

A NEW LOOK INTO THE *CATURANGA* PASSAGES IN *HARSACARITA* ¹

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The *Harsacarita* of Bana Bhatta is taken by Indologists as containing the first unequivocal reference to *Caturanga*, the Indian prototype of modern chess.² Bana Bhatta was the court poet of Emperor Harsavardhana, who ruled an empire in Northern India from Kanyakubja, the modern Kannauj in the period of AD 606-647. No doubt, a slightly earlier prose romance, the *Vasavadatta* of Subandhu, belonging to the beginning of the seventh century, contains an allusion to a game which could be arguably *Caturanga*, but the passage does not make any explicit reference to *Caturanga* or its pieces by name.³ In these circumstances, the references contained in *Harsacarita* to the game assume tremendous significance, since it is Bana who, for the first time in history, makes an explicit reference to *Caturanga*. It would be interesting to examine if the passage in question gives us any information about the nature and evolution of the game, which seems to be not an invention of the distant past, judging by the tone and tenure of the reference in the text. The present paper is an attempt to have a fresh look into the passages and find out their implications from the point of view of Chess history.

An obvious difficulty encountering anybody studying Bana is his style, which, as was wont in ancient classical literature of India, is the profusion of puns, *double entendre* and similar wordplays which make each expression infused with several layers of meaning. The passages in which *Caturanga* is alluded are no exception to this rule. A chess historian not accustomed to the conventions of Sanskrit poetry may even find such allusions far fetched, but we must remember that the learned readers of the time would readily understand all such allusions without much difficulty.

¹ I am thankful to Manfred Eder and Dr. Renate Syed for the stimulating discussions I had with them when writing this paper.

² It was Macdonnel (*Athenaeum*, July 27, 1897) who brought the passage to the attention of the chess historians for the first time.

³ The passage, as per the translation of Murray, is as follows: ‘The time of the rain played its game with frogs for chessmen (*nayadyutair*), which, yellow and green in colour, as if mottled with lac, leapt up on the black field (or garden-bed) squares (*kosthika*)’. Here, the term *nayadyutair* is taken by Thomas, on the basis of the commentator’s explanation, to mean chessmen, as referring to *Caturanga*, but this seems to be too indefinite. See H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess*, p.52.

The passage, in which the covert allusion to *Caturanga* occurs, is in the second *Ucchvasa* (chapter) of *Harsacarita* and reads as follows:

asminsca rajani astapadanam caturangakalpana

The passage refers to the musings of Bana, the poet and the biographer of Harsavardhana, when he meets the king for the first time. This passage has been translated by Cowell and Thomas [1961] thus:

Under this monarch, only the chessboards teach the position of the four members⁴

However, a more accurate translation would be like this:

When this king [reigns], the rendering of Caturanga occurs in the case of the Astapada

Here the passage requires some explanation on the basis of the context. Bana comes face to face with the king whom he describes as unique in certain regards. A novel feature of the king, in Bana's view, is that *Caturanga*, the traditional Indian army, occurs on *Astapada*, the 64 square board. Probably, the poet must have meant that army ceased to exist in the battlefield since no battle had to be fought. In this context, it may be recalled that Harsavardhana, under the influence of Buddhism or for some political reason unnerving him, had become a pacifist in the later phase of his career. The immediate preceding passage, *vrttanam padacchedah* (the cutting of feet exists in the case of metres) also strengthens this interpretation. This expression has a prosodic and a corporal significance. It means that "metrical verses alone came to be cut into feet", thereby implying that corporal punishment of cutting the feet of people came to be discontinued - a reform brought to judiciary by Harsavardhana. It can be seen that the general theme in these passages is the abhorrence of violence in the lifestyle of the people brought about by Harsavardhana, himself coming under the influence of Buddhism.

The passage, on closer scrutiny would also suggest that at the court of Harsavardhana, a game already existed involving the fusion between *Astapada* board and the *Caturanga* pieces. *Caturanga*, the fourfold Indian army was extracted to game pieces and the *Astapada* board, hitherto used in other board games, came to be used as the board for the newly invented game of *Caturanga*.

⁴ *The Harsacarita* of Bana, Tr. by E.B Cowell and F.W.Thomas, p.65.

Interestingly enough, Bana Bhatta does use the word *Astapada* in the sense of a board in some other passages of *Harsacarita* as well as *Kadambari* also, his other prose work. Let us have a closer look at these passages:

The passage in the beginning of *Harsacarita* is as follows:

krtakalasannidhnam iva andhakaritalalatapattastapadam antahpura mandanapatrabhangamakarikam bhrukutim abadhnan⁵.....

This passage, as translated by Cowell and Thomas, runs as follows:

Gathering a frown that darkened the Chess board of his forehead, like the presence of the god of death.....⁶

A more literal translation of Thomas [ZDMG lii 272] is quoted by Murray:

Contracting a frown which, as if the presence of Kala had been obtained, darkened the ashtapada of his forehead, and was the crocodile ornament which bedecks the wives of Yama.

