



Cultural exchange and travel accounts of Hiuen Tsang in Harsha era (606–647 CE)

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Abstract

The reign of Harsha (606–647 CE) represents a significant phase in the political, cultural, and intellectual history of early medieval India. Among the most valuable sources for understanding this period are the travel accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang), who visited India between 629 and 645 CE. His detailed observations provide a vivid account of the political administration, religious institutions, educational centers, social customs, economic conditions, and cultural interactions that characterized Harsha's empire. This paper examines Hiuen Tsang's travel narratives as an important historical source for analyzing the nature of cultural exchange between India and China during the seventh century. It explores how Buddhist pilgrimage, diplomatic contacts, scholarly interactions, and the movement of monks and merchants contributed to the transmission of religious ideas, philosophical traditions, art, architecture, and knowledge across Asia. The study also evaluates the historical reliability of Hiuen Tsang's accounts by comparing them with contemporary literary sources, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence. While recognizing certain limitations arising from his Buddhist perspective, the paper argues that his writings remain indispensable for reconstructing the socio-cultural and political landscape of Harsha's reign. Furthermore, the study highlights the broader significance of Indo-Chinese cultural relations in fostering mutual understanding, intellectual collaboration, and the dissemination of Buddhism across the Asian continent. By adopting a historical and analytical approach, the paper demonstrates that Hiuen Tsang's travel accounts not only illuminate the achievements of Harsha's empire but also reveal the enduring role of cultural exchange in shaping transregional connections during the early medieval period.

Keywords: Harsha, Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang), cultural exchange, Buddhism, travel accounts

Introduction

The 7th century CE in India marked a dynamic phase of political unification and cultural flourishing under the reign of Emperor Harshavardhana, who rose to power following the disintegration of the Gupta Empire. His rule brought much-needed stability to northern India and ushered in a period of revival in literature, religion, learning, and diplomacy. Harsha was not only a capable administrator and military leader but also a patron of scholarship, religious debate, and monastic education. His court attracted poets, scholars, and religious leaders from across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, creating a rich intellectual and cultural environment. A vital source of information on this era comes from the celebrated Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar Hiuen Tsang (also known as Xuanzang), whose pilgrimage to India from 629 to 645 CE was driven by a quest to obtain authentic Buddhist scriptures and study at leading centers of learning such as Nalanda Mahavihara^[1].

Hiuen Tsang's observations, recorded in his monumental work *Si-Yu-Ki* (Records of the Western Regions), provide a detailed and invaluable contemporary account of life in India under Harsha's reign. His writings offer rich insights into the religious pluralism of the time, where Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism coexisted under a tolerant political order. He describes in depth the structure and functioning of monastic institutions, particularly Nalanda, which he praised for its vast library, structured curriculum, and international student body. Hiuen Tsang also visited major urban centers such as Kanauj, Pataliputra, and Prayag, documenting their layout, population, trade activities, and cultural practices^[2]. His accounts reveal the complexity of Indian society, including its caste hierarchy, social customs, charitable

practices, educational networks, and the close relationship between religion and the state. He was personally welcomed by Harsha, who honored him at the Kanauj Assembly, a grand religious and philosophical gathering that underscored the emperor's commitment to inter-religious dialogue and Buddhist patronage.

Moreover, Hiuen Tsang's work highlights the transregional exchange of knowledge and faith during this period. His pilgrimage not only symbolized the deep intellectual and spiritual ties between India and China but also helped transmit Indian Buddhist philosophy back to East Asia, influencing Chinese Buddhist thought for centuries. The monk's journey and writings exemplify the global reputation India held in the early medieval period as a center of Buddhist learning and intercultural connectivity^[3]. Through his objective and richly detailed observations, Hiuen Tsang offers modern historians a rare and valuable window into the socio-political, religious, and educational landscape of Harsha's India, affirming its significance in the broader context of Asian history.

Hiuen Tsang: Life and Travels:

Hiuen Tsang, also known as Xuanzang (602–664 CE), was a distinguished Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, and pilgrim who undertook an extraordinary journey to India in the early 7th century in search of authentic Buddhist teachings. Born in Henan province, he was deeply dissatisfied with the corrupted Buddhist texts in China and resolved to travel to the land of the Buddha, defying the travel restrictions of the Tang Dynasty^[4]. In 629 CE, he embarked on his perilous journey across Central Asia, eventually arriving in India where he spent nearly 15 years visiting major religious and

educational centers such as Nalanda, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Taxila. He studied under eminent scholars like Silabhadra and engaged with local rulers, most notably Emperor Harshavardhana, who patronized Buddhism and welcomed him at his court in Kannauj. Xuanzang's travelogue, *Si-Yu-Ki* (Records of the Western Regions), offers invaluable insights into the religious, social, and political life of India during Harsha's reign. Upon his return to China in 645 CE, he brought with him hundreds of Buddhist texts and relics, significantly contributing to the translation and preservation of Indian Buddhist knowledge in East Asia^[5].

