

Banabhatta and His Royal Biography

Banabhatta's Harshacharita is the oldest surviving biography in India. Apart from painting a glowing picture of his patron Harsha of the Pushyabhuti dynasty, the writer also speaks about himself. The early part of Bana's pedigree is mythical and narrates the origins of the Vatsyayana branch of the Bhargava Brahmanas, to which he belonged, while the later part is historical.

Bana was born in Pritikuta, a Brahmana village in the Kanyakubja area, famed for the learning and stature of its residents. His mother, Rajadevi, died when he was a small child, and he was brought up by his father, who died when he was fourteen. Bana was taught by an illustrious teacher named Bharchu. In his youth, he set out on a series of travels, accompanied by his half-brothers and a colorful entourage, including poets, philosophers, artists, actors, monks, ascetics, a gambler, a singer, a goldsmith, and a dancing girl. It is no wonder that he acquired a bit of a reputation.



One day, Bana received a letter summoning him to present himself in Harsha's court. The meeting started badly. The king had believed the gossip about Bana's wayward ways and treated him with scant regard. Bana was quick to defend himself, arguing that although he may have been a bit wild in his youth, he came from a respectable

Brahmana family and lived a blameless married life. Within a few days, he became a court favorite, and many lavish presents and honors were showered on him. Bana went on to write the Harshacharita, a eulogistic biography of his patron, as well as a prose romance called the Kadambari.

Bana describes the Harshacharita as an *akhyayika*, a genre of texts related to the *itihasa* tradition. The episodes in the biography are selected and narrated from a literary and aesthetic perspective, adding a unique charm to the narrative. Its descriptions are vivid and literary and sometimes show a touch of humor. The work displays Bana's skills as a master of Sanskrit prose. Typical of the genre of royal biographies are long, elegant passages eulogizing the king. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

He (i.e., Harsha) was embraced by the goddess of Royal Prosperity, who took him in her arms and, seizing him by all the royal marks on all his limbs, forced him, however, reluctant, to mount the throne-and this though he had taken a vow of austerity and did not swerve from his vow, hard like grasping the edge of a sword; clinging closely to duty through fear of stumbling in the uneven path of kings, and attended with all her heart by truth who had been abandoned by all other kings, but had obtained his promise of protection, and waited on reverentially by the reflected images of a fair handmaid standing near, which fell on his toe-nails, as if they were the ten directions of space impersonate.

According to some scholars, the Harshacharita is incomplete because it ends after Harsha rescues his sister Rajyashri from the flames of the pyre on which she sought to end her life and his accession to the thrones of Thanesar and Kanauj. However, V. S. Pathak argues that the work is

complete as it has all five well-defined thematic stages: a beginning, effort, the hope of achieving the end, certainty of success, and a conclusion. This debate on the completeness of the Harshacharita invites us to ponder over its interpretation and significance. Rajyashri was Harsha's sister, but her name also means royal glory, and Harsha rescuing her symbolically represents his successful acquisition of royal glory.

Source Cowell and Thomas, 1993: 57; Pathak, 1966: 30-32

Reference: A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India by Upinder Singh