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CATURAṄGA PASSAGES IN *HARṢA-CARITA* : A FRESH LOOK

The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa Bhaṭṭa is taken by Indologists as containing the first unequivocal reference to Caturaṅga, the Indian prototype of modern chess.[1] Bāṇa Bhaṭṭa was the court poet of Emperor Harṣavardhana, who ruled an empire in Northern India from Kanya-kubja, the modern Kanauj in the period AD 605-47. No doubt, a slightly earlier prose romance, the *Vāsavadatta* of Subandhu, belonging to the beginning of the seventh century, contains an allusion to a game which could be rguably Caturaṅga, but the passage does not make any explicit reference to Caturaṅga or its pieces by name.[2] In these circumstances, the references contained in *Harṣacarita* to the game assume much significance, since it is Bāṇa who, for the first time in history, makes an explicit reference to Caturaṅga. 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 tenor of the reference in the text. The present paper is an attempt to have a fresh look into the passage and find out its implications from the point of view of Chess history.

An obvious difficulty encountering anybody studying Bāṇa is his style, which, as was prevalent in ancient classical literature of India, is the profusion of puns, double *entendre* and similar word-play which make various expressions infused with several layers of meaning. The passages in which Caturaṅga is alluded to 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 readers of that time would have readily understood all such allusions without much difficulty.

The passage, in which the covert allusion to Caturaṅga occurs, is in the second chapter (Ucchvāsa) of *Harṣacarita* and reads as follows :

> *asmiṅśca rājani ... aṣṭāpadānāṃ caturaṅga-kalpanā.*

The passage refers to the musings of Bāṇa, the poet and biographer of Harṣavardhana, 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 members.[3]

However, a more accurate translation would be : When this king [reigns], the rendering of Caturaṅga occurs in the case of the Aṣṭāpada.

Here the passage requires some explanation on the basis of the context. Bāṇa comes face to face with the

king whom he describes as unique in certain regards. A novel feature of the king, in Bāṇa's view is that Caturaṅga, the traditional Indian army occurs on Aṣṭāpada, the sixty-four 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 Harṣavardhana, under the influence of Buddhism or some political situation unnerving him, had become a pacifist in the latter phase of his career. The immediate preceding passage, *vṛttānāṃ padacchedaḥ* (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 the punishment of cutting the feet of people came to be discontinued — a reform brought to the judiciary by Harṣavardhana, probably under the influence of Buddhism. 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 Harṣavardhana himself under the influence of Buddhism.

The passage, on closer scrutiny, would also suggest that it was under the reign of Harṣavardhana that a fusion took place between the Aṣṭāpada board and the Caturaṅga pieces. Caturaṅga, the fourfold Indian army, was reduced to game pieces and the Aṣṭāpada board, which was hitherto used in other board games, came to be used as the board for the newly invented game of

Caturaṅga. Interestingly enough, Bāṇa Bhaṭṭa does use the word Aṣṭāpada in the sense of a board in some other passages of *Harṣacarita* as well as *Kādambarī*. The passage in the beginning of *Harṣacarita* is :

> *kṛtakālasaṃnidhānam iva andhakāritalalāṭa-paṭṭāṣṭāpadām antaḥpuramaṇḍanapatrabhaṅga-makarikāṃ bhrukuṭim abadhnan . . .*[4]

This passage, 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 . . .[5]

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

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

This interesting passage refers to the forehead of the sage Durvāsas, 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 Aṣṭāpada. This is indeed a very beautiful simile. But the translation of Aṣṭāpada in this passage as 'chess board', done by Cowell and Thomas is perhaps misleading, as Aṣṭāpada in Indian tradition originally signified only a sixty-four square board with which a number of board

games could be played. It was only later that the Aṣṭāpada board came to be used in Caturaṅga. 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 : *aṣṭāpada*, meaning a square board of sixty-four squares, eight rows of eight squares, and *daśapada*, meaning a similar board of ten squares, ten rows of ten 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.[6]