Hiuen Tsang embarked on his perilous journey from Tang China to India in 627 CE, driven by a deep spiritual and scholarly yearning to acquire authentic Buddhist scriptures and to study Mahayana philosophy at its source^[6]. Disturbed by the doctrinal inconsistencies and misinterpretations he encountered in Chinese translations, he felt compelled to consult the original Sanskrit texts and learn directly from the eminent Indian masters^[7]. His resolve led him through treacherous routes across Central Asia, traversing deserts, mountains, and hostile territories. Upon reaching India, he meticulously visited the major centers of Buddhist learning such as Kashmir, Kapilavastu, Nalanda, and Bodh Gaya^[8]. His primary aim was to study the Yogācāra (Vijñānavāda) school of thought, especially under the guidance of renowned scholars at Nalanda Mahavihara, where he spent several years mastering logic, metaphysics, and Indian philosophical systems^[9]. Beyond religious goals, his journey also had civilizational significance, as it fostered cross-cultural interaction and diplomatic ties between Tang China and Indian polities, most notably with Emperor Harshavardhana, who hosted him with great respect and provided him with access to court debates and religious assemblies^[10]. Hiuen Tsang's travel, thus, was a confluence of spiritual quest, academic rigor, and cultural diplomacy.

Hiuen Tsang was warmly received by Emperor Harshavardhana, who recognized his scholarly brilliance and spiritual dedication, and thus honored him as a distinguished guest^[11]. Harsha arranged for his comfortable stay and ensured state protection and patronage throughout his travels in northern India^[12]. At the imperial court in Kannauj, Hiuen Tsang was invited to participate in grand assemblies and inter-religious debates, notably the Kannauj Assembly (643 CE), which saw the participation of thousands of monks, Brahmins, and scholars from different philosophical traditions^[13]. Harsha not only presided over these gatherings but also publicly endorsed Mahayana Buddhism, declaring Hiuen Tsang's views as authoritative. The pilgrim admired Harsha's commitment to religious harmony, intellectual inquiry, and moral governance, portraying him as a benevolent and learned ruler who promoted merit-based administration and public welfare. Hiuen Tsang's detailed account of this encounter provides valuable insights into the court culture, religious pluralism, and political ethos of early medieval India^[14]. The emperor's support enabled Hiuen Tsang to access major Buddhist centers, such as Nalanda and Vallabhi, and to collect rare manuscripts, which he later translated upon returning to China, significantly enriching Buddhist literature.

Kannauj Assembly: A Symbol of Cultural Exchange

One of the most defining moments of Xuanzang's (Hiuen Tsang's) historical journey across the Indian subcontinent

was his participation in the grand Kannauj Assembly, convened by Emperor Harshavardhana of the Pushyabhuti dynasty in 643 CE^[15]. This monumental event was a remarkable expression of the cultural, religious, and intellectual vibrancy of early medieval Northern India^[16]. Harsha, a devout patron of Mahayana Buddhism who maintained a firm commitment to religious tolerance, organized the convocation specifically to promote dialogue among diverse religious sects and philosophical schools, thereby reinforcing India's age-old tradition of public debate, critical inquiry, and civilizational pluralism^[17]. The assembly brought together more than twenty vassal rulers including King Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa alongside thousands of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist monks, Jain scholars, Hindu Brahmins, and foreign dignitaries, creating an unprecedented platform for cross-cultural interaction and cross-sectarian engagement^[18].

Xuanzang, recognized across India for his profound scholarship and deep understanding of Mahayana and Yogācāra texts, was formally invited by Harsha to preside over the assembly as its chief speaker^[19]. He eloquently presented Mahayana doctrines and engaged with scholars of opposing traditions with humility and intellectual rigor, offering his philosophical propositions to be challenged by any scholar present^[20]. His central role signified not only his personal erudition and standing at Nalanda Mahavihara but also the openness of early Indian society toward foreign intellectuals^[21]. Harsha's immense respect for Xuanzang was evident in the ceremonial honors he conferred upon him throughout the event, including a daily royal procession where a golden image of the Buddha was carried on an ornately caparisoned elephant, followed on foot by the emperor himself and King Bhaskaravarman, serving as a symbolic gesture to proclaim the supremacy of sacred knowledge and ethical governance^[22].