This interesting passage refers to the forehead of the sage Durvasas, who is celebrated in Indian mythology as a short-tempered person, who flings into a passion at the slightest provocation. Here his furrowed forehead is likened to the chequered board of *Astapada*. This is indeed a very beautiful simile. But the translation of *Astapada* in this passage as 'chess board', done by Cowell and Thomas is misleading, as *Astapada* in Indian tradition originally signified only a 64 square board with which a number of board games could be played. It was only later that the *Astapada* board came to be used for *Caturanga*. To quote Murray,

Of more importance for our present purpose is a group of terms which are restricted to boards of definite shape and arrangement. There are two words of this kind: *ashtapada*, meaning a square board of 64 squares, 8 rows of 8 squares, and *dasapada*, meaning a similar board of 100 squares, 10 rows of 10 squares. These boards were employed for a more complicated form of game in which the use of the dice was combined with game upon a board (Luders, op.cit, 65). Both terms appear to have been used also for the games played upon these boards.⁷

⁵*The Harsacarita of Banabhatta, ed.by P.V.Kane, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973, p.3.*

⁶ Cowell and Thomas, op.cit, p.6

⁷ *A History of Chess*, pp.32-33.

Hence it is safe to conclude that this passage does not make any pointed reference to Chessboard as such, but to *Astapada*, the 64 square board which came to be used in *Caturanga* also.

Bana refers to *astapada* in the following passage found in his *Kadambari* also:

*Astapadaparicayacaturabhiih*⁸

Here the reference is to the maidens in the royal court of Kadambari, the heroine of the prose romance. Bana mentions that they were adept in board games, but no specific reference is contained about *Caturanga* in this passage. We cannot deduce the specific board game played by the maidens. If Bana wanted to convey the sense that they were adept in the *Caturanga* game, he could have mentioned that here. But the probability lies in the fact that *Caturanga* was one of the few board games which could be played on the *Astapada* board. It would be safe to assume that the *Astapada* board and the idea of *Caturanga* were totally unrelated before the invention of the Indian chess. Their mutual combination was definitely attested from the time of Harsavardhana onwards, and must have been in vogue some time before.

In the light of all this, another expression, immediately preceding the *Caturanga* passage of the *Harsacarita* also deserves our close scrutiny. The expression in question is *pustakarmanam parthivavigraha* and it occurs in the main sentence beginning with *asminsca rajani*.⁹

This passage is translated by Cowell and Thomas as follows:

*Under this monarch are found..... the figures of sculptures and not the vulgar disputes with kings*¹⁰

Unfortunately, this interpretation does not appear to be clear. Kane in his notes to *Harsacarita* rightly points out that there are two senses for the term *parthivavigraha*. *Parthiva* means either 'a king' or 'made from earth' (*prthivi*). *Vigraha* also has two senses, viz. 'idol'/'statuette' and 'war'. The compound *pustakarmanam*, which is in the genitive case, also deserves a close look. *Pusta* is, according to Monier Williams, 'working in clay, modeling' and *pustakarman*

⁸ *Kadambari*, p.196.

⁹ I am thankful to Manfred Eder, who has invited my attention to this important passage. Eder informs me that it is Renate Syed who has referred to this passage as evidence to her contention that chess originated from a didactic model using terracotta statuettes to exercise war strategies, under the Maukhari dynasty in Kannauj slightly before Harsavardhana became its ruler.

¹⁰ Op.cit .p. 65 [1961 Edn]

'plastering, painting'¹¹. Kane renders *pustakarmanam* as 'manufacture of dolls'. But it seems that the word means 'the statuette artifacts made of clay'. Accordingly, keeping in view Bana's fondness for wordplay, the passage may be translated as follows:

When this king reigns, the fight among kings is confined to the terracotta statuettes.

This passage invites at least two of unanswered questions.

1. Why were earthen (*parthiva*) statuettes of warriors made at all?
2. Why were they supposed to fight?

We have to surmise that

1. Statuettes of warriors made of clay were profuse during Harsavardhana's time.
2. They were involved in fights.
3. There was practically no fight of kings except in the case of statuettes of warriors.

The only assumption warranted by all these surmises is that during the reign of Harsavardhana, there was the practice of the terracotta of warriors fighting with each other and this becomes intelligible when we relate it to the prevalence of the *Caturanga* game.

To gather our scattered threads, we can conclude that during Bana's lifetime, *Caturanga* or the Indian chess was a relatively new game. It seems to have originated out of the fusion of two different traditions: One is the old board game tradition which used *Astapada* square board and the other is the symbolic representation of the fourfold Indian army. Bana seems to have marveled at this invention; he also credits the emperor, his patron, as the agent under whom the game came to be popular. From all this, we could conclude that Bana regarded the game of *Caturanga* to stand in as a reference point suggesting the glamour of Harsavardhana.

¹¹ *Sanskrit English Dictionary*, p.640.