Hence it is safe to conclude that this passage does not make any pointed reference to the chessboard as such, but to Aṣṭāpada, the sixty-four square board which came to be used in Caturaṅga also. Bāṇa refers to Aṣṭāpada in the following passage found in his Kādambarī also :

aṣṭāpadaparicayacaturābhiḥ.[7]

Here the reference is to the maidens in the royal court of Kādambarī, the heroine of the prose romance. Bāṇa mentions that they were adept in board games, but no specific reference is contained about chess in this passage. We cannot deduce the specific board game played by the maidens. If Bāṇa wanted to convey the sense that they were adept in the Caturaṅga game,

he could have mentioned that here. But the probability lies in the fact that Caturaṅga was one of the few board games which could be played on the Aṣṭāpada board. It would be safe to assume that the Aṣṭāpada board and Caturaṅga were totally unrelated concepts before the invention of Indian chess. Their mutual combination was attested, definitely from the time of Harṣavardhana onwards, and was in vogue possibly even before.

In the light of all this, another expression, immediately preceding the Caturaṅga passage of the *Harṣacarita* also deserves our close scrutiny. The expression in question is *puṣṭakarmaṇāṃ pārthivavigrahaḥ* and it occurs in the main sentence beginning with *asminś ca rājani*.[8] 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.[9]

Unfortunately, the interpretation does not appear to be clear. Kane in his notes to *Harṣacarita* rightly points out that there are two senses for the term *pārthivavigrahaḥ*. *Pārthiva* means either 'king' or 'made from earth' (*pṛthvī*). *Vigraha* also has two senses, namely 'idol' or 'statuette', and 'war'. The compound *puṣṭakarmaṇām*, which is in the genitive case, also deserves a close look. *Puṣṭa* is according to Monier Williams, 'working in clay, modelling' and *puṣṭakarman* 'plastering, painting.' Kane renders *puṣṭakarmaṇām* as 'manufacture of dolls'. But it seems that

the word means 'the statuette made of clay'. Accordingly, keeping in view Bāṇa's fondness for word-play, the passage may be translated 'When this king reigns, the fight among kings is confined to terracotta statuettes.' This passage invites a number of unanswered questions, including: Why were earthen (*pārthiva*) statuettes of kings made at all? Why were they supposed to fight?

We have to surmise that statuettes of kings made of clay were profuse during Harṣavardhana's time, and they were involved in fights. There was practically no fight of kings except in the case of statuettes.

The only assumption warranted by all these surmises is that during the reign of Harṣavardhana, there was the practice of the toys of kings fighting with each other and this becomes intelligible when we relate it to the prevalence of the Caturaṅga game.

To gather our scattered threads together we can conclude that during Bāṇa's lifetime, Caturaṅga or 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 Aṣṭāpada square board and the other is the symbolic representation of the fourfold Indian army. Bāṇa seems to have marvelled 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 might conclude that Bāṇa regarded the game of Caturaṅga as a reference point suggesting the glamour of Harṣavardhana.

Notes

1. It was Macdonnel (Athenaeum, 1897, July 27) who brought the passage to the attention of chess historians for the first time.
2. 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 (*kosṭhikā*)'. Here the term *nayadyutair* is taken to mean chessmen by Thomas on the basis of the commentator's explanation as referring to Caturaṅga, but this seems to be too indefinite. See H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess*, p. 52.
3. The *Harṣacarit*a of Bāṇa, translated by E.B Cowell and F.W. Thomas, p. 65.
4. The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, edited by P.V. Kane, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973, p. 3.
5. Cowell and Thomas, op.cit, p. 6.
6. A History of Chess, p. 53.
7. *Kādambarī*, p. 196.
8. 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 an evidence to her contention that chess originated under the Maukhari dynasty in Kanauj slightly before Harṣavardhana became its ruler.
9. op.cit., p. 65 (1961 edn).