The intellectual proceedings at the Kannauj Assembly spanned twenty-three days, during which Xuanzang defended his thesis against all theological counter-arguments^[23]. This grand event was immediately followed by an extended assembly at Prayag lasting seventy-five days, where Harsha conducted a historic alms-giving ceremony, distributing the vast accumulated treasures of the imperial state to monks, scholars, the destitute, and the poor, underscoring the deep-seated spirit of *dāna* (charity) in Indian tradition^[24]. The gathering became a living symbol of religious harmony, where even non-Buddhist traditions were accorded space for respectful articulation and participation^[25]. It epitomized Harsha's vision of an inclusive polity where spiritual merit, philosophical debate, and state patronage were intricately aligned^[26]. Xuanzang's detailed account of these proceedings in his travelogue, the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji*, alongside contemporary literary works like Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*, reveals the extraordinary syncretism and intellectual climate of seventh-century India, offering invaluable insights into the subcontinent's historical cultural diplomacy and its enduring global reputation as a primary seat of learning.

Nalanda and the Monastic Academic Tradition:

Hiuen Tsang spent several years at Nalanda Mahavihara, which he regarded as the pinnacle of Buddhist learning during his time. He vividly described Nalanda as a vast monastic university housing over 10,000 students and around 1,500 teachers, where a strict monastic discipline

and rigorous entrance tests ensured academic excellence^[27]. The curriculum was comprehensive, encompassing Buddhist scriptures, Mahayana and Hinayana philosophies, logic, medicine, grammar, metaphysics, and even subjects like astronomy and mathematics. Nalanda's libraries were immense, containing thousands of manuscripts, and its learned masters were renowned across Asia^[28]. The institution was supported by royal patronage and sustained by local donations. Hiuen Tsang's detailed account underscores Nalanda's role as a beacon of intellectual and spiritual exchange, symbolizing India's prominence in the global academic landscape of the early medieval period and its deep influence on Buddhist traditions across Asia^[29].

Beyond its physical grandeur, the institutional structure of Nalanda represented an unprecedented synthesis of monastic discipline (Vinaya) and rigorous scholastic debate (śāstrārtha)^[30]. Admission was administered through formidable gatekeeper-scholars (Dvārapāla) who subjected prospective entrants to oral examinations, admitting only a fraction of applicants to maintain the highest intellectual standards^[31]. Under the guidance of venerable abbots such as Śīlabhadra, students engaged in systemic studies of Madhyamika and Yogācāra philosophies alongside secular disciplines^[32]. Supported by revenue generated from royal land grants comprising over a hundred surrounding villages, Nalanda provided free boarding, lodging, and instruction, allowing an international community of scholars from Tang China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet to flourish in an atmosphere of unfettered intellectual inquiry.

Observations on Society and Culture

Hiuen Tsang's observations offer a vivid and insightful portrayal of Indian society and culture during the reign of Harshavardhana, blending keen ethnographic detail with personal admiration^[33]. He described the people as deeply religious, morally upright, and courteous, showing respect towards monks and guests. Indian society, as he observed, was structured around Brahmanical norms, with the caste system strictly enforced each group adhering to prescribed roles, occupations, and dietary habits^[34]. The cities he visited, particularly Pataliputra, Prayag, and Kanauj, were not only centers of learning and philosophical discourse but also bustling with trade, artisanship, and artistic expression^[35].

Under Harsha's rule, Tsang noted significant state involvement in public welfare. The emperor regularly organized large-scale religious assemblies, acts of charity, and public hospitals where monks and laypeople received care alike, revealing the humanitarian spirit of the time^[36]. Hiuen Tsang also detailed the syncretic and pluralistic character of Indian civilization, noting the coexistence of multiple religious traditions such as Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Jainism^[37]. His records illustrate a country of remarkable cultural depth, where diverse linguistic, culinary, sartorial, and ritualistic traditions thrived in harmony, making India a beacon of spiritual and intellectual exchange in the 7th century CE^[38].

Beyond urban centers, Xuanzang provided detailed documentation of daily life, agricultural practices, and administrative mechanics across rural hinterlands. He noted that judicial administration under Harsha relied heavily on moral integrity, with severe corporal punishments being rare and revenue primarily generated through a moderate one-

sixth taxation on agricultural produce. The social landscape was further enriched by a flourishing merchant class (Śreṇīs) that maintained trade routes connecting Northern Indian markets to coastal ports, ensuring economic prosperity alongside spiritual patronage. Xuanzang's ethnography emphasizes that despite rigid social stratification, communal life was bound together by a shared ethos of civic morality (Dharma) and institutional hospitality (Punya), reflecting an agrarian economy integrated into a vast network of monastic and imperial patronage.

