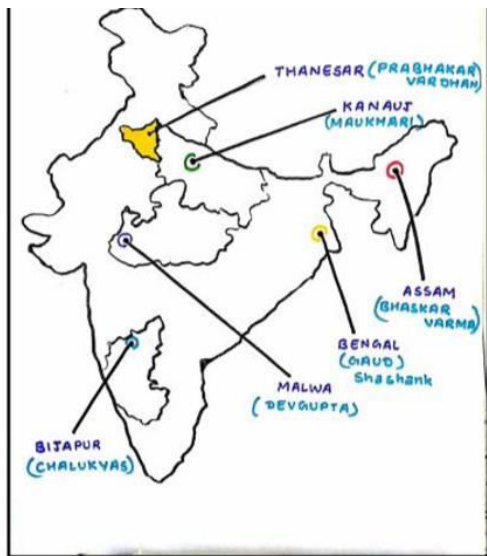
(Prelims + Mains) Supplementary Study Material

Module 11: Harshvardhan Empire

-Arti Chhawari

- The Guptas, with their seat of power in UP and Bihar, ruled over north and western India for about 160 years until the mid-sixth century. Then north India again split up into several kingdoms.
- The white Hunas established their supremacy over Kashmir, Punjab, and western India from about AD 500 onwards. North and western India passed under the control of about half a dozen feudatories who parcelled out the Gupta empire among themselves.
- Gradually one of these dynasties ruling at Thanesar in Haryana extended its authority over all the other feudatories. The ruler who brought this about was Harshavardhana (AD 606–47).
- Harsha made Kanauj his seat of power, and from there he extended his authority in all directions. By the seventh century Pataliputra fell on bad days and Kanauj came to the fore.
- Power shifted to military camps (*skandhavaras*), and places of strategic importance which dominated long stretches of land. To this class belonged Kanauj.
- Situated in Farrukhabad district of UP, it shot into political prominence from the second half of the sixth century onwards. Its emergence as a centre of political power from the reign of Harsha onwards typifies the coming of the feudal age in north India just as Pataliputra largely represents the pre-feudal order.
- The early history of Harsha's reign is reconstructed from a study by Banabhatta, who was his court poet and who wrote a book called *Harshacharita*. This can be supplemented by the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century and stayed in the country for about fifteen years.
- Harsha's inscriptions speak of various types of taxes and officials. Harsha is called the last great Hindu emperor of India, but he was neither a staunch Hindu nor the ruler of the whole country. His authority was limited to north India excluding Kashmir.
- Rajasthan, Punjab, UP, Bihar, and Orissa were under his direct control, but his sphere of influence spread over a much wider area. It appears that the peripheral states acknowledged his sovereignty.
- In eastern India he faced opposition from the Shaivite king Shashanka of Gauda, who felled the Bodhi tree at Bodh-Gaya. However, Shashanka's death in AD 619 put an end to this hostility. Harsha's southward march was stopped at the Narmada river by the Chalukya king Pulakeshin, who ruled over a great part of modern Karnataka and Maharashtra with his capital at Badami in the modern Bijapur district of Karnataka.

Administration

- Harshavardhana's reign is an example of transition from ancient to medieval times. Harsha governed his empire on the same lines as did the Guptas, but his administration had become feudal and decentralized. It is stated that Harsha had 100,000 horses and 60,000 elephants.
- The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang informs us that Harsha's revenues were divided into four parts. One part was earmarked for the expenditure of the king, a second for scholars, a third for the endowment of officials and public servants, and a fourth for religious purposes.
- He also tells us that ministers and high officers of the state were endowed with land. The feudal practice of rewarding and paying officers with grants of land seems to have begun under Harsha.
- The reign of Harsha is historically important because of the visit of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who left China in AD 629 and travelled all the way to India. After a long stay in India, he returned to China in AD 645. He had come to study at the Buddhist university of Nalanda situated in the district of the same name in Bihar and to collect Buddhist texts from India.
- The pilgrim vividly describes Harsha's court and life in those days, and this account is richer and more reliable than that of Fa-hsien, shedding light on the social and economic life as well as the religious sects of the period. The Chinese account shows that Pataliputra was in a state of decline, as was Vaishali.
- On the other hand, Prayag and Kanauj in the doab had become important. Hsuan Tsang calls the shudras agriculturists, which is significant. The earlier texts represent them as serving the three higher varnas. The Chinese pilgrim notes the living conditions of the untouchables such as scavengers, and executioners.

Buddhism and Nalanda

- The Buddhists were divided into eighteen sects when the Chinese pilgrim was in India. The old centres of Buddhism had fallen on bad days. The most famous centre was Nalanda, which maintained a great Buddhist university meant for Buddhist monks.
- It is said to have had as many as 10,000 students, all monks. They were taught Buddhist philosophy of the Mahayana school. In AD 670, another Chinese pilgrim, I-tsing, visited Nalanda, and he mentions that only 3000 monks lived there.
- According to Hsuan Tsang, the monastery at Nalanda was supported from the revenues of 100 villages. I-tsing raises this number to 200. Nalanda thus had a huge monastic establishment during the reign of Harshavardhana.
- Harsha followed a tolerant religious policy. A Shaiva in his early years, he gradually became a great patron of Buddhism. As a devout Buddhist he convened a grand assembly at Kanauj to widely publicize the doctrines of Mahayana.
- After Kanauj, he held at Prayag a great assembly which was attended by all the tributary princes, ministers, nobles, etc. On this occasion, an image of the Buddha was worshipped, and discourses were given by Hsuan Tsang.
- Banabhatta gives us a flattering account of the early years of his patron in his book *Harshacharita* in an ornate style which became a model for later writers. Harsha is remembered not only for his patronage and learning but also for the authorship of three plays: *Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali*, and *Nagananda*.
- Harsha's authorship of the three dramas is doubted by several medieval scholars. It is held that they were composed by a person called Dhavaka in the name of Harsha for some consideration.