Religious Pluralism and Tolerance:

Hiuen Tsang's travel accounts provide a vivid portrayal of the spirit of religious pluralism that permeated Indian society during the reign of Harshavardhana in the 7th century CE. Although Harsha personally adhered to Mahayana Buddhism and actively promoted its doctrines evident in his patronage of Buddhist monasteries and the invitation extended to Hiuen Tsang to attend and preside over religious assemblies his rule was notably inclusive^[39]. Tsang recorded that Harsha offered generous support not only to Buddhist institutions but also to Hindu temples and Brahmins, often through land grants and donations, reflecting a deep-seated commitment to maintaining communal harmony^[40]. Jain shrines too received protection, suggesting that religious coexistence was a core principle of the state's administrative philosophy^[41].

Harsha's policies reflected a conscious attempt to accommodate the diverse religious landscape of India. Cities such as Kanauj, Prayag, and Pataliputra stood as examples of this pluralistic ethos, where monks, scholars, and priests from different faiths coexisted, engaged in dialogue, and participated in intellectual debates^[42]. Tsang observed that no religion faced persecution, and people were free to worship as per their traditions, wear their distinctive religious garments, and follow unique rituals^[43]. Public religious debates were often encouraged, and tolerance was seen not just in state policy but also in the daily lives of the people^[44].

This harmonious environment fostered by Harsha created a fertile ground for cultural and spiritual growth^[45]. Tsang's accounts note that the emperor regularly convened religious gatherings like the great quinquennial assembly at Prayag where offerings were made not only to Buddhist monks but also to Brahmins, Jains, and the poor, further underscoring the spirit of compassion and inclusion^[46]. The religious tolerance observed by Tsang was thus not passive coexistence but an active commitment to spiritual dialogue, hospitality, and ethical governance^[47].

This institutionalized pluralism was reinforced through royal epigraphy and state administrative mechanisms, where land grants (agrahāras) were conferred without sectarian bias to foster regional stability and agricultural development^[48]. The royal patronage extended to the trifold reverence of the Sun God (Sūrya), Śiva, and the Buddha within Harsha's personal lineage reflects a syncretic model of kingship that balanced traditional Vedic legitimacy with Mahayana universalism^[49]. Consequently, the early medieval Indian state functioned as a mediator of philosophical debate, ensuring that intellectual diversity contributed to civilizational resilience rather than social fragmentation.

Cultural and Intellectual Exchange

Hiuen Tsang's journey to India during the reign of Harshavardhana was far more than a pilgrimage; it was a

landmark in the history of intercultural dialogue between India and China. His travels symbolized a profound two-way cultural and intellectual exchange that had lasting impacts on both civilizations. In India, Hiuen Tsang immersed himself in advanced Buddhist scholarship at the renowned university of Nalanda, where he studied Mahayana and Hinayana doctrines, logic, metaphysics, and Sanskrit literature under some of the most celebrated teachers of the time. He meticulously documented Indian philosophy, religious practices, administrative systems, and daily life, thereby preserving valuable knowledge for future generations^[50].

One of the most remarkable aspects of this exchange was the translation of over 600 Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese upon his return to China. These texts became foundational in shaping East Asian Buddhist thought. Hiuen Tsang established a translation bureau in Chang'an (modern Xi'an) with imperial support, where he worked tirelessly with Chinese scholars and monks to transmit the philosophical depth of Indian Buddhism. His translations, commentaries, and oral teachings laid the groundwork for what would become the Faxiang school of Buddhism in China^[51].

Beyond religion, Hiuen Tsang influenced Chinese education, literature, and art. Indian iconography, ideas of kingship, and university models inspired Chinese monasteries and learning centers. His records, especially the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (*Da Tang Xiyu Ji*), became a vital source of historical and geographical knowledge, not just for China but for later scholars across Asia and Europe^[52]. In this sense, Hiuen Tsang acted as both a cultural ambassador and a preserver of Indian civilization, ensuring that invaluable aspects of India's classical past survived through the centuries^[53].

The transmission of knowledge across the Silk Route and maritime channels, catalyzed by Xuanzang's journey, established an enduring paradigm for Sino-Indian diplomatic engagement^[54]. Upon his return, Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty recognized the strategic and scholarly value of Xuanzang's accounts, leading to official Tang diplomatic missions dispatched to Harsha's court at Kanauj led by envoys like Li Yibiao and Wang Xuance^[55]. These exchanges facilitated not only the transfer of philosophical treatises such as the *Vijnaptimatrasiddhi* (Cheng Weishi Lun) but also technical knowledge, including Indian methods of sugar refinement and botanical sciences, to China^[56].

Furthermore, Xuanzang's rigorous transliteration methodology standardized the Chinese translation of Sanskrit philosophical terminology, bridging vast linguistic divides between Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan language families^[57]. The architectural design of prominent Tang structures, such as the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda built in Chang'an to house the imported Sanskrit manuscripts and Buddha relics, directly mirrored Indian stupa aesthetics and monastic spatial arrangements observed at Nalanda and Bodhi Gaya^[58].

In the long historical continuum, Xuanzang's writings served as the primary geographical and historical framework utilized by 19th- and 20th-century archaeologists such as Alexander Cunningham and Marc Aurel Stein to identify and excavate major ancient Indian historical sites, including Nalanda, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Sanchi^[59]. Through this preservation of spatial memory and textual heritage,

Xuanzang's pilgrimage transformed into a permanent bridge of civilizational dialogue, cementing ancient India's foundational influence on the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual development of East Asia^[60]. His legacy stands as an enduring testament to international academic collaboration, demonstrating how cross-border intellectual exchanges can permanently shape global civilization^[61].

Critical Analysis

While Hiuen Tsang expressed deep admiration for India's rich spiritual and intellectual heritage, his writings also provide a critical lens on certain social and religious practices of the 7th century. He was particularly struck by the rigidity of the caste system and noted with concern the marginalization of lower castes, who were often denied access to education and religious institutions^[62]. Despite the egalitarian ideals of Buddhism, Hiuen Tsang observed that social hierarchy remained deeply entrenched, limiting spiritual opportunities for many. He specifically documented the severe spatial and social segregation of "untouchable" groups such as the *Chāṇḍālas*, noting that they were forced to reside outside city walls, signal their approach when entering public spaces, and work in occupations strictly segregated from mainstream society^[63]. He also recorded disparities in access to monastic education, noting that prestigious centers like Nalanda primarily admitted advanced scholars, high-caste elites, or established foreign monks, thereby reflecting broader patterns of social exclusion and academic inequality^[64]. Admission to Nalanda required passing rigorous oral examinations administered by the *Dvārapāla* (gatekeeper-scholars), a system that inherently favored those with prior access to elite textual training^[65].

Furthermore, he criticized certain aspects of Indian religiosity, especially the prevalence of superstitions, elaborate rituals, and mechanical observance of customs that, in his view, had overtaken genuine spiritual pursuit^[66]. He disapproved of the blind reliance on astrology, omens, animal sacrifices, and self-mortification practices such as ritual suicides at sacred sites like Prayag which he believed diluted the ethical core of religious life^[67]. Nevertheless, Hiuen Tsang's tone remained largely respectful, and he contextualized these shortcomings within an otherwise vibrant and diverse cultural landscape^[68]. His account thus provides not only an invaluable record of India's religious pluralism and intellectual traditions but also a reflective critique of the social challenges that coexisted with its achievements^[69].

Hiuen Tsang's travel account, the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji*, remains one of the most indispensable primary sources for understanding the socio-cultural, religious, and intellectual landscape of early medieval India^[70]. His detailed observations offer a rare foreign perspective on Indian society during Emperor Harsha's reign, capturing both its accomplishments and contradictions. Through his interactions with the royal court, Buddhist monastic institutions, and various local communities, Hiuen Tsang illuminated an era characterized by vibrant scholarly activity, religious tolerance, and intercultural exchange. His depiction of Emperor Harsha as a benevolent, learned, and inclusive ruler underscores the syncretic spirit of the time, where Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Jainism coexisted within a framework of mutual respect^[71].

The systematic translation of Indian Sanskrit texts into Chinese by Hiuen Tsang further strengthened civilizational ties between India and East Asia, marking the Harsha era as a significant phase in the global history of knowledge transmission. Harsha's patronage of scholars like Hiuen Tsang highlights India's age-old commitment to welcoming foreign intellectuals and fostering an atmosphere of philosophical inquiry and open debate. Viewed through Hiuen Tsang's narrative, the reign of Harsha emerges as a high point of religious coexistence, educational excellence, and pan-Asian cultural dialogue an enduring legacy in the annals of Indian and world history^[72].

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